

Trump, Ukraine and NATO: Two Crossroads for Europe

by Alessandro Marrone

Donald Trump's second administration will probably push hard European allies to increase their defence spending and, in continuity with Joe Biden's, will try to rally Europe's support to contain and roll back China's influence on the global stage. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that the incoming Republican president will try to withdraw from NATO or somehow break the alliance. Washington will rather seek a peace deal with Moscow over Ukraine at expense of Kyiv, which will represent a first crossroads for Europe. A peace too favourable to Russia would encourage the Kremlin to test NATO's collective deterrence and defence – this would constitute a second crossroads for European allies.

A more cohesive and loyal administration

The US institutional and political system places checks and balances on presidential powers also concerning national security, foreign and defence

policy, and therefore NATO. For example, a hypothetical decision by Trump to withdraw from the NATO treaty would require a two-thirds majority in the Senate to become a reality, and is therefore impossible to happen. The new administration's approach to the Alliance's collective deterrence and defence will likely be a dynamic balance, the result of the constant interaction between the president's disruptive attitude and the continuity of the political-institutional system in the broad sense.

In his first term, Trump could count only on a small number of loyalists and suffered a certain ostracism from US institutions as well as members of his own administration, whom he replaced with unprecedented frequency. This time, Vice-President-elect J.D. Vance is fully aligned with Trump: for instance, he called for a peace deal in Ukraine because, in his view, Kyiv cannot win against Moscow. The appointed Secretary of State Marco Rubio holds

Alessandro Marrone is Head of the Defence Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

well-known hawkish positions on China, in line not only with the new president but also a large part of the US defence and intelligence establishment. Future Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth is rather young and new in this policy field, as well as very close to Trump. He graduated from Princeton and Harvard, then served as a military official in Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally he supported Trump's conservative positions working as a Fox TV anchorman over the last eight years. The Director of National Intelligence who will coordinate 16 US intelligence agencies, Tulsi Gabbard, is also very aligned with the president. Last but not least, Trump's ally Elon Musk will have a cross-cutting role in the administration, which will enable him to participate in the White House policy-making on a number of dossiers relevant to international security and defence.

The fact Trump selected the people for two dozen key posts in only ten days since his election,¹ by picking also Republican governors and lawmakers, demonstrates his political strength, his grip on the party and his readiness to implement the policies he announced. Moreover, Trump made it clear he is going to quickly replace the first and second lines of the State Department and other institutions not aligned with his administration, by fully using the US spoil system. Finally, he counts on a Republican party which expelled a number of political figures who opposed him in previous years, and is therefore more ready to support his

¹ Sam Cabral, Amy Walker and Nadine Yousif, "Who Has Joined Trump's Team So Far?", in *BBC News*, last updated on 19 November 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx24gze60yzo>.

administration and policies. As a whole, it can be expected that Trump will be able to move from words to deeds in terms of foreign and defence policy in a faster, deeper and more effective way than during his first term.

Trump's priorities in NATO: Defence investment and China

There is a strong bipartisan consensus in the US and a certain continuity between Trump and Biden in pushing for European allies to invest more in their defence, to relieve US armed forces and taxpayers from what is perceived as an unfair burden. The new president will ask for it in a very harsh and threatening way,² in the name of the "America First" principle that distinguishes his political platform. Since 23 out of 32 NATO member states have already reached the goal of 2 per cent of GDP invested in defence,³ US pressure will be directed above all at the eight countries that are still non-compliant.⁴ Among these, Italy stands out at about 1.5 per cent: not increasing enough the defence budget could become a problem for the Giorgia Meloni government's relations with Washington. Furthermore, since Poland will spend 4.7 per cent of its GDP on

² Kate Sullivan, "Trump Says He Would Encourage Russia to 'Do Whatever the Hell They Want' to Any NATO Country that Doesn't Pay Enough", in *CNN*, 11 February 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

³ Clara Falkenek, "Who's at 2 Percent? Look How NATO Allies Have Increased Their Defense Spending Since Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", in *Econographics*, 8 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=778815>.

⁴ Iceland is excluded from the statistics as it does not have a standing army.

defence in 2025, the United Kingdom is aiming for 2.5 per cent and several other allies are on this trajectory due to the Russian threat, it is not excluded that, under US pressure, NATO will set a new threshold higher than 2 per cent. That would be fully in line with the “peace through strength” approach Trump outlined during his first term.⁵

Such priority on defence investments may go hand in hand with a partial reduction of the US military presence in Europe, or its threat as a bargaining tactic, but this redeployment is unlikely to be drastic due to the opposition of the Pentagon, aware of the entailed risks. In this context, it is likely that the marginalisation of the southern flank in the NATO agenda, which has been ongoing for years, will continue and worsen. Trump has made it clear that Washington’s external intervention will be strictly linked to the existence of an “essential” American interest, which in this region can be traced back, in his administration’s vision, only to the staunch support for Israel. It is therefore necessary for Italy to acknowledge it and act for the stability of the enlarged Mediterranean region primarily outside of the NATO framework, whether on a bilateral basis, within the EU or ad-hoc coalitions of European countries.⁶

Another continuity between Trump, Biden and the US establishment is the

⁵ Robert C. O’Brien, “The Return of Peace Through Strength”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (July/August 2024), p. 24-38, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131815>.

⁶ Alessandro Marrone and Gaia Ravazzolo, “NATO and Italy in the 75th Anniversary of the Alliance: Perspectives beyond the Washington Summit”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 24|06 (July 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18693>.

absolute priority given to the strategic confrontation with the hegemonic challenge posed by China, and therefore to the Indo-Pacific. Such American priority has led NATO to formulate an increasingly harsh assessment of the Chinese threat since 2019: from the constant cyber warfare to the space race, from China’s growing nuclear arsenal to the strategic use of investments and trade to create dependencies in Europe. At the same time, NATO has strengthened partnerships with four Indo-Pacific countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. It is likely that both trends – NATO’s focus on the Chinese threat and regional partnerships in the Indo-Pacific – will continue and accelerate in the next four years.

The US negotiations with Russia over Ukraine: A first crossroads for Europe

The major discontinuity between Biden and Trump instead concerns Western support for Ukraine, which the last Washington summit embedded in the NATO structure. The new administration will in all likelihood try to negotiate with Russia a peace deal over Ukraine in order to disengage the US from this war, considered a distraction and unnecessary cost with respect to the China priority. This would be consistent with the prevailing isolationist mood of the Republican electorate, as well as with Trump’s political platform. Vance has already publicly mentioned the possibility that Russia will keep the areas it has occupied, a demilitarised zone will be established along the current line of demarcation, and Ukraine will be a

neutral country.⁷ Against this backdrop, Moscow will certainly try to get the most at Kyiv's expense, also considering that Trump does not have an ideological anti-Russian position. The negotiations will not be easy, but their strategic direction is set since "prioritisation" of US resources towards China will surely be a mantra of the White House. To be sure, negotiations may fail for two main reasons: either Putin may raise the bar too high so as to make a deal unacceptable in political terms for the Trump administration; or the Kremlin may bet that Washington will disengage from Ukraine in any case over the mid-term, and that Moscow has just to stay the course for a few more years in order to win the whole country and occupy Kyiv as it planned to do in February 2022. Still, a negotiation will take place, and the possibility of a peace deal quite favourable for Russia at the expenses of Ukraine is real. This poses a first crossroads for European members of NATO. They can assist as spectators to a bilateral US-Russia dialogue and suffer its consequences, as happened with the US-Taliban deal over Afghanistan. Or they can elaborate a strategy for a peace more favourable to Ukraine than those to be negotiated by Trump and Putin, investing political, military and economic resources in it, and trying to influence Washington's position towards Moscow, possibly via a strategic dialogue in NATO. Negotiating tactics may vary, and should include also an

⁷ Maegan Vazquez and Karen DeYoung, "Vance Says Trump's Plan to End War in Ukraine Could Include Creating Demilitarized Zone", in *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2024, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2024-09-13/trump-plan-for-ukraine-demilitarized-zone-15163398.html>.

increase of support to Ukraine in order to deal with Russia from a position of strength. So far, Europeans as a whole have provided more military aid to Ukraine than the US, and Ukraine is by all means a priority for their security, surely more than for the US: Europeans could and should indeed play a meaningful role – or they can decide to wait and see.

The credibility of NATO collective deterrence: A second crossroads for Europe

A peace deal too favourable for Russia will enable Putin to claim victory in Ukraine at home and abroad. As a result, the Kremlin will be even more convinced that the use of force pays off, as Western democracies, at the end of the day, seem to always give up. Accordingly, some time after the peace deal is brokered, Russia may try again to invade what remains of Ukraine, as he did in 2022 by breaking the Minsk agreements. The Kremlin may find that it would be very easy to grab the much smaller and weaker Moldova, as Russian troops already occupy Transnistria. And/or Moscow may be tempted to launch a military attack on the Baltic States or elsewhere along NATO's eastern flank to test the Allies' collective defence. This is the greatest and most dramatic question mark over Trump's approach to the transatlantic Alliance and Europe. If the Republican administration will let Moscow believe it can occupy part of a NATO member's territory, and if Washington will not militarily intervene to defend its ally under attack despite article 5, this would be the end of the Atlantic Alliance.

It would also be the end of the EU as a political union, because all the countries on the eastern flank are members of both organisations: if NATO does not act, the Union will not be able to defend its member state under attack despite the EU treaties solidarity and mutual assistance clauses. This is the worst-case scenario, which is not at all impossible. The only feasible way to prevent this contingency is to build a stronger European pillar of NATO, which entails several steps both in the short- and mid-term: first, expanding the Western European military presence on the Eastern Flank from battalions to brigade-size to further dissuade Russia from a strike; second, implementing NATO regional plans by pre-deploying and/or preparing equipment and logistics mainly shouldered by Europeans; third, fulfilling NATO's New Force Model ambitious requirements in terms of deployable units, up to 100,000 troops in 10 days, 200,000 in 30 days and 500,000 in six months; fourth, staffing the integrated military command as much as possible at various levels and across different commands; fifth, providing the necessary enablers in the five operational domains; sixth, continuing to increase defence budgets in line with threat assessments, military requirements and NATO targets, with a focus on capabilities for peer-to-peer conflicts. Last but not least, NATO is a politico-military alliance, and all these steps should go hand in hand with proactive and timely political cooperation among European countries within NATO to forge a common position to be discussed with the US, rather than resorting to ad hoc, fragile, inconsistent groupings, meetings and declarations

that risk increasing confusion.⁸ This should happen urgently with respect to the aforementioned crossroads in negotiations with Russia, in which the risk of fragmentation among European countries is high, for both international and domestic politics reasons and cleavages. Overall, building a stronger, more solid and more cohesive European pillar within NATO would enable the US to maintain a limited but crucial conventional presence in Europe, make NATO deterrence credible vis-à-vis Moscow, and broadly speaking result in a more balanced and sustainable alliance across the Atlantic.

In conclusion, European countries will likely have to face two crossroads under the Trump administration regarding their own national security. First, since their primary security interest is to contain Russia, they will have to act to influence the peace talks as favourably to Kyiv as possible, by committing the necessary political, diplomatic, military and economic resources and by being pro-active rather than reactive. Second, they will have to work hard and quickly to enhance the European pillar of the Alliance to keep collective deterrence and defence solid also in Putin's eye. If Europe fails to take the right path at these two crossroads, in a few years it could find itself in the worst-case scenario of a Russian attack crossing EU and NATO borders, with catastrophic consequences on European security, stability and prosperity. A risk that is not worth taking.

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⁸ Alessandro Marrone, "A Europe-led NATO to Guarantee European Security: The Time Has Come", in *Aspenia Online*, 16 June 2024, <https://aspensiaonline.it/?p=54692>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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