There is ongoing speculation today about whether the United States will leave NATO, as President Trump repeatedly criticized European allies as irrelevant to U.S. national security interests and called NATO a "paper tiger." Similarly, an increasing anti-European bias is becoming evident among some of his core voters – understandable when Western Europeans were seen as free-riding on America's dime, but unfair to allies in the Nordic-Baltic Northeast Corridor, especially Finland, Sweden, Poland, and the Baltic States, who have always invested in defense. These expressions of pique, frustration, and anger are real and will continue to influence transatlantic relations. It is increasingly clear that NATO, as we once knew it, has run its course, and without major changes in how the United States engages with its European allies, it may fade away. Yet despite recriminations from Washington, especially since the Iran war added another point of tension to the troubled waters of the transatlantic relationship, and despite growing resentment among the European public angered by Washington's criticism, both sides recognize that NATO still remains a crucial force multiplier for the U.S. and a key part of European defense and deterrence strategy in the Atlantic region. Even with the Trump administration's harsh critique of NATO, the reality remains that the U.S. needs European allies, even if only to project power into the North Atlantic, the High North, the Middle East, and Africa. Conversely, Europe relies on America for its security because, without the United States in NATO, it will struggle to defend itself for at least another decade, even if it meets all its current defense spending commitments.

The current turmoil in NATO isn't just caused by Trump's unpredictable governance, which keeps allies and adversaries unsure of America's next move. NATO faces tough challenges because threat perceptions across Europe no longer match the assumptions that shaped NATO during the Cold War. Additionally, the U.S. force posture and its legacy bases in Europe, especially in Germany, no longer provide a clear, unified geostrategic picture. Alliances must reflect shared interests and threat perceptions to stay credible and effective. This shared threat view and mutual goal of deterring the Soviet Union and its satellites laid the foundation for the original strong transatlantic bond that kept NATO united, credible, and effective for decades. Since the Cold War ended, however, the gap between the old U.S. force

posture and basing and the new post-communist geopolitics has widened, driven by changing geography and diverging threat perceptions. Europe has struggled to find common ground as its landscape has shifted significantly—due to the fall of the Soviet Union, Germany's reunification, and notably, several rounds of NATO enlargement that reshaped the continent's geostrategic landscape. This has left the 30 European allies to navigate a new regional security environment where geographic location influences both threats and each nation's core interests, especially as the U.S. becomes less involved on the continent in providing leadership and setting priorities.

NATO's current crisis offers a real chance to discuss its adaptation to new realities, as restoring consensus and credible deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic region has long been overdue. Although some progress was made when three regional plans were accepted at the 2023 Vilnius summit, the alliance must carefully evaluate these new realities, not just in Europe but globally. The United States faces challenges from an "Axis of Dictatorships," a de facto alliance between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, at a time when the U.S. defense budget is half of what it averaged during the Cold War, its military roughly half as large, and its ability to engage in a full-scale state-on-state war limited to one primary and one secondary theater. Meanwhile, regional power balances in Europe, the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula, and the Indo-Pacific are becoming more fragile. With U.S. national debt exceeding $39 trillion and interest costs surpassing the nation's defense budget, the U.S. urgently needs a NATO alliance that can strengthen Europe's defenses and help improve America's fiscal situation.

Washington faces three main options for NATO's future: keep the current approach and risk weakening the alliance to irrelevance, completely withdraw as Donald Trump has threatened, or reform how the U.S. collaborates with its NATO allies, determine the alliance's priorities, and reorganize U.S. force posture to protect Europe and safeguard American interests. The first option suggests NATO would slowly fade away; the second implies NATO would be dismantled by U.S. decisions because, without America's nuclear umbrella, advanced

capabilities, and high-end enablers, NATO would simply stop functioning, no matter how many new Strategic Concepts are drafted or NATO summits are held.

Although the President suggested that the United States might withdraw from NATO while also aiming to end the conflict in Ukraine and reset relations with Russia, the main strategic challenge for the U.S. remains: preventing any hostile power, especially Russia, from dominating Europe and weakening transatlantic security. In this context, today more than ever, decisions about America's future relationship with Europe depend on the country's overall economic and social health and its ability to avoid continued overspending. It will also rely on Washington's willingness to reaffirm the geopolitical realities that have long shaped U.S. security policy. In just one year of the second Trump term, there has been a lasting shift in transatlantic relations, leading to both positive gains in European defense spending and negative repercussions, as overly harsh rhetoric from Washington has greatly strained the transatlantic bond.

The Trump administration's new hemispheric strategy has already significantly impacted two key pillars of transatlantic relations: (1) the decreasing resources, especially conventional forces, that the United States can deploy if European allies are attacked, and (2) the ongoing political cohesion within the NATO alliance under U.S. leadership, including host-nation support and increased allied contributions to collective deterrence and defense. The situation has become even more difficult amid disagreements over Europe's failure to assist the United States in opening the Strait of Hormuz and its general lack of support for the American military campaign against Iran. This shift, driven by harsh fiscal realities at home, means that as the first pillar becomes more limited, Europeans will need to bear the responsibility within NATO to support the second by providing most of the theater's conventional forces. The question is not whether NATO remains a U.S.-centered alliance or shifts toward a Europe-led security framework with some U.S. backing; rather, it is whether NATO can adapt and keep the U.S. at its core, ensuring that nuclear deterrence remains credible, since Europe cannot provide it, or risk becoming hollowed out and ultimately falling apart.

A new approach should guide the United States’ NATO policy, proposing that deterrence can be strengthened and transatlantic credibility preserved by focusing U.S. operational efforts where they are most effective: the “Northeast Corridor,” which includes Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland. This approach builds on some long-standing assumptions since 2022, such as strengthening NATO’s eastern flank, while also depending on the idea that integrating the Nordic countries would greatly enhance Baltic defense and expand credible deterrence into the European High North, linking it to the Arctic and U.S. hemispheric priorities. The countries of the Northeast Corridor share threat perceptions regarding Russia and are therefore committed to adequately resourcing their defenses to ensure deterrence remains effective and, if deterrence fails, that any Russian invasion would be stopped and reversed.

There is a clear geostrategic reason behind this approach. The Northeast Corridor faces three main challenges: (1) the Baltic States’ geography, which makes those countries directly vulnerable to Russian pressure and potential attack routes, (2) the Arctic-North Atlantic maritime pathways, crucial for U.S. and European trade and for U.S.-Europe reinforcement plans, and (3) Poland’s vital new role as the main land hub for NATO’s eastern defenses. Focusing the U.S. NATO strategy on the Northeast Corridor provides several benefits in addressing these issues. First, it enhances NATO’s deterrence credibility because if its most committed allies’ borders cannot be defended, the entire alliance is at risk. Second, it taps into these highly capable regional militaries, especially Finland’s extensive conventional artillery—the largest in Europe—and Poland’s large, modern, and growing armored forces. Third, by covering both maritime and land domains, it creates practical, effective synergies between them. In this context, the Swedish and Norwegian navies would play key roles in stopping a potential Russian advance, while Finland, with its mobilization capacity, and Poland, with its large population and high defense spending, would form the core of land-based forces. This plan also integrates the Corridor’s air power, utilizes current stocks of fourth-generation aircraft, and prepares for the expanded presence of F-35s that Poland and Finland will add to Norway’s existing assets. It also leverages these countries’ investments in

remotely guided UAVs and fully AI-driven platforms, where their strong commercial industries and private equity could be used to develop shareable, dual-use systems.

A viable American Northeast strategy would require a fundamental shift in how Washington engages with NATO, including reordering key partnerships and reassessing the role of the American legacy base infrastructure in Europe. It would also need an upfront investment in advanced enabling capabilities allocated specifically for the Corridor. This should prioritize undersea capabilities, with an emphasis on anti-submarine warfare, ISR integration, long-range fires coordination across the region, resilient command and control (C2), and effective air and missile defense systems (AMD). To execute the strategy, the U.S. would need to preposition weapons, equipment, and munitions and, most importantly, move toward permanent basing—with at least one brigade in Finland or the Baltic States and two in Poland. These forces should be relocated from their current bases in Germany to bolster the frontier and establish a credible U.S. and NATO deterrent posture—a point this author has consistently emphasized since 2022.

A new US strategy for NATO will require substantial investment in North-South military mobility. Currently, most regional infrastructure is post-imperial and oriented east-west. With Finland's eastern border alone stretching an additional 830 miles that NATO must defend, military mobility becomes crucial for an effective regional approach. Most mobility infrastructure investments along the flank should be led by the Northeast Corridor allies. An example is Poland's ongoing "Central Communications Hub" CPK project—a large new airport connected by rail and high-speed roads to enable rapid and efficient transport and fueling, exemplifying such an innovative approach. These investments should be duplicated across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Baltics to credibly shorten reinforcement timelines, while rail links, especially in the Polish CPK project, should be designed with military mobility in mind.

The United States should work with Northeast Corridor allies to develop specific joint plans to

close the GIUK–Norwegian Sea approaches and protect transatlantic sea lines of communication. These efforts should support the U.S.-focused hemispheric defense strategy by better aligning NATO's resources with our hemispheric and homeland defense. Plans would include coordinating an integrated AMD system for the European High North and the Baltic Sea region. Along with resilient basing—both U.S. and allied—the Northeast Corridor could quickly boost capacity to establish a strong deterrent and defense posture against Russia's incursions. This method would be more cost-effective than maintaining the current setup. Furthermore, for the Northeast Corridor plan to succeed, the U.S. and NATO must develop and regularly rehearse corridor-specific wartime missions, since unexercised capabilities are just declarations. The ongoing exercise program should focus on host-nation support, reception and staging, forward movement, and, most importantly, seamless, integrated targeting that uses data maneuver in the 4 GHz electromagnetic spectrum. A key cost-saving for the United States is that the level of commitment needed would be a fraction of what was required during the Cold War, while the synergies created would significantly offset the reductions in force.

Admittedly, no strategic solution is without risks, and the Northeast Corridor strategy is no different. One risk is political: adopting this approach could create a "two-tier" Europe within NATO, with allies to the South and West feeling left out and overlooked, which would complicate alliance politics. The "two-tier" NATO issue could be partly addressed by shifting the current legacy infrastructure in Europe, especially in Germany, toward training, reinforcement, and support, along with investing in sustainment facilities in eastern Germany near the Polish border. With strong U.S. leadership and close cooperation among allies, this shift would not be a drawback because, much like the Bonn Republic during the Cold War, Poland is not NATO's primary hub on the eastern flank at the point of contact.

A U.S. strategy that prioritizes the Northeast Corridor as NATO's new center of gravity could also heighten competition for American resources, since the essential enablers for the Corridor would overlap with some Indo-Pacific needs, requiring clear prioritization and

coordination before allocation decisions are made. Critics might also argue that such a major shift in NATO’s priorities could impact escalation management—if the U.S. and NATO focus on the Corridor is seen by Russia as preparations for decisive area denial, Moscow might respond with Phase Zero pre-crisis pressure, potentially escalating to a full-scale standoff. Lastly, this strategy depends on how credible the European commitment to strengthening its defense industrial base and readiness levels really is, without which the Northeast Corridor would simply serve as a fragile shield for NATO and could, in fact, invite Russia to test it at will.

Most importantly, refocusing U.S. priorities in NATO toward Europe’s Northeast Corridor concentrates deterrence where it is most needed and aligns U.S. resources with alliance credibility. This approach treats deterrence as geographically centered at the point of contact, with several American permanent bases along the northeastern flank reassuring allies that Washington fully supports their efforts to strengthen NATO’s defense. Synergies between U.S. and allied interests are vital to the Northeast Corridor strategy, as Sweden and Finland’s integration into NATO’s planning enhances depth and operational flexibility for Baltic defense through geostrategic rear positions, their airfields, dispersal options for both U.S. and European forces, and clearly defined ground maneuver corridors. Poland is pivotal to this strategy because it is the only NATO country on the eastern flank capable of providing logistics, combat power, mass, and sustainment in a potential conflict with Russia. In short, if properly coordinated and resourced under NATO’s regional plans, the Northeast Corridor could become the alliance’s most unified and effective operational area, aligning interests and threats and giving this vital alliance a renewed sense of purpose.