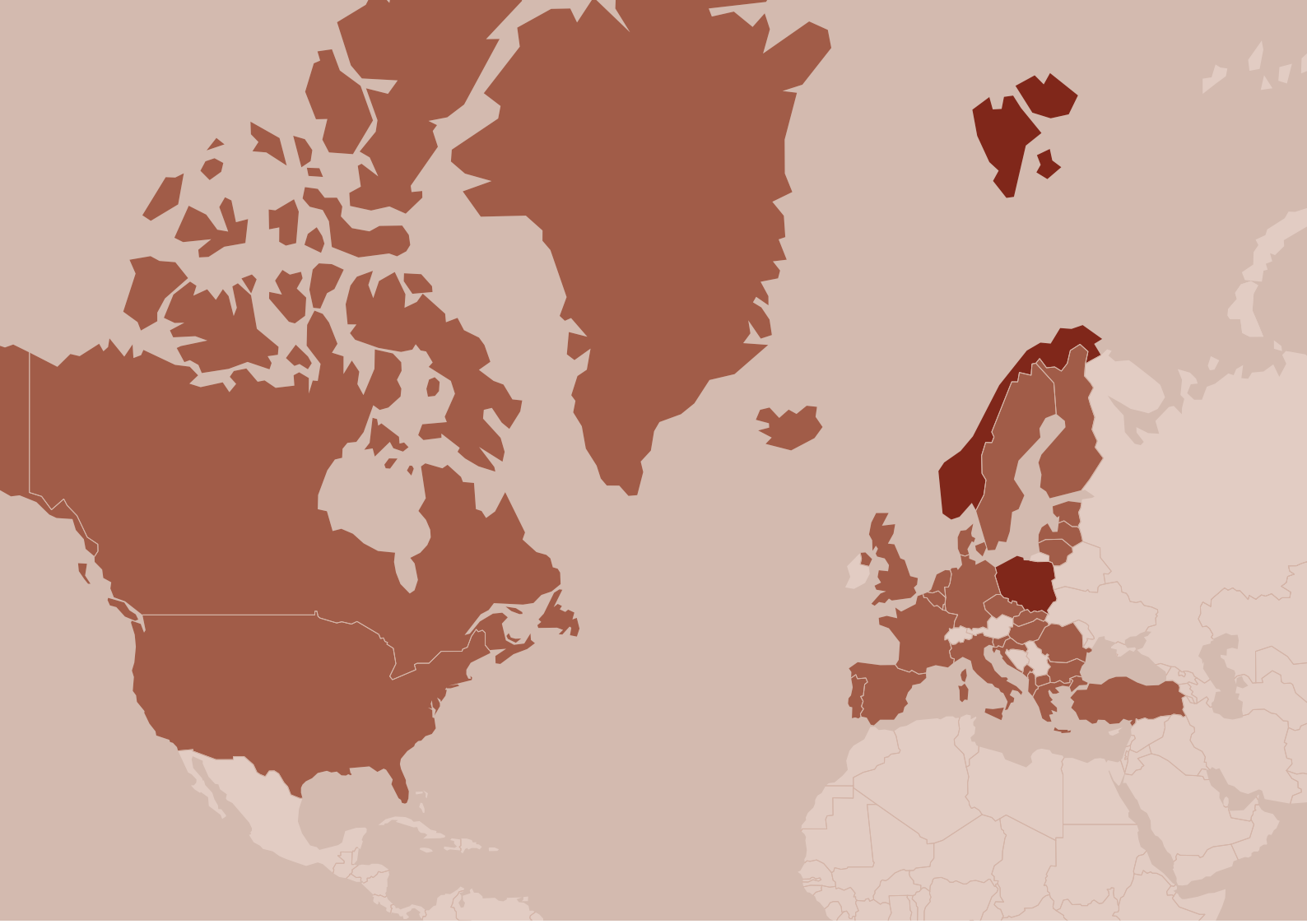




NORPOLFACTOR WP 4

Norway and Poland as members of transatlantic and European security community

Opportunities and challenges (2024)

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Affairs



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Work on this NORPOLFACTOR paper was concluded on 20 January 2025, the day of inauguration of Donald Trump as the U.S. 47th president. Our analysis covers only developments to this date, but we are aware that developments in the weeks, months and years to come can – and most probably will – make some of the preliminary conclusions we draw at this important turning point look odd and/or off target.

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1

The concept of security community

Norway is one of the founding members of NATO since 1949 and member of the cooperation in the European Economic Area that has strengthened economic and partly political bond between Norway and the European Union since 1994. The main reason why Norway is not a full-fledged member of the EU is that 52.2 percent of 88.6 percent of eligible voters who took part in the referendum conducted in the country on 27 and 28 November 1994 rejected the idea of Norway's joining the union.

Poland joined the two Western institutions first after the country regained its full sovereignty in 1989. In 1999 Poland, together with the Czech Republic and Hungary, joined NATO. In 2004 the country managed to meet the EU entry criteria and joined the EU after the referendum held on 7 and 8 June 2003 in which 77.45 percent of the 58.85 percent of eligible voters who took part supported this idea.

Both NATO and the EU are often referred to as the most important institutional embodiments of the Western security community, a group of countries that stick to liberal-democratic values and believe that common social, political and economic problems must and can be resolved by processes of peaceful change which means that they rule out the use of violence as a way of settling disputes among them. The term 'security community' was first used in 1957 by Karl Deutsch who defined it as a group of people believing that the resolution of social, political and economic problems should be done by institutionalized procedures, without resorting to large-scale physical force. Members of a security community are also bound by the 'sense of

community', the mutual sympathy, trust, and common interests.¹ Another seminal work on security communities by Adler and Burnett published in 1998 redefined security community as a group of actors who share identities, values, and meanings and are involved in many-sided direct interactions and share reciprocal long-term interests.²

States form security communities to eliminate the use of force in relations among them and security alliances to increase their security vis-à-vis external actors who may pose a threat. The logic of deterrence was the chief rationale for joining NATO in 1949 and in the later rounds of its enlargement. Belonging to a military alliance provides opportunities to improve security by joining forces with others – but can also give rise to challenges and fears. The most important challenge is the loss of autonomy, creating a situation of dependence. The main fear is the fear of being abandoned by allies in a crisis, and the fear of being drawn into a conflict resulting from the imprudent actions of one or many allies.³ When making decision on joining a security community that is mostly, as the EU, preoccupied with economic and social aspects of broadly understood security questions related to prevention of an external aggression may seem to play a much less prominent role as the EU has not been traditionally viewed as a provider of hard security. However, for various reasons the situation is about to change as there are growing doubts about the credibility of the NATO Article 5 caused by the recent developments in the USA and the EU has embarked on the policy of strengthening its military muscle.

NATO and the EU as evolving security communities

NATO was established in 1949 to provide collective security to its members in the time of rising tensions after the outbreak of the Cold War between what was to become a transatlantic Western security community and the Soviet Union. Its main purpose at that time, at least according to an apocryphal interpretation of the words of the first NATO Secretary General Lord Ismay was to 'keep the U.S. in, Germany down and the Soviet Union out'. Over the past 75 years NATO's main objective has been to build the necessary deterrence potential to prevent aggression against its members and the adequate military capabilities to repel any aggression should it happen. The security guarantee provided by NATO's Article 5 is also what have made several countries seek membership in the alliance after its inception in 1949. As a result, the number of members of NATO increased from the original 12 in 1949 to 32 by the end of 2024, with Finland and Sweden joining as the last ones in 2023 and 2024 respectively. One of the key reasons why various countries have over the past 75 years sought the membership of the alliance was the perception of the Soviet Union and then Russia as a source of possible strategic threat based on the historical record. This was also the main motivation of Norway and Poland when they decided to join the alliance at different moments of the alliance's – and their – history.

The EU is another example of a relatively well-functioning security community. It is important to remember that the key idea informing the work on the European integration project was the assumption that increased level of economic and political cooperation would be the best way of preventing the outbreak of a new devastating great power conflict in Europe.

Although the focus of this European integration project was economic integration, its implementation has also had huge political and security implications for the increasing number of EU members and Europe as a whole. With the broad understanding of security, including not only its purely military aspects, but also

economic, environmental, societal and political dimensions, it is obvious that the EU has become an increasingly more important security actor. There are several developments and institutional adaptations that have made the EU a more important security actor. The European Union plays a significant role in shaping security both within Europe and globally through various strategies and policies:

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is a key framework under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that allows EU member states to collaborate on security and defence matters, addressing conflicts and crises, protecting the Union and its citizens, and strengthening international peace and security.⁴

EU Global Strategy titled *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe* outlines the Union's strategic vision for its global role.⁵ This strategy emphasizes the importance of a rules-based global order, conflict resolution, and better coordination of internal and external actions to bolster security and defence of the EU but also in more general terms.⁶

European Security Union is another security-related initiative launched in 2020 that aims to ensure that EU security policy reflects the changing threat landscape, builds long-term resilience, and engages various stakeholders in a comprehensive approach to security.⁷

Finally, the EU can use various types of power at its disposal – such as normative power, regulatory power, market power and economic power to project its influence and respond to developments in its strategic environment. The EU's response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine has further solidified its role in global security as the EU has been actively involved in providing not only economic and humanitarian but also military support to Ukraine and at the same time embarked on the policy of reinforcing its own defence capabilities.⁸

Faced with the need to add military capabilities to its power arsenal the EU and member states embarked on the policy of rebuilding their military potential and industrial capacities to be able to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian aggression and deal with the growing Russian military challenge to Europe. In addition, the EU has been facing various security risks, challenges and threats stemming from various parts of the broadly understood security spectrum caused by implementation by adversarial powers of various measures from the political and hybrid warfare toolbox.

This was most probably one of the reasons why the Polish Presidency of the Council that began on 1 January 2025 decided to focus on how the EU could deal with various security related challenges. Poland presented an ambitious presidency programme, the main goal of which was to implement the priorities set around the topic of security. Poland took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union at a time of uncertainty and concern when Europe was grappling with the consequences of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. In a situation of increasing geopolitical tensions, the erosion of the rules-based international order and hybrid attacks targeting European democracy and security there was an obvious need to strengthen its own defence capacity, to protect the Union and its citizens and provide support to the immediate neighbourhood. It was therefore decided that the EU should deal with the following broadly understood set of security challenges.

In the sphere of defence and security the EU must adopt a concerted and ambitious approach, complementing the efforts of NATO in this area. Special attention should be given to improving defence readiness, revitalisation of defence industry, strengthening cooperation with NATO and like-minded non-EU countries, mainly the USA, as well as the UK, South Korea and others.

Having in mind the complex nature of threats states and societies must deal with also questions related to protection of people and borders were defined as important. Here special attention should be paid to security at the EU's external borders and dealing with various types of hybrid threats, including resistance to foreign interference and disinformation and measures aimed at strengthening of the resilience of

democracy and its ability to curb polarization. Another topic that deserves more attention is the better coordination in the fight against disinformation, information manipulation as well as the ability of the EU's ability to prevent and mitigate the effects of hostile actions in cyberspace, including through the development of modern, secure digital services.

Having adopted the broad understanding of security and being first and foremost an economic organisation it should not be surprising to see that also questions related to security and freedom of business, issues related to deepening of the Single Market, the reduction of bureaucratic burdens and focus on a fair – and unfair – competition, questions related to energy transition, including security of the supply of energy resources and full withdrawal from imports of Russian energy sources were also put on the agenda by the Polish Presidency.

Most probably because of the role Polish agriculture plays in the EU also issues related to competitive and resilient agriculture were added to the list of the EU and Polish Presidency priorities in the first half of 2025. In addition and probably caused by the recent outbreak of the COVID pandemic and its devastating impacts on economy and society, health related questions were also deemed important, with special attention given to the efficiency of medical services that was to be improved by digital transformation of healthcare and diversification of medicines supply chains.

There have been several reasons why security has become the top EU priority in the first half of 2025 and will most probably remain one of the key policy foci in the years to come. The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine has been one of the key factors influencing thinking about security in the EU and member states, especially in those most exposed to its negative immediate consequences and having good reasons to fear Russia's revanchism. Also Russia's use of various types of measures from its hybrid and political warfare arsenal aiming at undermining cohesion of the Western community and its political and societal resilience played an important part in drawing attention to security.⁹ But also recent developments in the collective West and especially what could be labelled the strategic anxiety caused by the return of Donald Trump as the U.S. 47th president

and the impact this return may have on the form and content of the transatlantic security cooperation have prompted the EU institutions and member states to focus more not only on non-military aspects of security, but also on the need to improve Europe's military capabilities, strengthen its strategic autonomy and ability to act independently of the U.S.

Although at the moment of writing the new U.S. administration has not yet presented any official detailed plans concerning its relations with the U.S. European allies, including Norway and Poland, the previous experience of having Donald Trump as the U.S. president as well as his recent statements on NATO have made many think about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to Europe and thus the credibility of the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.¹⁰

Having this uncertainty in mind it should not be surprising to see more attention being paid in Europe to the possible role of the EU as a security provider to its members. It is therefore also important to remind that the EU has its own variant of NATO's Article 5. The Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union states that 'if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations charter'¹¹. In addition, this article states that 'this shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy

of certain Member States. Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation'.¹² When compared to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, it is worth noting that Article 42(7) can be interpreted as broader and potentially stronger, as it refers to "all means in their power" rather than the more limited formulation of "such action as it deems necessary" in Article 5¹³. Moreover, while NATO focuses specifically on "armed attack," the EU clause uses the term "armed aggression," which could be understood more expansively. For instance, a hybrid attack that is clearly offensive and aggressive in nature—but may fall below the threshold of a full-scale military invasion—might still trigger the EU clause. That said, what continues to make Article 5 more powerful in practice is its normative weight and prominence in public discourse. Article 42.7, by contrast, remains relatively underutilized and rarely referenced by political leaders, policymakers, or military officials. Nevertheless, it is a legal and political tool that could be revived or emphasized in times of crisis, particularly if NATO's collective defence framework were ever to come under strain.

Having these recent developments in mind we will now examine how Norwegian and Polish policymaking communities have responded to these emerging challenges by looking at the evolution of their thinking on the importance of their participation in the transatlantic and European security communities.

2

Norway and the transatlantic security community 2024

Norwegian security is served best by the greatest possible degree of long-term stability and predictability in and around Europe and by well-functioning institutions and agreements that regulate relations between states. Norway should also contribute to strengthened Norwegian and European deterrence capabilities. A well-functioning, well-regulated international society is in Norway's interest. Defending and strengthening an international legal rules-based order is therefore of significant security policy importance. The defence of Norway is based on the recognition that the security challenges facing Norway exceed what Norway will be able to face alone and depends on support to be provided by reliable allies. This was also the key reason why Norway decided to join NATO in 1949.

Norway was one of the founding fathers of NATO, joining already in 1949 and has been playing an important part as its member in the Cold War and the post-Cold War contexts.¹⁴ Norway is also located on an important NATO Northern flank and is sometimes referred to as NATO's eyes and ears in the North.¹⁵

Over the past 75 years Norway has pursued its security policy in a strategic environment dominated by Russia. Given the clear asymmetry in economic, military and demographic potentials, the growing normative gap and Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour NATO membership is still viewed as the best option for dealing with external security challenges, risks and threats in this complex strategic environment, where also

the emergence of new technologies and China as a global player enter the strategic calculus.¹⁶

The importance of NATO is well documented in the set of recently published Norwegian policy documents and especially in the document outlining Norway's long-term priorities in security and defence policy until 2036.¹⁷

NATO is mentioned 271 times in this strategic document. NATO is described as important to Norway, because the security challenges that the country faces exceed what Norway will be able to handle alone. 75 years membership in NATO has secured peace and been Norway's security guarantee. It provided Norway with security and extended room for action. The strengthening of the country's armed forces will support close and integrated allied cooperation and NATO as a credible and effective guarantor of Norwegian and allied security. The document also underlines the importance of the fact that all Nordic countries have become members of the alliance, strengthening Norway's security. The enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden has contributed to redrawing the strategic map of the region, as there is now more focus on the Baltic Sea region. Norway's role as a recipient country of allied reinforcements is becoming more important in helping to defend the NATO countries Sweden and Finland, especially in a situation when it is expected that Russia will meet NATO expansion with a strengthened military presence in the north and northwest, especially along the Finnish border.

What has made NATO important for Norway was that the membership in the alliance allowed the country to avoid bilateralisation in relations with the Soviet Union and then with Russia because it was expected that the United States would intervene on the Norwegian side if conflict broke out between Norway and the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Norway put some limitations on its NATO membership to maintain a low level of tension in the North. The main elements of this policy were: the base policy; the nuclear and port policy; and restrictions on allied military activity, especially in Finnmark which borders on Russia. This policy towards NATO and Russia continued after the end of the Cold War.

Norway describes itself as a maritime front-line state in NATO. Russia views the maritime domain as strategically important because the country has stationed significant parts of its nuclear retaliation capacity on the Kola Peninsula and protection of these strategic assets is a top priority. This also defines Norway's role in NATO in the region that is the area of operation for Russia's strategic submarines. To pursue its policy in the region Russia needs access to the open seas in the North especially since the Baltic Sea is now dominated by NATO countries.

Being a NATO member makes Norway engaged in the areas where the country has not obvious security interests. Norway's engagement in NATO's expeditionary operations is one example of this type of developments. Another one is Norway's growing concerns related to China's role as a security actor as China has also been elevated to the NATO agenda. This has to do with the complex threats posed by China and growing conventional and nuclear capabilities that could challenge the Alliance. Also interaction between China and Russia is of increasing importance for the threats Norway and NATO face, for instance in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a watershed event that has also influenced Norway's relations with NATO. Western unity was defined as crucial and NATO has shown considerable unity following Russia's attack on Ukraine. NATO's Strategic Concept from 2022 required strengthening of collective defence capabilities and placed increased demands on member

states' contributions, including Norway. The threat from Russia has reduced internal tensions between European countries. This has led to an increased willingness to invest in defence among European member states.

Consequently, NATO has been paying more attention to revitalization of collective defence, including in areas where NATO strategic interests overlap with Norway's strategic interests. This has also led to increased Allied interest in situational awareness and presence in the High North and North Atlantic. After 2020 official NATO documents identified Russia and terrorism as the main threats to allied security. Faced with these challenges adopted a new approach to the alliance's collective defence. Special attention was given to coordination of activities in peacetime the planning of the collective response to emerging threats. For Norway, this entailed increased expectations for capacity, volume, flexibility, readiness, availability, infrastructure and host nation support.

Operating in this new international environment NATO had to rethink how to pursue its three core tasks deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and security cooperation with partners. After a period when the focus was put on crisis prevention and management NATO now places the greatest emphasis on deterrence and defence capabilities. This means that NATO must have a broad set of available forces, with increased readiness and greater endurance and that Norway and all other 31 members of the alliance must deliver on their NATO-related obligations.

NATO's ability to defend its members depends on how questions related to improving military capabilities are dealt with by its members. The main task is to deter potential aggressors from launching an attack on NATO by having a credible deterrence strategy. NATO's current deterrence strategy is based on nuclear weapons, conventional forces and missile defence, supported by capabilities in outer and digital space. Nuclear weapons remain the ultimate security guarantee for the alliance and as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will also be a nuclear alliance. However, the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence depends on how these questions are dealt with and addressed by the sole nuclear NATO power that has traditionally provided a

FIGURE 1 Norway's defence expenditures 2014–2024⁷⁷

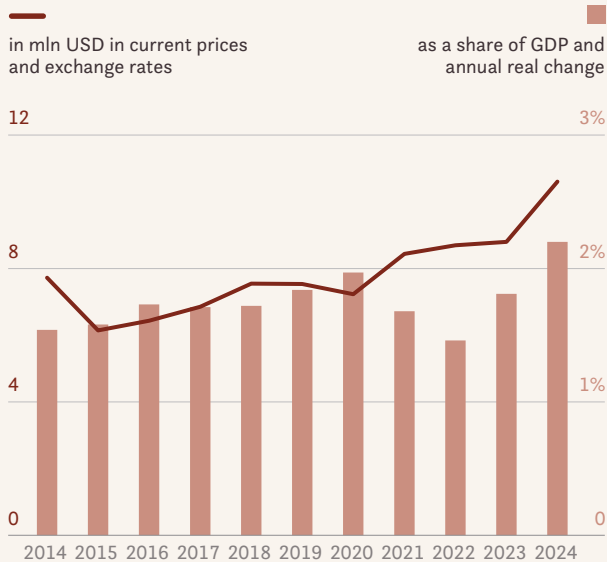
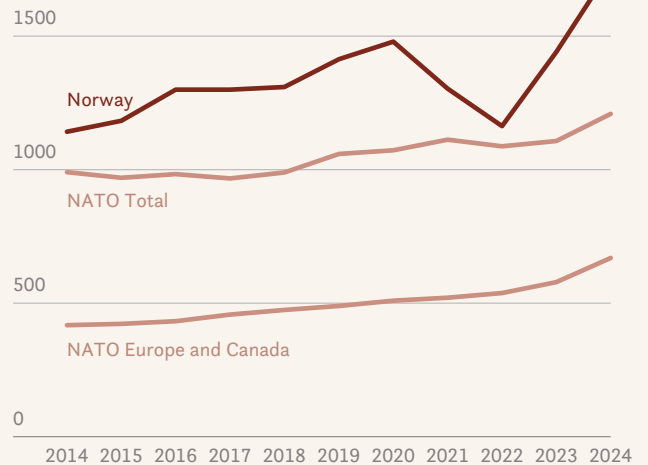


FIGURE 2 Norway's defence spending per capita, compared with European allies and Canada and whole NATO



credible nuclear umbrella to other members of the alliance, including Norway. This means that the political changes in the U.S. observed over the past decade have also had – and are going to have – a crucial impact on the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence, and NATO's deterrence in more general terms.

The 2023 and 2024 NATO Summits reaffirmed the unity of the Alliance and set common Allied goals to strengthen military and deterrence capabilities. From the Norwegian point of view important decisions included a continued restructuring of NATO's collective defence, including the new burden-sharing goals for all the members of the alliance. The countries also agreed to increase resilience in the form of increased protection of underwater infrastructure and risk-reducing measures, which was especially important from the point of view of Oslo which uses underwater infrastructure to provide access to needed energy resources to its NATO allies. With the ongoing full-scale war in Europe it was important that both summits clearly emphasized the Article 5 commitment in the Atlantic Charter that an attack on one is an attack on all.

The military transformation of NATO that is to help the alliance meet the threat from Russia

and international terrorism in line with NATO's Strategic Concept and Comprehensive Concept for Deterrence and Defence plays an important part in securing the security of Norway. In response to NATO expectations Norway has managed to increase the level of its investments in defence to reach the 2% goal, launched its own long-term defence plan¹⁸ and assigned additional funding to boost its military capabilities as the best way of securing its own security¹⁹ and making a credible contribution to increasing military capabilities and deterrence potential of the whole alliance.

For various reasons related amongst others to unexpected increase in GDP caused by skyrocketing energy prices in the first two years after Russian invasion of Ukraine it was first in 2024 that Norway managed to find ways of spending more than 2% of GDP on defence, which was a minimum goal set by NATO and expected by the old and new American administration.

Although it took some time for Norway to meet the 2% line for defence-related expenditures Norway has been one of the biggest defence spenders per capita and most of the hardware was imported from the U.S., which has contributed to strengthening the bilateral security bond and cooperation between Oslo and Washington.

The u.s. factor in Norwegian foreign and security policy 2024

Paying special attention to relations with the USA is understandable having in mind the key role the USA plays in securing security of Norway and all other members of the alliance. Although the USA has taken the lead role when responding to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Washington has over the past decade warned that the level of its engagement in Europe will not be maintained due to the shift of the strategic focus towards the Indo-Pacific region in which competition with China is defined as the main challenge. In addition, Washington argued that the European members of the alliance should take greater responsibility for security in Europe and invest more in their defence capabilities, securing a more balanced burden-sharing within the alliance. These arguments about the need for a more just burden-sharing within the alliance were voiced very strongly especially by the first Trump administration.

During his re-election campaign in 2024 Donald Trump voiced similar concerns and warned that only those members who invest enough in their defence reaching the agreed 2% share could count on the U.S. support during a possible crisis. The re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024 and his formal return to the White House on 20 January 2025 must therefore be considered important factors shaping the future of transatlantic relations. Also the fact that Donald Trump and his team expressed a lot of criticism against the approach towards the war in Ukraine adopted by his predecessor Joe Biden and his administration should be considered an important factor. However, at the moment of the writing of this text the work on which was concluded on 20 January 2025 it is difficult to say how the concerns voiced by Donald Trump during his electoral campaign are going to be translated into policies of the new administration.

In more general terms the U.S. is today viewed by Norwegian policymakers in the following manner: From being the undisputed leader in the world community after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the United States is no longer as

dominant militarily, economically, politically or culturally. This is due, among other things, to the fact that other actors have grown larger and gained more power, especially China. At the same time, the United States' own power base does not have the same strength and scope as before. The United States still has global reach with its military power, but it no longer has the ability to dominate every region militarily at all times. Pressure from within and from abroad against the United States' global position and influence is likely to increase in the coming decades.²⁰ This recognition of the relative weakening of the U.S. power influences also the Norwegian official thinking about the U.S. role as a provider of long-term security guarantees to the country.

According to the most detailed examination of security challenges faced by Norway and measures to be taken to address them, the United States plays a crucial role in Norwegian and European security. The United States accounts for around 70% of total defence spending in NATO, and over time has conveyed a clear message that European allies must contribute more to their own security and secure a more balanced burden sharing in the alliance. This was especially underlined by the first Trump administration (2016–2020) and early signals and warnings coming from Washington during the presidential campaign and the weeks prior to the official transfer of power on 20 January 2025 demonstrated that the Trump 2 administration will push European allies – and Canada – for an even higher level of spending on defence.

American military presence and engagement in Europe is a proof of transatlantic solidarity but it is expected that pressure on the United States' global position will increase. The position of the United States is no longer as dominant as it used to be and the USA will increasingly depend on cooperating with allies and partners to achieve its goals. The United States has taken a leading role in the face of Russia's attack on Ukraine, but the main challenge from the United States' perspective will continue to be China. As the United

States increasingly prioritizes its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, this will affect the United States' military footprint and approach in Europe and in the Norwegian vicinity.²¹

Norwegian policymakers expect the United States to remain the world's strongest military power until 2040. The United States' interest in and role in European security persists as a result of mutual economic dependence, human, cultural and value-based ties that have been built up over a long period of time. The United States also has a fundamental security policy interest in ensuring that Europe is not dominated by states that could threaten the American continent. At the same time, the United States also has more and more overarching global interests. China has been identified for many years as the most serious and real challenger to the United States' global role. The United States' increasing emphasis on China and Asia was reaffirmed in 2022, when the Biden administration presented its national security strategy. It refers to China as the dimensional and long-term threat to American interests. Russia is considered an immediate threat to global and regional stability but is not considered by Washington to have the economic and strategic resources to challenge the United States in the long term.

However, what does not seem to pose a long-term strategic threat to the USA is viewed as posing an almost immediate threat to Norway that borders Russia in the High North where Russia's key strategic assets are deployed. Because in the worst-case scenario these Russian strategic assets can be used to launch a retaliatory strike against the USA it is expected that the USA will be interested in continuing its strategic cooperation with Norway even if the cooperation with other European NATO members were to be downplayed in the U.S. future strategy. This is also one of the reasons why the Norwegian authorities decided to strengthen the bilateral strategic cooperation with the USA. There are several reasons for that:

- **The United States is Norway's most important ally.** The practical bilateral defence cooperation has developed over more than 75 years, based on shared values and mutual security interests. This cooperation is characterized by good dialogue and encompasses all branches, levels, and domains of the Armed Forces.

- **The U.S. is crucial for Norway's defence.** The cooperation with the U.S. will continue to be significant for the development of Norway's defence capabilities and will influence regional cooperation, especially with the UK and Nordic countries.
- **The U.S. is the main contributor to NATO** and is vital for the alliance's deterrence and military defence of Europe. To ensure continued American engagement in European security, it is essential for Norway and Europe to strengthen the European pillar in NATO.
- **Material and industrial cooperation** between the U.S. and Norway is a key part of the dialogue with the U.S. This cooperation has increased over many years, strengthening defence and security ties. Examples include the NASAMS air defence system and the Naval Strike Missile (NSM), reflecting American trust in Norwegian technology.
- **The U.S. drives the development of operational concepts** for future high-tech and demanding environments. The trilateral multidomain cooperation between the U.S., UK, and Norway is central to this effort.
- **Prepositioning of U.S. forces and materiel in Norway** is crucial for U.S. bilateral plans for reinforcement and defence of Norway, supporting NATO plans. The agreement with the U.S. Marine Corps on prepositioning and reinforcement is particularly important.
- **Norway's government emphasizes** that the Armed Forces should ensure that American concept development is relevant for U.S. forces' ability to operate in Norway and nearby areas. The ability to exercise, train, and operate with U.S. forces is maintained and developed.
- **The agreement on Colocated Operating Bases** with the U.S. Air Force Europe includes prepositioning of equipment for combat and tanker aircraft in Norway. Areas under the Supplementary Defence Cooperation Agreement (SDCA) will be used to further develop U.S. prepositioning in Norway, including in the air domain.

- **Significant measures** have been implemented to improve facilities for U.S. forces' training in Inner Troms.
- **The prepositioning arrangement** with the U.S. Navy will be further developed, including the storage of equipment for the updated Expeditionary Medical Facility concept.²²

To address many of the issues related to the idea of strengthening of the bilateral security cooperation between the USA and Norway the two countries signed the Supplementary Defence Cooperation Agreement (SDCA). This is to result in strengthened bilateral cooperation because the SDCA facilitates the development of defence cooperation, benefiting Norway, the Nordic region, and the Baltics by supporting allied reinforcements. An important element is the planned U.S. investments in infrastructure that will enhance Norway's ability to receive and support allied forces, contributing to NATO's regional plans and Nordic defence cooperation. Following the 2022 agreement, four areas were established, with plans to create eight more, increasing capacity for allied forces and prepositioning. The signing of the SDCA will also help Norway deal with the emerging China challenge and address practical issues related to the U.S.-China rivalry and the impact it may have on the U.S. willingness and ability to provide support to European allies.²³

The formalisation of the bilateral defence and security cooperation between Norway and the

USA is an important step that can have a stabilizing effect in what many predict could become an era of higher level of instability and unpredictability following the return of Donald Trump to the White House. The renewed Trump administration's focus on America First! policy can herald the opening of a new period in transatlantic relations, less U.S. interest in European affairs and even growing tensions in relations between the USA and its European and North American allies. The signals sent by president Trump during his electoral campaign and the period of power transition with his controversial statements on the fate of Greenland where the use of military power against one of the U.S. European allies was not completely ruled out and against another NATO ally Canada that was threatened with being forced to join the USA as the 51 state have sent some shock waves through many European capitals. Also in Norway the debate shifted after the re-election of Donald Trump and his many combative statements undermining credibility of the U.S. security guarantees and more attention has been since paid to how to meet and operate in the changing international environment. For obvious geographical, economic and political reasons the issue of how European allies some of who were the same time EU members could realign to improve Europe's ability to deal with various security risks, challenges and threats in Europe's neighbourhood without the U.S. – or even against the U.S. – has become an important topic in the national Norwegian debate in the last months of 2024 and first month of 2025.

Norway and the European security community 2024

To start with, there was limited attention to EU foreign policy cooperation in Norway in the early 1990s because Norwegian authorities had little faith in the EU's ability to establish itself as a relevant foreign and security policy actor.²⁴ However, after the changes in the international environment caused partly by Russia's more aggressive policy in Europe and signals about possible U.S. disengagement from Europe the debate on EU's role in Norwegian foreign,

security and defence policy gained momentum.²⁵ By 2024 the EU is viewed in Norway as an important element of the European security architecture as it established itself as a strong economic, political, legislative and normative institution, and has increasingly become a security policy actor. The EU is for instance mentioned as an important security actor 23 times in the 2024 document on long-term defence strategy published by the Norwegian

Ministry of Defence.²⁶ The war in Ukraine has also led to a closer cooperation between the EU and NATO on addressing security-related risks, challenges and threats stemming from various parts of the broadly understood security spectrum. However, the EU members are in a challenging situation as they try to deal with the effects of Russia's attack on Ukraine, the rise of China, weak economic growth, a historic commitment to defence, migration challenges

from the global South, the increased terrorist threat and domestic political tensions. In addition, by the end of 2024 they also face a new American administration that has been sending confusing signals during the period of formal power transition between Biden and Trump administrations. All those factors also influence Norway's relations with the EU that is Norway's most important political and economic partner.

Institutional and Operational Security Cooperation with the EU

The EU is viewed in the public debate as an important international actor and premise provider, and one of Norway's most important political and economic partners. Norway is one of the non-member countries that cooperates most closely with the EU on security and defence.²⁷ Cooperation has developed as the EU has strengthened its role in the security and defence policy area. From 2003 to the present, cooperation has been centred around participation in EU military operations, security policy dialogue, and defence-related research and development. In light of the deteriorating security policy situation and the experiences from the Ukraine war, it is clear that Europe will have to increase its own military capabilities in the future. This will make Europe better able to handle crises and wars in the future. The war has demonstrated that U.S. deliveries of weapons and equipment have been crucial to Ukraine's ability to resist the Russian attack so far. The war has also revealed that Europe has major shortcomings in both military breadth and depth.

Like most other NATO countries, Norwegian authorities have been clear that the EU must not develop into a military alternative or competitor to NATO. Both NATO leaders and the majority of the alliance's countries have warned against ambitions to establish the EU forces, as this could weaken NATO's internal cohesion and military strength. However, despite certain tensions,

NATO and the EU have managed to establish closer cooperation on various issues of mutual interest, such as the protection of critical infrastructure. They have developed a division of roles in which the two organizations complement and reinforce each other. This has become particularly clear after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Responsibility for collective defence lies with NATO, and the EU's role is primarily in crisis management and hybrid threats. A joint EU–NATO declaration from January 2023 emphasized that the EU and NATO “strategic partnership” is based on shared values and interests, and that the two organizations have complementary and mutually reinforcing roles in support of international peace and security.

The official Norwegian perception is that developments in EU cooperation in the area of defence and security are moving faster than before. Cooperation is deepening, and it is expanding into areas that have previously been the responsibility of the member states. For instance, during the first three years of the conflict in Ukraine the EU has demonstrated its ability to coordinate sanctions, financial support, and measures against complex threats. This “division of labour” between NATO and the EU on military and non-military tasks is highlighted as a good model for the added value the EU can play in the area of security policy, without risking weakening NATO.

Strategic Dilemmas of Non-Membership and Future Outlook

As a non-member of the EU with cooperation regulated by the EEA agreement that does not address questions related to traditional security Norway faces several dilemmas. The most crucial issue is the fact that parts of security and defence policy that both concern and may affect the country are discussed and decided in arenas in the EU where Norway is not at the table. This is the case when the EU discusses sanctions towards Russia, and the handling of complex threats and issues related to security of supply where Norway plays a key part as one of major energy suppliers to the EU. Norwegian authorities should therefore ensure concrete cooperation mechanisms that should make it possible to handle cross-border threats. Norway should also have agreements with the EU that make it possible to obtain the equipment and supplies that are critically important.

The EU's so-called strategic compass sets the framework for the development of the EU as a security and defence policy actor up to 2030. An important area of cooperation is the European Defence Fund (EDF), in which Norway participates. The aim is to promote multinational cooperation on research and development of defence capabilities in Europe. The EU has established new mechanisms to increase the production capacity for ammunition (ASAP), and joint procurement of defence capabilities (EDIRPA). A number of defence projects within the framework of permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) are also being implemented. The EU has also launched new projects in outer space, including through Secure Connectivity.

The cooperation between Norway and the EU is based on annual security policy talks. One of the key areas of cooperation is in the defence industry. In line with the EEA Agreement, Norway participates in the European Defence Fund on a par with the member states. In addition, Norway participates financially and with personnel in

the EU Training Mission for Ukrainian Personnel (EU MAM), as well as in the European Defence Agency's (EDA) program for joint procurement of ammunition. Norway has decided to participate in ASAP and EDIRPA and is still working towards participation in Secure Connectivity. Norway is an active participant in EDA, as well as the PESCO project on military mobility and takes active part in EU crisis management exercises.

However, from the official point of view NATO should remain the cornerstone of Norwegian security policy because the EU is still not able to project military power and has limited military capabilities. The deteriorating security situation in and around Europe has also led to greater attention being paid to the EU's ability to safeguard internal and external security. For the Norwegian government, it is therefore important that developments in the EU in the area of security and defence policy complement and do not duplicate NATO and thus contribute to strengthening transatlantic cooperation.

However, the election of the new old U.S. president in November 2024 and signals coming from Washington have led to a renewed interest in strengthening security cooperation between Norway and the EU and the UK in a situation when there are signs that the transatlantic bond can be weakened and the U.S. commitment to Europe can no longer be taken for granted. The most recent edition of the Defence Analysis produced by the Defence Research Establishment formulates this dilemma in the following manner: Political developments in the United States are creating greater unpredictability about American support and presence in Europe. Taking into account deep uncertainty is therefore central to defence planning. At the same time, our allies are investing heavily in developing military forces that can defend our security, and the opportunities for Nordic military cooperation have never been better.²⁸

3

Poland and the Transatlantic Security Community

Historical Trajectory of NATO Accession

Poland's NATO accession represents a pivotal case in the post-Cold War evolution of the Western security community, highlighting how historical experience, strategic uncertainty, and identity realignment shaped Poland's integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutional order. As a relatively recent member compared to founding states like Norway, Poland's path was shaped by the challenges of post-Soviet transition, regional instability, and a strategic ambition to re-anchor itself in the West. Its accession to NATO in 1999 marked a significant moment not merely a military realignment, but a foundational step toward safeguarding national sovereignty, consolidating international standing, and ensuring long-term stability within a historically contested region. The decision to pursue NATO accession was grounded in Poland's complex historical experience, its evolving post-Cold War security calculus, and its strategic aspiration to embed itself within the Euro-Atlantic community.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent geopolitical transformation of Europe in the early 1990s created both opportunities and uncertainties for Poland. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Polish territory in 1993 marked the end of an era of external military control, but also introduced new strategic vulnerabilities in a region where Russia's long-term intentions remained uncertain. At the same time, conflicts in the Balkans demonstrated the fragility of post-communist transitions and the need for

robust security guarantees. For Poland, NATO represented not only a military alliance but also a political commitment to Western democratic values and the principle of collective defense—ensuring that the country would never again face existential threats in isolation. As Polish Foreign Minister Bronisław Geremek declared upon Poland's accession to NATO: “For the people of Poland, the Cold War, which forcibly excluded our country from the West, ends with our entry to NATO. Poland, as member of the most powerful alliance, bringing together democratic nations of Western Europe and North America, joins the vital process of bridging old divisions and contributes to the security and stability in Europe.”²⁹

However, the process of NATO accession was neither immediate nor guaranteed. It required years of intense diplomatic engagement, military restructuring, and strategic lobbying, particularly in the United States, where Polish-American communities and influential figures such as Zbigniew Brzezinski played a critical role in advocating for Poland's inclusion. Poland had to prove its readiness to contribute to the alliance's collective security framework, align its military standards with NATO requirements, and demonstrate its commitment to Western defense principles. The Polish government also had to navigate complex international dynamics, including resistance from Russia, which viewed NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to its sphere of influence.

Strategic Rationale Behind NATO Membership

Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 was a strategic milestone in the country's post-Cold War foreign policy, driven by security concerns, the need for military modernization, and aspirations for greater international influence. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 marked a defining moment in European security, leaving former Soviet satellite states like Poland in a position of profound uncertainty. For over four decades, Poland had been a tightly controlled member of the Soviet-dominated military alliance, with its defense strategy, military infrastructure, and foreign policy all dictated by Moscow. However, as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Warsaw Pact disintegrated, Poland suddenly found itself without external security guarantees. While newfound independence offered opportunities for self-determination, it also exposed deep vulnerabilities.³⁰

These vulnerabilities were heightened by Poland's historical experience of being caught between competing great powers. The 20th century had been marked by repeated invasions, occupations, and shifting borders, with Poland frequently serving as the battleground for European conflicts. For example, the memory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) and subsequent division of Polish territory between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union is still remembered and summoned in the discussion nowadays. Later, under Soviet rule, Poland had been forced into an alliance that primarily served Moscow's

strategic interests rather than its own national security needs. With the Cold War over Poland faced an urgent question: how could it prevent history from repeating itself?

Compounding these concerns was the instability within Russia itself. The failed Soviet coup attempt of August 1991, orchestrated by hardline communist officials in an effort to preserve the collapsing Soviet empire, underscored the volatility of the post-Soviet space.³¹ While the coup ultimately failed, its very existence demonstrated that powerful factions within the Soviet establishment were unwilling to accept the dissolution of their sphere of influence. This raised alarms in Poland, as it signaled the possibility of political and military upheaval in Russia that could have direct consequences for its neighbors. Even after the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist in December 1991, Russia remained unpredictable, struggling with economic collapse, internal political crises, and a military establishment resistant to the loss of its former empire. Against this backdrop, NATO membership emerged as both a strategic necessity and a political priority for Poland. The alliance's principle of collective defense, enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, provided a crucial security guarantee: an attack against one NATO member would be considered an attack against all. By joining NATO, Poland would gain not only military protection but also the assurance that it would no longer face existential threats in isolation.³²

Poland's Path to NATO

The first high-ranking Polish government official to express Poland's ambition of joining NATO was Prime Minister Jan Krzysztof Bielecki. During his visit to the United States in 1991, just weeks after the failed Soviet coup attempt, which underscored the Soviet Union's growing instability, Bielecki called for the extension of NATO protection over Central and Eastern European states.³³ However, his statement failed to generate significant interest in NATO expansion in Washington, as NATO membership for Poland was largely considered unfeasible until the departure of Russian troops from Poland in 1993.³⁴

One of the most crucial steps in Poland's path to NATO was the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory, a process that symbolized the definitive end of Soviet military influence in the country. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991,³⁵ Poland found itself in a complex security situation: while it had regained full sovereignty, tens of thousands of Russian troops remained stationed on Polish soil, remnants of decades of Soviet control. The continued presence of these forces was a source of concern, as it not only represented a lingering vestige of Poland's Cold War subjugation but also raised fears that Moscow might attempt to maintain its influence in the region. Negotiations for the withdrawal of Russian troops began in earnest in the early 1990s. Polish leaders, determined to assert full control over national security matters, engaged in diplomatic talks with Moscow to secure an orderly and complete departure. A breakthrough was achieved with the signing of an agreement in 1992, under which Russia committed to withdrawing its forces from Poland by 1993. The process was completed on September 17, 1993, when the last Russian soldiers left Polish territory—a date laden with historical significance, as it marked the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939.³⁶

The departure of Russian troops was a pivotal moment for Poland's security policy. It removed a major obstacle to NATO accession, as Western leaders had been reluctant to consider expanding the alliance while Russian forces were still present in Central and Eastern Europe. The

withdrawal also reinforced Poland's sovereignty, eliminating the direct military presence of its former occupier and allowing the country to pursue independent defense policies. Furthermore, it sent a clear signal to the international community that Poland was firmly committed to integrating with the West, free from external military constraints.

From that point forward, Poland could fully engage in discussions about NATO enlargement, demonstrating that it was no longer under the shadow of Russian military influence. The successful withdrawal of Russian troops strengthened Poland's case for membership, reassuring NATO members that admitting Poland would not risk direct confrontation with Moscow. Support for NATO membership among Polish political and governmental leaders was not universal following the collapse of communism. While many saw integration with the alliance as a vital step toward securing Poland's sovereignty and long-term stability, others viewed the idea with skepticism or outright opposition. Skeptics within Poland's leadership feared the West's unwillingness to extend security guarantees to former Soviet satellites.³⁷ Others were concerned that pursuing NATO accession too aggressively could provoke Russia, potentially jeopardizing Poland's fragile post-communist transition. One of the strongest sources of opposition came from within Poland's own military establishment. Many high-ranking army generals, who had spent the bulk of their careers preparing for a potential war against NATO during the Cold War, struggled to accept the idea of Poland joining the alliance they had once been trained to counter.³⁸ These officers had been deeply embedded in the Soviet-style military doctrine and structure, and for some, shifting allegiance from the Warsaw Pact to NATO felt not only unnatural but potentially dangerous. There were concerns about how quickly Poland could modernize its armed forces to meet NATO standards, as well as anxieties about losing strategic autonomy in defense planning.

Despite these reservations, Poland's pro-NATO advocates led by reformist politicians and

diplomats worked tirelessly to shift the national security debate. Figures such as President Lech Wałęsa and Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski argued that NATO membership was essential for Poland's security, especially in light of regional instability and uncertainty surrounding Russia's future trajectory. Over time, as geopolitical realities became clearer and NATO's expansion plans gained traction, domestic resistance gradually weakened. By the mid-1990s, NATO membership had become a central pillar of Poland's foreign policy consensus, paving the way for its accession in 1999.

During his visits to Brussels and Germany in 1992, President Lech Wałęsa unexpectedly announced that Poland was considering forming an alternative military alliance in Central and Eastern Europe. This statement was intended to pressure the U.S. administration into accelerating Poland's NATO accession by signaling that, if left out, Poland might seek other security arrangements. However, Wałęsa miscalculated the reaction. His remarks were widely interpreted as an indication that Poland was no longer prioritizing NATO membership, leading to confusion among Western policymakers.³⁹

The unexpected nature of Wałęsa's statement caused concern in diplomatic circles, prompting Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, to issue an urgent communiqué to Polish diplomatic missions. The message reaffirmed that Poland's official policy had not changed and that NATO accession remained a top strategic goal. Despite this clarification, Wałęsa's remarks created a sense of disarray in Poland's foreign policy, particularly among Western governments, who began to question whether Poland had a clear and unified vision for its security future. This episode reinforced concerns in Washington that Poland was not yet fully prepared for NATO membership.

Although the next Polish government, led by Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka, maintained a generally pro-NATO stance, it was not always fully consistent in its messaging regarding Poland's aspirations. This was reflected in the remarks of Minister of Defense Janusz Onyszkiewicz, who stated, "There is no reason to talk about NATO accession when we are not wanted there."⁴⁰ Such statements underscored the lingering uncertainty and hesitation within Poland's political leadership, further complicating efforts to

secure a clear path toward NATO membership. Some degree of reservation toward NATO membership was warranted, as in 1992, NATO had no concrete plans to expand eastward. At the time, the alliance's primary focus was on redefining its role in the post-Cold War security landscape, maintaining stability in Europe, and managing relations with a weakened yet unpredictable Russia. NATO's leaders were cautious about making commitments to former Warsaw Pact countries, fearing that premature expansion could provoke Moscow and destabilize the fragile political transformations underway in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴¹ Compounding NATO's hesitation was the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars in 1991, which fundamentally shaped the West's perception of security risks in the former Eastern Bloc. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia—marked by ethnic conflicts, border disputes, and mass atrocities such as the Siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996) and the Srebrenica massacre (1995)—demonstrated the dangers of nationalist tensions resurfacing after the Cold War.⁴² Western leaders worried that similar conflicts could erupt among newly independent states in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical grievances, ethnic divisions, and fragile democracies could fuel instability.

For NATO, the immediate priority was crisis management rather than enlargement. The alliance focused on containing the Yugoslav conflict, working alongside the United Nations to implement peacekeeping missions and later conducting military interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These efforts absorbed much of NATO's political and strategic bandwidth, leaving little room for discussions about expansion. Western policymakers preferred a "wait and see" approach, monitoring whether former Eastern Bloc states could develop stable democracies and resolve any regional disputes peacefully.⁴³ As a result of these concerns, NATO and the European Community (later the European Union) encouraged regional cooperation initiatives as an alternative to immediate integration. One of the most significant efforts in this regard was the formation of the Visegrád Group in 1991, comprising Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary (later including Slovakia after the Czechoslovak split in 1993). The Visegrád Group aimed to strengthen economic, political, and military cooperation among its members, serving as a stepping stone toward deeper integration with Western institutions.⁴⁴

From NATO's perspective, the Visegrád Group was a pragmatic solution to the security dilemma posed by the former Eastern Bloc. If these countries could demonstrate a capacity for cooperation, economic reform, and democratic governance, they would be seen as more viable candidates for NATO membership in the future. Conversely, if tensions or conflicts arose within the region, it would validate NATO's cautious approach and justify delaying expansion indefinitely. Despite NATO's reluctance, Poland remained committed to securing membership. The Polish government, under Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka (1992–1993), continued diplomatic efforts to strengthen relations with NATO. Recognizing that formal accession was unlikely in the short term, Poland sought incremental steps toward integration, including participating in NATO-led training exercises and increasing cooperation on military reforms. In 1993, Suchocka's government made a bold move by officially applying for NATO membership. However, the response from NATO was not what Poland had hoped for. NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner issued a negative reply, stating that NATO was not planning any expansion in the near future.⁴⁵ Wörner reassured Poland, however, that if NATO were to expand, Poland would be among the first candidates for membership. This response, while disappointing, provided a crucial diplomatic signal—for the first time, a high-ranking NATO official acknowledged that enlargement was not entirely off the table. The door to membership, though not yet open, was no longer firmly shut.⁴⁶ This acknowledgment encouraged Poland to double down on its efforts, proving itself as a reliable partner for the alliance.

One of the primary reasons for NATO's initial reluctance to expand eastward was skepticism within the United States, the alliance's most influential and dominant security guarantor. As NATO's leading military and political force, the U.S. effectively had the final say over alliance policy, and during the early 1990s, there was little appetite in Washington for enlargement.⁴⁷ In the administration of President Bill Clinton, the prevailing sentiment among policymakers was that NATO expansion could needlessly antagonize Russia at a time when its political future remained uncertain. The U.S. was concerned about how Russia, still in a volatile state following the collapse of the Soviet Union, might react to the inclusion of former Warsaw Pact states into the Western military alliance.⁴⁸

A brief moment of ambiguity arose in 1993 when Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Polish President Lech Wałęsa issued a joint declaration in which Yeltsin appeared to express no objections to Poland joining NATO. However, this position was quickly walked back by Russian diplomats, who reaffirmed Moscow's opposition to any eastward expansion of the alliance. Russia's foreign policy establishment, including key figures within its defense and intelligence structures, continued to view NATO enlargement as an existential threat, a stance that soon hardened into official doctrine.⁴⁹

For the Clinton administration, this development reinforced existing concerns. While there was growing support for helping post-communist countries integrate with the West, Washington prioritized maintaining stability in its relations with Russia, a far larger and more geopolitically significant power. U.S. policymakers feared that an overly aggressive push to expand NATO could humiliate or alienate Yeltsin's reformist government, potentially derailing democratic and economic liberalization efforts in Russia. The administration also worried that a weakened Yeltsin could be replaced by hardline nationalists or former Soviet elites who were already critical of Russia's post-Cold War trajectory.⁵⁰ As a result, the U.S. maintained a cautious approach toward NATO enlargement, prioritizing diplomatic engagement with Moscow over immediate expansion. Rather than offering outright membership to Central and Eastern European states, Washington promoted alternative forms of cooperation, such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, launched in 1994. This initiative allowed former Soviet bloc countries to engage in military collaboration with NATO without granting them full membership, offering a compromise that sought to reassure both aspiring NATO members and Russia.⁵¹

Despite initial reservations about NATO enlargement, the United States sought a way to address the security concerns of Central and Eastern European countries while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. In response to growing demands for closer ties with NATO and the security vacuum created by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative was launched in 1994. This American-led program aimed to foster trust, military cooperation, and interoperability between NATO member states and non-member

countries—predominantly in Europe, including several post-Soviet states. Ultimately, 18 countries participated in the initiative. However, the nature of cooperation between NATO and PfP members remained ambiguous. Unlike full NATO membership, which included binding security guarantees under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the PfP did not offer explicit defense commitments. Instead, it focused on military training, joint exercises, and dialogue on defense policies, making it unclear whether it was merely a temporary framework for engagement or a permanent substitute for NATO expansion.

This uncertainty became evident when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, visited Poland to discuss the Partnership for Peace with President Lech Wałęsa. In a well-known exchange, Albright sought to reassure the Polish leadership by saying in Polish, “Jestem optymistką” (“I am an optimist”), implying that the initiative would meet Poland’s security expectations. However, President Wałęsa was far less convinced. He saw the PfP as little more than a consolation prize for countries that would ultimately be denied NATO membership. Wałęsa feared that the program was a way to indefinitely delay expansion rather than serve as a meaningful step toward full integration. Given these concerns, Poland adopted a more assertive stance regarding its participation in the Partnership for Peace. When the leaders of the Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) met with President Bill Clinton in Prague in 1994, Wałęsa made Poland’s position clear: before agreeing to join the PfP, he demanded explicit assurances that the program was not an alternative to NATO membership but rather a precursor to accession. He insisted that it be formally stated that PfP participants would have the right to apply for full NATO membership in the future. Without this guarantee, Poland would refuse to sign the agreement. As a result of these negotiations, President Clinton made a crucial diplomatic concession. During the Prague Summit, he publicly acknowledged that NATO enlargement would take place, marking the first time a sitting U.S. president had explicitly confirmed the alliance’s intention to expand eastward. This statement, though still lacking a concrete timeline, was a significant turning point. It signaled to Poland and other aspiring NATO members that their accession was no longer just a distant possibility but an eventual reality.⁵²

By securing this commitment, Poland played a catalytic role in reorienting the enlargement debate. The Partnership for Peace, once seen as a vague initiative with an uncertain future, ultimately became a stepping stone for full membership. In the coming years, Poland, along with other Central and Eastern European states, would intensify diplomatic efforts to accelerate NATO’s expansion, culminating in the 1997 invitation to join the alliance and full accession in 1999.

Finalizing NATO Expansion: The Road to the 1999 Enlargement

The years 1995 and 1996 were pivotal in shaping the trajectory of NATO’s eastward expansion. During this period, the United States undertook extensive diplomatic, political, and military preparations to ensure a smooth enlargement process. Despite occasional controversies in Poland’s internal politics, Washington’s confidence in Poland as a strong candidate for NATO membership remained firm. Poland’s strategic location, its commitment to military modernization, and its growing cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace program reassured American policymakers that it was ready for accession.

Despite these developments, NATO expansion remained a highly sensitive geopolitical issue, particularly concerning Russia’s opposition. In 1997, NATO and Russia reached a critical juncture: to prevent escalation over eastward enlargement, the alliance negotiated a diplomatic compromise to address Moscow’s security concerns. On May 27, 1997, at the NATO Summit in Paris, NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security.⁵³ This agreement aimed to establish a framework for future NATO-Russia relations and sought to ease Moscow’s fears about the alliance’s enlargement. The Founding Act was structured into five main sections, outlining the principles of the relationship, the range of issues NATO and Russia would discuss, the military dimensions of their cooperation, and the mechanisms designed to foster greater military-to-military engagement. A crucial aspect of the agreement was that Russia officially recognized NATO’s right to expand, though it did so reluctantly and with specific conditions.

Under the terms of the agreement, NATO pledged not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory

of new member states, nor would there be any changes to NATO's existing nuclear posture or nuclear policy. Additionally, the alliance committed to refraining from establishing permanent military installations, including American military bases, on the territory of the newly admitted nations. These conditions effectively created a two-tier NATO structure, in which Poland and other members joining in 1999 had fewer direct NATO military assets on their soil compared to long-standing alliance members. Instead of permanent military installations, NATO adopted a policy of rotational troop deployments in the newly admitted states, a framework that continued to define the presence of NATO forces in Central and Eastern Europe well into the 21st century. While these restrictions were seen as necessary to reassure Russia, they also raised concerns among the new members, who feared that they might be treated as second-class participants within the alliance. Nevertheless, Poland and other candidate countries accepted these terms, recognizing that NATO membership—despite its conditions—remained the most reliable security guarantee in the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape.

With Russia's concerns addressed through the Founding Act, NATO moved forward with the formal process of enlargement. On July 8, 1997, at the NATO Summit in Madrid, the alliance's heads of state and government made the historic decision to invite Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to begin accession negotiations. This landmark decision was enshrined in the Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation, which reaffirmed NATO's commitment to an open-door policy for future members. The declaration further specified that the alliance aimed to sign the Accession Protocols during the next North Atlantic Council session, scheduled for December 16, 1997, and complete the ratification process in time for the new members to achieve full accession by April 1999.⁵⁴

Although the Madrid Summit marked a significant milestone in Poland's path to NATO, accession was still not guaranteed. The final step required ratification by all NATO member states, a process that posed significant challenges, particularly in the United States. While by 1997 the Clinton administration was fully committed to NATO enlargement, the U.S. Senate, which held the power to approve the expansion, remained divided on the issue. Many American policymakers

and senators were skeptical, fearing that admitting former Warsaw Pact states into NATO would unnecessarily antagonize Russia and jeopardize post-Cold War diplomatic progress. Others questioned whether the alliance was overextending itself by incorporating new members that had not yet fully modernized their military forces. Concerns also arose over the financial burden of NATO expansion, with some arguing that new members might require costly support from the alliance before they could meaningfully contribute to collective defense. To address these concerns and ensure a successful ratification process, Poland launched one of the largest diplomatic and lobbying campaigns in its history. Throughout 1998, Polish officials, political leaders, and advocacy groups worked tirelessly to persuade U.S. senators of the necessity of NATO enlargement. Polish Ambassador to the United States, Jerzy Koźmiński, played a central role in these efforts, holding numerous meetings with American lawmakers to reassure them of Poland's commitment to NATO's strategic objectives and its readiness to meet alliance obligations. His work was strongly supported by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former U.S. National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, who was one of the most influential figures advocating for Poland's accession. Brzezinski framed NATO expansion as a matter of strategic necessity, arguing that a stable and democratic Central Europe was in the best interest of the United States and NATO as a whole. Another key player in Poland's lobbying efforts was the Polish American Congress, a major organization representing the Polish diaspora in the United States. The Polish American community had long been an influential force in U.S. politics, and its leaders mobilized grassroots support for NATO enlargement. Letters were sent to members of Congress, urging them to support Poland's accession, while celebratory events and public campaigns were organized to highlight Poland's contributions to European stability. These efforts helped shift public opinion and built momentum within the U.S. Senate.⁵⁵ The critical point came in 1998 when the U.S. Senate finally voted on NATO expansion. Although opposition remained from some senators who feared that enlargement could destabilize U.S.-Russia relations, the final vote reflected overwhelming support for the admission of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. With the United States' approval secured, the accession protocols were ratified across the alliance, culminating in Poland's formal entry into NATO on March 12, 1999.

Poland's NATO accession was not an inevitability but rather the result of persistent diplomatic maneuvering, strategic lobbying, and a clear vision of national security priorities. Through determined negotiations and political advocacy, Poland overcame initial skepticism in the United States, reassured NATO allies, and successfully navigated complex diplomatic engagements with Russia. The restrictions placed on new members regarding nuclear weapons and military installations remained a point of contention, but these conditions did not outweigh the immense security benefits of joining the alliance.

Poland's entry into NATO marked a transformative moment in its post-Cold War history. It not only provided the country with the most robust security guarantees it had ever enjoyed but also reinforced Poland's place within the wider Western security structure. Beyond its immediate impact on Poland, the 1999 enlargement set a precedent for further NATO expansion, paving the way for future rounds of enlargement, including the accession of the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries in the early 2000s. In the years following its accession, Poland emerged as one of NATO's most active members, contributing to NATO operations and championing increased defense spending, and playing a leading role in shaping NATO's policies in Eastern Europe.

With its place in NATO secured, Poland's foreign policy entered a new phase, one in which the country was no longer at the periphery of European security but at its core. As a member of NATO, Poland took on the role of a regional leader, working to ensure that other post-communist states could follow the same path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Its successful accession in 1999 was not just a victory for Poland but a key moment in the broader transformation of Europe's security architecture in the post-Cold War era.

On March 12, 1999, in a ceremony held in Independence, Missouri, USA, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland gathered to complete the final step in their countries' accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Representing Poland, Foreign Minister Professor Bronisław Geremek officially handed over Poland's instrument of accession to the U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright. With this act, Poland

formally became a full-fledged member of the North Atlantic Alliance, marking the culmination of nearly a decade of diplomatic efforts, military reforms, and strategic lobbying.

The choice of Independence, Missouri as the location for this historic event was deeply symbolic. The city was the hometown of former U.S. President Harry S. Truman, who played a crucial role in the creation of NATO in 1949. By holding the ceremony in the birthplace of the North Atlantic Treaty, the United States underscored the enduring significance of NATO's mission and the alliance's role in maintaining European security. It also reaffirmed America's long-standing commitment to the transatlantic bond, a relationship that Poland had sought to strengthen through its membership.

As Poland officially joined the alliance, Foreign Minister Geremek delivered a powerful and poignant speech, highlighting the profound significance of this moment—not only for Poland but also for the general vision of freedom and security in Europe. His speech encapsulated the historical journey of Poland, the importance of transatlantic ties, and the responsibilities that came with NATO membership.

Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 marked a historic geopolitical shift, as the country formally aligned itself with the West after decades of Soviet domination. The phrase "for our freedom and yours" referenced in Geremek's speech held deep historical significance. Originally used by Polish revolutionaries in the 19th century, it symbolized Poland's long-standing tradition of fighting not only for its own independence but also for the freedom of others. By joining NATO, Poland reaffirmed this commitment on an international scale, pledging to contribute to collective security, peacekeeping missions, and the defense of democratic values across Europe and beyond.

The moment was also symbolically significant for Poland's post-communist transition. For over four decades, Poland had been a satellite state of the Soviet Union, its foreign policy dictated by Moscow, and its military operations subordinate to Soviet strategic objectives. NATO membership not only provided a security guarantee but also represented the final and irreversible break from Soviet influence, securing Poland's place among Western democracies. Moreover,

“Poland shall be a dedicated advocate both of the process of European integration and the strong transatlantic link. The United States has given the Atlantic Community leadership, stability, and strength.

We should keep the door open for those who have fought for freedom. Another curtain must never again descend on Europe.

These are the sources of our strength. We cannot let them fade away in the future.”⁷⁸

Foreign Minister Professor Bronisław Geremek



the ceremony in Independence, Missouri, was a diplomatic affirmation of U.S. leadership in NATO expansion. The Clinton administration had been instrumental in advocating for Poland's accession, overcoming initial skepticism within the U.S. Senate and among NATO allies. Key figures such as Albright, Brzezinski, and Clinton were instrumental in transforming NATO enlargement from aspiration to reality.

Poland's accession to NATO was not only a historical achievement but also a foundational step toward becoming an influential actor in today's transatlantic security architecture. As discussed in earlier sections, the current international environment is marked by uncertainty, shifting power dynamics, and renewed geopolitical

rivalry. Poland's historical experience of navigating instability, lobbying for inclusion, and adapting to NATO's evolving strategic vision continues to shape its proactive role in regional and alliance-wide security matters. Together with Norway, Poland now contributes to the resilience of the transatlantic and European security communities, drawing on distinct experiences but converging in their shared commitment to democratic values and collective defense. Yet, Poland's integration into the transatlantic framework also carried the seeds of future uncertainty, particularly as shifting U.S. priorities and internal alliance tensions now test the resilience of the security community it worked so hard to join.

A New Chapter in Poland's Security and Foreign Policy

With its formal accession to NATO, Poland now bore the responsibilities and obligations of full membership. No longer a mere observer or partner, Poland was now expected to contribute to NATO missions, modernize its armed forces to meet alliance standards, and actively participate in collective defense efforts. The transformation of the Polish military, which had begun years before accession, would now accelerate as Poland integrated into NATO's strategic and operational framework.

Poland's entry into NATO also reinforced the security architecture of Central and Eastern

Europe, reassuring other former communist states that their aspirations for integration into Western institutions were attainable. The successful accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 laid the groundwork for subsequent waves of enlargement, eventually bringing in countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria in 2004. Poland, as one of the first post-communist states to join NATO, became an advocate for further expansion, ensuring that the alliance's doors remained open to other nations seeking security and democratic stability.

The accession ceremony in Independence, Missouri, was not merely a diplomatic formality—it was the final, irrevocable step in Poland’s decades-long journey toward rejoining the Western world. As Minister Geremek’s speech articulated, this was a victory not only for Poland but for the broader cause of freedom and European unity. The event symbolized the end of Poland’s post-communist transition and the beginning of a new era in which Poland, as a member of NATO, would actively shape and contribute to European and global security.

For millions of Poles, both in the homeland and within the Polish diaspora, this day was the fulfillment of a dream that had seemed impossible just a decade earlier. NATO membership provided Poland with the most robust security guarantees Poland had received in its modern history, ensuring that the country would never again stand alone in defending its sovereignty. At the same time, Poland’s accession strengthened NATO itself, demonstrating the alliance’s continued relevance in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

By the time Poland formally entered NATO, the country had already become an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic security system. In the years that followed, Poland proved to be one of NATO’s most committed and active members, participating in military operations, peacekeeping missions, and regional defense initiatives. The words spoken by Bronisław Geremek on that historic day in 1999 continue to resonate, encapsulating the essence of Poland’s place in the transatlantic alliance: “Poland is no longer alone in the defense of her freedom.”

Upon joining NATO in 1999, Poland, alongside Hungary and the Czech Republic, entered the alliance under conditions shaped by the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. While the Article 5 security guarantee applied equally to all members, new entrants were subject to limitations regarding permanent NATO bases and nuclear weapon deployments. This arrangement, intended to reassure Russia, led some analysts to describe the initial membership of post-communist states as constrained in strategic depth. Despite these early constraints, Poland began asserting itself as a committed NATO member by participating in key alliance operations. Polish forces deployed to the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo in 1999 and later contributed

significantly to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 2002 onward. These deployments demonstrated Poland’s willingness to share the alliance’s burdens and helped strengthen its credibility as a security contributor.

NATO’s enlargement policy, which continued beyond Poland’s accession, proved to be one of the most significant strategic shifts in post-Cold War Europe. Following the inclusion of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, NATO underwent two additional major waves of enlargement in 2004 and 2009, bringing in countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Baltic states, and later Albania and Croatia. These expansions not only consolidated democratic governance and stability across Central and Eastern Europe but also fundamentally altered the balance of power on the continent, extending NATO’s collective defense umbrella to regions that had long been exposed to geopolitical instability. Poland played an instrumental role in the success of NATO’s expansion, serving as both a model for newly admitted states and a strong advocate for further enlargement. Recognizing that regional security could only be guaranteed if the alliance’s presence in Eastern Europe was robust and unified, Polish policymakers championed the accession of countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, whose strategic positions were critical in securing NATO’s eastern flank.

Poland’s Strategic Ascent in NATO: From Peripheral Member to Pillar of European Security

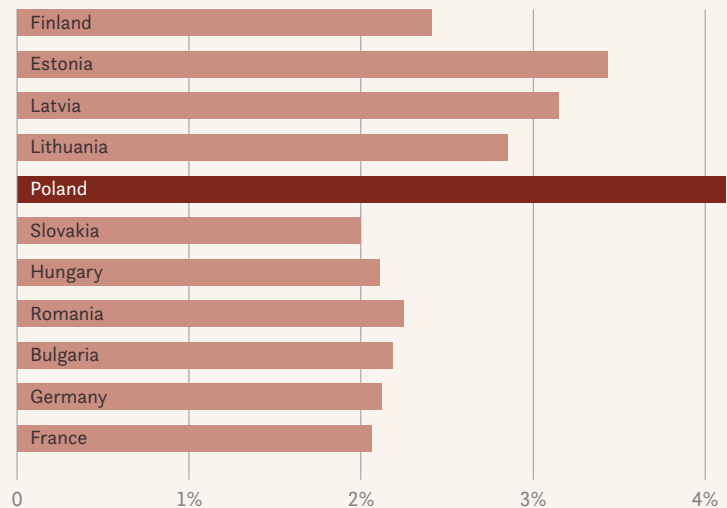
Poland’s accession to NATO in 1999 marked a decisive step in its post-Cold War foreign policy. While the initial years of membership were shaped by limited influence and cautious integration, the subsequent decades have seen Poland emerge as one of the alliance’s most reliable and proactive members. This transformation—driven by increasing defense investments, strategic diplomacy, and active operational contributions—has elevated Poland from the alliance’s eastern periphery to the core of its strategic architecture. In turn, NATO membership has provided Poland with critical security guarantees, enhanced its global standing, and enabled Warsaw to become a regional leader in shaping transatlantic and European security.

From the outset, NATO membership represented for Poland more than a military alliance—it was a political commitment to Western democratic values and collective defense. In the fragile post-Soviet security environment of the 1990s, Poland saw NATO as the only credible institution capable of providing lasting protection from the uncertainty posed by Russia’s internal instability and potential revanchism. This was not a theoretical concern. The 1991 failed Soviet coup, the presence of Russian troops on Polish soil until 1993, and the wars in the Balkans all underscored the need for credible collective defense mechanisms.⁵⁶

While the 1999 accession was historic, Poland entered NATO under constraints shaped by the NATO-Russia Founding Act. This agreement, signed in 1997, committed NATO to refrain from placing permanent military bases or nuclear weapons in new member states, an effort to ease Russian anxieties about enlargement. As a result, Poland initially occupied a second-tier status within the alliance—benefitting from the Article 5 guarantee in principle but lacking the full force posture that older members enjoyed.⁵⁷ However, Poland rapidly moved beyond this peripheral role. The early 2000s saw Poland begin to participate in NATO missions, including the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the KFOR mission in Kosovo. These contributions signaled Poland’s willingness to carry its share of the alliance’s burdens. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a strategic turning point for NATO, reaffirming Poland’s longstanding concerns about regional security. In response, Warsaw accelerated its military modernization program and supported NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), under which multinational battle groups were stationed in Poland and the Baltic states. The 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit further elevated Poland’s role as a frontline state, hosting U.S. rotational forces and joint exercises on its territory.⁵⁸

A critical factor in Poland’s rise as a central NATO member has been its consistent and substantial investment in defense. While many long-standing NATO members failed to meet the alliance’s target of allocating 2% of GDP to defense, Poland not only met this benchmark but surpassed it. In the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Poland embarked on a wide-ranging modernization program, acquiring F-35 fighter jets, Patriot missile systems, HIMARS launchers, and M1

FIGURE 3 Defence expenditure as % of GDP (2024 Estimate)



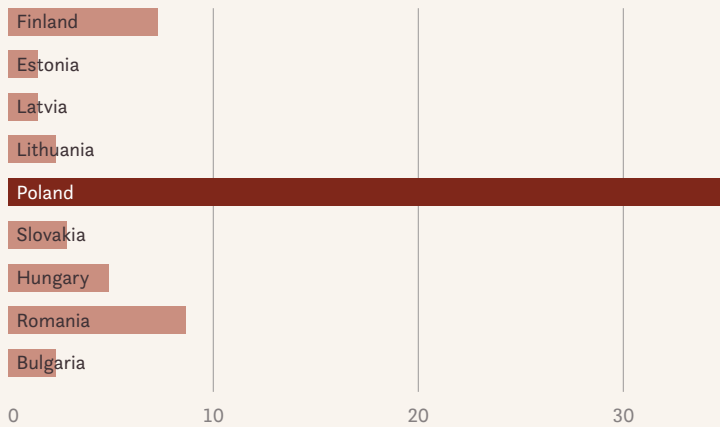
Source: NATO

Abrams tanks. It also expanded its Territorial Defense Forces and invested in cyber capabilities and command infrastructure. By 2023, Poland’s defense budget reached nearly 4% of GDP, making it one of NATO’s top defense spenders. This placed it in a unique position within the alliance—both as a model of burden-sharing and as a credible military actor capable of influencing strategic decisions. In practical terms, these investments allowed Poland to host rotational deployments of U.S. troops, participate in joint NATO exercises, and develop a professional, technologically advanced military force capable of responding to regional crises.⁵⁹

Poland’s location has further enhanced its role in NATO. Bordering Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave, Belarus, and Ukraine, Poland sits at a critical juncture between NATO and the eastern security frontier. This position has made it an indispensable component of the alliance’s Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), initiated after the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw. Under this framework, multinational battle groups were deployed to Poland and the Baltic states, led by the United States, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom.⁶⁰

Poland also hosted the NATO Multinational Division North East in Elbląg and actively participated in air policing and naval surveillance missions across the Baltic region. These operational roles underscored Poland’s dual status as both a frontline state and a strategic hub, linking allied

FIGURE 4 Nominal Defense Expenditure in USD bln (2024)



logistics, command, and intelligence assets. The 2020 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States further deepened bilateral cooperation. It authorized a larger and more permanent American military presence in Poland, including the establishment of U.S. V Corps Headquarters Forward Command in Poznań. This not only overcame the political limitations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act but also reflected growing U.S. recognition of Poland as a regional security anchor.⁶¹

Beyond the eastern flank, Poland has consistently participated in NATO's broader missions, underscoring its commitment to alliance solidarity. Polish troops were actively involved in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, with more than 28,000 personnel rotated through over the years. In Iraq, Poland not only contributed to NATO's training mission but also led a multinational stabilization division in the early 2000s, showcasing its leadership capacity in expeditionary operations. Polish fighter jets have participated regularly in Baltic Air Policing, while its navy contributed to Operation Active Endeavour and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean, focusing on maritime security and counter-terrorism. Poland has also taken part in the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) since its establishment in 2014, often providing key components to the spearhead units.⁶²

Since joining PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) in 2017, Poland has taken part in multiple projects aligned with its strategic priorities. These include the EU Radio Navigation Solution, Network of Logistic Hubs, and the European Medical Command, reflecting a pragmatic approach to EU defense collaboration where NATO's primacy is not undermined. Although Poland has been wary of concepts like "strategic autonomy," it supports EU defense tools that enhance operational readiness and reinforce transatlantic cohesion.⁶³

During its preparations for the 2025 Council Presidency, Poland placed a strong emphasis on strengthening the European defense industrial base, supporting Ukraine's security sector reform, and enhancing EU-NATO coordination mechanisms. This positioning reflects Warsaw's broader ambition to ensure that European defense initiatives serve as a force multiplier for the alliance, rather than as a rival structure.⁶⁴

Another factor shaping Poland's strategic thinking has been the evolving posture of the United States in Europe. While Poland remains one of Washington's most steadfast allies, concerns have grown in Warsaw about the possibility of reduced U.S. commitment to European security, especially following persistent debates in American politics about NATO burden-sharing and global prioritization. Although there was no major U.S. military withdrawal from Europe as of the end of 2024, the perception of strategic ambiguity has encouraged Poland to diversify its defense ties.

This diversification includes deeper regional defense cooperation through the Bucharest Nine, enhanced logistics and interoperability with neighboring allies, and increased investment in national defense capabilities. Poland's leadership has also advocated for higher defense spending across the alliance. In March 2024, President Andrzej Duda called for NATO to raise its defense spending benchmark from 2% to 3% of GDP, arguing that the threats facing the alliance demanded greater urgency and commitment.⁶⁵

Poland and European Security Community

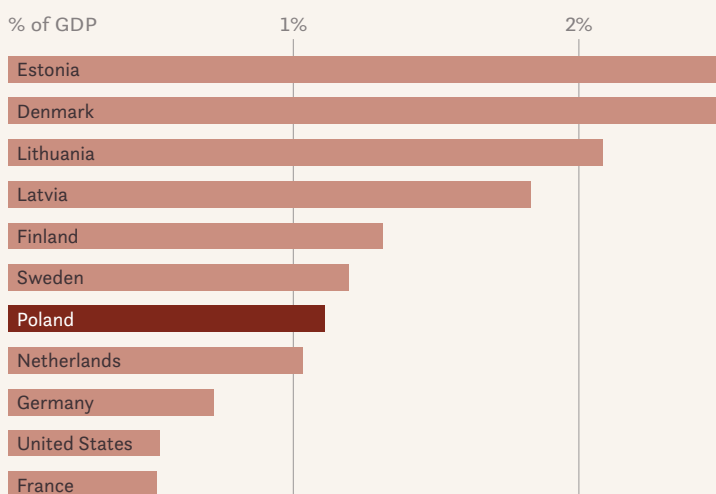
Poland's accession to NATO laid the foundation for its current security and foreign policy trajectory. Today, as discussed earlier in this paper, Poland plays a critical role on NATO's eastern flank, especially in the context of renewed Russian aggression and questions surrounding U.S. commitment to Europe. Like Norway, Poland views its membership in NATO as a cornerstone of national security—but while Norway's engagement is rooted in decades of alliance-building, Poland's perspective is shaped by a more recent struggle for integration and recognition. This duality reflects the evolving nature of the transatlantic security community: one that relies both on legacy members and on newer, strategically pivotal allies to preserve unity and resilience amid uncertainty.⁶⁶

Poland's relationship with the European Union as a security actor has historically been complex, shaped by geopolitical realities, a deep-rooted transatlantic orientation, and domestic political divisions. Since joining NATO in 1999, Poland has viewed the alliance, anchored by the United States, as the ultimate guarantor of its national security. This position was notably evident during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when Poland chose to support the operation alongside the U.S. and the UK, despite unease from parts

of the EU, especially from Paris. French President Jacques Chirac's dismissive remarks that countries like Poland had "missed a good opportunity to keep quiet" illustrated the existing skepticism in parts of Western Europe regarding the Atlanticist loyalties of the new Central European members.⁶⁷ Poland, for its part, saw the war as a way to deepen its strategic alignment with Washington and to assert itself as a serious player on the international stage, even if it meant alienating some EU heavyweights.

Fast forward two decades, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has radically changed the landscape. Poland has emerged as a key frontline actor in both NATO and EU frameworks, not just geographically but politically and militarily. Its proactive support for Ukraine has included substantial military aid, diplomatic efforts, logistical support, and a consistent push for tougher EU sanctions against Russia. Polish leaders have frequently emphasized that without Poland's push and determination, the EU's collective response would have been slower and less decisive. Warsaw's position as a bridge between the EU and Ukraine has become an essential part of the continent's strategic response to Russian aggression, positioning Poland as a natural advocate for stronger and more coherent European defense efforts.

FIGURE 5 Government support to Ukraine by donor country



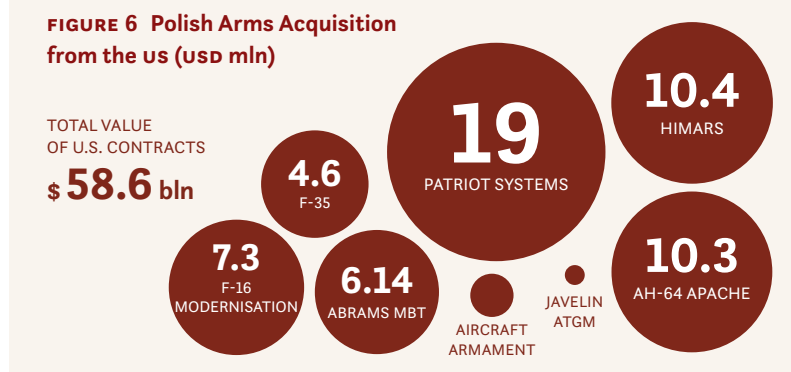
Source: Kiel Institute

This evolving security role is reflected in Poland's increasing engagement with EU defense initiatives. While initially wary of projects like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) due to fears they might sideline NATO or create parallel command structures, Poland now participates in 13 PESCO projects. These include key areas such as electronic warfare, passive radar, and cyber defense. Poland is also active in the European Defence Fund (EDF), which supports joint research and capability development, and participates in the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), a process to synchronize and optimize member state defense planning. These steps signal Warsaw's growing recognition that EU defense initiatives can complement, rather than contradict, its NATO commitments, especially in a context where the future reliability of the U.S. is increasingly uncertain.

Despite this increasing involvement, Poland's approach to defense procurement has often sparked tension with EU partners. A particularly visible episode came in 2016, when Warsaw abruptly canceled a multi-billion-euro deal with France's Airbus for Caracal helicopters, citing cost and operational issues.⁶⁸ The decision irritated Paris and reignited long-standing suspicions that Poland preferred transatlantic or non-European suppliers over EU-based defense firms. That perception was reinforced in 2022–2023, when Poland signed massive deals with South Korea for K2 tanks, K9 howitzers, FA-50 light combat aircraft, and Chunmoo rocket systems.⁶⁹ These contracts were aimed at quickly rearming the Polish military in response to the growing Russian threat, but they also reignited the debate in Europe over intra-EU defense industrial solidarity and the fragmentation of procurement.

This divide in strategic thinking also runs through Poland's domestic politics. The former ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) strongly emphasized loyalty to Washington, often downplaying or outright dismissing EU-led defense efforts as either inefficient or politically compromised. PiS officials consistently viewed the U.S., with its unmatched military capabilities, as Poland's only reliable guarantor. In contrast, the Civic Coalition (KO), now leading the government under Donald Tusk, supports a dual-track approach: maintaining strong ties with the U.S. while actively investing in EU defense structures.⁷⁰ This political shift has encouraged renewed cooperation with France and Germany and a more constructive attitude toward EU mechanisms, even as the U.S. enters yet another period of political unpredictability with a presidential election that may once again disrupt traditional alliances.

In light of these developments, Poland has also begun rethinking its own contributions to the European defense ecosystem, not just militarily but industrially. The Polish defense industry remains a paradox. On one hand, it has produced highly regarded systems such as the Piorun man-portable air defense system and advanced radar technologies. On the other hand, it still struggles with outdated production capabilities in key areas like artillery and missile manufacturing. Many facilities are remnants of the Soviet era, underfunded and ill-suited for the demands of modern warfare. The hope in Warsaw is that EU-level investment and integration, especially under the renewed push for



joint capability development, can help revitalize Poland's defense sector. There is cautious optimism surrounding the upcoming European Defence Industrial Strategy white paper, which is expected to lay out the framework for supporting and modernizing defense industries across the Union. For Poland, this could mean targeted investments, access to shared R&D programs, and the modernization of legacy production lines that are currently bottlenecked. Whether Poland will truly be able to position itself as a manufacturing hub for a new era of European defense depends on the scale and coordination of these efforts.

Poland's defense spending trajectory reinforces its ambitions. Already among EU's and NATO's top spenders, Warsaw aims to hit 4.7% of GDP in defense outlays by 2025. An extraordinary figure even by Cold War standards. This spending is not only about deterrence; it also positions Poland as a credible partner within both NATO and the EU, capable of fielding modern forces and supporting allies in real operational terms. While skepticism remains about Brussels' ability to act quickly or decisively in a military context, Polish strategists increasingly see value in the EU's complementary role, particularly in areas like resilience, logistics, supply chains, and hybrid threats.

Poland today stands at the intersection of two strategic paths. It continues to treat NATO and the U.S. as central to its defense posture, but it no longer treats EU defense policy as symbolic or irrelevant. The shift is not ideological but pragmatic, driven by a combination of urgent security realities, concern over the stability of the U.S. political system, and Poland's own aspirations to become not just a consumer of European security, but a co-producer. The challenge now is to turn this evolving mindset into long-term policy and investment decisions that can bridge old structures with new opportunities both for Poland's national interests and the EU's collective security future.

4

NATO and the EU: what can make them irrelevant and how Norway and Poland should deal with the emerging strategic uncertainty?

Because both Norway's and Poland's security depends to a very large extent on how the alliances/security communities they both are members of will be able to deal with external risks, challenges and threats as well as with internal tensions that can undermine their cohesion and unity it is important to learn more about what can undermine both NATO's and the EU's ability to deliver security to its members.

What can make an alliance irrelevant and even lead to its demise? This question has attracted considerable attention, for academic as well as policy-related reasons.⁷¹ There is also a good understanding of what can lead to the demise of an alliance⁷² – the worst-case scenario for smaller members whose security depends on the assistance of their more powerful alliance partners.⁷³

Walt⁷⁴ linked the issue of alliance collapse to the lack of interest on the part of one or many of its members, or to such 'irrational' reasons as domestic politics, personal pique or misperceptions. Specifically, Walt held that alliances may collapse due to changing threat perceptions, declining credibility, domestic factors such as demographic and social trends, domestic competition, regime change and ideological divisions. Duffield, Michota and Miller⁷⁵ identified

a major war as the main cause of the demise of historical alliances. They also argued that alliances may collapse when the conditions that promoted their creation are no longer present – because of the loss of power of the main actor or shifts in the international distribution of power, due to changes in threat perceptions, or sudden political change in one or several partner countries that loosens the bonds of affinity that had held the alliance together.

Warren⁷⁶ conducted a historical examination of existing alliances that revealed four factors that had led to the collapse of alliances: defeat of a partner (45%); partners' interests diverging (32%); disappearance of the threat (21%); failure of partner to abide by agreements (9%). More generally, he argued that, in 66% of all cases, the main reason for collapse was a change in the status of the threat.

Addressing potential external threats has been the main motivation for both Norway and Poland to join NATO and work together – although in different formats – with the EU on addressing various risks, challenges and threats stemming from the international environment. Changes in the external framework, such as the disappearance of an external threat may have a huge

impact on these two historical security communities' evolution and cohesion because the disappearance of an external threat has historically been the main reason for the demise of many alliances. Also differing perceptions of external threats within an alliance may undermine internal cohesion, resulting in internal divisions and leading ultimately to its demise as a functional vehicle of interstate cooperation on security-related matters.

However, alliances are often formed mainly for internal identity-related reasons, as communities of states sharing culture, norms and values. This means that internal developments within the member-states and the alliance as such may play a crucial role in shaping its internal dynamics and cohesion. Sudden internal developments in one or several partner countries that undermine the normative foundation of the alliance may lead to tensions and ultimately to its demise. On the other hand, shared identity may extend the lifespan of the alliance securing its survival, even after the external threat has disappeared or changed.

The recent developments in the international environment, such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine or the emergence of China as an economic and military superpower have indeed changed the framework conditions in which both the transatlantic and the European security community Norway and Poland are members of must operate. These changes in the international environment have also influenced internal dynamics in these two security communities. Maybe the most consequential of these changes has been the shift of the strategic focus noticed for some time in the most important NATO power, the USA, that has over the past decades been paying increasingly more attention to developments in the Indo-Pacific region and much less attention to developments in Europe. Russian aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a sort of return of the USA to Europe, as the USA has been the most important provider of military, economic and political support to Ukraine and the Biden administration decided to strengthen its strategic cooperation with Europe.

However, the return of Donald Trump to the White House has brought back some bad memories from the recent past and is by many in Europe viewed as heralding a new era of strategic

unpredictability and instability. In addition, there are some strong signals coming from Washington that the tensions between the USA and its European allies are caused not only by questions related to unfair burden-sharing among the members of the transatlantic community, but also by the growing normative gap between Washington and most of its European allies. For the time being it is difficult to predict how these new developments are going to change internal dynamics in both the transatlantic and the European security communities and whether these changes can lead to their demise. It is also too early to say how these recent developments are going to influence relations between these two important security communities in a situation when the normative glue that has traditionally facilitated cooperation between them seems to show signs of degradation and decomposition.

For both Norway and Poland these new developments pose a serious challenge. They both joined NATO seeking a shelter against a potential external military and ideological threat from the east. The most important guarantor of their security has over the past years been the USA, that also has been one of the key founders and promoters of the liberal international order. At the same time, both Norway and Poland have strengthened their political and economic cooperation with the European security community – Norway as an associate EEA member without full rights, and Poland as a full-fledged member with direct access to the EU decision making table. Both Norway and Poland are committed to support liberal international order based on a set of widely accepted rules and regulations that secure equal rights to all members of international society.

However, when Washington, their main ally and guarantor of security sends a message that it is no longer interested in playing by the liberal-democratic rules it had traditionally supported and promoted they see this development as a serious challenge to the internal cohesion of NATO and can fear that this may mean the beginning of the end of the alliance they have relied on as the guarantor of their security. This may also mean that they will seek an even closer cooperation with the European security community where their main economic, political and normative interests will be best served after the transatlantic rupture.

However, being members of both security communities Norway and Poland should approach this new situation cautiously, avoid any unnecessary escalation of tensions in relations between the USA and European allies and work on easing the existing tensions in this important relationship. At the same time, they should consider a worst-case scenario, such as the demise of the transatlantic alliance, and prepare for a

life after NATO in which a far greater role will be played by the emerging European security community. For Norway this may mean a new round of discussion and decisions on the form of Norway's relationship with the EU, for Poland this may mean building stronger relations with the country's European allies and taking greater responsibility for its own security in a much less predictable and fluid international environment.

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