

E-PAPER

US elections and European cohesion

Scenario implications for
Ukraine and transatlantic
security

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Introduction

Over the last three years, the transatlantic alliance has demonstrated a largely remarkable unity in its support for Ukraine. Robust military aid, tough economic sanctions, intense diplomatic engagement and significant financial contributions of over EUR 185 billion^[1] to Ukraine are testimony to this. Though the support has often been less ambitious and slower than Kyiv has needed, it has at least enabled Ukraine's continued resistance against Russian aggression.

As the war is soon to enter its fourth year, however, support is eroding. On both sides of the Atlantic, financial and military aid for Ukraine has become more contentious and uncertain. In the EU, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has regularly blocked military aid, while Republicans in the House of Representatives delayed the last bundle aid package for months. In the European Union, political forces opposed to continuing support for Ukraine are gaining momentum, with a notable shift to the hard right in the most recent EU parliamentary elections. Germany's new party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which is committed to ending the war in Ukraine at whatever cost to Ukraine, gained significant support in three recent regional elections alongside the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which also opposes continued support for Ukraine. Key EU states, including Germany, have earmarked fewer resources for Ukraine for the years to come.

The future of US policy is particularly uncertain, and the future of transatlantic support for Ukraine hangs in the balance of November's elections; the fate of Ukraine's battlefield will also be decided at the ballot box. On the question of support for Ukraine and commitments to European security and NATO, a Harris presidency or a Trump 2.0 presidency present starkly different challenges to Washington's European partners. While Trump has openly questioned NATO's values and collective defense commitments, as well as criticized the scale of US support for Ukraine, Vice President Kamala Harris has repeatedly said that, as president, she «will stand strong with Ukraine and our NATO allies».

Unlike in 2016, leaders across Europe believe that a second Trump term is possible, if not probable, yet no one seems prepared. Given this context, this paper examines how the European Union and its Member States might adjust their Ukraine and NATO policies based on hypothetical scenarios that could arise from the outcome of the US election. We plot out potential Harris and Trump administration policies on key questions related to support for Ukraine and NATO, as well as possible European responses and potential outcomes along the variables of unity and decisiveness.

1 Using the Kiel Institute numbers, and for the European side including the EU institutions and Member States, as well as the UK, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland.

The three specific issues we examine are

- US military and financial support for Ukraine.
- A negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia.
- The short-term (4-year) future of NATO.

We first present the likely positions of both a Harris and a Trump administration on these issues, based on published positions, expert analysis and informed assumptions where necessary. Following this, we plot out three different European responses to US policies:

1. **Strong:** A united and decisive approach.
2. **Split:** A deeply divided approach.
3. **Stuck:** A united in indecision approach, where the EU holds together, but lacks the ability to act effectively.

Note: We have opted to not separate the <Split> scenario into decisive and indecisive alternatives, as our argument is that a split EU would contain states moving decisively in different directions, while others hedge, and hence a split response necessarily contains a mix of decisiveness. This leaves us with a 2x3 matrix of outcomes based on whether the EU responds to Harris or Trump positions with a strong, split or stuck stance. Finally, we have refined, tested and reviewed each of our scenarios in an online workshop with foreign policy and security experts.

In our analysis, we assume a divided congress, with the GOP winning a slim Senate majority and the Democrats winning a slim majority in the House of Representatives. This is in line with the most recent polling, though it is so close that any outcome is possible. As we have seen in President Biden's struggles to get Ukraine funding passed by the House in 2024, the majorities in Congress affect a president's ability to turn policy into reality.

Table 1: Overall summarized scenario results

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Harris Administration	Strong on NATO and support for Ukraine	NATO deterrence undermined, weakened support for Ukraine	NATO deterrence undermined, weakened support for Ukraine
Trump 2.0 Administration	Europeanization of NATO, deterrence preserved, but without Ukraine	Ukraine support evaporates, NATO weakened as bilateral relations prevail	Ukraine support evaporates, NATO weakened as US pivots and EU fails to step up

1. US support for Ukraine

1.1. Harris: strong support with limitations

Harris has been an outspoken and unwavering advocate of helping Ukraine defend itself against Russia. For example, at the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland in June 2024, she said: «President Biden and my support for the people of Ukraine is unwavering. We support Ukraine not out of charity but because the people of Ukraine and their future is in our strategic interests.» At a meeting with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy (as presidential candidate) in Washington on 26 September 2024, she repeated this view nearly verbatim: «The United States supports Ukraine not out of charity, but because it's in our strategic interest.» She also promised that she «will continue to stand with Ukraine [and] will work to ensure Ukraine prevails in this war». Although the Harris campaign has not released any kind of plan for Ukraine, given all of her statements as presidential candidate, we expect that positions toward Ukraine support will be quite similar to those pursued by the Biden administration. With Phil Gordon tapped as a potential future national security advisor in a Harris administration, it is also possible that she would advocate slightly higher levels of support initially, and some lifting of restrictions on using long-range US weapons to hit targets inside Russian territory, if this were coordinated with allies. A Harris administration would be keen to coordinate with European allies and would expect EU allies to provide a proportional share of the responsibilities and support. Her administration would also support EU efforts to increase European industrial production. With the election behind them, Republican opposition to supporting Ukraine could soften, at least for some time, making another significant spending package possible in the first year of the Harris administration.

1.1.1. Harris + strong EU: Ukraine well-funded and supported in its fight into 2026

In this scenario, relieved and emboldened by a Harris presidential win, the European Union continues and modestly increases its support for Ukraine, with decisive and quick commitments in late 2024 or early 2025. This is coordinated with a US aid package and a loosening of restrictions on Ukraine, with the aim of changing the war dynamics before war fatigue and politics weaken Western support. Potential spoilers, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, are disempowered by continued US leadership on Ukraine and held in check by a strong European Commission, which signals that it will instigate Article 7 proceedings with regard to Hungary's rule of law implementation, to gain more leverage over Hungary, if necessary.

In her political guidelines for the next European Commission, President von der Leyen has stated that this Commission will be «an investment Commission» and that «the best investment in European security is investing in the security of Ukraine». The EU would use all

instruments at its disposal to ensure Ukraine's needs are met and Europeans would substantially increase production capacity for material such as launchers or radars. Furthermore, the US and Europe would manage, in 2025, to provide Ukraine with much more defense against missiles and aircraft coming close to the annual supply of 4,800 anti-aircraft missiles outlined in the Estonian plan.

For Ukraine to match Russian military spending, an additional €135 billion is required, which would only amount to 0.26% of GDP by the transatlantic alliance.^[2] Under this scenario, EU leaders would agree to provide additional funding in 2025 and aim to reach a 0.25% of GDP target, as had been put forth by the newly designated High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas and Central and Eastern European Member States, as well as the European Parliament. For the EU, this would mean an estimated €42.9 billion, slightly less than the Ukraine Facility adopted in 2023. Such an EU target could also unlock a funding request from the new Harris administration of perhaps up to \$65 billion.

In coordination with a new Harris administration, who understands the need to provide Ukraine with leverage to successfully enter a negotiated settlement from a position of strength, European leaders would also permit Ukraine to use their weapons to neutralize military sites in Russia. This would be combined with significant funding packages in the first quarter of 2025 and European countries providing material they have been holding back in their stockpiles (tied to promises from the Harris administration to replenish these supplies and provide deterrence). The EU would increase production, reaching the target of two million shells by the end of 2025, and increase its joint procurement projects. Additionally, Europeans would collaborate to scale up the production of long-range UAVs inside Ukraine, with the help of a €70 billion Eurobond issue in summer 2025, which has also been advocated by the Harris administration.

Finally, the EU would adapt its military assistance mission (EUMAM) to train Ukrainian troops nearer to Ukraine, if not inside Western Ukraine itself.^[3]

Last but not least, sanctions against Russia would continue and be well-coordinated, and progress would continue to be made to circumvent leakage.

In this scenario, Ukraine enters 2026 as well-supplied as it has ever been, with united transatlantic political support, and the EU has launched significant joint arms production projects that will be delivering by 2027, having made huge steps in joint procurement. However, even with a Harris administration and a strong EU, it will get increasingly

2 Calmfors, Lars. «Western countries can easily afford more support for Ukraine», Financial Times, 20 August 2024.

3 Barigazzi, Jacopo. «EU mulls training soldiers inside Ukraine», Politico, 27 August 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-eu-mulls-training-soldiers-inside-ukraine>

difficult to maintain levels of support near €100 billion beyond mid-2026. War-spending fatigue among progressive democrats, Trumpist Republicans and various factions in key European states will grow and endanger support, unless Ukraine is seen to be on the brink of victory.

1.1.2. Harris + split EU: Orban spoils while Berlin and Paris look inward

In this scenario, despite committed US leadership from the Harris administration, the EU's internal divisions grow starker, stymieing any cohesive response to the ongoing conflict and leaving Ukraine undersupplied.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continues to block critical funds for Ukraine and uses his veto power to extract concessions on unrelated issues. EU Member States with new governing coalition parties who are wary or outright opposed to Ukraine support, such as Austria and the Netherlands, also voice their opposition more loudly, happy to have Orbán spearhead the rebellion. EU capitals that had firmly supported Ukraine until 2024 start to get bogged down by domestic turbulence: the political situation in France remains volatile and presidential elections in 2027 foresee a win for Marine Le Pen, while the German government coalition faces continued infighting, budgetary constraints and mounting public pro-russian anti-war sentiment fueled by AfD and BSW wins in regional elections. Heading toward the 2025 federal election, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) try to stem their losses by talking more about peace and tight budgets, respectively. The lack of EU leadership by Germany and France cannot be compensated by other Member States. Poland and the Baltic states continue to push for strong EU support but are also increasingly unwilling to fill the gaps. Public concerns mount over the influx of Ukrainian refugees and the Polish government increasingly feels the need to hold back war material for its own defense, anticipating a Russian attack on NATO territory in the foreseeable future. Given the lack of EU solidarity and decreasing odds of victory, various frontline countries choose to prioritize keeping their own stockpiles robust.

The European Commission struggles to find additional financing for Ukraine. An erosion of EU cohesion weakens the Union's overall stance on Ukraine, making it harder to muster the political will to significantly increase military aid or support large-scale economic assistance.

A European Commissioner for Defence, crucial for strengthening Europe's defense industrial base, faces strong opposition from several Member States concerned about national defense autonomy and the financial burden of increased military spending, turns out to be a lame duck from day one. This delays any meaningful increase in the production of defense equipment necessary for Ukraine.

Moreover, the Harris administration, while committed to supporting Ukraine, finds chaotic discord instead of a partner. The lack of coordination leads to inefficiencies, with the US forced to take on a larger share of the burden, both financially and militarily. This feeds domestic opposition in the US, increasing pressure on the Harris administration to also reduce Ukraine support, given the pull-back from Europe.

In this fractured environment, sanctions against Russia are inconsistently enforced, with loopholes exploited by EU Member States looking to maintain economic ties with Moscow. Training for Ukrainian troops would be limited, and discussions about allowing Ukraine to strike targets in Russia are deadlocked.

In this scenario, Ukraine enters 2026 short on supplies and with inadequate financial support; a collapse of the Ukrainian frontline is increasingly likely. Prospects for EU or NATO membership appear more distant than ever, as both organizations are beset with infighting. Furthermore, progress on joint procurement and production falters due to open disagreements. Open EU dysfunction emboldens Putin to increase sabotage operations, and strengthens factions of the Harris administration skeptical of getting pulled into an unending commitment in Ukraine.

1.1.3. Harris + stuck EU: more rhetoric – same slow delivery

In this scenario, despite being united in principle and relieved by a Harris presidential win, the European Union remains indecisive in its approach to supporting Ukraine. While there is broad agreement among EU Member States on the importance of aiding Ukraine, political dynamics and budgetary constraints prevent the EU from taking bold actions. Instead, the EU remains stuck, falling slightly behind 2024 levels of support for Ukraine at great political effort. The European Commission expresses strong rhetorical support for Ukraine and acknowledges the need for continued assistance but struggles to translate it into more ambitious action. Member States find it difficult to reach consensus on financial and military aid. Down from over €7 billion in 2024, Germany only contributes the allocated €4 billion in 2025. Furthermore, the €50 billion envisioned by the G7 falls short of the target, while others in Europe follow Germany's lead of slightly lowering 2025 commitments. Discussions on an extension of the Ukraine Facility post-2027 face a repeat scenario as that which happened in 2023, with Orbán slowing down and blocking decision-making processes, and there are delays in the disbursement of funds and deployment of military aid. Other EU Member States, especially those with new governing coalitions more cautious or financially constrained, also adopt a <wait-and-see> approach, further contributing to the EU's inertia.

The EU's military assistance mission continues at its current capacity, with training for Ukrainian troops occurring at existing locations in the EU. But plans to move training closer to Ukraine or to provide more advanced capabilities are postponed indefinitely due to risk aversion and a lack of consensus among EU leaders.

The indecision invites the Kremlin to escalate vertically and horizontally, amplifying and extending hybrid operations inside the EU, as well as using other theaters of war – such as the Middle East – to increase pressure on the Member States. This in turn raises domestic concerns and increases Ukraine fatigue, limiting the political room for maneuver.

Concerned about a potential collapse of the Ukrainian frontline, the EU and national governments do the bare minimum to help Ukraine stay in the war. As is traditionally the case, the EU only moves forward in its support for Ukraine under «shock moments», when push comes to shove. The Harris administration, while committed to supporting Ukraine, is increasingly isolated and frustrated with the EU's inability to act decisively. This frustration leads to tensions within the transatlantic alliance, as the US is forced to shoulder more of the burden, both financially and militarily. This increases calls for the US to exit the Ukraine war and puts the White House at loggerheads with the GOP-controlled Congress.

In this scenario, Ukraine enters 2026 short on supplies, with inadequate financial support and dire prospects. EU or NATO membership appear more distant than ever, as both organizations are strained. No progress on joint procurement and production is made. The transatlantic alliance remains intact but divided, and Ukraine receives barely enough support to avoid disaster but not enough to gain a decisive advantage.

1.2. Trump 2.0: Ukraine and Europe on their own

Donald Trump has promised to end the war in 24 hours. While that is almost certainly not how it will turn out, he will make a point of changing the US position quickly, likely within the first 100 days. Military support will be curtailed, and no new funding requests will be put before Congress, unless it is in the context of negotiations (see next section). Some financial support may continue, especially if linked to an agreement to enter negotiations (see next section), but Europeans will be expected to pick up more of the financial burden, in particular, as well as the military costs. A Trump administration Pentagon will be hesitant to divert further capabilities from Asia or the Middle East to the Ukrainian theater, or to go much deeper into US stockpiles, unless the incentives are there.

1.2.1. Trump + strong EU: the election shocks the EU into action, but not for Ukraine

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House is a wake-up call for the EU and its Member States. US financial and military support for Ukraine is on the chopping block, and Kiev is running out of crucial air defense, artillery and anti-tank ammunition.^[4] There is a necessity to step up efforts and fill the gap. A debate in the EU

4 For a list of U.S. deliveries to date, see: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>

emerges, regarding whether or not the EU should increase its support and cover the reduced US support to Ukraine. After careful deliberation and calculation, the majority in the EU comes to the conclusion that more money must be put towards defense, but maybe not all to the defense of Ukraine.

Hoping to get a picture of Trump's thinking on Ukraine and future US support for Kyiv, Poland, which will hold the EU Council presidency from January 2025, sends President Duda to meet Trump and gauge the temperature. In coordination, other European leaders such as Giorgia Meloni follow.

Increasingly, it becomes clear that Ukraine will not be able to keep up the fight for much longer without US support and that the EU will not be able to fill the gap. While several Member States wish to intensify support for Ukraine, these efforts simply come too late. The order books of the arms industry are already full.

Given these circumstances and uncertainty about whether a Trump administration will come to the EU's rescue in case of future Russian aggression, the EU and its Member States decide to provide one last support package to Ukraine for 2025, while massively investing in their own security.

Based on the Next Generation EU fund, calls for common European defense bonds to the tune of €100 billion (as proposed by President Macron and HR/VP Kaja Kallas) overcome opposition from wary Member States. In the hope of placating Trump, the financing is used to strengthen the European pillar of NATO and is particularly used to buy armaments from the US military-industrial complex. However, the additional EU financing is primarily geared towards replenishing European armament stocks and increasing Europe's own military build-up.

Internationally, the EU intensifies its engagement with other stakeholders, such as the UK, Japan and South Korea, in order to bring them on board when it comes to supporting Ukraine and filling the gap left by a reduction in US support.

US lack of support for Ukraine allows the Europeans to rhetorically take the moral high ground and emphasize their continued support for Ukraine, while most of the new financing actually focuses on the EU's own defense. In this context, the new European Commissioner for Defence reinforces the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), in order to incentivize common European procurement and boost EU armaments production.

In this scenario, the Trump administration jolts the EU into decisive action and keeps it united and decisive, but less in regard to Ukraine than to the EU's own territorial defense. Tensions emerge in the transatlantic alliance when it comes to isolating Russia and maintaining sanctions. Trump's rhetoric that he has very good relations with Putin and wants to cut a deal further emboldens Russia. Ukraine enters 2026 underfinanced and underarmed.

1.2.2. Trump + split EU: Trump and Orbán bring Meloni and others on board to oppose further support

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House emboldens forces inside the EU that oppose support for Ukraine. Viktor Orbán, holding the EU Council presidency, travels to the US to congratulate Trump and feels vindicated in his opposition. Soon after, other EU Member States, such as Slovakia, the Netherlands and Italy, join Hungary in looking to reduce budgetary and domestic pressures. The EU is deeply divided and unable to advance additional support for Ukraine beyond what has already been agreed.

Wary of Trump's threats towards NATO, individual EU Member States re-direct financial and military support for Ukraine towards their own defense, in the hope of currying favor with Trump and keeping the US security umbrella safely over Europe. Individual Member States, such as Poland and the Baltics, try to hold the line at first when it comes to supporting Ukraine, but in the end give up, also focusing on their own national defense. The European Commission aims to coordinate these national defense efforts and strengthen common European procurement and puts forth the idea of common EU defense bonds, but the EU is too split to make any progress on them. Concerned about their own national security and opposed to further common European debt, EU Member States go it alone.

Additional rounds of EU sanctions against Russia fail, as Member States cannot agree and the new Trump administration mulls rolling back some of the US sanctions. The EUMAM is not renewed.

In this scenario, a new Trump administration deepens divisions within the EU and leads to European inaction and national action. Each Member State tries to approach him individually to promote their national agenda (as has happened in the past). The Trump administration encourages this situation, preferring bilateral meetings to going through official EU channels.

With a lack of leadership and coordination, the existing international coalition in support of Ukraine disintegrates. Ukraine is left to fend mostly by itself and is in a weak position when it comes to peace negotiations. Moscow is content knowing that time is on its side.

1.2.3. Trump + stuck EU: failing slowly

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House leads to significant concerns in the European Union, which – although it largely remains united – leads to inertia. While showing unity in its political communication and commitment to support Ukraine, the EU struggles with indecision when it comes to action.

Trump's election is a shock leading to paralysis. Many Member States feel disheartened, believing that it is impossible for the EU to maintain its support for Kyiv amid reduced US aid. There is little appetite to fill the vacuum left by Washington. Already agreed financial and military assistance to Ukraine, as well as EU training missions, continue, but there is no expansion in support. Given Europe's own pressing domestic priorities, as well as political and budgetary challenges, EU Member States believe there is little reason to compensate for the loss of US support.

The EU becomes reactive-driven, looking for cues in the Trump administration and developments on the Ukrainian battlefield, to see how it should move forward. This results in fragmented and incremental responses rather than a cohesive and robust strategy. To make up for it, the EU focuses on diplomatic efforts to rally international support for Ukraine from other global actors, such as the UK, Japan and Canada. But the failure of the EU to augment its own support leads international partners to also limit their aid.

The EU continues to impose sanctions on Russia and works to maintain a unified front in international forums, but it cannot tighten the screws any further. Reduced US support and the EU's own limited actions create an impression of weakened resolve. Moscow sees this as an opportunity to press its advantages.

In this scenario, the EU's unity in political commitment is undermined by its inability to act decisively and effectively. Without US military support, Ukraine faces significant deficiencies in its capacity, leaving it vulnerable and unable to fight effectively. The reduced US support exacerbates the challenges Ukraine faces, and while the EU's diplomatic efforts help to keep the international spotlight on the conflict, they are not enough to counterbalance the effects of the reduced aid. Moscow continues to believe that time is on its side.

Table 2: Support for Ukraine

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Harris Administration	Ukraine well-funded and supported in its fight into 2026	Orban spoils while Berlin and Paris look inward, speeding up war-fatigue among Americans	Support for Ukraine continues, slower and less than Kyiv needs
Trump 2.0 Administration	The election shock kicks the EU into action, but not for Ukraine	Ukraine left to fend for itself while some member states seek partnership with Trump, others fail to muster joint initiatives	No substitute for US withdrawal of support, EU political engagement proves too little

2. Push for negotiations

2.1. Harris: a coordinated path toward a ceasefire

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the Harris administration will not be able to offer Ukraine as much as it needs for as long as it needs it. GOP resistance to more big spending packages will be fierce, and (absent a dramatic change in fighting momentum in Ukraine's favor) the public and the Democratic party will also exhibit increasing war fatigue. As the war drags on, echoes to Afghanistan grow stronger. The Harris team will know that by the 2026 midterm elections, at the very latest, a path to a cease-fire Kyiv can live with will need to be found. To this end, they may be willing to grant Kyiv one last aggressive and better supplied push. A Harris administration would be willing to be a strong partner for rebuilding efforts but would likely expect the EU to take the lead and the greater responsibility. If European partners step up, President Harris might be open to accepting NATO membership for Ukraine (only after fighting has ended) to compensate for the loss of territory (a kind of West Germany model).

2.1.1 Harris + strong EU: one more ambitious push to put Ukraine in a favorable position for negotiations

In this scenario, emboldened by a Harris presidential victory and continued support and US leadership on Ukraine, the EU and its Member States look towards discussing potential avenues for a negotiated settlement. Understanding that it is not in their interest to have a protracted, long-term war, and given increasing domestic pressure, the transatlantic alliance looks to provide Kyiv with another one-off big support package, including the possibility to strike military sites in Russia and facilitate the training of Ukrainian soldiers in westernmost Ukraine (see scenario 1.1.1). The aim is to allow Ukraine to launch a successful counter-offensive in 2025 and use the Kursk operation as another bargaining chip to strengthen Kyiv's position in a negotiated settlement. Back-channel diplomacy makes it clear to Ukraine that it is necessary to come to a negotiated settlement, even if it means accepting preliminary de facto territorial concessions.

In order to entice Ukraine into such a negotiated settlement, the transatlantic alliance offers substantial reconstruction funds, aimed at rebuilding war-torn infrastructure and revitalizing the Ukrainian economy. The funds are intended to provide immediate relief and long-term development opportunities. In addition, future military support through further bilateral security guarantees is offered, boots on the ground to secure the cease-fire are considered by EU Member States such as France and Poland, as well as Western partners like the UK, and the path to EU membership becomes concrete. There remain differences in opinion regarding Ukraine's possible NATO membership, with some advocating a West Germany model while others propose a South Korea model.

Last but not least, the transatlantic alliance aims to raise the pressure on Russia with further sanctions and increases sanctions on China for supporting Moscow, with the aim of increasing Beijing's interest in having Russia and Ukraine conclude a negotiated settlement.

In this scenario, the US and EU take a comprehensive joined-up approach, working together to create a favorable environment conducive to a negotiated settlement. They provide military support in order to maximize the effectiveness of a Ukrainian counter-offensive, and allow Ukraine to challenge Russian advances, secure strategic areas and hold Russian territory for bargaining purposes. They also address Ukraine's long-term economic needs with reconstruction funds. But this support effort comes at a price, and they make Ukraine understand that patience is running thin, and that it therefore needs to come to a negotiated settlement.

2.1.2. Harris + split EU: the US has to go it alone

Although the Harris administration continues US support for Ukraine, the EU falls by the wayside. Deeply divided and indecisive, it cannot agree on a shared political vision and strategy for Ukraine. Two camps emerge in the EU: one led by Hungary and Slovakia, who want to coerce Ukraine into a negotiated settlement at any cost and believe the rapid withdrawal of support to Ukraine will achieve this; and the other, led by Poland and the Baltics, who want to join up with the US and empower Ukraine into negotiations by providing significant support and material.

However, increasing domestic challenges, budgetary constraints and a surge of populist parties in national elections mean that a number of EU Member States increasingly look to a negotiated settlement at any cost. Instead of putting pressure on Russia via further sanctions, providing Ukraine with more weapons and support, and offering substantial reconstruction funds, all of which would build ground for a favorable position of Ukraine in negotiations, a number of EU Member States decide to pressure Ukraine into a deal instead. This entails reducing financial and military support, as well as delaying and putting into question Ukraine's EU membership.

The division in the EU leads to inaction and indecisiveness. The US finds itself increasingly isolated when it comes to supporting Ukraine and coming closer to a negotiated settlement. Without dedicated EU support and incentives, such as significant reconstruction funds and a clearer EU membership perspective, the US is unwilling to put all of the burden on its own shoulders. Given domestic calls to withdraw from Ukraine, particularly as the Europeans are not engaging, Washington increasingly feels the need to pressure Ukraine into accepting a negotiated settlement.

In this scenario, significant tensions emerge not only inside the EU but also in the transatlantic alliance. While the Harris administration aims to put Ukraine in a strong position

from which to conclude a negotiated settlement, a number of individual EU Member States aim to do the exact opposite, in the hope of getting Ukraine to simply accept any deal. This leads EU Member States to undermine US efforts and increases domestic pressure in the US, forcing the Harris administration to change tack. Eventually, this situation leads to a less-than-ideal negotiation settlement; as Kyiv would be receiving mixed messages from Western partners, it would prefer to hold out for firmer security guarantees.

2.1.3. Harris + stuck EU: EU stays on the sidelines

In this scenario, while the Harris administration continues US support for Ukraine and aims to create an environment favorable for Ukraine to enter a negotiated settlement, the EU actively stays on the sidelines, letting the US take full leadership and ownership. The EU sticks to its pre-agreed support to Ukraine regarding reconstruction funds and membership perspective but does not get involved when it comes to a negotiated settlement. For many EU Member States, this is a politically comfortable position, outsourcing responsibility for Ukraine to Washington and concentrating increasingly on the domestic challenges that they face.

The lack of decisiveness and ambition, however, puts even more pressure on the Harris administration. The US, under Harris' leadership, finds itself balancing between providing military and economic aid to Ukraine and managing growing concerns about the sustainability of long-term engagement. Domestically, there are increasing debates within Congress about the extent of US involvement, given the EU's absence, with some factions calling for a reassessment of the strategy as public opinion becomes more polarized.

As Ukraine continues to endure the economic and human toll of war, the pressure on all sides to find a diplomatic solution grows, but the path forward remains elusive, with the US bearing the brunt of the leadership burden.

This situation would likely result in a less-than-ideal negotiation settlement (both from the perspective of Ukraine and European Member States), as the EU is stuck on the sidelines with no agency.

2.2. Trump 2.0: peace between Trump and Putin

A new Trump administration would seek a «deal» to end the fighting in Ukraine as an early priority. Donald Trump can be expected to hold back or threaten to cut US support in order to apply pressure to Kyiv to take such a deal. This will certainly include loss of territory, and possibly also demands for neutrality and prohibition of NATO membership (Trump's running mate J.D. Vance has already suggested this). Trump could be sympathetic to a Russian view of proposals and would be more focused on getting something done quickly

rather than something better for Kyiv. That said, the Trump administration would want something that looks like a success, so Kyiv is not without some leverage.

2.2.1. Trump + strong EU: coordinated leverage gets EU a seat at the table

In this scenario, realizing Trump wants a quick solution to Russian's war of aggression against Ukraine and to push Kyiv into a negotiated settlement, the EU aims to shape the environment ahead of Trump entering office on 20 January and influence Trump's thinking on a negotiated settlement. There are discussions in the EU for another preliminary support package for Ukraine that would help the country to remain strong through 2025, as well as allowing limited strikes with western weapons into Russian territory, the aim being to strengthen Ukraine's position in the war as President Trump enters the White House.

European leaders, such as Polish President Duda and Italian Prime Minister Meloni, also try to convince Trump that a quick deal on Ukraine would not be in his interest, and that – in an attempt to flatter his ego – he has to get a deal that has the semblance of victory for Ukraine, postulating that with the right deal he might be a candidate for the Nobel peace prize, but not so with a deal Kyiv dislikes.

In addition, the EU – led by the Weimar triangle of Poland, France and Germany – makes it clear to Trump that they should be included in the negotiated settlement given that they hold the majority of the €300 billion worth of frozen Russian assets, which is a significant lever for negotiations. Additionally, the EU – under its new de-risking and economic security agenda – offers Trump a tougher approach towards China. EU officials propose increasing tariffs on certain Chinese goods and limiting critical Chinese technologies in sectors directly linked to security risks, hoping to appease both Trump's hawkish stance on China and the geopolitical realities of European industry.

The EU does not actively undermine Trumpian efforts but tries to shape Trump's thinking and room for maneuver, by highlighting that it too has strategic assets that can be used, such as frozen Russian assets, reconstruction funds, increased defense budgets with orders for US arms companies and EU membership for Ukraine, as well as a toughening of position vis-a-vis China. A key part of the EU's strategy is to push for long-term security guarantees for Ukraine, ensuring that any deal includes provisions for Ukraine's continued military and economic support, even after a ceasefire or peace agreement. French President Macron, in particular, emphasizes the need for a European-led defense initiative to bolster the EU, as reliance on US leadership under Trump may prove unpredictable. Germany's Olaf Scholz echoes these sentiments, though he faces internal political pressures to prioritize economic stability over foreign military commitments. At the same time, European leaders make clear that the sanctions regime on Russia should remain in place until concrete and verifiable steps are taken by Moscow to end hostilities and withdraw forces from Ukrainian territory.

In this scenario, the EU shapes the strategic landscape in Europe by using all its leverage, such as reconstruction funds and frozen Russian assets, as well as the prospect of EU membership for Ukraine and a tougher stance on China. Their coordinated pre-planning earns Europeans (in the Weimar 3 format) a seat at the negotiation table. 2025 is spent working with the Trump Administration and Putin to find a settlement that not only safeguards Ukraine's sovereignty but also strengthens Europe's security architecture and keeps the US engaged in Europe.

2.2.2. Trump + split EU: EU plays little to no role

In this scenario, while President Trump actively withdraws support for Ukraine and pressures Kyiv to enter a negotiated settlement with Russia, the EU is confounded and unable to find a common position. It splits into different camps ranging from those who publicly support Trump's efforts (Orbán, Le Pen, Wilders, Kickl and Weidel) to those who publicly decry Trump letting Ukraine down (Macron, Tusk and Kallas) and those who keep relatively silent, satisfied that the war might finally come to a standstill and relieve domestic pressure without acknowledging this publicly (Scholz).

The divide in the EU deepens as there are serious differences in debates on defense spending, support for Ukraine and the post-war security architecture in Europe. A number of countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, openly look towards a return to full economic engagement with Russia. Others, such as Poland and the Baltic states, express outrage at the perceived abandonment of Ukraine, viewing it as a betrayal of their regional security interests.

In this scenario, the EU is so divided that it cannot play any meaningful role shaping the environment for a negotiated settlement and ultimately becomes marginalized. Some even soon advocate for a return to normal economic relations with Russia, in order to relieve economic pressures at home. Trump is looking for a high-stakes, high-publicity peace summit and the EU's security interests are overshadowed by direct dealings between Washington and Moscow.

2.2.3. Trump + stuck EU: wait and see

In this scenario, the European Union is united, but instead of actively shaping the outcome or taking a strong stance, the EU collectively decides to stay on the sidelines, avoiding deep involvement in the Trump-led push for a negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia. The decision is driven by a combination of war fatigue, domestic economic pressures, and a desire to let the US take the lead while avoiding further escalation or entanglement. Leaders across Europe, while generally agreeing that a negotiated settlement is inevitable, lack the political will to either oppose or engage fully with the process.

Countries like France and Germany, which have traditionally taken the lead on European foreign policy, are cautious. Macron and Scholz quietly agree that while Ukraine's sovereignty must be upheld, active involvement in the negotiations risks alienating their voters, who are increasingly focused on economic issues and weary of the conflict's impacts. The Eastern European states, led by Poland and the Baltics, are deeply concerned about any settlement that might compromise Ukraine's territorial integrity, but they feel isolated within the broader EU consensus. Despite their misgivings, they reluctantly agree to go along with the EU's overall stance to avoid further internal division.

As Trump pressures Ukraine into a settlement, the EU chooses a wait-and-see approach, opting to avoid direct confrontation with Washington or Moscow. This is a strategic decision based on the belief that any settlement pushed by Trump may ultimately fail or at least prove unstable, and the EU would prefer not to be associated with it if things go wrong. The EU issues vague diplomatic statements about supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic future but avoids any concrete commitments that would tie it to the negotiation process. While the EU provides financial aid to Ukraine, it does so in a way that is decoupled from the negotiations.

The EU's leaders privately justify their inaction by pointing to the geopolitical realities of the moment. They see the Trump administration's approach to Ukraine as unreliable and believe that any settlement pushed by Trump will ultimately leave unresolved tensions in Eastern Europe. While the EU remains wary of Russia's intentions, it calculates that staying out of the negotiations will allow it to maintain leverage over Russia in the future, particularly through the frozen Russian assets and reconstruction funds. If the US-Russia negotiations falter or produce an unsatisfactory outcome for Ukraine, the EU will then be in a position to step in and offer support to Kyiv on its own terms.

While the EU's strategy of non-involvement preserves its unity in the short term, it risks leaving Europe vulnerable to shifting global power dynamics. By allowing Trump and Russia to take the lead, the EU potentially loses its influence in shaping the post-war order in Europe and risks alienating Ukraine long-term.

In the long run, this scenario leads to a more fragmented and weakened European Union, particularly if the post-war settlement in Ukraine proves unstable. In the 2025–2026 window, while the EU remains united, its failure to engage in the negotiation process limits its influence over the future security architecture of Europe. Ultimately, this scenario reflects an EU that prioritizes internal cohesion and stability over assertive diplomacy but risks being left out of key geopolitical decisions.

Table 3: Pressure for peace negotiations

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Harris Administration	High levels of support in 2025 ensure that Kyiv enters negotiations from a strong position and with united backing of NATO partners	Some EU states undermine US and EU efforts to bolster Ukraine's position, leaving Kyiv weakened and Europe sidelined	While pressure on Kyiv mounts, the EU fails to find a joint position as Harris waits for EU signals, the result is weakened Ukrainian negotiating position.
Trump 2.0 Administration	EU united ensures it has a seat at the table and that Kyiv gets strong security guarantees	EU divides over negotiations, weakening Ukraine's prospects and EU cohesion	EU unable to actively shape negotiations, weakening Ukraine's prospects

3. NATO

3.1. President Harris: committed to NATO and better burden sharing

The Harris administration would maintain a clear commitment to NATO, while also building and strengthening other alliances and partnerships (e.g. AUKUS and the Quad) and prioritizing the China challenge. Also, the Middle East will require some attention and resources. A Harris administration may be willing to push European partners more actively toward a partial and gradual Europeanization of NATO and/or a much stronger EU + UK pillar within NATO. Negotiations over Ukraine's NATO membership or securing Ukraine may provide an opportunity to remake the alliance.

3.1.1. Harris + strong EU: the Europeanization of NATO

In this scenario, realizing that a political window is closing and the Russia threat will remain, the EU responds decisively to a Harris administration push to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. A first joint effort to stock up Ukraine significantly enables it to fight effectively in the first half of 2025. In the meantime, top diplomats from the Harris administration ask Europeans to come up with a plan to offer Ukraine credible defense as part of a cease-fire/settlement negotiation, one that relies mainly on European (including UK) capabilities (with US backin) regarding a nuclear umbrella and strategic capabilities, such as surveillance and reconnaissance tools. The US also promises that they will stay engaged as long as Europe takes on more of the conventional burden and develops key capabilities.

The French, wanting NATO membership for Ukraine and a more capable EU defense, win Polish, German and Italian support for significant EU defense integration. Unlike previous EU strategies (e.g. the Defense Industry Strategy), this time the UK and Ukraine are to be included in the plan. Despite the looming election in Germany, Scholz is able to move forward because the conservatives and the Greens back the plan. Poland and other eastern flank countries are reassured by Harris administration promises that a new bargain will keep the US in. The pressure of security guarantees for Ukraine and wanting to keep the US engaged in NATO creates powerful momentum.

A compromise is found between those countries that want to strengthen EU defense industrial capacity and those that prefer the most efficient solutions, by which EU funds will be unlocked to support collaborative EU industry projects to fill selected crucial capability gaps (air and missile defense, or underwater protection, for instance) while including UK and Ukraine industries in other collaboration efforts, such as joint procurement and the coordination of strategic capabilities. The European Sky Shield Initiative dispute is

resolved as France joins the initiative after a promise is made to increase reliance on the Franco-Italian MAMBA system in the medium term. Thus, the EU common defense and defense industry will be strengthened, with increased coordination and cooperation among EU states, while at the same time the EU and UK coordinate capability building to strengthen the European pillar of NATO.

Furthermore, understanding the need for strong deterrence, EU NATO members lock in spending at or above the 2%-target, on the understanding that better coordination will improve the efficiency of EU military spending.

In this scenario, the EU makes a new grand security bargain before mid-2026. This bargain bolsters a more collaborative and coordinated EU defense industry, while also collaborating with the UK toward a significantly more capable European pillar in NATO by 2035, including key strategic enabling capacities. Coordination with Ukraine's defense industry is also advanced. The US remains committed to NATO, including nuclear deterrence and some strategic capabilities, but will be able to focus more of its capabilities in other theaters. This stronger NATO provides credible defense for Ukraine as it enters into cease-fire/peace negotiations with Russia in 2025–2026.

3.1.2. Harris + split EU: two-direction Europe on defense

Asked by the Harris administration to take more of a lead, European countries instead divide. Paris pushes to bolster the EU defense industry and exclude the UK, while other EU states push for increasing capacity through more coordinated procurement but rely heavily on US supplies and want to work with the UK. Allies cannot agree on a strategy and hence land at a stalemate. France and Italy lead an effort to bolster the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), also pushed by the Commission and the defense Commissioner. However, Germany and other frugal states refuse to add to the budget, leaving the EDIP hamstrung. Meanwhile, the eastern flank governments invest heavily in US weapons to more quickly increase capacity and keep the US engaged. Both efforts include Ukraine, but differently and not sustainably. Spending goes up in some countries, but not in others, and no notable capacity increases.

The European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) remains a bone of contention, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI.

Furthermore, the far-right parties in Germany, Netherlands, France and elsewhere in Europe continue to foment anti-war and pro-Russian sentiment, so that political divisions within European countries over NATO and support for Ukraine intensify.

In this scenario, the EU and NATO enter 2026 as they entered 2025 in terms of capacity, but with more open divisions. Insufficient support from the EU and growing fatigue in

Washington has pushed Ukraine into negotiations from a weak position, with no prospect of NATO membership and little progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO. Divisions over EU defense industry support appear unbridgeable. The US remains committed to NATO; however, it cannot delay moving more of its attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence weakened, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

3.1.3. Harris + Stuck EU: Strong Rhetoric, but results fall short

Asked by the Harris administration to take more of a lead, the EU Commissioner of Defence Andrius Kubilius launches an ambitious plan to revise a more ambitious European Defence Industrial plan and to build out defense partnerships with Japan, South Korean and the UK. After eight months, the strategy is published, and despite public support, Paris, Berlin and Warsaw signal that the core disagreements over whether EU budgets should go to non-EU suppliers continues to block genuine agreement. Furthermore, Germany and the other frugal countries continue to block eurobonds or common financing for grand-scale investments.

As a result, the newly strengthened EDIP does not get any new funding and production subsidies continue to underdeliver. EU Member States cannot agree whether to gain more strategic capabilities by buying externally or through common EU projects, and thus continue to develop them at the current pace. The ESSI division continues, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI. Spending goes up in some countries but not in others, and no notable capacity increases. Germany again falls short of 2% spending in 2026.

With no sign of NATO becoming more effective and coordinated, the matter of Ukraine membership also gets delayed, with no clear answer in sight.

In this scenario, the EU and NATO muddle through 2025 and 2026 without any significant new initiatives or new capabilities. As a result, superficially aligned results mirror a divided Europe. Countries struggle to support Ukraine and make only slight progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO. Divisions over EU defense industry support appear unbridgeable. The US remains committed to NATO; however, it cannot delay moving more of its attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence weakened, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, and NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

3.2. President Trump 2.0: toward a <dormant> NATO

A second Trump administration will be more committed to dramatically shifting transatlantic burden sharing in NATO. Trump will seek significant increases in European military spending, while his administration will push Europeans to take over the conventional defense of the continent. Accordingly, all infantry brigades and logistics permanently deployed in Eastern Europe should be European in combination and command, and infantry and logistics necessary for guarding the frontiers of Europe should be in European hands. On these conditions, the US would remain part of NATO, offering its nuclear deterrence and acting as a kind of last guarantor (with the open threat of withdrawing all support to NATO if Europeans do not step up). The non-military budget of NATO would be dramatically cut, and US contributions to the budget would fall sharply. Further expansion of NATO and out-of-area operations would be prohibited.

3.2.1. Trump 2.0 + strong EU: Europeanization of NATO

Europeans, having read the policy papers about a dormant NATO, began preparing ideas before November 2024. In this scenario, between mid-November and January, joint strategizing sessions are held with political representatives and members of the defense planning staffs of France, Germany, Italy and Poland. Together they develop a plan to offer to Trump and win the agreement of all key EU allies. The first element is an immediate increase in defense spending and contributions to NATO and to Ukraine support, which can be offered as a quick win for Trump. But additionally, the EU Member States plot out their own timeline toward European responsibility for conventional defense, including key strategic enablers, in order to placate the <dormant NATO> camp, while maintaining US engagement.

In this plan, the EU defense industry would be consolidated and spending increased. Capabilities would be coordinated among EU states (with some EU support and budget through the EDIP) but would also include partners such as South Korea, Japan and, especially, the UK. European conventional forces and readiness would have targets for an annual 5–10% increase over 10 years. Despite the looming election in Germany, Scholz is able to move forward because he gets backing from the conservatives and the Greens. Poland and other eastern flank countries resist the temptation to seek bilateral deals, understanding that some degree of US withdrawal is unavoidable. The pressure of security guarantees for Ukraine and wanting to keep the US engaged in NATO creates powerful momentum.

A compromise is found between those countries that want to strengthen EU defense industrial capacity and those that prefer the most efficient solutions, by which EU funds will be unlocked to support collaborative EU industry projects to fill selected crucial capability gaps (air and missile defense, or underwater protection, for instance) while including the UK and Ukraine industry in other collaboration efforts such as joint procurement and the coordination of strategic capabilities. The European Sky Shield Initiative dispute is

resolved as France joins the initiative after a promise is made to increase reliance on the Franco-Italian MAMBA system in the medium-term. Thus, the EU common defense and defense industry will be strengthened, with increased coordination and cooperation among EU states, while at the same time the EU and UK coordinate capability building to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. Europeans continue to rely significantly on US-produced systems (F-35s and beyond) into the medium term and EU-NATO complementarity is assured.

Furthermore, understanding that US disengagement requires a stronger European deterrence, NATO members lock in spending at or above the 2%-target, as better coordination will improve the efficiency of European military spending.

In this scenario, the EU has made a new grand security bargain before mid-2026. This bargain bolsters a more collaborative and coordinated EU defense industry, while also collaborating with the UK toward a significantly more capable European pillar in NATO by 2035, including key strategic enabling capacities. Coordination with Ukraine's defense industry is also advanced. The European promises have kept the US engaged in NATO, including nuclear deterrence and some strategic capabilities, while the threat of further withdrawal remains ever present. Due to European cohesion and decisiveness, NATO deterrence remains credible, though support for Ukraine suffers and any further expansion of NATO membership is off the table.

3.2.2. Trump 2.0 + split EU: divide and abandon

Faced with a new Trump administration's more forceful criticism of NATO and war on the continent, Europeans divide. Paris pushes to bolster the EU defense industry, while eastern flank states seek bilateral assurances from Washington. France leads an effort to bolster the EDIP, also pushed by the Commission and the defense Commissioner. However, other partners seek faster, more reliable and immediate solutions. Furthermore, Germany and other frugal states refuse to add to the budget, leaving the EDIP hamstrung. Meanwhile, the eastern flank governments invest heavily in US weapons to more quickly increase capacity and keep the US engaged. Both efforts include Ukraine, but differently and not sustainably. Spending goes up in some countries, but not in others, and no notable capacity increases.

The European Sky Shield Initiative remains a bone of contention, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI.

Furthermore, the far-right parties in Germany, Netherlands, France and elsewhere in Europe continue to foment anti-war and pro-Russian sentiment, so that political divisions within European countries over NATO and support for the Ukraine intensify. Italy and the

Netherlands join the Orban camp of supporting a Trump initiative to quickly «resolve» the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine's NATO membership and any expansion of NATO is off the table.

In this scenario, NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Lack of military and financial support has driven Ukraine into negotiations from a weak position and no significant progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO is visible. Divisions over the EU defense industry remain unbridgeable, while states on Europe's eastern flank seek their own deal with Washington. The US shifts more capacity and attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence hollowed, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

3.2.3. Trump 2.0 + stuck EU: Trump withdraws while EU underperforms

Trump bemoans poor performance of underspending allies and unilaterally announces the withdrawal of troops and equipment. EU NATO partners scramble to find an answer to pacify Trump and keep him from an immediate full exit from NATO and the European theater – but they cannot agree on any measures that would significantly change the picture. EU Member States again offer promises to reach 2% and short-term appeasement but cannot manage any grand bargains.

France again makes the case for strategic autonomy and leads an effort to bolster the EDIP, also pushed by the Commission and the defense Commissioner. However, other partners seek faster, more reliable and immediate solutions. Furthermore, Germany and other frugal states refuse to add to the budget, leaving the EDIP hamstrung. Meanwhile, the eastern flank governments invest heavily in their defense, feeling vulnerable, relying on US weapons to more quickly increase capacity and keep the US engaged. Both efforts include Ukraine, but differently and not sustainably. Spending goes up in some countries, but not in others, and no notable capacity increases.

The ESSI remains a bone of contention, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI.

Furthermore, the far-right parties in Germany, Netherlands, France and elsewhere in Europe, continue to foment anti-war and pro-Russian sentiment, so that political divisions within European countries over NATO and support for the Ukraine intensify. Italy and the Netherlands join the Orban camp of supporting a Trump initiative to quickly «resolve» the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine NATO membership and any expansion of NATO is off the table.

In this scenario, NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Lack of military and financial support has driven Ukraine into negotiations from a weak position, and despite positive announcements and Commission papers, progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO is small and more symbolic than meaningful because fundamental divisions over EU defense

industry strategy remain unbridgeable, while states continue to bolster their defenses individually. The US shifts more capacity and attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence hollowed, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

Table 4: Future of NATO

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Harris Administration	EU makes grand security bargain before mid-2026, bolstering defense industry, while also collaborating with the UK. NATO cohesion and deterrence strengthened	NATO members struggle to support Ukraine. Divisions over EU defence industry support block any progress on improving EU capabilities. Deterrence weakened.	NATO members struggle to support Ukraine, only slight progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO. Divisions over EU defence industry support appear unbridgeable
Trump 2.0 Administration	Due to European cohesion and decisiveness, NATO deterrence remains credible, despite US steps toward a «dormant NATO»	NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Support for Ukraine is rapidly dwindling, while no progress is made toward a stronger European pillar in NATO and Trump withdrawing	Trump begins to withdraw troops and capacity from NATO, while European NATO members try but fail to increase sharing and pooling capabilities, leaving large gaps ahead and weak deterrence

4. Conclusion

The hypothetical scenarios above indicate how interwoven the different elements of European security are. Support for Ukraine (or lack thereof) affects negotiation scenarios, obviously, but also the short-term prospects for NATO. In particular, the pressure of ensuring Ukraine's security might, with the right elements in place, make new grand bargains possible, despite the political challenges on both sides of the Atlantic.

Secondly, the scenarios illustrate well that the results of the US election are only part of the puzzle. With either a Harris administration or a Trump administration, positive and negative outcomes are possible, for Ukraine and for the state of European security and deterrence in the next four years. Most tellingly, given the state of acute challenges faced by Europe (even with a Harris administration), the stuck and split EU scenarios ended up being quite similar. Sometimes status quo action leads to not neutral, but negative results, if the scenarios above are accurate, Europe is entering such times.

Crucial elements in the EU responses are timing, resources and strategic linkages or leverage. Especially in the Trump scenarios, a prepared and proactive Europe is a more secure one. The window between 5 November (though results are likely to take at least a few days) and 20 January will be a crucial one in the case of a Trump victory. With a Harris administration, Europe has more time to strategize, but it should not miss the window.

The scenarios also reveal that a conflict of interest could arise between self-defense and defense of Ukraine. To an extent, we see this already with some Member States unwilling to deplete their stockpiles to an overly vulnerable level, despite the genuine belief that Ukraine is also defending Europe more broadly by holding back Russia. Without strong US backing, this conflict grows more acute, as a couple of scenario outcomes see eastern flank countries prioritizing their own defense build-up in a Trump 2.0 administration.

Finally, the scenario exercise reveals that Europe is not without leverage and capabilities to shape the next four years. Europe holds Russian frozen assets and has significant financial resources to contribute, much more so if it were willing to consider eurobonds. Europe has people that may be able to influence Trump, such as Poland's President Duda or Italy's Premier Meloni, perhaps. While Europe (including the UK) cannot compensate for a withdraw of US military support, it does have strong and growing defense industries. Finally, when it comes to Ukraine, the EU has a membership perspective to offer and reconstruction funds, both of which are an important element of Ukrainian and European stability – or instability – moving forward.

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