

BRIEF

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| RACHEL HOFF |

At this summer's Washington Summit, NATO leaders will discuss many challenges facing the Alliance: supporting Ukraine to win the war, restoring peace in Europe, and deterring further Russian expansionism. The most daunting long-term challenges facing the Alliance, however, may be the political ones. In capitals on both sides of the Atlantic, questions of political will are most important to shaping the future of NATO in its next 75 years. How can Europe help make the case to the American people that the Alliance still matters?

POLITICAL WILL

In Europe, leaders of NATO member states that do not yet meet their commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence will need to muster the political will to do so. Investing in military readiness and capabilities is the best way to deter a potential Russian attack on Allied countries—and, public opinion evidence suggests, persuade the American people to remain engaged in the Alliance.

In the US, political leaders will need to address a significant anti-NATO sentiment among many Americans. The Washington Summit offers an opportunity for European NATO leaders to help make the case to the American people that the Alliance matters. Doing so will require an open and honest dialogue across the Atlantic to develop an understanding of the political opposition to NATO within the US.

AMERICAN RHETORIC

If President Trump is re-elected, one can assume he will continue aggressively pressing NATO

member states to meet (at least) the 2% commitment—and tying US Article 5 obligations to this commitment. While it may be popular in some quarters to view his rhetoric as an assault on the Alliance, leaders in the eastern part of Europe currently above the 2% floor know the benefit that would come if other Allies committed to and sustained greater investments in their defence capabilities. It would make NATO stronger, which is why every US president in the last two decades has pressed the issue of burden-sharing.¹

But whether or not President Trump is in office again by the 2025 Summit in The Hague, his messaging on NATO is here to stay—because it resonates with the American people. It is worth noting that President Trump's NATO comments are from campaign rallies—not in-depth media interviews with journalists pressing for his stance on 2% spending and Article 5. And the response from his supporters is wild applause.²

In the US, political leaders will need to address a significant anti-NATO sentiment among many Americans

When Americans discuss NATO with their transatlantic counterparts, they often send reassuring messages to assuage European concerns about the direction of US politics.³ That reassurance is important, and American leaders on both sides of the aisle have carried those messages.⁴ But recent rhetoric from President Trump and others on the American side of the Alliance—particularly about Article 5 commitments—is concerning, and it is worth

understanding the sentiments underlying this rhetoric in order to chart a path forward.⁵

US PUBLIC OPINION

The results of the latest Reagan Institute Summer Survey (a public opinion poll of the American people) offer some insights.⁶ First, the good news:

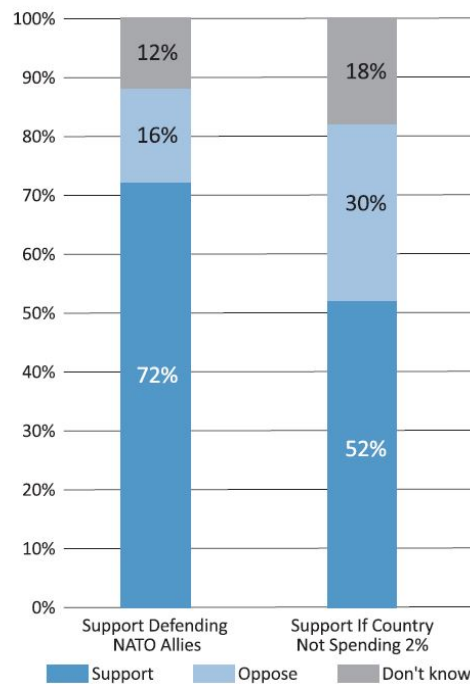
1. **Overall perception of NATO is strong, bipartisan, and consistent.** Around 60% of Americans—including majorities of both Democrats and Republicans—say they have a favourable view of NATO in this poll. This number has stayed remarkably consistent over the six years of Reagan Institute polling.⁷ It is comparable to NATO’s favourability in the UK, only slightly lower than it is in Germany, and higher than it is in France.⁸
2. **Support for NATO is even greater in practice than in theory.** Favourability towards NATO is one thing, but support for the Alliance’s core principle of collective defence is another. Over 70% of Americans say the US should respond with military force if a NATO Ally in Europe was attacked. Support for America’s Article 5 commitments is bipartisan as well, with approval from more than two-thirds of both Democrats and Republicans.
3. **Americans understand the advantages of the Alliance.** According to the Reagan Institute survey, Americans recognise numerous benefits of NATO membership to the US. Over three-quarters say that having Allies who will stand by us if we are attacked is one of the main benefits of NATO. Nearly 70% value NATO’s role in checking Russian power and expansionism. And over 60% regard NATO as beneficial to deterring violent conflict that would disrupt international trade and in protecting freedom and democracy in Europe.

This is not the whole story, however. A closer look at the data reveals some widely-held and deep-seated scepticism about NATO. Here are some more challenging takeaways from the 2024 Reagan Institute Summer Survey data:

1. **Support for Article 5 wavers if countries are not spending 2%.** Leaders in European

member states should note that the high levels of support for America’s Article 5 commitments drop precipitously—from 72% down to just 52%—for countries that are not meeting the pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. The drop takes support among Republicans down to only 46% who want America to abide by its obligation to defend a NATO country not meeting the 2% commitment.

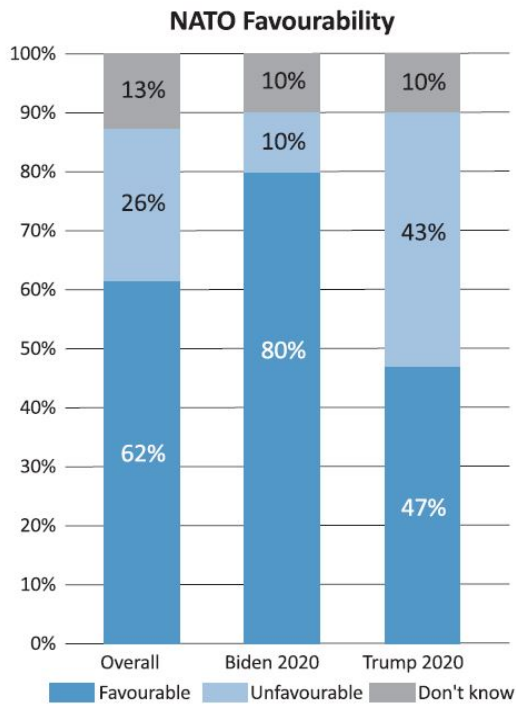
Support for U.S. Defending NATO Allies if Attacked



Source: Reagan Institute

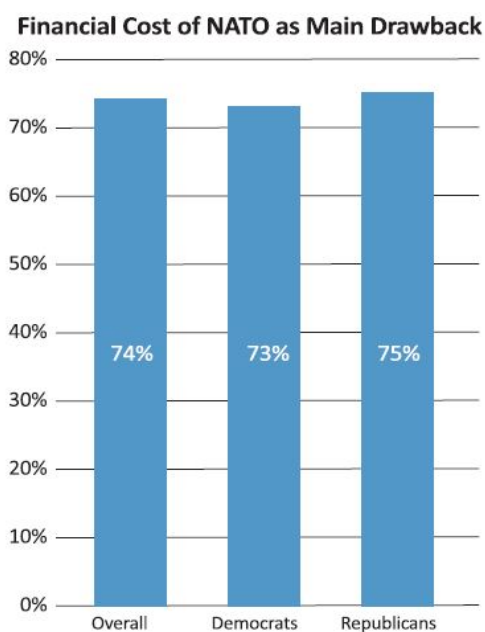
High levels of support for America’s Article 5 commitments drop precipitously for countries that are not spending at least 2% of GDP on defence

2. **NATO favourability lags among Trump voters.** While overall American support for NATO remains high, only 47% of those who voted for President Trump in 2020 have a favourable view of the Alliance. And more than two in five Trump voters see NATO negatively, with 43% reporting an unfavourable view of the Alliance. These opinions are not a new phenomenon based on recent rhetoric; they are consistent with our polling since 2018 among Republicans.⁹



Source: Reagan Institute

3. Frustrations over cost and burden-sharing drive concerns about NATO. Despite overall support for the Alliance, a majority of Americans think NATO Allies are not doing their fair share to shoulder the burden of defence spending. Three-quarters regard the financial costs of NATO as a drawback of US membership in the Alliance—a view shared by both Democrats and Republicans.



Source: Reagan Institute

These data points help explain President Trump’s campaign trail rhetoric regarding NATO, criticising not the Alliance architecture itself but the fairness of burden-sharing between the US and its Allies.¹⁰ Concerns about NATO should be properly understood as such, rather than more broadly reflecting an isolationist retreat from global alliances.

Trump’s campaign trail is not a criticism of the Alliance architecture itself but of the fairness of burden-sharing

BOLSTERING SUPPORT

The NATO Washington Summit represents an important opportunity to build support for the Alliance—and mitigate concerns about it. European leaders should help explain to the American people why NATO matters. The Reagan Institute polling offers some insight into what messages are likely to resonate.

Americans want to hear from NATO leaders that European partners are willing to do what it takes to meet our shared strategic objectives by increasing spending to strengthen their own defence posture. Leaders would be wise to heed the words of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who said that President Trump’s recent comments regarding NATO should be “a wake-up call for many European countries that haven’t done enough.”¹¹ NATO leaders need to demonstrate that they are taking concerns seriously on this side of the Atlantic.

The Baltic nations and other eastern flank Allies are already leading the way. Over the past decade, Estonia’s defence spending has increased from 1.93% of GDP to 3.43%, while Latvia and Lithuania have increased their defence spending from under 1% of GDP to 3.15% and 2.85% respectively.¹²

Since President Trump first took office in 2016, 18 countries have boosted their defence spending above 2%, with a total of 23 NATO allies now meeting that goal.¹³ Continuing these trends will go a long way to assuage the fairness concerns of the American people and bolster support for the NATO Alliance. And if a European Ally was attacked, the Reagan Institute survey

suggests that American public opinion would be more supportive of the US fulfilling its NATO Article 5 obligations.

CONCLUSION

If President Trump does return to the White House next year, he will likely be looking to score a political win on NATO among his electoral base. There are at least two ways he could get that win: he could pull the US out of NATO because our Allies are not carrying their fair share, or he could convince those Allies to increase their own defence spending and shoulder more of the burden of our collective defence.

ENDNOTES

¹ Christina Wilkie, "[Trump Is Pushing NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense. But so Did Obama and Bush](#)," *CNBC*, 12 July 2018.

² The Times and the Sunday Times, "[Donald Trump Says He Would 'Encourage' Russia to Attack Nato](#)," Youtube video, 01:33, 11 February 2024.

³ Nandita Bose and Alan Charlish, "[Biden Reassures Eastern NATO Allies on Security after Putin's Nuclear Warning](#)," *Reuters*, 22 February 2023; "[Reassuring NATO Is Key US Army Role](#)," *Association of the United States Army*, 18 November 2022.

⁴ Reuters, "[Biden to NATO: I Want Europe to Know the U.S. Is There](#)," Youtube video, 00:56, 14 June 2021; CNN, "[Marco Rubio reacts to Trump threatening NATO country to 'pay up'](#)," Youtube video, 10:42, 11 February 2024.

⁵ Kate Sullivan, "[Trump Says He Would Encourage Russia to 'Do Whatever the Hell They Want' to Any NATO Country That Doesn't Pay Enough](#)," *CNN*, 11 February 2024.

⁶ Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, "[Reagan Institute Summer Survey](#)," 17 June 2024.

⁷ Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, "[2018 National Defense Survey](#)," 1 December 2018.

⁸ Matthew Smith, "[American and Western European attitudes to NATO in February 2024](#)," *YouGov*, 23 February 2024.

⁹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, "2018 National Defense Survey."

¹⁰ Andrew McDonald, "[Donald Trump Says He Won't Quit NATO — If Europe Pays Its Way](#)," *Politico*, 19 March 2024.

¹¹ Nick Schiffrin, Sonia Kopelev and Dan Sagalyn, "[Statements from United States are making us worried': Estonian leader reacts to Trump comments](#)," *PBS NewsHour*, 16 February 2024.

¹² NATO, "[Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries \(2014-2024\)](#)," 17 June 2024, 9.

¹³ NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024), 9."

The latter win would be easier for President Trump to accomplish, and it would be a far better outcome for the security of all NATO members and the world at large. And it is the more likely outcome—regardless of who wins the US election in November—if European leaders take advantage of the opportunity at the Washington Summit to explain why NATO matters and to demonstrate their own commitment to the Alliance.

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