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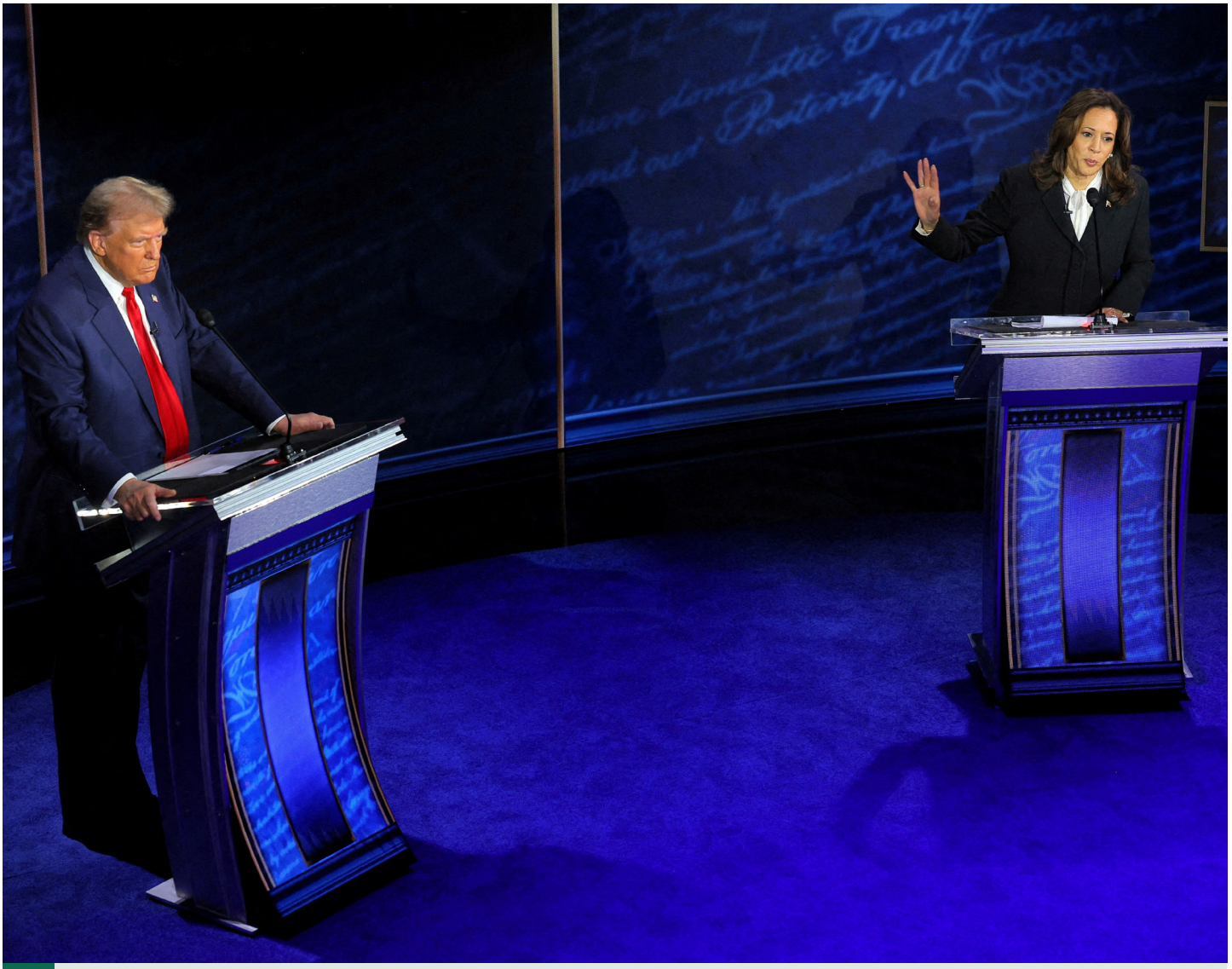

US and UK Elections: Implications for NATO and Northern European Security

Ed Arnold, Max Bergmann and Karsten Friis

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Introduction

Elections on both sides of the Atlantic have highlighted diverging views and increasing tensions over the importance of the security alliance, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. The most impactful election will undoubtedly take place in the United States, where the two candidates present Europe with remarkably different challenges. The election of Vice President Kamala Harris will largely represent continuity with President Biden. While reassuring Europe about her and America's commitment to European security, there will be few clear incentives for Europeans to undertake the transformational changes necessary to adapt to an increasingly volatile security landscape. On the other hand, if former President Donald Trump secures a second term in the Oval Office, Europeans could see their transatlantic security alliance thrown into turmoil and could be forced to consider difficult and uncomfortable steps to strengthen their own security. 2024 has also seen important elections in the US and perhaps most notably for Northern European security in the United Kingdom. The UK election on July 4th led to a change in the main governing party for the first time in 14 years. The new Labour government has expressed a "NATO first" approach, the need for a "reset" with Europe, and firm support for Ukraine.

As the NATO Alliance reflects on its 75th anniversary celebration in Washington, DC, questions loom regarding its capacity to deter a potentially emboldened Russia, particularly considering the Kremlin's recent advances in the war in Ukraine, now entering its third year. This analysis assesses the implications of the elections on both sides of the Atlantic. It combines perspectives from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway, and weighs the implications for NATO, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and future security in Northern Europe.

The United States Elections

The two presidential candidates, Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump have very different perspectives on NATO.

As President Biden's Vice President and as a candidate Harris has publicly expressed strong support for the NATO alliance and for Ukraine. Nevertheless, Europeans will worry about the depth of her commitment to NATO and European security, contrasting her with President Biden, who had been deeply engaged with NATO and European security issues for nearly half a century. A key challenge will be how a President Harris will balance the calls from Europeans, now extremely concerned about their security and wanting significantly more US engagement, with the demands caused by a rising China, as well as other global events. However, given the ongoing war in Ukraine, the sharp contrast that Harris has made with Trump on Russia and NATO, as well as the sense that support for Ukraine and strengthening NATO is an important Biden administration legacy issue – an administration that she was a leading member of – it is likely that her administration will make a point of prioritizing Ukraine and NATO, initially at least.

A second Trump administration is more challenging to surmise. Nevertheless, it will likely have a much greater impact on NATO than his first administration. With European security more a focus now and with President Trump now likely to have identified several likeminded political appointees that share his scepticism of NATO, US policy will probably go in a dramatically new direction. But will Trump's harsh rhetoric be matched with policy action this time?

Harris Administration Priorities

No American president had more foreign policy experience coming to office than Joe Biden. Vice President Harris, by contrast, would have significantly more foreign policy experience than most incoming first term presidents, having served as Vice President for four years and been on the Senate Intelligence Committee for a similar amount of time. Harris has thus travelled around the world representing the Administration, including at the Munich Security Conference and at the Ukraine Peace Conference. Her national security advisors are also integrated with the White House's foreign policy team. With former Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, Phil Gordon, serving as her National Security Advisor, she has a seasoned Europe hand as her closest advisor. In her public statements in an official capacity and as a candidate for President she has expressed strong support for NATO and Ukraine. In her speech at the Democratic National Convention she said, "Trump… threatened to abandon NATO. He encouraged Putin to invade our allies. Said Russia could 'do whatever the hell they want'. Five days before Russia attacked Ukraine, I met with President Zelensky to warn him about Russia's plan to invade. I helped mobilize a global response — over 50 countries — to defend against Putin's aggression. And as president, I will stand strong with Ukraine and our NATO allies."

Harris will likely seek to reassure Europe and Ukraine early in her administration. She will probably ask Congress to pass an additional aid package and will make a point of visiting Europe early in her tenure. However, Harris will face tensions about America's engagement with Europe. President Biden has what can be described as a traditional view of America's role in NATO and saw the need for the

United States to continue play its central, if not indispensable, role in Europe.

Yet Harris will likely face questions over how much attention, and therefore resources, can be devoted to Europe given other demands, especially China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, with a Harris administration there exists the potential of the US making strong public commitments to Europe yet those pronouncements not matching the reality of shifting resources and attention to Asia.

There is an ongoing debate in the United States over the extent to which the US military is overstretched in the world. On the one hand, the US military remains the preeminent military force with tremendous global capacity. On the other hand, US military spending relative to its GDP has declined and the threat posed by China is more challenging than any other threat to the United States since the Soviet Union. China's military modernization has thrown a spotlight on the challenges to the US military and its defence-industrial base, particularly as regards shipbuilding and stockpiles of munitions.

There is already intense competition for resources between theatres, specifically between EUCOM and INDOPACOM. It is likely, despite Russia's military recapitalization, that INDOPACOM will receive the lion's share of the Pentagon's assets. Moreover, it is clear that a Harris administration wants to focus overall on the Indo-Pacific, as seen through the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the implementation and creation of new and enhanced partnerships including the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN, and more. During the first year of the Biden administration, despite the President's deep attachment to NATO and European security, the emphasis was on the Indo-Pacific. The administration sought to "park" Russia and shift the alliance's focus to Asia. It also demonstrated that it was willing to dismiss European concerns about the withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS's impact on relations with France.

It is possible that Harris may return to the posture of the Obama administration towards Europe, when Europe was not treated as a priority. President Obama was not seen as having a deep attachment to Europe or European security and was perceived as largely going through the motions in his engagement with Europe. President Harris, however, may have a deeper attachment brought out by the war in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine will remain a key focus area for the Harris administration. President Harris will likely seek a follow-on supplemental aid package in 2025 for Ukraine. However, the administration may also be open to re-engaging Russia in negotiations should future Ukrainian counteroffensives prove futile. If the war ends with a stalemated ceasefire, the administration's attention will likely shift significantly from Europe. However, actions by Russia to destabilize Europe, and potentially the United States, may prove impossible to ignore and frustrate the administration's Asia hands who are eager to pivot.

Furthermore, she may develop strong relationships with European leaders, just as President Obama did with Angela Merkel and David Cameron. The new UK Labour government led by Keir Starmer will be very keen to rekindle the special relationship. Additionally, EU Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen had a very close relationship with President Biden, which led to a dramatic strengthening in US-EU collaboration, and will likely seek to establish a similarly close relationship with President Harris.

Trump Administration Priorities

A second Trump administration may prove far different than his first administration. Looking back at the Trump administration's actions on Europe, Europeans should not take solace in the fact that money for European security increased through the European Deterrence Initiative and that the Trump administration sold lethal anti-tank missiles to Ukraine. Those actions were done either by a Congress that was very different to today due to the presence of traditional hawks like John McCain, and an administration that contained non-partisan stalwarts of American foreign policy, such as General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense.

President Trump's negative views of NATO are deeply held. At the NATO Summit in 2017 and his first as President, President Trump refused to commit to Article 5. In 1987, Trump paid over $94,000 for a full-page advertisement in The New York Times, disparaging NATO and alliances, asking "Why are these nations not paying the United States for the human lives and billions of dollars we are losing to protect their interests?" Furthermore, unlike his first administration, which did little planning to govern since it did not expect to win, there is significant planning for his second term. Many political appointees are being identified and policy papers are being drafted to align with and implement Trump's world view, including pulling back from NATO. One prominent paper, by Sumantra Maitra, calls for a "dormant NATO" with the US substantially pulling back from the alliance but still offering its nuclear deterrent.

Another main line of argument from Trump-allied scholars asserts that the US military is overstretched and there is a need to focus almost all US attention on the threat posed by China. Moreover, it is argued, the only way to make Europe step up and take responsibility for its own security, is for the US to step back. Former Trump Pentagon official Elbridge Colby is one of the most prominent purveyors of this view.

As for Ukraine, it is unlikely that Trump will seek another supplemental aid package and one is not likely to be passed if he is President. Trump did not support the 2024 supplemental but also did not vigorously oppose its passage.

Nevertheless, Trump continues to have an affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his first impeachment was the result of President Trump trying to pressure President Volodymyr Zelensky to open up a corruption investigation into then-candidate Biden. Trump has said he would immediately resolve the war, yet has offered no concrete plans about how he would do so. It is unlikely that Trump would take an active interest in the conflict, and if his administration gets involved, it will likely be to pressure Ukraine to come to terms with Russia.

This can be a possible starting point for a new Trump administration. But Trump may also not pay much attention to European security and is unlikely to prioritize a new policy towards NATO. It will thus be left to appointees at State and Defense to develop and execute a new NATO policy. They may not care to do so and may drag their feet. Europeans may also proudly point to their increases in defence spending, which may blunt Trump's criticism and demands for change. But a more likely outcome is that Trump's decades-long deep scepticism of NATO, as well as a slew of motivated political appointees that not only strongly back him but also want to move Republican foreign policy in a new direction, will push US policy towards NATO in a starkly different direction.

This means shifting responsibility for the defence of Europe to Europeans. In response, Europe's best course may be to both take dramatic action and plead for time, given Europe will not be able to fill the void left by an abrupt US pullback anytime soon.

The United Kingdom elections

On 4 July 2024 Labour won a landslide victory with 412 seats of a total 650 in the UK House of Commons. Almost immediately, the new UK Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, and his defence and security teams attended NATO's historic 75th anniversary Washington Summit, followed by the UK hosting the fourth meeting of the European Political Community. This fortuitous international schedule allowed the new government to immediately progress two central pillars of its emerging defence and security policy – a "NATO first" approach and a "reset" with Europe. Moreover, an earlier than anticipated election allows the new government to have five months to 'bed in' before having to manage the aftermath of a hugely divisive US election and the destabilizing prospect of a second Trump Presidency.

Defence and security as an unlikely battleground

It has long been a truism of UK politics that there are "no votes in defence". However, in a more dangerous, more volatile, and more confrontational world, where domestic pressures such as the cost of living crisis can be directly linked to international affairs– especially Russia's war on Ukraine – defence and security featured more prominently in the election campaign. However, it was not a decisive issue for the outcome. The main difference that now stands between the two parties is overall defence spending. In April 2024, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that the UK would increase defence spending to 2.5 % of GDP by 2030 – described as a "turning point" in European security. Thus far, Labour has declined to match this policy, instead describing it as an aspiration.

Now in power, Labour have assessed that there is a £22bn deficit in the public finances and that October budget's will be "painful" with departments directed to identify up to £1bn of savings. In this tight fiscal environment, and with a £17bn black hole already in the defence equipment budget to 2033, further defence cuts might need to be made.

The Strategic Defence Review

On 17 July 2024 the Prime Minister launched the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) to "determine the roles, capabilities and reforms required by UK Defence to meet the challenges, threats and opportunities of the twenty-first century, deliverable and affordable within the resources available to Defence within the trajectory to 2.5%."

The SDR is a departure from recent UK reviews which also included foreign and security policy in their scope and, thus far, it reflects the 1998 SDR – the last under a Labour government. It is to be an external review, led by Lord Robertson of Port Ellen – who managed the 1998 version as Secretary of State for Defence – alongside retired General Sir Richard Barrons, and Dr Fiona Hill, former deputy assistant to President Trump and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the U.S. National Security Council from 2017 to 2019. Due to report in the first half of 2025, the SDR will likely have to make tough choices for UK defence that have too often been deferred. Moreover, the outcome of the US Presidential election will be a key determining factor to the outcome of the review and the possible trajectory of Euro-Atlantic security over the next decade.

In addition, Foreign Secretary David Lammy has outlined the "case for progressive realism" as Labour's approach to foreign policy, where European security will be the absolute priority. This includes a broad "reset" of relations across Europe to expedite a "wide ranging and ambitious" UK-EU defence and security pact as a foreign policy priority. While relations between the EU and UK have improved since the start of the war in Ukraine due to practical cooperation on sanctions policy, these proposals would make improving the UK's relations with Europe a point of difference. In conjunction with this ambition, on 28 August PM Starmer travelled to Berlin to meet Chancellor Olaf Scholz to kick off a six-month negotiation of a new bilateral cooperation treaty to be ready in "early 2025". The negotiations will be led by foreign ministries and have defence cooperation as a key pillar. Therefore, the UK's relationship with Europe is likely to be a significant change from previous UK policy.

Implications of a Harris win

Given the central tenets of UK defence and security policy – the bilateral relationship with the US and NATO as power maximisers – a Harris win would be inherently preferable for the UK.
The hope in London will be that there is a large degree of policy continuity in the US if the White House is retained by the Democrats under a Harris Presidency. In the short-term, this is likely to be the case. However, the UK must be prepared for more substantial changes of American policy over the course of this Parliament. Indeed, the NATO Summit in Washington in July was Sir Keir Starmer's first international trip as Prime Minister, and due to the alphabetical seating arrangements, he sat next to President Biden throughout. Despite the change of ticket from Biden to Harris shortly after the Summit, this was a good opportunity to forge a strong Democrat-Labour pairing and increase Washington's engagement with the UK on wider policy. However, there will still be hard choices for the UK to make, especially around resourcing its global aspirations between the two priority "strategic arenas" – the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific respectively. Here, it is highly likely that the UK will follow the US lead and gain agreement on where UK diplomatic, technological, and military assets can best support US global aspirations between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and between the threats and challenges posed by Russia and China, individually and collectively.

Implications of a Trump win

A second Trump Presidency would be far more difficult for the UK to weather than the first. The security environment has rapidly deteriorated in the intervening four years and stability and predictability are important traits in international affairs. There are several immediate implications for the possible Trump effect on UK national security.

First, Trump's NATO policy and its unpredictability would be incredibly difficult for the UK, given the US's role within the Alliance and its absolute centrality to defence policy. As such, any serious Trump-induced NATO crisis will require a strong, and perhaps bold, response from the UK, and necessitate working with its network of European allies to stabilise the situation.

Moreover, the UK would have to step up in Europe to mitigate the impacts of any US drawdown, especially in specialist capabilities such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW). A potential drawdown of US assets within the UK would be minimal, given the strong nuclear and intelligence relationship and joint working between the two countries which would largely be sheltered from political changes. Therefore, any such crisis is also an oppor-

tunity for the UK to re-state its European leadership credentials.

Second, AUKUS is a strategic infrastructure and technology transfer programme with a significant diplomatic component. It requires stability and predictability. There will be concern in the UK over what advice Trump might be getting on the deal, and whether he can strike a better one for the US. Moreover, questions continue to be raised over whether the US has the capacity to provide the allotted Virginia Class submarines to Australia under Pillar 1 of the pact. If Pillar 1 falters, then Pillar 2 – the most ambitious and valuable – would be in serious jeopardy.

Finally, both the bilateral US-UK intelligence relationship and the 5EYES intelligence relationship between the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand might be subjected to strain given the revelations in 2023 that hundreds of classified documents were found in Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, including details of allies' defence capabilities and potential vulnerabilities,

Continuity

The UK SDR will be the first written by the Labour Party in 27 years. There will be understandable political pressure to put a Labour stamp on UK defence policy. However, these imprints are likely to be rhetorical, with terms such as "Global Britain" and "Indo-Pacific tilt" – long associated with Brexit and the Conservatives – dropped for newer slogans. Beyond such rebranding, it is difficult to see any truly substantive changes. In both the Integrated Review 2021 and its 2023 "refreshed" document, the Euro-Atlantic was already the UK's priority – despite the messaging of the "tilt" – with Russia identified as the most acute threat. Moreover, the refresh committed the UK to "lead and galvanise where we have most value to add, giving particular priority … to the contribution we can make in northern Europe as a security actor". This prioritisation of Northern Europe has been a natural evolution of UK policy over the last decade and there are strong drivers for an increased role for the UK in the region, as part of NATO. This role would be as a leading nation of the Joint Expeditionary Force, or bilaterally with Britain's closest allies in the Baltic Sea Region. As such, it is very unlikely that this strategy will be changed.

Norway and Northern Europe

Norway, like most other European allies, would be more comfortable with a Harris administration than a Trump one. The current Democratic presidency has made international partnership and integrated deterrence a cornerstone of its security policy, and it is likely that Harris will follow the same pattern. But such a rationale is unlikely to be emphasised in the same way by a new Trump administration, given Trump's more transactional approach to international relations. Furthermore, the unpredictability which follows Trump's political style creates unease among allies. That said, as argued above, in time a Democratic-led US will also prioritize Asia-Pacific over Europe. In other words, Norway and its Nordic and European neighbours must prepare for a reduced American footprint in Europe. The question is rather how abruptly it will happen and how far such a drawdown from Europe eventually will go.

For Norway and the other Nordic states, NATO membership is primarily an alliance with the United States, secondarily with the major European military powers, and thirdly with each other. Strengthening (and joining) NATO has been a means to achieve all three ends, as it institutionalises and operationalises the commitments of the armed forces. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, have all also established a host of bilateral collaborative defence agreements with the US, UK, Germany, France and other allies, in addition to their multilateral Nordic Defence Cooperation. Several joint defence-industrial projects with industrial partners within the region and beyond also reinforce security ties. The question is whether all these initiatives are strong enough to secure continued deterrence and defence of Northern Europe if the United States reduces its engagement in Europe.

NATO more robust

Over the last decade or so the allies have made NATO more relevant and robust in order to meet the main security challenges facing both the American and European continents. Russia, terrorism, and China are all listed in NATO's Strategic Concept and in recent Summit declarations, but there is little doubt that it is the Russian aggression against Ukraine that has shaped the concrete reform of NATO since 2014. This reformation includes new defence plans, new response forces, and a shared political commitment to stop cutting defence budgets and rather increase them to 2% of GDP. Much of the political focus has been on the 2% target and burden-sharing, but with 23 allies likely to reach this target in 2024, the political risk associated with burden-sharing may be reduced. All the Nordic allies have declared they will reach the 2% landmark in 2024. On the other hand, there is already pressure within the alliance to continue the increases up towards 2.5% and beyond, so one cannot rule out that the US administration will continue to emphasise enhanced burden-sharing in the future.

NATO has simultaneously done a tremendous job at reorienting itself to address the new threat landscape. This work has been progressing more or less irrespective of the nature of presidential administrations in the US, or political leadership in other allied countries for that matter. The newest suite of defence plans, based on the 2020 concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), and combined with a new force model designed to fulfil these plans under a revised command structure, means NATO is about to become more prepared for collective defence than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

What remains is the implementation of the planned increases in European defence spending. It will take several years before these investments materialise in a substantially stronger Europe which is less dependent upon the US. But through the defence plans the requirements will be clearly spelled out. These requirements also apply to the two new NATO members, Finland and Sweden, which need to both fill positions in NATO headquarters and strengthen their own forces. As argued elsewhere, formal membership is only the beginning. In short, this effort to transform NATO and equalise burden-sharing both increases the chances of continued US commitment and strengthens Europe's ability to take more responsibility in a concerted way.

Bilateral agreements with the US

The US has signed bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCA) with all the Nordic countries. These agreements envisage US investment in multiple military bases – altogether 48 – across the Nordics to facilitate swift movements of US troops and equipment between countries. However, thus far few concrete investments have been made. Other bilateral defence agreements, such as the US Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPP-N), also exist. If a future US administration deploys fewer troops to Europe, the need for these investments and facilities might be reduced. If, on the other hand, the US seeks to keep contributing to conventional deterrence in Europe even with fewer troops permanently stationed here, the calculus could be different. Bases and facilities to which one can quickly deploy from the US in case of crisis could rise in importance. With Finland and Sweden in NATO, their territories (as well as Denmark's and Norway's) would also be prized as a mean of supporting allies' ability to reinforce the Baltics.

Nonetheless, a reduced American footprint in Northern Europe would most likely negatively impact US participation in exercise activity in the Baltic Sea and the Nordic countries. Exercises enhance situational awareness, familiarity with the terrain, and experience with cold weather operations – all important elements to maintain the ability to operate in the North. Hence, the absence of such training could, over time, erode the credibility of the US deterrence in Northern Europe.

Another important US bi- and multilateral activity is the Bomber Task Force (BTF), which is the deployment of American B-1B, B-2 or B52 bombers to Europe about four times per year. It is a very potent signal of US commitment to collective defence in Europe, both conventional and nuclear. The BTF has regularly operated in the Nordic region, including in the Arctic and most recently in Sweden. This activity could also in principle be reduced or cancelled by a new US administration. On the other hand, the BTF was initiated during the Trump presidency (in 2019), and since it does not imply the permanent stationing of troops or equipment in Europe, it may not be the first to be sacrificed in the case of a draw-down.

Over the last few years, we have also witnessed an intensified trilateral defence cooperation between the US, the UK, and Norway in the north. F-35s, P8 MPAs, Marines, UAVs, Navy, and other units are exercising and cooperating very closely. This is cost-effective, increases interoperability, and draws the participants closer together on both operational and political levels. This activity could of course also suffer from a potential US draw-down, but as long as it also serves US national interests it is likely to continue.

US National security interests in the Arctic

The United States has significant national security interests in the Arctic and the North Atlantic. In other words, American attention to these regions is not only a result of the security guarantee enshrined in NATO. Rather, it is first and foremost driven by the presence of the Russian strategic nuclear submarines (SSBNs) in the Arctic. Nuclear ballistic missiles launched from these submarines represent a direct threat to the North American continent. More recently, new Russian hypersonic missiles and other Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDT) have been tested in the Arctic. As a result, the US has a significant national interest – as a form of extended homeland defence – in detecting, deterring, and preventing the use of these weapons in case of war. This remains unchanged since the Cold War and will continue to be so irrespective of American policy towards NATO and the rest of Europe. Several American military commands, such as Northcom, Norad, the 2nd Fleet, and the 6th Fleet all have an eye on Russian nuclear and EDT activities in the Arctic. Sub-sea activity, aerial maritime patrols, space activity, sensors, and intelligence collection in the North are all associated with this. Hence, the broad bilateral intelligence cooperation with Norway will continue regardless of who sits in the White House. Recent new initiatives, such as the joint US-Norwegian satellite station at Andøya Space Centre, are also likely to continue. This new establishment will support the infrastructure of the US Space Force and is "intended to increase situational awareness; command, control and tracking; and create a resilient meshwork of sensors and effectors". It is, according to media reporting, "particularly designed for the use of long-range precision weapons and air defense against cruise missiles".

Defence of the Nordic territories

Despite the probable continuation of American attention on Russian strategic weapons, it is not a given that the US commitment to reinforcement and forward defence in the Nordic region will continue as before. It is, for instance, not necessarily certain that control of the land domain is a military prerequisite for the US tracking of Russia's strategic submarines. If this is so, the US Army and Marine Corps may not prioritise the European northern flank in their planning. More restrained US engagement in Europe in the future could therefore imply that the Nordics would have to defend the northern flank with significantly reduced US support. The Nordics are advancing plans for closer integration of their air forces under a joint command, and the land forces are deliberating something similar. But allied (European) support will continue to be necessary if a protracted conflict breaks out in the North. The UK is likely to continue its engagement but is also stretched between commitments to the Baltics/Estonia through the Enhanced Forward Presence, and the Nordics, including the Arctic. But few other European powers have a surplus of ground forces which could realistically be deployed in the North.

Conclusion – is Europe ready?

If Donald Trump is elected in November, it will surely have a chilling effect across most European capitals. Not primarily because of fear of NATO collapsing, but because of the uncertainty it brings regarding US commitments to collective defence and support for Ukraine. Furthermore, a more introverted United States which puts up higher trade barriers, disbands its climate policies, and ceases to be a global leader for liberal democracy will be at odds with Europe on many fronts. Security and defence cannot be seen in isolation from these other policy areas.

Hence, in most scenarios for future transatlantic security relations, it is assumed that the United States will expect its European allies to carry the main burden of European defence. As defence budgets are rising in most European countries – they have increased by 43% since 2014 – this message appears to be getting through to European capitals. Already 23 of the 32 NATO allies are expected to reach the 2% target this year. Nevertheless, Europe continues to get surprisingly little 'bang for the buck', given the fact that the combined European defence spending is 17% of the global total, amounting to $407bn in 2023. This is mainly because European armed forces continue to be primarily organized nationally. As a result, there are numerous parallel structures, as each country tends to insist on retaining everything, from staff colleges to defence industries, under national control. To increase efficiency and operational effect, Europe needs to integrate more, even if it is politically challenging. This also applies to the Nordics.

Northern Europe must be prepared for change: potentially abruptly with a Trump administration or more gradually with Harris. While the American military footprint in Europe is likely to be reduced over time, the Putin regime in Moscow will remain a challenge and a danger to Europe as long as it is in power. Europe must therefore be prepared to stand up against this risk with reduced American assistance. For the smaller Nordic allies close to Russia's border, this is potentially dangerous and the continued support from key allies, such as the UK and the US, is crucial. Therefore, the Nordics need to beef up their own defence structures, integrate and cooperate more closely with the UK and others under the NATO umbrella, but also actively cultivate security links to Washington – irrespective of who is holding the reins in the White House.

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