

Trump's Transactional Approach and the Conditionality of U.S. Commitment to NATO: A Neorealist Analysis

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Received: 25-01-2026

Revised: 08-02-2026

Accepted: 23-02-2026

Published: 10-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines Donald Trump's transactional approach toward NATO and its implications for U.S. alliance management. Although burden-sharing has been a long-standing issue within NATO, Trump's approach differed in tone, intensity, and political meaning. Earlier U.S. administrations also encouraged European allies to increase defense spending, but Trump framed the issue more directly through cost, payment, reciprocity, and conditional commitment. Using neorealism as the analytical framework, this article argues that Trump did not dismantle NATO or formally abandon the alliance. Instead, he changed the political logic of U.S.–NATO relations by making American commitment appear more conditional, cost-conscious, and interest-based. NATO remained institutionally intact, Article 5 continued to exist as the basis of collective defense, and U.S. participation in NATO structures continued. However, Trump's criticism of NATO as "obsolete," his demands that allies "pay their fair share," and his conditional rhetoric weakened trust, raised fears of abandonment, and intensified European debates over strategic autonomy. The article concludes that NATO's institutional resilience constrained Trump's ability to withdraw from or fundamentally break the alliance, but it could not fully prevent damage to the credibility and reassurance that sustain alliance cohesion.

Keywords: NATO, Trump, transactional foreign policy, burden-sharing, neorealism, alliance management, U.S. commitment, Article 5.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

NATO has been one of the most important pillars of U.S. alliance management since the end of the Second World War. Established in 1949, the alliance institutionalized U.S. involvement in European security and created a collective defense framework linking North America and Europe. For decades, NATO functioned not only as a military alliance but also as a political and institutional expression of U.S. leadership within the liberal security order. Its central principle, Article 5, established that an attack against one member would be considered an attack against all, thereby making credibility and reassurance essential to the functioning of the alliance.

The United States has historically played the dominant role within NATO. It has provided military power, nuclear deterrence, strategic leadership, and political reassurance to European allies. In return, European states have been expected to contribute to collective defense and support the broader transatlantic security order. This arrangement is often described as the "transatlantic bargain," in which U.S. security guarantees

and European contributions together sustain NATO's institutional and strategic relevance (The Transatlantic Bargain, 2012).

However, NATO has also been marked by persistent burden-sharing debates. The United States has repeatedly argued that European allies do not contribute enough to their own defense, while many European states have remained dependent on American military capabilities. This tension existed long before Donald Trump. Yet Trump's presidency gave the burden-sharing debate a sharper and more explicitly transactional character. Unlike previous presidents, Trump repeatedly criticized NATO allies in public, described the alliance as "obsolete," and framed allied defense spending as a matter of payment, fairness, and return to the United States (Kaufman, 2017; Olsen, 2021)

Trump's approach therefore raised important questions about the future of U.S. commitment to NATO. The issue was not simply whether NATO would survive. NATO did survive. The more important question was whether Trump's rhetoric and policy style changed the way allies perceived U.S. reliability. This article examines that question by analyzing Trump's transactional approach toward NATO through a neorealist lens.

Problem Statement

The central problem addressed in this article is that Trump's transactional foreign policy challenged traditional assumptions about U.S. commitment to NATO. While U.S. concerns over European defense spending were not new, Trump reframed burden-sharing in a more direct and conditional manner. Instead of presenting NATO primarily as a long-term institutional alliance based on collective defense and shared responsibility, Trump often discussed it as an arrangement in which allies had to prove their value through financial and military contributions.

This created uncertainty within the alliance. NATO's formal structures remained intact, and the United States did not withdraw from the alliance. Yet Trump's repeated criticism created doubts about whether U.S. support could still be treated as automatic. The problem, therefore, lies in the tension between institutional continuity and political uncertainty. NATO survived Trump's pressure, but the credibility and predictability of U.S. commitment were affected.

Objectives of the Study

This article aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine Trump's transactional approach toward NATO through a neorealist lens.
2. To analyze how Trump reframed NATO burden-sharing debates in terms of cost, reciprocity, and contribution.
3. To assess how Trump's rhetoric affected perceptions of U.S. commitment and alliance credibility.
4. To evaluate NATO's response to Trump through institutional resilience, burden-sharing adjustments, and European strategic autonomy debates.
5. To explain what the NATO case reveals about interest-based alliance management under Trump.

Research Questions

This article is guided by the following research questions:

1. How did Trump's transactional approach affect U.S.–NATO relations?
2. How did Trump's burden-sharing demands reshape the meaning of U.S. commitment to NATO?
3. What does NATO's response reveal about institutional resilience and the limits of transactional alliance management?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to debates on U.S. alliance management, NATO burden-sharing, and the future of American commitment to formal alliances. The article shows that Trump's approach should not be understood simply as isolationism or personal unpredictability. Rather, it reflected a more explicit interest-based logic in U.S. alliance management. From a neorealist perspective, alliances are instruments of national interest and strategic utility. Trump's approach made this logic more visible by linking U.S. commitment to allied contribution.

The study is also significant because it distinguishes between the survival of an alliance and the quality of trust within it. NATO did not collapse under Trump. However, institutional survival does not mean that the alliance was unaffected. Trump's rhetoric weakened reassurance, intensified fears of abandonment, and encouraged European debates over autonomy. This distinction is important for understanding the future of U.S. alliance management.

Organization of the Article

The article is organized into six sections. The first section introduces the research problem, objectives, questions, and significance. The second section reviews relevant literature and explains the neorealist framework. The third section presents the methodology. The fourth section analyzes NATO burden-sharing before Trump, Trump's criticism of NATO, and NATO's response. The fifth section provides a neorealist interpretation of the NATO case. The final section concludes the article and identifies its broader implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

NATO as an Institutional Alliance

NATO is widely understood as a formal institutional alliance based on collective defense, consultation, military cooperation, and U.S. leadership. Its creation reflected the strategic need to deter Soviet expansion and stabilize Western Europe after the Second World War. Over time, NATO became more than a military pact. It became a political community and a central institution of the liberal security order.

Schake and Pepe (2020) describe NATO's original purpose through Lord Ismay's famous formulation: "to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down" (Schake & Pepe, 2020). This statement captures NATO's Cold War role in deterring Soviet power, anchoring U.S. involvement in European security, and embedding Germany within a cooperative Western framework. NATO's survival after the Cold War further demonstrated its institutional adaptability.

The idea of the transatlantic bargain is also important. The bargain linked American security guarantees to European contributions and cooperation. However, this bargain was not purely transactional. It was embedded in institutional commitment, shared security expectations, and long-term alliance management (The Transatlantic Bargain, 2012). This is why Trump's approach generated concern: it appeared to shift NATO from a political and institutional commitment toward a more conditional exchange.

Burden-Sharing in NATO

Burden-sharing has been a recurring issue in NATO since the early decades of the alliance. The United States has long argued that European allies rely too heavily on American military power while underinvesting in their own defense. Zeneli and Dickinson (2024) trace the burden-sharing debate back to President Eisenhower's warning that "the American well can run dry" (Zeneli & Dickinson, 2024). This shows that Trump did not create the burden-sharing issue.

The debate became more politically visible after the 2014 Wales Summit, where NATO allies agreed to move toward spending 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2024. The 2 percent benchmark became a simple measure of whether allies were contributing fairly. However, McInnis, Fata, Jensen, and Macias (2024) argue that this metric does not fully capture the range of contributions allies make to collective security. They suggest that NATO should move toward a broader idea of responsibility-sharing, including resilience, preparedness, and whole-of-government capabilities (McInnis, Fata, Jensen, & Macias, 2024).

This literature is important because it shows that Trump's burden-sharing demands were not entirely new. What was new was the way he communicated them. Earlier U.S. administrations usually framed burden-sharing within the language of collective responsibility. Trump, by contrast, framed it more directly through payment, fairness, and return on American investment.

Trump's Transactional Foreign Policy

Trump's foreign policy has often been described as transactional because it emphasized reciprocity, bargaining, cost-benefit calculations, and direct material returns. In the NATO case, transactionalism appeared most clearly in Trump's criticism of allies for not spending enough on defense and his suggestion that U.S. protection should depend on allied contributions.

Kaufman (2017) argues that Trump's description of NATO as "obsolete" created concern among European allies because it questioned the relevance of an alliance that had provided security guarantees for nearly seventy years (Kaufman, 2017). Olsen (2021) similarly argues that Trump openly criticized NATO but did not take drastic steps to end U.S. commitment (Olsen, 2021). This created a gap between rhetoric and policy. The alliance survived, but uncertainty increased.

Sperling and Webber (2019) explain Trump's NATO policy through the concepts of "exit" and "voice." They argue that NATO's institutionalization made U.S. exit difficult. As a result, Trump used "voice" by criticizing and pressuring the alliance from within rather than withdrawing from it (Sperling & Webber, 2019). This argument is central to the present study because it shows that Trump's approach was disruptive but constrained by institutional structures.

Neorealism as the Analytical Framework

This article uses neorealism as its main analytical framework. Neorealism views the international system as anarchic and emphasizes state survival, self-help, national interest, and the distribution of power (Waltz,

1979). From this perspective, alliances are not permanent moral commitments. They are instruments through which states pursue security, manage threats, and improve their strategic position.

Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory is useful because it explains that states form alliances in response to perceived threats, not only in response to power (Walt, 1987). Snyder's work on alliance politics is also relevant because it highlights the problems of abandonment and entrapment in alliance relationships (Snyder, 1984; Snyder, 1997). In the NATO case, Trump's rhetoric raised fears of abandonment because it made U.S. commitment appear less automatic.

Neorealism helps explain why Trump demanded greater burden-sharing. From this perspective, the United States, as the leading power within NATO, had an interest in redistributing alliance costs to European allies. However, neorealism alone does not fully explain Trump's rhetorical style. It explains the strategic logic behind burden-sharing demands, while transactionalism describes the policy style through which those demands were expressed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the article examines political rhetoric, alliance expectations, burden-sharing debates, institutional responses, and perceptions of credibility. These issues cannot be understood only through numerical data. They require interpretation of policy discourse, scholarly analysis, official statements, and alliance behavior.

Data Sources

The study relies on secondary and publicly available sources. These include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, NATO-related documents, official statements, and expert commentaries. The article uses sources on neorealism, alliance politics, NATO burden-sharing, Trump's foreign policy, and NATO's institutional resilience.

Method of Analysis

The article uses thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. The main themes include burden-sharing, transactionalism, alliance commitment, U.S. reliability, institutional resilience, European strategic autonomy, and fear of abandonment. These themes are then interpreted through neorealism to assess how Trump's approach reflected interest-based alliance management.

Scope and Limitations

The article focuses only on Trump's approach toward NATO. It does not examine all U.S. alliances or compare NATO with other cases in detail. The study is also limited by its reliance on secondary sources and public documents. Since Trump's second term is ongoing, some recent developments remain fluid and may evolve over time. Despite these limitations, the article provides a focused analysis of how Trump's transactional approach affected U.S.–NATO relations.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

NATO Burden-Sharing before Trump

Burden-sharing debates in NATO existed long before Trump. The United States has consistently expected European allies to contribute more to collective defense. This expectation was rooted in the asymmetry of the alliance. The United States provided the largest share of NATO's military capabilities, nuclear deterrence, and strategic leadership, while many European allies relied heavily on American protection.

The burden-sharing debate became especially important after the 2014 Wales Summit. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO members agreed to move toward spending 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2024. This benchmark became the most visible indicator of allied contribution. However, the 2 percent target was also criticized for being too narrow. It measured defense spending but did not necessarily show whether allies had the capabilities needed for NATO's actual security challenges.

Trump's criticism must therefore be placed within this historical context. He did not invent the burden-sharing problem. U.S. presidents before him also urged European allies to spend more. The difference was that Trump changed the tone and meaning of the debate. Earlier presidents generally framed burden-sharing as part of collective responsibility. Trump framed it more directly as a question of payment, fairness, and whether allies were giving enough in return for U.S. protection.

Trump's Criticism of NATO

Trump's criticism of NATO became one of the clearest examples of his transactional approach to foreign policy. During the 2016 campaign and early in his presidency, he described NATO as "obsolete." This statement caused concern among allies because it questioned the relevance of the alliance itself. NATO had long been treated as a central pillar of U.S. and European security. By calling it obsolete, Trump suggested that the alliance had to prove its usefulness according to contemporary American priorities.

Trump later softened this language to some extent, but he continued to criticize allies over defense spending. At NATO headquarters in Brussels in 2017, he stated that members "must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations" (The White House, 2017). This language was significant because it framed NATO less as a security community and more as a financial arrangement in which allies were failing to meet their obligations.

Trump's criticism created uncertainty because it linked U.S. protection to allied payment. In alliance politics, rhetoric matters. NATO's credibility depends not only on Article 5 as a legal commitment, but also on the belief that the United States will act in a crisis. If allies begin to doubt American political will, deterrence can weaken. Trump's repeated criticism therefore affected the perception of U.S. reliability even though the formal treaty remained unchanged.

Transactional Framing of Alliance Commitment

Trump's approach reframed NATO commitment in transactional terms. Instead of emphasizing institutional solidarity or shared strategic purpose, he focused on what allies contributed and what the United States received in return. This shifted the meaning of burden-sharing. Defense spending became not only a military issue but also a test of whether allies deserved continued American protection.

This does not mean that Trump's policy was simply anti-NATO. The United States remained inside the alliance. U.S. military engagement in Europe continued, especially in relation to deterrence on NATO's

eastern flank. Koschut (2021) captures this contradiction by arguing that Trump made U.S. solidarity appear conditional on allied payment while the United States continued to invest militarily in parts of Europe (Koschut, 2021). This shows that Trump's approach combined strategic continuity with political disruption.

Sperling and Webber's (2019) argument about "voice" and "exit" is useful here. Trump did not exit NATO. Instead, he used criticism as pressure. His approach was therefore not a complete rejection of NATO but a form of bargaining within the alliance (Sperling & Webber, 2019). From a neorealist perspective, this can be understood as an attempt to redistribute costs and ensure that allies contributed more to a security arrangement from which they benefited.

Threats and Uncertainty around U.S. Commitment

The most serious effect of Trump's criticism was the uncertainty it created around U.S. commitment. NATO depends on reassurance. European allies do not rely only on American capabilities; they also rely on American political will. Trump's repeated criticism raised doubts about whether the United States still viewed NATO as a long-term commitment or as a conditional arrangement.

Olsen (2021) argues that there was a gap between Trump's words and deeds (Olsen, 2021). Trump strongly criticized NATO and reportedly threatened withdrawal, but he did not formally end U.S. commitment. This gap is important. It means that NATO did not collapse, but the political meaning of American leadership changed. Allies could no longer assume that U.S. presidential rhetoric would automatically reinforce alliance solidarity.

Kaufman (2017) also emphasizes the concern among European allies. Trump's statements created anxiety because NATO's credibility rests on reliable U.S. security guarantees. Even without withdrawal, repeated questioning of NATO could weaken trust (Kaufman, 2017). This supports the argument that Trump's impact should be measured not only by formal policy outcomes but also by changes in allied perceptions.

NATO's Response: Resilience and Adaptation

NATO's response to Trump combined resilience and adaptation. The alliance did not collapse. Article 5 remained intact, NATO institutions continued to function, and the United States remained involved in alliance structures. This demonstrates NATO's institutional strength.

At the same time, NATO allies responded to Trump's pressure by increasing attention to defense spending. Trump's criticism made the 2 percent target more politically urgent. Some allies increased defense budgets, while NATO as an institution continued to emphasize burden-sharing commitments. However, analysts also warned that allied contributions should not be measured only through defense spending as a percentage of GDP. The debate increasingly expanded toward responsibility-sharing, resilience, preparedness, and broader security contributions.

NATO's institutional resilience is central to understanding why Trump did not fundamentally break the alliance. Sperling and Webber (2019) argue that NATO's institutionalization made U.S. exit difficult (Sperling & Webber, 2019). Olsen (2021) similarly argues that domestic and institutional factors in the United States limited Trump's ability to radically change NATO policy (Olsen, 2021). These factors included congressional support, the U.S. security establishment, public opinion, and NATO's place in American strategic culture.

However, resilience did not mean that NATO was unaffected. The alliance survived institutionally, but trust and reassurance were weakened. This is a central finding of the article. Formal alliances can survive transactional pressure, but their internal expectations may still change.

European Strategic Autonomy Debates

Trump's criticism also strengthened debates on European strategic autonomy. If U.S. commitment appeared less reliable, European allies had reason to consider how they could reduce dependence on Washington. Strategic autonomy did not mean abandoning NATO. Rather, it reflected the desire for Europe to become more capable of acting and defending itself if U.S. support became uncertain.

Koschut (2021) argues that Trump's approach produced shock waves among NATO members and contributed to a loss of trust in Washington (Koschut, 2021). This helps explain why strategic autonomy became more politically relevant. It was not only about military capability; it was also about uncertainty regarding American political will.

European autonomy debates revealed NATO's continuing vulnerability. European allies recognized the need for greater defense capacity, but they could not quickly replace U.S. capabilities. The United States remained the dominant military power in NATO, the provider of nuclear deterrence, and the central actor in alliance command and planning. Thus, NATO allies debated autonomy while continuing to depend on American leadership.

Continued Dependence on U.S. Leadership

Despite increased defense spending and strategic autonomy debates, NATO remained dependent on U.S. leadership. This dependence is structural. The United States possesses military capabilities, nuclear forces, intelligence assets, logistics, and command capacity that European allies cannot easily replace. Therefore, NATO's response to Trump was not to abandon the United States, but to adapt while preserving the alliance.

This dependence made Trump's transactional approach particularly significant. If NATO were less dependent on U.S. power, Trump's rhetoric might have mattered less. Because NATO relies heavily on American leadership, uncertainty in U.S. commitment created wider anxiety. This is why the issue was not only material but also psychological and political. Allies needed reassurance that the United States remained committed to collective defense.

NATO's continued dependence also shows the limits of European strategic autonomy. European states may seek greater defense capacity, but the alliance remains U.S.-led. Therefore, Trump's approach exposed a structural tension within NATO: Europe wants reliable U.S. leadership but also fears dependence on U.S. domestic politics and presidential uncertainty.

Neorealist Interpretation of the NATO Case

NATO as a Strategic Instrument of U.S. Power

From a neorealist perspective, NATO remains an instrument of U.S. strategic utility. The alliance helps the United States maintain influence in Europe, deter adversaries, organize transatlantic security, and preserve a favorable balance of power. Therefore, Trump's criticism did not necessarily mean that NATO had lost strategic value. Instead, it showed that Trump wanted the alliance to produce clearer and more measurable benefits for the United States.

This interpretation helps explain why Trump did not withdraw from NATO. NATO continued to serve American interests. However, Trump sought to change the terms of the relationship by demanding greater allied contributions. In this sense, NATO remained useful, but U.S. commitment was increasingly framed as something that had to be matched by allied performance.

Burden-Sharing as Cost Redistribution

Burden-sharing under Trump can be understood as cost redistribution. The United States had long carried a large share of NATO's military burden. Trump's demands reflected the view that European allies should assume greater responsibility for their own defense. This is consistent with neorealist assumptions that states seek to minimize costs and maximize strategic advantage.

However, the way burden-sharing is framed matters. When burden-sharing is framed as collective responsibility, it can strengthen alliance cooperation. When it is framed as payment for protection, it can weaken trust. Trump's rhetoric often followed the second pattern. This made burden-sharing appear less like shared defense planning and more like a transactional exchange.

Conditional Commitment and Fear of Abandonment

Snyder's alliance security dilemma helps explain why Trump's rhetoric created concern. Allies fear abandonment when they believe a powerful patron may reduce support or fail to act in a crisis (Snyder, 1984). Trump's criticism made this fear more visible in NATO. If U.S. protection appeared dependent on whether allies spent enough, then collective defense seemed less automatic.

This does not mean that abandonment occurred. The United States remained in NATO. But the perception of possible abandonment increased. In alliance politics, perception matters because deterrence depends on credibility. If allies or adversaries believe U.S. commitment is uncertain, the political value of the alliance can be weakened.

Institutional Resilience despite Transactional Pressure

The NATO case also shows the limits of transactional leadership. NATO's institutional depth constrained Trump. The alliance's legal commitments, military structures, bureaucratic routines, domestic support networks, and strategic importance made withdrawal difficult. Trump could criticize and pressure NATO, but he could not easily dismantle it.

This is why NATO's response reveals both resilience and vulnerability. Institutions protected the alliance from immediate breakdown. However, they could not fully protect trust and reassurance. NATO survived, but its members became more aware that U.S. commitment could be politically contested.

What NATO Reveals about Interest-Based Alliance Management

The NATO case shows that even highly institutionalized alliances remain shaped by national interest, cost distribution, and strategic utility. Trump's approach exposed this logic by making contribution and reciprocity central to alliance management. At the same time, the case shows that alliances cannot be reduced to transactions alone. They also depend on credibility, trust, and reassurance.

Therefore, Trump's NATO policy was not simply a rejection of alliances. It was a form of interest-based alliance management expressed through a transactional style. The result was not NATO's collapse, but a change in the political meaning of U.S. commitment.

CONCLUSION

This article examined Trump's transactional approach toward NATO and its implications for U.S. alliance management. The central argument is that Trump did not destroy NATO or formally abandon the alliance. NATO remained institutionally intact, Article 5 continued to provide the formal basis of collective defense, and the United States remained inside NATO structures. However, Trump changed the tone, meaning, and political logic of U.S.–NATO relations.

The article showed that burden-sharing debates were not new. U.S. concerns over European defense spending existed long before Trump and became especially visible after the 2014 Wales Summit. However, Trump intensified the debate by framing burden-sharing less as a matter of collective responsibility and more as a question of payment, fairness, and return on American investment. In doing so, he made U.S. commitment appear more conditional and transactional.

Trump's criticism also affected perceptions of U.S. reliability. By calling NATO "obsolete," criticizing allies for underpayment, and linking protection to contribution, he raised doubts about whether U.S. support could still be assumed as automatic. This weakened reassurance and intensified fears of abandonment, even though NATO's formal commitments remained in place.

NATO's response demonstrated both resilience and vulnerability. The alliance adapted by increasing attention to defense spending and reaffirming institutional commitments. It also stimulated European debates over strategic autonomy. However, NATO remained dependent on U.S. leadership, which made uncertainty in American commitment especially significant.

From a neorealist perspective, the NATO case shows that alliances remain instruments of strategic utility, but they also require trust and credibility to function effectively. Trump's approach reflected an interest-based logic by emphasizing cost distribution, burden-sharing, and national advantage. Yet the case also shows the limits of reducing alliances to transactional exchanges. NATO survived because of its institutional resilience, but Trump's rhetoric weakened the confidence and predictability that sustain alliance cohesion.

The article concludes that Trump's transactional approach redefined U.S. commitment to NATO by making it appear more conditional, cost-conscious, and tied to allied contribution. This finding has broader implications for U.S. alliance management. If future U.S. leaders continue to frame alliances primarily through payment and immediate return, formal alliances may survive institutionally but experience deeper problems of trust, reassurance, and strategic credibility.

Limitations of the Study

This study has three main limitations. First, it relies mainly on secondary sources, official statements, and scholarly analyses. It does not use interviews with policymakers or classified documents. Second, the study focuses only on NATO and does not compare Trump's approach toward other U.S. alliances in East Asia or the Middle East. Third, Trump's second term is still ongoing, so some recent developments remain uncertain and may evolve over time.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research can compare Trump's NATO policy with his approach toward U.S. alliances in East Asia, especially Japan and South Korea. Another useful direction would be to compare Trump's alliance management with Biden's approach in order to determine whether conditionality is mainly leader-driven

or part of a broader structural shift in U.S. foreign policy. Future research can also examine European perceptions of U.S. reliability through interviews with diplomats, defense officials, and policy experts.

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