

BRIEF

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND
COOPERATIVE SECURITY
EUROPEANISING NATO NO. 3

| THIERRY TARDY |

Do NATO's Kosovo Force or partnerships with third countries still make sense when Russia directly threatens the Atlantic Alliance and the US is decreasingly committed to defending it? For Europe, any sign that the US would question its commitment to NATO is bad news as it creates new vulnerabilities. Yet, a possible US withdrawal from the two core tasks of crisis management and cooperative security, or US pressure for NATO to abandon them entirely, could also be an opportunity—one by which the Europeans contribute to the materialisation of the European pillar in NATO by taking full responsibility for tasks that are politically and militarily less demanding. Either as a step towards a more balanced burden with the US within NATO, or as a transitory measure before the EU takes over those tasks.

With the end of the Cold War, NATO's mandate and activities came to be articulated around three core tasks. Alongside collective defence, which became dormant in the 1990s and 2000s before acquiring renewed centrality in the context of Russia's resurgent aggressivity, the Alliance embraced crisis management and cooperative security. Crisis management has encompassed stabilisation operations outside the NATO area, from the Western Balkans to Libya and Afghanistan. Cooperative security has established partnerships with third countries in Europe (Partnership for Peace), North Africa (Mediterranean Dialogue), the Middle East (Istanbul Cooperation Initiative), and the Indo-Pacific.¹

The three core tasks were reasserted in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept.² But with collective

defence once more central to NATO's identity, the question of the need to maintain the other two tasks has resurfaced as the Trump administration has challenged the very role of NATO. From the 2025 US National Security Strategy to the 'NATO 3.0' that the US calls for, crisis management and cooperative security are painted more as diversions from NATO's main *raison d'être* than as elements of its adaptation.³ US statements concerning NATO's future do not mention the two secondary tasks, but their explicit focus on collective defence and the need to "return to factory settings" clearly define priorities.⁴ Furthermore, the US has indicated a will to pull out from NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), while partnerships, including with Ukraine, have taken a back seat in NATO's recent activities. If not simply abandoned in the US vision of the Alliance's future, crisis management

Crisis management and cooperative security would implicitly fit into the European share of the transatlantic burden, rather than that of the US

and cooperative security would implicitly fit into the European share of the transatlantic burden, rather than that of the Americans.

DO THEY STILL MATTER?

From a strategic perspective, at a time when the priority is collective defence against Russia, it is legitimate to question the relevance of crisis management and cooperative security to contemporary NATO. The end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2014, when collective defence came back to the fore following Russia's invasion

and annexation of Crimea, had already made crisis management secondary. Today, NATO is engaged in only three such operations (in Kosovo, the Mediterranean Sea and Iraq). Arguably none of these is crucial to NATO's essence.

Likewise, the idea that cooperative security should be a core task has always been contested and has never been fully implemented. NATO officials regularly complain that it has been chronically under-resourced. Even the new trend of inviting the Indo-Pacific 4 (Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Korea) to each NATO summit has yet to lead to any substantial cooperation beyond information exchange and exercises.

NATO's European Allies are politically and operationally capable of playing a more important role in crisis management

This said, crisis management and cooperative security have been important Alliance activities and arguably matter to peace and security in Europe today. Debates about a possible US withdrawal from Kosovo and NATO distancing itself from Ukraine as a partner have led to a number of good arguments against the marginalisation of these two activities.⁵ For example, in March 2026, a letter from a bipartisan group of congress representatives to US Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned that "at a time of heightened political fragility and growing malign influence in the Western Balkans, a premature reduction of the U.S. presence risks destabilizing not only Kosovo, but the broader region, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina."⁶ They also mentioned Russia as having "consistently sought to exploit fractures in the Western Balkans and weaken NATO and EU support in the region." Hence the necessity for NATO, and the US, to remain present in the region.

Meanwhile, the evolution of threats, both in terms of their multifaceted nature and from a geographical perspective, speaks to a need to weave partnerships with countries that offer added value in the domain of security, in Europe, especially with Ukraine, but also in North Africa, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

If the US pushes for doing less in NATO while inviting Europeans to do more, there might therefore be a logic for Europeans to take more of the transatlantic burden by, *inter alia*, taking responsibility for crisis management and cooperative security. Otherwise, those tasks may simply be abandoned by the Alliance as a whole.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF NATO

Today, the US presence in NATO is essential for activities that are militarily complex or demanding, making it largely irreplaceable in collective defence. But crisis management and cooperative security are less dependent on the US—even if the role the US played in the early stages of the IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1996 or the KFOR in Kosovo in 1999, and then in ISAF in Afghanistan throughout the 2000s, could hardly have been taken by the Europeans alone.

NATO's European Allies are politically and operationally capable of playing a more important role in crisis management. Politically, the long-awaited awakening of European states that followed Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine suggests that they would, if need be, be eager to take more responsibility on this front than they were, say, 10 years ago. Especially if the US is putting pressure on them and if, in the Western Balkans in particular, the crisis-management agenda is also relevant to wider policies towards Russia. Operationally, the recent US decision to relinquish command to the Europeans of NATO's Joint Force Command in Naples (that covers the Western Balkans) attests to the incremental process by which Europeans might take over.⁷

As for capabilities, what crisis management requires is not beyond reach either.⁸ In Kosovo, the kinds of enablers that only the US provides are not those most in need. The US presence in KFOR is approximately 600 troops (out of 4 500) who play an essential logistical role in Kosovo and in the region. As is the case whenever US troops are engaged, these units also provide intelligence and contribute to the operation's command. Replacing these assets is arguably not insurmountable for Europeans, as demonstrated in neighbouring Bosnia, where the Europeans took over from NATO more than 20 years ago.

However, the issue is more political than material. What would matter most is the signal that a US withdrawal would represent, be it for nationalist Serbian forces in Kosovo or for Russia. Russia plays a long game in the Western Balkans and could interpret any intent of a US withdrawal as positive for their own endeavour. This concern would then need to be addressed by the US compensating its pulling out of troops by remaining present through intelligence, for example, as well as bilaterally in both Serbia and Kosovo.

A similar burden-shifting could happen in the cooperative security domain, where an increased European role should compensate for any US distancing. Ukraine is a case in point. The US relinquishment of its leadership of the Security Assistance Group for Ukraine (SAG-Ukraine), and its earlier insistence on the creation of the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List programme (in which Europeans have the lead), attest to the necessity of, and opportunity for Europeans to assume renewed leadership.⁹

By taking on a larger role, Europeans could make a virtue out of necessity. Taking more of the crisis-management and cooperative-security burden would then be a necessary step towards Europeanising the Alliance. Conversely, not taking more responsibility in these domains would not bode well for the Europeans' capacity to do more in collective defence, which remains NATO's primary strategic objective, and arguably where the European pillar must take off.

In practice, this would imply that Europeans are in charge in NATO entities dealing with crisis management and cooperative security (mainly the Operations Division and the Political Affairs and Security Policy division within the International Staff), have the lead in policy-making (agenda setting, chairing of committees under the North Atlantic Council and other working groups, etc.) and provide the near-totality of the workforce and capabilities in operations or in partnerships.

FROM THE EUROPEAN PILLAR TO THE EUROPEANS ALONE?

Within NATO, and in accordance with the US 2025 National Security Strategy and 2026

National Defense Strategy, a new division of tasks would then emerge, by which the US would remain in charge of nuclear deterrence and engaged in hard defence while the Europeans would provide the bulk of conventional forces for collective defence and be in charge of the crisis management and cooperative security portfolio.¹⁰

Increased responsibility in crisis management would also help in empowering Europeans for their own security governance activities within the EU, with the development of an autonomous defence policy, or in other frameworks outside NATO (e.g., the coalition of the willing, and its hypothetical operation in Ukraine).

The question about crisis management and cooperative security raises that of whether they would not be better handled in other frameworks

This is because, unintentionally, the US question about the relevance of crisis management and cooperative security within NATO also raises that of whether those tasks would not be better handled in other frameworks. A new division of tasks could then emerge, by which NATO would do collective defence only, while other actors, including the EU, would embrace the broader crisis management and cooperative security spectrum. This is, by and large, what has already happened over time, with the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, and, especially, in response to the war in Ukraine. The EU has created and run more than a dozen military CSDP operations, including that in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Berlin Plus arrangements.¹¹ And in response to the war in Ukraine, the EU has proved to be an effective security actor, embracing a wide range of activities (from sanctions to the financing of the delivery of weapons and the training of Ukrainian forces) that relate to crisis management and cooperative security. Taking over KFOR in Kosovo or becoming the main interlocutor and supporter of Ukraine is therefore neither conceptually absurd nor practically impossible.¹²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ NATO, "[Partnership for Peace programme](#)," 8 June 2024; NATO, "[Mediterranean Dialogue](#)," 18 September 2025; NATO, "[Istanbul Cooperation Initiative](#)," 30 October 2024; NATO, "[Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region](#)," 13 April 2026.
- ² The 2022 Strategic Concept makes 'collective defence' an overarching objective of the Alliance, while the three core tasks are 'deterrence and defence', 'crisis prevention and management', and 'cooperative security'. NATO, "[NATO 2022 Strategic Concept](#)," June 2022.
- ³ The White House, "[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)," November 2025; Department of War, "[Remarks by Under-Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial \(As Prepared\)](#)," 12 February 2026.
- ⁴ Department of War, "Remarks by Under-Secretary of War"; Department of War, "[War Department Review to Ensure 'NATO 3.0' Becomes Europe-Led Defense Alliance](#)," 18 June 2026.
- ⁵ Ellen Francis, "[NATO Summit sidesteps question of Trump ending military aid for Ukraine](#)," *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2025; David J. Kostelancik, "[A US Kosovo Pull-Out? The Wrong Move at a Bad Time](#)," *CEPA*, 18 March 2026.
- ⁶ US Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, "[Ranking Member Shaheen, Representative Turner Lead Bicameral, Bipartisan Letter Pressing State Department on Potential Drawdown of U.S. Forces from NATO Kosovo Mission](#)," 12 March 2026.
- ⁷ Victor Jack and Paul McLeary, "[US to shift control over top NATO military commands](#)," *Politico*, 9 February 2026.
- ⁸ Tony Lawrence, "[If America Wants KFOR Out, the EU Must Be Ready to Step In](#)," *REUNIR*, c. March 2026.
- ⁹ The Security Assistance Group for Ukraine was created in 2022 by the Pentagon to coordinate security assistance to Ukraine by NATO states. It remains a US body while the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) plays a similar role within NATO. NATO, "[NATO Allies and partners fund over 4 billion in PURL packages for Ukraine](#)," 10 December 2025; Paul McLeary and Jack Detsch, "[Pentagon ends leadership of Ukraine aid group as US distances from Europe](#)," *Politico*, 31 July 2026.
- ¹⁰ The White House, "National Security Strategy"; Department of War, "[2026 NDS. National Defense Strategy](#)," January 2026.
- ¹¹ Signed in 2003, the Berlin Plus arrangements allow for the EU to draw on NATO assets to run an EU-led operation.
- ¹² European Union, European External Action Service, "[EUFOR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA Military Operation ALTHEA](#)," 30 November 2020; European Union, EUR-Lex, "[Cooperation with NATO](#)," 21 May 2007.

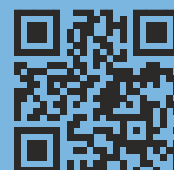
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THIERRY TARDY

Thierry Tardy is a Non-Resident Research Fellow of the ICDS and an Associate Professor at the Catholic University of Lille.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

 ICDS.TALLINN
 @ICDS-TALLINN.BSKY.SOCIAL
 @ICDS_TALLINN
 ICDS-TALLINN
 WWW.ICDS.EE



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076