

April 2025

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Volume 5, Number 4

# U.S. Domestic Polarization and Implications for Allied Assurance

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

# **U.S. Domestic Polarization and Implications for Allied Assurance**

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**National Institute Press®**

Published by  
National Institute Press®  
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750  
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

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National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

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## Executive Summary

U.S. domestic polarization affects U.S. foreign policy, but it also affects how allies perceive Washington, undermines the U.S. goal of assuring allies, and damages the U.S. ability to manage alliances. While the impact of polarization on U.S. foreign and defense policy has been extensively studied from a U.S. domestic perspective, very little analysis has focused on the effects of domestic polarization on allied perceptions, assurance, and the U.S. ability to manage alliances. Allied assurance is predicated on allies' expectations that the United States has sufficient capabilities and will to credibly extend deterrence and come to their defense if deterrence fails. Yet, it appears that U.S. domestic polarization undermines allies' perceptions of the U.S. will to do so. This dynamic weakens U.S. credibility as an ally, which then hampers its ability to assure allies and manage allied relations—ultimately damaging U.S. security.

The added complication is that too few foreign government officials understand the U.S. defense and foreign policy process, leaving them more at the mercy of soundbites taken out of context and occasionally misleading and overly simplified headlines that magnify the degree of U.S. domestic polarization.<sup>1</sup> These factors make U.S. alliance management more open to malign foreign actor influence and more challenging at a time when the United States needs allies to stand united and to help counter a rising China, an aggressive Russia, and their disruptive regional partners, Iran and North Korea.

This *Occasional Paper* clarifies the impacts of U.S. domestic polarization on the government's ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Polarization is not inherently bad. Polarization can work as a self-correcting mechanism on general issues in a situation in which a party moves too far away from a median voter.

manage alliances and addresses how the United States can formulate policies and improve communication with allies in ways that overcome the challenges. It can help U.S. policy makers better understand how allies perceive U.S. domestic polarization and respond to it. It identifies U.S. measures designed to lessen allied doubts stemming from their perceptions related to U.S. domestic polarization—thereby contributing to strengthening the U.S. alliance network, and improving communication among the U.S. public and with allies.

The *Occasional Paper* employs qualitative research methods, including a case study of U.S. aid to Ukraine, and discusses allied perspectives with regard to the impacts of domestic polarization. This case study provides unique insights into allies' understanding of U.S. domestic polarization and how they respond to it. Some of this data was obtained through virtual interviews with allied government officials (former and current) and subject matter experts. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding allied thinking on the matter broadly, utilizing direct inputs from policymakers and experts in allied countries, and using that data to inform recommendations regarding U.S. alliance management.

The U.S. government can take several important steps to mitigate the effects of polarization on U.S. alliance relations. At the forefront of these efforts is a competent domestic communications plan aimed at making the case to the public for why the United States benefits when it is engaged globally. Lessons of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War are becoming forgotten at the risk of a collapse of the world order that the United States helped to uphold after the end of World War II. U.S. post-World War II efforts were informed by a bloody and expensive experience that taught the United States that if it does not fight abroad, it will have to fight at home—sooner or later.

The president has a unique role in communicating this message to Americans and to allies, particularly because he has an exceptionally strong position as an actor in foreign and defense policy. This, of course, presumes that the president shares the sentiment. Until recently, no U.S. post World War II president fundamentally questioned the need to deploy U.S. forces abroad, including to Europe. While Congress holds the purse strings and the Senate's advice and consent process is essential to ratification of international treaties, Congress' position relative to the executive branch has weakened overtime, which makes the president's opinions and approach that much more important.<sup>2</sup>

For a policy to survive an administration, bipartisan involvement and buy-in is necessary. Otherwise, U.S. credibility will suffer as policies change from administration to administration and party to party. Fluctuations in U.S. policy lead allies to perceive Washington's commitment as both uncertain and unpredictable, and thereby undermine their assurance and their alliance with the United States.

Making the case to the American people regarding why global engagement and U.S. alliances matter, how they benefit from them, and what it takes to maintain them in today's contentious, adversarial environment, is the first order of (a rather urgent) business with regard to overcoming domestic polarization's effects on foreign policy. A well-crafted communications strategy would have a valuable side effect of making it harder for adversaries' influence operations and disinformation efforts to succeed.

Structurally, the ongoing U.S. homeland vulnerability to peer and near-peer adversaries' long-range missiles would put any president in the extremely difficult position

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., as documented in Kenneth R. Mayer, *With the Stroke of a Pen - Executive Orders & Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, January 1, 2002).



of having to decide whether to intervene on behalf of an ally at the cost of a potential attack on the U.S. homeland and presents a significant potential source of polarization in a conflict. U.S. relations with NATO have historically helped make U.S. retaliatory threats credible in the face of the difficulties stemming from protecting the U.S. homeland. They included significant short- and intermediate-range nuclear force deployments to allied states, a large conventional forward presence, and a robust nuclear modernization program. By making U.S. extended deterrence and assurance more credible by protecting the U.S. homeland, the United States would eliminate one potential avenue of polarization that adversaries could exploit in a crisis.

U.S. allies ought to continue to increase their defense budgets and capabilities commensurate with the unprecedented threats they face. Decreasing the difference between U.S. contributions to their security versus their own would remove one of the main contentious issues in the U.S. public discourse. Because allies, too, face a challenge of sustaining domestic support for defense spending, they ought to communicate with their respective publics regarding its necessity and importance in the context of alliance relations and looming threats.

Lastly, politicians and decision-makers in allied countries ought to strengthen their understanding of the workings of the U.S. government to be able to understand the different actors and dynamics that come into play in the formulation of U.S. foreign and defense policy. Sensationalist headlines and media-driven hyperbole skew perceptions and introduce a degree of unnecessary misunderstanding into already complex bilateral and multilateral relations. Minimizing this “noise” is a prerequisite for more effective relations management.

## Introduction

Despite the importance of the United States as a leader of a global network of alliances, many allies do *not* have a mature understanding of the U.S. foreign and defense policy process; nor do they appear to understand the varied internal or external actors that impact its formulation. This makes them susceptible to soundbites taken out of context and occasionally misleading and overly simplified headlines that magnify the degree of U.S. domestic polarization. Malign foreign actors exploit this reality to undermine the U.S. ability to manage its alliance network at a time when the United States needs its allies to stand united to help counter a rising China, an aggressive Russia, and their disruptive regional partners Iran and North Korea.

This *Occasional Paper* points to the need for a broader recognition of the impact of U.S. domestic polarization on U.S. ability to manage alliance relations. This is critical in an era of great power competition and conflict, because alliances are one of the few areas in which the United States has an unquestionable advantage over its adversaries. That is why adversaries are so intent on disrupting them—political polarization serves as one of the vehicles for them to do so. Second, improving the U.S. understanding of how adversaries utilize polarization to advance their goals helps U.S. officials tailor policies to make them more resilient and resistant to such activities, alone and in cooperation with U.S. allies.

In addition to providing an allied perspective on polarization and how it shapes their policy choices, this analysis points to the need for a broader recognition of the impact of U.S. domestic polarization on Washington's ability to manage alliance relations. It identifies how U.S. political polarization affects allied perceptions of U.S. credibility as an ally, and how those perceptions shape allied behavior vis-à-vis the United States. This analysis

advances an understanding of the effects of domestic polarization on U.S. alliance goals and offers recommendations regarding how Washington might mitigate those effects.

## Deterioration of the Strategic Environment

Much has been written about the worsening national security environment in the past several years. The 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (NSS) noted that “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” and mentioned the increasing resources these countries, especially China, are investing to improve their capabilities to do so.<sup>3</sup> The 2022 NSS argued that the United States is “in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order.”<sup>4</sup> Published after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the NSS noted that “Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today,” and that Russia and China “now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy.”<sup>5</sup> The word “competition,” however, does not capture the actual nature of conflict between the United States and the “no-limit” partnership of two nuclear-armed revisionist powers intent on overturning the international

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<sup>3</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 25, available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, p. 2, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 8-9.

order that has served its and allies' interest so well since the end of the World War II.

The 2023 report by the bipartisan *Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* concluded that within the 2027-2035 timeframe, the United States "will face two nuclear peer adversaries for the first time" and that neither of the previous two NSS reports adequately address this reality.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. government and most of its allies are far too slow to recognize the nature of danger to their interests, and so far have been largely unwilling to take unprecedented measures to improve their standing vis-à-vis their adversaries.

These trends are worsened by Russia's close cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea. According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China "has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine" through its large-scale support for Russia's defense industrial base.<sup>7</sup> That is a rather mild assessment of China's support for Russia's war effort and the economy that sustains it. Without China's help in subverting sanctions, Russia's economy would be closer to a collapse. China's efforts at stemming the supply of drones and their parts to the Ukrainians and to European countries that support them are also notable.<sup>8</sup>

In June 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a treaty committing them to providing military assistance to each

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<sup>6</sup> Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. 7, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Washington Summit Declaration*, July 10, 2024, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_227678.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia*, 2025, pp. 70-73, available at <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2025-en.pdf>.

other.<sup>9</sup> North Korea has provided Russia with millions of artillery shells since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> The treaty ratifies a pre-existing months-long relationship of North Korea trading ammunition for Russia's know-how, presumably in space and missile technologies.<sup>11</sup> North Korean troops now fight against the Ukrainians in the Kursk region of Russia.<sup>12</sup> Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Iran has also emerged "as a key enabler of Russia's air and ground campaign in Ukraine."<sup>13</sup> Iran has provided Russia with hundreds of unmanned aerial vehicles and other support for Russia's brutal invasion.<sup>14</sup>

These conditions are made worse by U.S. arms control initiatives during and since the end of the Cold War and the nation's long-standing presumption against a

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Kuhn, "Concerns mount as Russia and North Korea commit to a mutual defense pact," *NPR*, June 20, 2024, available at <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/20/nx-s1-5011604/leaders-of-russia-and-north-korea-sign-pact-indicating-a-deeper-cooperation>.

<sup>10</sup> Soo-Hyang Choi, "North Korea Sent Russia Millions of Artillery Shells, South Korea Says," *Time*, June 14, 2024, available at <https://time.com/6988568/north-korea-russia-artillery-shell-south-korea-defense-minister/>.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Kuhn, "Kim Jong Un vows full support for Russia as Putin pledges space tech for North Korea," *NPR*, September 13, 2023, available at <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/13/1199190066/russia-north-korea-putin-kim-jong-un-summit>.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Gardner, "About 1,000 North Koreans killed fighting Ukraine in Kursk, officials say," *BBC*, January 25, 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c87djeezjxeo>.

<sup>13</sup> Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "The Uncomfortable Reality of Russia and Iran's New Defense Relationship," *War On the Rocks*, July 24, 2024, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-new-defense-relationship/>.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Demarest, "Attack drones at heart of 'military partnership' between Russia, Iran," *C4ISR*, March 27, 2024, available at <https://www.c4isrnet.com/unmanned/uas/2024/03/27/attack-drones-at-heart-of-military-partnership-between-russia-iran/>.

comprehensive homeland missile defense system.<sup>15</sup> As adversaries are exploiting U.S. vulnerabilities and deterrence gaps, the situation is becoming more precarious for allies that have for decades relied on U.S. extended deterrence. U.S. allies should not confuse structural imperatives and realities stemming from U.S. vulnerabilities with the effects of U.S. domestic polarization, even though the former shapes the latter.

## U.S. Polarization and Political Science Research

Domestic polarization, or when the preference of a group regarding an issue becomes both distinctly bimodal and the two modes are moving further apart,<sup>16</sup> is a long-standing feature of the U.S. political system and has been increasing on domestic issues for years.<sup>17</sup> A close examination of congressional voting indicates a disappearance of centrist

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<sup>15</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence and Arms Control: Ending the Deceptive 'Holiday from History'," *information Series*, No. 616 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 10, 2025), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/).

<sup>16</sup> The definition draws on Frances Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance," *Annual Review of Political Science*, No. 18 (February 4, 2015), p. 263.

<sup>17</sup> For an example, see Gary Jacobson, "Party polarization in national politics: The electoral connection," in Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (eds.), *Polarized politics: Congress and the president in a partisan era* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, January 2000), available at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary-Jacobson-3/publication/247118625\\_Party\\_Polarization\\_in\\_National\\_Politics\\_The\\_Electoral\\_Connection/links/5c7596d4458515831f72944b/Party-Polarization-in-National-Politics-The-Electoral-Connection?\\_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary-Jacobson-3/publication/247118625_Party_Polarization_in_National_Politics_The_Electoral_Connection/links/5c7596d4458515831f72944b/Party-Polarization-in-National-Politics-The-Electoral-Connection?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19).

politicians (Democrats who vote with Republicans at least on some issues, and vice-versa).<sup>18</sup>

Regarding foreign affairs, despite both majorities of Democrats and Republicans arguing that the United States should maintain or even increase its commitment to NATO, the difference between them is the largest it has ever been as reflected in Chicago Council polling since 1974 (from 4 percentage points in 1970 to 25 in 2020).<sup>19</sup> The 2024 National Defense Strategy Commission, in a first for such a report, noted that “the polarization of U.S. domestic politics is harming the U.S. military and U.S. national security” and expressed concerns “that the traditional post-World War II bipartisan support for a strong military, preservation of alliances, and engagement in international affairs is waning.”<sup>20</sup>

In a follow up interview, the Commission Chair Congresswoman Jane Harman and the Commission Vice Chair Ambassador Eric Edelman stated that “Public support is the necessary foundation not just for increased national spending—and the taxes and reforms to entitlements that spending will require—but for the viability of the all-volunteer force, the needed partnership between the government and the private sector, and for the resilience that will be required at home if the nation goes to

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<sup>18</sup> Jeff Lewis, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, “Weekly Update of ‘Common Space’ DWNOMINATE Scores,” December 12, 2016, available at [http://k7moa.com/Weekly\\_Constant\\_Space\\_DWNOMINATE\\_Scores.htm](http://k7moa.com/Weekly_Constant_Space_DWNOMINATE_Scores.htm); quoted in Kenneth Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter 2018), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Dina Smeltz, “Are we drowning at the water’s edge? Foreign policy polarization among the US Public,” *International Politics* No. 59 (2022), p. 791.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Harman and Eric Edelman, et al., *Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, RAND, July 2024, p. 20, available at <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html>.

war.”<sup>21</sup> In a 2018 survey, U.S. foreign policy experts agreed that domestic polarization, not North Korean or Iranian nuclear weapons program or China and Russia’s increasing belligerence, was a “critical” threat to the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary political science research focuses on mapping the rise of polarization in Congress and its impact on U.S. foreign policy,<sup>23</sup> discusses the effects of polarization on arms control,<sup>24</sup> and whether external threats reduce polarization.<sup>25</sup> The current literature suggests that domestic polarization makes it harder to obtain support for force deployments abroad, complicates the conclusion of treaties, makes it more difficult for the United States to learn from and adapt to failures, complicates the U.S. ability to make long-term commitments to allies, and makes the United

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<sup>21</sup> An Interview with Congresswoman Jane Harman, Chair, Commission on the National Defense Strategy and Amb. Eric Edelman, Vice Chair, Commission on the National Defense Strategy, *Journal of Policy & Strategy* Vol. 4, No. 5 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/journals/volume-4-2024/>.

<sup>22</sup> Dina Smeltz, Joshua Busby and Jordan Tama, “Political polarization the critical threat to US, foreign policy experts say,” *The Hill*, November 9, 2018, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/415881-political-polarization-is-the-critical-threat-to-us-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>23</sup> Gyung-Ho Jeong and Paul Quirk, “Division at the Water’s Edge: The Polarization of Foreign Policy,” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (January 2019), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1532673X17719721>.

<sup>24</sup> Florian Böller, “Brakeman or booster? Presidents, ideological polarization, reciprocity, and the politics of US arms control,” *International Politics*, Vol. 59 (2022), pp. 725-748.

<sup>25</sup> Rachel Myrick, “Do External Threats Unite or Divide? Security Crises, Rivalries, and Polarization in American Foreign Policy,” *International Organization*, No. 75 (Fall 2021), pp. 921-928, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/85C21E7EBD9EB38EDDB95F68A0458A88/S0020818321000175a.pdf/do-external-threats-unite-or-divide-security-crises-rivalries-and-polarization-in-american-foreign-policy.pdf>.



States more vulnerable to foreign intervention in its domestic political system.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, there is a paucity of analysis on how U.S. domestic polarization impacts how allies perceive the United States as a security assurance provider and how these perceptions undermine the U.S. ability to manage its alliance relations. Another glaring gap in the body of research on polarization is just how divorced it is from practical policymaking and how little it accounts for how allies view U.S. domestic polarization.<sup>27</sup>

Recent research indicates that domestic and foreign policies are becoming increasingly polarized along party lines, even if the latter is occurring at a slower rate than the former.<sup>28</sup> Donald Trump's first term as president and his strong, and unequivocally voiced opinions regarding alliances, burden-sharing, and perceived free loading, have revived interest in examining the impacts of domestic polarization on U.S. foreign and defense policy. Defense and foreign policy analysts themselves occasionally appear to have contributed to the divide by making hyperbolic

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<sup>26</sup> Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," p. 9, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> For example, political scientists rarely consider the *substance* of a treaty or whether conditions leading an administration to a withdrawal from a treaty have merit. Rather, the incoming assumption is that treaties are a mark of liberal internationalism and therefore inherently good, and withdrawals unilateral and therefore inherently bad for U.S. foreign policy. Policymakers, however, have to be concerned with both details of a treaty and conditions surrounding its implementation to make sound policy. Moreover, the experience of both the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty withdrawals show that allies follow where the United States leads, particularly when the United States has a sound communication strategy which minimizes opportunities for adversaries to sow discord.

<sup>28</sup> James Bryan and Jordan Tama, "The prevalence of bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy: an analysis of important congressional votes," *International Politics*, Volume 59, pp. 874–897, (August 4, 2021).

statements that appear to be driven more by emotions than sound analysis.<sup>29</sup>

A recent Gallup poll found that fewer Americans rate the goal of “defending U.S. allies’ security” as very important than in 2017 (from 66 percent to 59 percent).<sup>30</sup> There is a significant partisan gap between Republicans and Democrats on the question of working with organizations like NATO to protect the United States and its allies: only 41 percent of Republicans consider it a foreign policy priority, vis-à-vis 89 percent of Democrats.<sup>31</sup> This polarization makes the United States “look inconsistent and unreliable to our partners overseas.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, the majority of Republicans (64%), most Democrats (92%), and independents (75%) believe that the NATO alliance should be maintained.<sup>33</sup>

Almost *all* U.S. political science research is concerned with U.S. perceptions, U.S. political processes, and U.S.

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<sup>29</sup> “The EU-U.S. relationship doesn’t exist anymore,” stated the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Heather Conley contrary to common evidence in a June 2020 article on the erosion of the Transatlantic Alliance. Quoted in John Walcott, “Unquiet on the Western Front: Why the 74-Year Alliance Between Europe and America Is Falling Apart,” *Time*, June 19, 2020, available at <https://time.com/5855200/us-europe-alliance-failing/>. This is just one of many examples of experts getting carried away by emotions rather than defaulting to their analytical judgment; not that there would be nothing to critique in the Trump Administration’s foreign and defense policy.

<sup>30</sup> Lydia Saad, “Americans’ Foreign Policy Priorities, NATO Support Unchanged,” *Gallup Poll*, March 4, 2025, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/657581/americans-foreign-policy-priorities-nato-support-unchanged.aspx>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jordan Tama, “Did Ukraine have to become a partisan US issue?,” *AFP*, March 9, 2025, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250309-did-ukraine-have-to-become-a-partisan-us-issue>.

<sup>33</sup> Saad, “Americans’ Foreign Policy Priorities, NATO Support Unchanged,” *op. cit.*

foreign policy conduct. The exception to the rule assesses different assurance strategies from the perspective of citizens of allied countries, but does not take polarization into account.<sup>34</sup> Another examines the attitudes of the British public toward U.S. domestic polarization, but even that study omits elites' views and refrains from making policy recommendations.<sup>35</sup> The study argues that polarization "may cause states to doubt existing commitments that America has made to its allies," "can affect the willingness of allies to engage in future partnerships or agreements with the United States," and "can have downstream reputational consequences for the United States by negatively impacting perceptions of American global leadership."<sup>36</sup>

What do policymakers and experts based in allied countries have to say about polarization in U.S. domestic politics? And how should U.S. policies and communications be adjusted in the light of this information? After all, to tailor effective assurance policies, U.S. policymakers must understand how allies view U.S. assurance and what shapes and informs their perceptions. The lack of analysis with regard to how polarization shapes these perceptions has the potential to undermine U.S. assurance efforts and therefore U.S. alliances.

This analysis addresses the following questions: what do policymakers and experts based in allied countries say about polarization in U.S. domestic politics; and, should U.S. policies and communication strategies be adjusted in

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander Lanoszka and Lauren Sukin, "Credibility in Crises: How Patrons Reassure Their Allies," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 68, No. 2 (June 2024), available at <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/68/2/sqae062/7641089>.

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Myrick, "The reputational consequences of polarization for American foreign policy: evidence from the US-UK bilateral relationship," *International Politics* (February 27, 2022), available at <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/79a4ac2a-aad3-47e7-9d5a-1aac4aa8209c/content>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 2-3.

light of this information? So far, most of political science research on polarization is almost exclusively based on a quantitative approach, meaning that it is focused on identifying and analyzing patterns in a large amount of data. This approach tends not to extend to explaining their causes, providing a picture of how U.S. allies perceive U.S. polarization, or answering the question of how they adjust their policies vis-à-vis the United States to account for the effects of polarization. Knowledge of each of these aspects could help to make U.S. assurance policies more effective.

The quantitative approach is also insufficient for the purpose of devising policies that would help U.S. policymakers tailor their strategies to effectively assure allies despite U.S. domestic partisanship. Practical recommendations on how to improve assurance policies for the U.S. government are sorely lacking in this body of political science research. Moreover, the existing research is even less useful to policy practitioners in allied countries, who usually have only a general understanding of the inner workings of the U.S. government. Yet, they are the perspectives that effective alliance management strategies must consider.

## **Polarization and U.S. Allies' Views**

U.S. domestic polarization creates concerns for U.S. allies. According to interviews with experts in foreign countries, polarization creates unpredictability and instability.<sup>37</sup> That is a decidedly negative effect at a time when U.S. allies in Europe feel the Alliance needs to project unity under the

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews were conducted as a part of research for Michaela Dodge, "Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions," *Journal of Politics & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Analysis-Dodge-4.2.pdf>.

leadership of the United States to help deter Russia's potential aggression against NATO's European members.

Polarization makes it more difficult to sustain a consistent foreign and defense policy and distracts the U.S. government from the global engagement upon which allied security depends. At worst, polarization prevents policy issues from being discussed on their merit rather than through the uncompromising lens of partisanship. It is causing U.S. allies to question U.S. credibility as a guarantor of their security as they ponder whether there will be enough American public support to make good on U.S. alliance commitments if allies need U.S. help in defeating a potential aggressor.

In the long run, if allies do not perceive the United States as a reliable and credible guarantor of their security, they will work to obtain alternative means to strengthen their security, potentially becoming more autonomous in the process. For example, to increase their sense of security, states could become cooperative or even collaborate with America's adversaries. Increasingly authoritarian and pro-Russian governments in Hungary and Slovakia appear to be placing a bet that the West will lose in a long-term competition with Russia; other allied governments are only waking up to the need to minimize their economic dependence on China.

Apparent U.S. polarization with regard to support for Ukraine could threaten the prospect of preserving Ukraine's integrity and Alliance unity on the subject – with potentially negative effects throughout Europe and Asia. A Russian victory in Ukraine could be fatal to U.S. efforts to counter authoritarian tendencies in European democracies and alignments with U.S. adversaries would be sure to follow, among many other harms.<sup>38</sup> If U.S. security guarantees are perceived as lacking credibility, due to

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<sup>38</sup> Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *op. cit.*

domestic polarization or for other reasons, allied governments could make the calculation that developing independent nuclear weapon capabilities will strengthen their security. In many foreign countries, discussions about U.S. allies “going nuclear” are heard much more often and are more politically acceptable within the policy-making community than they were 10 years ago.<sup>39</sup> European NATO members are now discussing alternatives to U.S. nuclear weapons and the U.S. “nuclear umbrella” given the perceived unreliability of the Trump Administration. For example, then-second-term presidential candidate Trump said he would let Russia do “whatever the hell they want” to any NATO country not meeting the Alliance’s defense spending guidelines.<sup>40</sup>

Ukraine’s regrets with regard to giving up nuclear weapons on its territory reinforce the perception that nuclear weapons are useful tools in a state’s effort to secure its own survival.<sup>41</sup> Yet, more nuclear-armed states would

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<sup>39</sup> For an example of this dynamic in Germany, see Michael Rühle, “German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent,” *Information Series*, No. 571 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 3, 2024), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/).

<sup>40</sup> Kate Sullivan, “Trump says he would encourage Russia to ‘do whatever the hell they want’ to any NATO country that doesn’t pay enough,” *CNN*, February 11, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that “Either Ukraine will have nuclear weapons and that will be our protection or we should have some sort of alliance. Apart from NATO, today we do not know any effective alliances.” See Seb Starcevic, “Zelenskyy: We need NATO or nukes ... and we want NATO,” *Politico*, October 17, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-nukes-volodymyr-zelenskyy-war-ukraine-aid-russia/>. In a recent interview, Zelenskyy stated that giving up nuclear weapons was “absolutely stupid, illogical, and very irresponsible.” See “Ukraine Giving Up

demonstrate the failure of extended deterrence to assure and, even if those states are allies, would be a significant failure of decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

## Alliance Politics and Recent Developments

Some politicians and experts in Europe consider President Trump a polarizing figure that has contributed to an erosion of America's support for transatlantic relations by publicly and unequivocally attacking U.S. allies that do not meet their defense commitment as agreed by NATO in 2006.<sup>42</sup> Prior to President Trump's 2024 re-election, some journalists commented on his lack of interest in alliances and on what they perceived as the administration's intent for a U.S. retreat from a position of world leadership.<sup>43</sup> Yet, President Trump's criticisms of allies for not spending enough on their defense has been a long-standing feature of U.S. foreign and defense policy, even if stylistically expressed differently from earlier administrations.<sup>44</sup>

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Nukes Was 'Absolutely Stupid, Illogical, And Very Irresponsible,' Zelenskyy Says," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 28, 2025, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-zelenskiy-nuclear-weapons-interview-trump-putin-/33291628.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "What the world thinks of Trump's return to the US presidency," *The Atlantic Council*, November 8, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-the-world-thinks-of-trumps-return-to-the-us-presidency/>.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in, *National Public Radio, Fresh Air: World*, hosted by Dave Davies, "From high tariffs to isolation, what a 2<sup>nd</sup> Trump term might mean for foreign policy," November 13, 2024, available at <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/13/g-s1-34010/from-high-tariffs-to-isolation-what-a-2nd-trump-term-might-mean-for-foreign-policy>.

<sup>44</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, "Europe Can't Trust the U.S. Anymore," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2025, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/03/buzz-saw-pine-forest/681984/?gift=ikAS-C->

While previous presidents appeared disinclined to change the status quo despite other NATO members' unwillingness to meet their defense spending obligations, this does not seem to be the case with President Trump who publicly discusses Europe's need to re-arm and chastises some allies that are too slow to increase their defense spending. Granted, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine dispelled remaining traces of the post-Cold War "end of history" optimism and (should have) imparted a sense of urgency regarding the need to arm in many European states. The optimistic view assumed "that Washington could depend on international organizations to help it confront major challenges and that 'global governance' would emerge with the help of American leadership. ...That view presumed that since other countries were progressing inexorably toward liberal democracy, they would share many of Washington's goals and would play by Washington's rules."<sup>45</sup> It turned out to be wrong.

Conversations among European experts following President Trump's 2024 re-election to a degree appear to reflect the polarization in the United States, although it is worth to note that the transatlantic relationship was far from harmonious during the Cold War.<sup>46</sup> Much of the media coverage of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's and Vice-President J.D. Vance's February 2025 trip to the NATO Defense Ministerial, Ukraine Defense Contact Group meetings, and the Munich Security Conference focused on the contours of the Trump Administration's potential

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<sup>45</sup> Nadia Schadow, "The End of American Illusion," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Private conversations with the author and Cohen, "Europe Can't Trust the U.S. Anymore," op. cit.



retreat from Europe's security<sup>47</sup> and generated perceptions that the administration is making concessions to Russia even before the negotiations started.<sup>48</sup> For example, German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz and then-German opposition leader Friedrich Merz joined in a rebuke of Vice President J.D. Vance's criticism of the state of democracy in some European countries.<sup>49</sup> Such criticism finds favor in one part of the political spectrum rather than the other, potentially contributing to U.S. domestic polarization.

Within the expert community, the reception of these remarks tended to reflect the degree of polarization in the U.S. debate, with a majority of observers critical of the Trump Administration's policy toward NATO allies and Ukraine. On one hand, many policy-makers berated the United States for "abandoning" Europe and "cozying up" to the Russians.<sup>50</sup> On the other, some welcomed reminders about the necessity for Europe to be clear about the values for which it stands and argued that the United States is right for pushing NATO members to increase their defense

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Jack Detsch, Joe Gould and Paul McLeary, "As US recedes, NATO scrambles to find a new leader," *Politico*, February 16, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-recedes-nato-scrambles-find-new-leader-munich-security-conference/>.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Schmitt and John Ismay, "Hegseth's Bruising 72-Hour Debut Overseas," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2025, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/us/politics/hegseth-ukraine-russia.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Ludwig Burger, "German opposition leader joins rebuke of Vance criticism," *Reuters*, February 15, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-opposition-leader-joins-rebuke-vance-criticism-2025-02-15>.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew A. Michta [@andrewmichta], May I say a few word to my European friends who now berate the US for allegedly "cozying up to Russia" and "abandoning Europe"? I'm sorry, but what was NordStream 1/2 about? What was the "Minsk process" after Russia invaded Georgia and seized Crimea? Where were you then? 1/5 [X, formerly Twitter], 2:44 PM, February 17, 2025, available at <https://x.com/andrewmichta/status/1891574452774645918>.

spending and support Ukraine in a conflict that geopolitically should concern them much more than the United States.<sup>51</sup> This group seems collectively exasperated by the European governments' inability to mobilize enough support for Ukraine to defeat the Russian aggression and some of them commented on their dislike of the liberal elite's abuse of state power to silence opposition parties.<sup>52</sup> H. E. Bartosz Cichocki, Poland's former ambassador to Ukraine, assessed that "If the European leaders' statements post-Munich conference work as a wakeup call for European governments to do more on defense, that would be a good thing. But if they only serve to criticize the Trump Administration, that is not prudent."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it is not, because Americans are more likely to support alliances if such a support is not affiliated with one political party over another.

U.S. domestic polarization regarding foreign policy issues and alliances is contributing to foreign leaders' questioning whether the United States would come to their defense and how to make alternative provisions for their security. For example, Germany's incoming chancellor Friedrich Merz declared his "absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the United States."<sup>54</sup> A survey in France found that almost three quarters of respondents do not believe that the United

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<sup>51</sup> Author's interviews.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with the author, February 17, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Roger Cohen, "A Europe in Emotional Shock Grapples With a New Era," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2025, available at [https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/world/europe/trump-putin-russia-europe.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.2U4.UROj.VlxE3fKBc3Yg&smid=tw-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/world/europe/trump-putin-russia-europe.html?unlocked_article_code=1.2U4.UROj.VlxE3fKBc3Yg&smid=tw-share).

States is an ally of France today.<sup>55</sup> Yet, European countries simply do not have the required capabilities some in France and Germany require, and will not for the foreseeable future.<sup>56</sup>

Trump Administration officials have further dismayed allies by taking a seemingly conciliatory approach to the Russian Federation. For example, Trump Administration nominees have publicly refused to call Russia an invader arguing such a step would impede the administration's efforts to bring peace to Ukraine, despite the fact that it was Russian-backed separatists and Russian troops that invaded Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 respectively.<sup>57</sup> Following a February 2025 meeting between Presidents Trump and

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<sup>55</sup> Juliette Brossault, "SONDAGE BFMTV. Guerre en Ukraine: pour 73 % des Français, les États-Unis ne sont plus un allié de la France [BFMTV POLL. War in Ukraine: for 73% of French people, the United States is no longer an ally of France]," *BFMTV*, March 4, 2025, available at [https://www.bfmtv.com/international/europe/ukraine/sondage-bfmtv-guerre-en-ukraine-pour-73-des-francais-les-etats-unis-ne-sont-plus-un-allie-de-la-france\\_AN-202503040506.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/international/europe/ukraine/sondage-bfmtv-guerre-en-ukraine-pour-73-des-francais-les-etats-unis-ne-sont-plus-un-allie-de-la-france_AN-202503040506.html).

<sup>56</sup> Laura Kayali and Lucia Mackenzie, "Europe shows withdrawal symptoms after 75 years of addiction to US troops," *Politico*, April 25, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-united-states-troops-germany-security-maps-europe-military-peter-hegseth/>; and Ben Barry et. al, "Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 2025, available at [https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states/iiss\\_defending-europe-without-the-united-states\\_costs-and-consequences\\_052025.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states/iiss_defending-europe-without-the-united-states_costs-and-consequences_052025.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Joe Gould, "Defense deputy secretary pick avoids saying Russia invaded Ukraine," *Politico*, February 25, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/02/25/pentagon-defense-russia-ukraine-00206008>, and Megan Lebowitz, "Two Trump officials decline to say Russia started the war in Ukraine," *NBC News*, February 23, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/trump-administration/trump-administration-officials-decline-russia-started-ukraine-war-rcna193357>.

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy,<sup>58</sup> the administration halted the provision of military aid and temporarily suspended all intelligence sharing with Ukraine.<sup>59</sup> The administration's steps reflect a growing divide between the Democrats and the Republicans regarding the degree of U.S. responsibility to help Ukraine.<sup>60</sup>

Leaders of European countries promptly showed support to Zelenskyy following the meeting.<sup>61</sup> While some wondered whether the United States is committed to Europe's security at all, others realize that European NATO members do not have many realistic alternative security options due to decades of underfunding their militaries and defense industries. These leaders realize they must focus on strengthening transatlantic relations.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Whether Americans considers the United States or Ukraine at fault appears to depend on partisan leanings, see for example Julia Manchester, "46 percent of voters see no clear winner in Trump-Zelensky meeting: Poll," *The Hill*, March 3, 2025, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5173356-trump-zelensky-meeting-poll/>.

<sup>59</sup> "Trump administration pauses U.S. military aid to Ukraine," *CBS News*, March 3, 2025, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-administration-pauses-u-s-military-aid-to-ukraine/>.

<sup>60</sup> Moira Fagan, Jacob Poushter and Sneha Gubbala, "How Americans view the Russia-Ukraine war," *Pew Research Center*, April 17, 2025, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/04/17/how-americans-view-the-russia-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>61</sup> Christian Oliver, Giovanna Faggionato, Victor Goury-Laffont and Max Grier, "'Free world needs a new leader': Europe defends Zelenskyy after Trump attack," *Politico*, February 28, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-donald-trump-jd-vance-oval-office-white-house-us-ukraine-war-russia/>.

<sup>62</sup> Ketrin Jochecová, "European leaders rally behind Ukraine as US stops aid," *Politico*, March 4, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-leaders-rally-behind-ukraine-us-stops-military-aid/>.

The perceived concessions to the Russians (and the Chinese) include the abrupt suspension of programs run by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), including in Ukraine.<sup>63</sup> Similarly concerning are discussions about cancelling the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*.<sup>64</sup> RFE/RL is one of the few entities that counters Russia's influence operations and is active in countries that used to be in the Soviet sphere of influence. The Trump Administration is also reportedly considering relinquishing the Supreme Allied Commander Europe position, which would signal an end to a U.S. significant military support to NATO.<sup>65</sup> The change could be a part of a wider restructuring of the U.S. combatant commands the Administration is reportedly in the process of discussing.<sup>66</sup> The Republican chairs of the House and Senate Armed Services committees already issued a statement criticizing the administration's lack of coordination with Congress

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<sup>63</sup> Vaughn Hillyard, "State Department terminates U.S. support of Ukraine energy grid restoration," *NBC News*, February 28, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/state-department-terminates-us-support-ukraine-energy-grid-restoration-rcna194259>.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew Rice, "Trump's Special Envoy Rips Voice of America, Radio Free Europe as a 'Relic of the Past'," *The New York Sun*, February 10, 2025, available at <https://www.nysun.com/article/trumps-special-envoy-rips-voice-of-america-radio-free-europe-as-a-relic-of-the-past>.

<sup>65</sup> Courtney Kube and Gordon Lubold, "Trump admin considers giving up NATO command that has been exclusively American since Eisenhower," *NBC News*, March 18, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-admin-considers-giving-nato-command-exclusively-american-eisenhower-rcna196503>; and Mark Hertling, "The Supreme Allied Commander Must Be an American," *The Bulwark*, March 21, 2025, available at <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/supreme-allied-commander-must-be-american-nato-europe-trump-saceur>.

<sup>66</sup> Emily Brooks, "GOP chairs 'very concerned' over report of Trump changing military commands," *The Hill*, March 19, 2025, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5204366-gop-chairmen-rogers-wicker-trump-nato-command/>.

regarding this issue.<sup>67</sup> These steps, driven in part by U.S. domestic polarization regarding U.S. debt and deficit, contribute to increase the U.S. allies' uncertainty regarding whether the United States is willing to continue to play a leadership role in the global security order.

## **Domestic Politics and the Case of U.S. Aid to Ukraine**

The case of U.S. aid to Ukraine is an instructive example of how U.S. domestic polarization has shaped allied perceptions of Washington in a way that has undermined U.S. efforts to assure allies.<sup>68</sup> European countries that feel Russia's threat more acutely than the United States are looking to Ukraine as a litmus test for U.S. willingness to help them in case Russia's imperial ambitions do not stop in Ukraine. As the topic of Ukraine help became more polarized within the public discourse, they became concerned that U.S. alliance guarantees will be increasingly controversial and therefore weaker, too. A perception of weakness could invite Russia's further aggression, particularly given Russia's stated objective to reestablish its

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<sup>67</sup> "Chairman Rogers, Chairman Wicker Joint Statement on Reports of Potential Combatant Command Changes," *Press Release*, March 19, 2025, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=5018>.

<sup>68</sup> Parts of this section are taken from Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series*, No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/). The author is grateful for the National Institute's permission to utilize this work.

influence on territories of countries that used to be a part of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia are also assessing U.S. willingness to help Ukraine and using it as a proximate indicator of how likely the United States would be to help them in their own efforts to counter potential North Korean or Chinese aggression. Expressing a similar sentiment, Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament, asked in the aftermath of a particularly brutal attack against Ukrainian civilians “If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country?”<sup>70</sup> If allies do not believe that the United States will come to their defense because doing so is too contentious from a domestic political perspective, they will try to secure themselves by pursuing other courses of action, including those that could be damaging to U.S. national security, e.g. the development of their own nuclear capabilities or striking a separate deal with U.S. adversaries.

If Russia is victorious in Ukraine, the United States would lose credibility as a guarantor of today’s global

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew Roth, “Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>; and Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, “Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” December 17, 2021, available at [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear\\_cache=Y](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y).

<sup>70</sup> Marko Mihkelson [@markomihkelson], If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country? [X, formerly Twitter], 2:27 AM, September 4, 2024, available at <https://twitter.com/markomihkelson/status/1831225102819570067>.

security architecture; an architecture that has helped keep the U.S. homeland safe from large-scale attacks and allowed billions of people to prosper beyond any comparable time in humankind's history. Russia's victory would reverberate throughout the U.S. alliance system, making U.S. security guarantees less credible—and U.S. domestic polarization with regard to the matter of helping Ukraine defeat Russia's aggression would be a major factor in that perception.

In fact, former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said with regard to deterring China from a cross-strait attack that "A Ukrainian victory will serve as the most effective deterrent to future aggression."<sup>71</sup> Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu argued that if the United States abandons Ukraine, China would "take it as a hint" that the United States and its allies would "back off" in the case of China's sustained action against Taiwan.<sup>72</sup> At a conference in Estonia, Samir Saran, the head of the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think tank, "almost mocked" the West's inability to organize Russia's battlefield defeat, despite Russia's economy being twenty times smaller than the West's.<sup>73</sup> The consequence of Ukraine's potential defeat would be a less prosperous world order that is less safe for Americans, their allies, and the Free World's interests.

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<sup>71</sup> Jack Detsch, "Taiwan's former president says Ukraine needs US weapons more urgently than Taipei," *Politico*, November 23, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/23/taiwans-former-president-says-ukraine-needs-u-s-weapons-more-urgently-than-taipei-00191400>.

<sup>72</sup> Wu Tse-yu, "Arms supply suspension would embolden China," *Taipei Times*, March 31, 2024, available at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/03/31/2003815730>.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick Wintour, "'We're in 1938 now': Putin's war in Ukraine and lessons from history," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/08/putin-war-ukraine-forgotten-lessons-of-history-europe>.



While Ukraine is not a NATO member, and therefore not covered by the Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, the United States pledged to safeguard Ukraine's territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.<sup>74</sup> The Clinton Administration spearheaded Ukraine's denuclearization in its effort to prioritize relations with Moscow "over all else" and "ridiculed" Ukrainian concerns over their security, even insinuating that U.S. officials knew Ukraine's interests better than the Ukrainians themselves.<sup>75</sup> Following the signature of the document, Ukraine joined the NPT and gave up nuclear weapons on its territory. Kyiv has come to regret its decision, along with President Clinton.<sup>76</sup> Recently, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry called the Budapest Memorandum "a monument to short-sightedness in strategic security decision-making."<sup>77</sup> The extension of U.S. nuclear umbrella has been the most useful nonproliferation tool in the U.S. toolkit, but if U.S. allies do not consider U.S. security guarantees credible because the U.S. public is too polarized to achieve a consensus on the need to help allies under duress, they are more likely to develop their own nuclear capabilities.

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<sup>74</sup> *Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, December 5, 1994, available at <https://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> Casey Michel, "Ukraine Now Faces a Nuclear Decision," *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/07/ukraine-now-faces-a-nuclear-decision/>.

<sup>76</sup> Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, "Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons," *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

<sup>77</sup> "Ukraine Giving Up Nukes Was 'Absolutely Stupid, Illogical, And Very Irresponsible,' Zelenskyy Says," op. cit.

While Ukraine is not an ally in the formal sense, U.S. aid to Ukraine is a relatively easy test of U.S. willingness to follow up on its commitments to allies.<sup>78</sup> Russia's defeat in Ukraine does not require that the United States put its own troops in harm's way. Placing U.S. forces in harms way on behalf of an ally or a partner would be a major source of domestic polarization, especially if that ally or partner nation did not substantively contribute to its own defense in the years prior.

The situation could be quite different if Russia invades NATO countries that without the United States currently lack capacity to fight efficiently against an aggressor. Then-German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated that Russia may attempt an attack against a NATO country by the end of the 2020s given the expansion of its military.<sup>79</sup> Germany's Federal Intelligence Agency President Bruno Kahl recently emphasized that Russia could try to test the Alliance's collective security guarantees, especially if the war in Ukraine comes to an end.<sup>80</sup> Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov warned of "a possible military conflict with NATO in Europe in the next decade."<sup>81</sup> Should the Russians see themselves as victorious in Ukraine, the danger to European NATO allies would increase.

Article V of the of the North Atlantic Treaty states "that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or

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<sup>78</sup> More on the most recent developments below.

<sup>79</sup> "Germany warns Russia may attack NATO by 2029-2030," *The New Voice of Ukraine*, January 23, 2025, available at <https://english.nv.ua/nation/germany-fears-putin-is-gearing-up-for-a-future-nato-confrontation-50483902.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Bohdan Babaiev, "Germany's intelligence chief says Europe may face threats after Ukraine war," *RBC-Ukraine*, March 8, 2025, available at <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/germany-s-intelligence-chief-says-europe-1741448195.html>.

<sup>81</sup> "Russia to prepare for war with NATO," *Politico*, December 16, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-to-prepare-for-war-with-nato-andrei-belousov-vladimir-putin/>.

North America shall be considered an attack against them all" that NATO countries "will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking [...] such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."<sup>82</sup> The United States deploys tens of thousands of troops to various NATO countries, including states that are relatively close to the Russian and Belarussian borders. The extent of U.S. forward deployments has been questioned at different points in U.S. history, and was massively scaled down after the end of the Cold War (from about 300,000 during the Cold War to over 50,000 today).<sup>83</sup>

During the Biden Administration, U.S. activities in Ukraine were limited to providing substantial military, intelligence, and economic support, which the United States was able to do without much political controversy during the first two years of the war. By the end of 2023, Republicans in Congress refused to support another aid package for Ukraine absent significant immigration reform (a largely domestic polarizing issue) that the Democrats refused to support.<sup>84</sup> Some Republicans also felt that the Biden Administration did not have a viable plan to defeat Russia and was too slow to take steps that could have improved Ukraine's position.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Collective defence and Article 5," July 4, 2023, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/bu/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/bu/natohq/topics_110496.htm).

<sup>83</sup> Ellen Francis, "Uncertainty over Trump's plans for U.S. troops in Europe fuels anxiety," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2025, available <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/02/us-troops-europe-trump-russia/>.

<sup>84</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr, "Why are some Republicans opposing more aid for Ukraine?," *BBC News*, December 7, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67649497>.

<sup>85</sup> Paul McLeary, Joe Gould and Jack Detsch, "GOP Ukraine hawks slam Biden for 'slow-walking' decision to allow strikes inside Russia,"

Even though the Ukraine aid package passed in April 2024, the delay enabled Russia to achieve success on the battlefield that has proven difficult to reverse.<sup>86</sup> This fact has not gone unnoticed particularly by those U.S. allies that see an increased danger of Russia's aggression, especially should Ukraine be defeated. U.S. domestic polarization on immigration issues made the consensus on providing help to Ukraine that much harder to achieve as each party tried to maneuver the other to make concessions on its agenda of interest.

The Trump Administration's steps to pressure Ukraine into accepting a ceasefire on what appeared to be Russia's terms sent shocks throughout the U.S. Alliance system, as discussed above. If recent public polls are correct, the administration's approach is not supported by a majority of the American people, who, by a large margin, sympathize with the Ukrainians and understand that Russia is an aggressor in the unprovoked war it initiated.<sup>87</sup> According to the first poll since February 2025 Oval Office meeting between Presidents Zelenskyy and Trump, 45 percent of Americans disapprove of President Trump's handling of the war in Ukraine while 40 percent approve.<sup>88</sup> The percentage of Americans who disapprove of President Trump's foreign policy has also increased, from 37 percent

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*Politico*, November 17, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/17/republicans-ukraine-missile-policy-00190061>.

<sup>86</sup> Frederick W. Kagan and Riley Bailey, "How Delays in Western Aid Gave Russia the Initiative: From the Ukrainian Counteroffensive to Kharkiv," *Institute for the Study of War*, May 22, 2024, available at <https://www.aei.org/articles/how-delays-in-western-aid-gave-russia-the-initiative-from-the-ukrainian-counteroffensive-to-kharkiv/>.

<sup>87</sup> Aaron Blake, "Americans don't love Trump's methods on Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2025, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/03/05/americans-dont-love-trumps-methods-ukraine/>.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

in January 2025 to 50 percent in March 2025.<sup>89</sup> The percentage of Americans who think the United States is not doing enough to help Ukraine has increased from 30 to 46 percent between December 2024 and March 2025.<sup>90</sup> A sign of polarization is that the increase is largely driven by Democrats (and some independents), while the Republicans' levels of support remain about the same. Illustrating the point further, the share of Republicans who believe the United States should aid in Ukraine's defense has dropped 13 points since November.<sup>91</sup>

U.S. domestic polarization and the Trump Administration's overtures to Russia over ceasefire negotiations make allies nervous, including in the Indo-Pacific. Senior Fellow for military studies at the Lowy Institute Mick Ryan argued that "In delivering mixed messages on Ukraine negotiations, he [President Trump] is building the environment for misunderstanding and gross strategic miscalculations by China and others in our region."<sup>92</sup> Some U.S. allies are reportedly reconsidering the extent to which they are sharing intelligence with the United States and what would happen if the United States ceased intelligence sharing altogether.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Megan Brennan, "Support for Greater U.S. Role in Ukraine Climbs to 46% High," *Gallup*, March 18, 2025, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/658193/support-greater-role-ukraine-climbs-high.aspx>.

<sup>91</sup> Moira Fagan, Jacob Poushter and Sneha Gubbala, "How Americans view the Russia-Ukraine war," op. cit.

<sup>92</sup> Mick Ryan, "Trump retreat emboldens Putin and Xi. Australia must rethink its whole US relationship," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 16, 2025, available at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/trump-retreat-emboldens-putin-and-xi-australia-must-rethink-its-whole-us-relationship-20250216-p5lclgw.html?js-chunk-not-found-refresh=true>.

<sup>93</sup> Antoaneta Roussi and Amy Mackinnon, "Trump deepens NATO's crisis of trust on sharing intel," *Politico*, March 6, 2025, available at

The U.S. defense industry might eventually also feel the impact of uncertainty. The Trump Administration's abrupt-yet-temporary end to intelligence-sharing arrangements between the United States and Ukraine reportedly impacted Ukraine's High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) rocket launchers' ability to strike targets beyond a range of 40 miles.<sup>94</sup> Following the decision, some experts in Europe questioned the wisdom of their countries' decisions to procure U.S.-made high-end weapon systems that depend on continued U.S. support for their operations and maintenance, including F-35s.<sup>95</sup> What if an abrupt change in the U.S. public's mood led a future U.S. president decided to "turn off" critical support at an inopportune moment?

## **Implications for U.S. Assurance Efforts and Alliance Management**

The increase in allies' efforts to insulate the transatlantic alliance from the effects of U.S. domestic polarization appeared to have taken on greater urgency after President Trump's announcement to seek reelection. For U.S. allies, President Trump's policies present a departure from U.S. defense and foreign policy business-as-usual and the unwillingness of previous administrations to impose any real costs on delinquent allies.

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<https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-crisis-slovakia-donald-trump-hungary-slovakia-national-defense-academy>.

<sup>94</sup> David Axe, "Abruptly Blocking Intel, The U.S. Prevents Ukraine's HIMARS From Firing For Maximum Effect," *Forbes*, March 5, 2025, available at

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2025/03/05/abruptly-blocking-intel-the-us-prevents-ukraines-himars-from-firing-for-maximum-effect/>.

<sup>95</sup> Author's interviews.

The allies view the administration's policies as representing a pole in U.S. domestic discussions about the nature of U.S. involvement abroad. They see it as indicative of a widening opinions regarding the degree to which U.S. defense investments in alliances are worth it. The published number of articles on "Trump-proofing" NATO increased significantly after President Trump announced he would seek re-election in the 2024 election, partly because of the insistence with which he pushed allies to meet their defense commitments, and partly because of his rather blunt communication style.<sup>96</sup>

While allies focus on the persona of President Trump, they (ought to) know that his approach is a reflection, not the cause, of a broader movement toward an America-First approach within U.S. society.<sup>97</sup> That approach will inform U.S. foreign and defense policymaking for years to come and cause disagreements on fundamental foreign and defense policy issues. For example, the percentage of poll respondents who think the United States will be better off if it engages globally has been decreasing in recent years, perhaps as a result the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>98</sup> In other words, current polarization is but an

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<sup>96</sup> For example, he reportedly said that he would let Russia do whatever it wants if the invaded country didn't invest sufficient resources to its defense. See Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," *CNN*, February 11, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Keith B. Payne, "'America First': Neither Cosmopolitan Nor Isolationist," *Information Series*, No. 609 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 16, 2024), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-america-first-neither-cosmopolitan-nor-isolationist-no-609-december-16-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-america-first-neither-cosmopolitan-nor-isolationist-no-609-december-16-2024/).

<sup>98</sup> Dina Smeltz, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, Lama El Baz, and Libby Berry, "A Cost of Conflict Americans Turn Inward Results of the 2023 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign

aspect of a broader challenge of sustaining U.S. alliances and getting the public on board with spending the resources necessary to do so.

For some allied states, focusing on President Trump's communication style rather than the substance of his argument (which is not that much different from his predecessors regarding the need for a more equitable "burden sharing") is a convenient distraction from their own failures to sufficiently provide for their own defense and years-long neglect of their military forces. Yet, it is precisely this neglect at the expense of the United States that the American public finds insupportable. Others understand the importance of providing for their own defense given U.S. fiscal realities and the public's increasing unwillingness to support the business-as-usual approach to sustaining U.S. alliances.

Then-Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (now NATO's Secretary General) argued that allies should "stop moaning and whining and nagging about Trump," noting that "we do not spend more on defense or ramp up ammunition production because Trump might come back. We have to do this because we want to do this, because this is in our interests."<sup>99</sup> Former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Nadia Schadlow made a similar case when she pointed out that allies could adopt a more constructive approach to relations with then-presidential nominee Trump, starting with the acknowledgment of policies that the Trump Administration got right, but for which it was disparaged

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Policy," *The Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs*, 2024, pp. 7-8, available at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Chicago%20Council%20Survey%202023%20Overall%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Karen Gilchrist, "Germany's Scholz commits to spending 2% on defense 'in the 2020s, in the 2030s and beyond'," *CNBC*, February 17, 2024, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/17/germanys-scholz-commits-to-spending-2percent-on-defense-over-next-10-years.html>.



during its tenure (e.g. sanctions on companies that helped to finish the Nordstream 2 pipeline and its emphasis on friend-shoring to counter China's unfair trade practices).<sup>100</sup>

Several trends are apparent in allies' adjustment to the impacts of polarization on U.S. foreign policy and the resultant unwillingness for the United States to continue to assume a large majority of the defense burden for U.S. alliance partners. First, the Trump Administration's pressure has since caused allies to commit to further defense spending increases and defense investments. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a plan to spend additional EUR 800 billion for defense.<sup>101</sup> Poland is now a NATO leader in defense spending as it plans on investing as much as 4.7 percent of GDP in defense this year and an expansion of its military forces.<sup>102</sup> European countries are discussing their own contributions to Ukraine's defense and role in a potential ceasefire.<sup>103</sup> While increases are driven as much by Russia's threat to Europe's security order as by U.S. domestic polarization and

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<sup>100</sup> Nadia Schadow, "Europe should stop hand-wringing about Trump — and be more constructive," *Politico*, July 23, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-donald-trump-us-presidency-nato-summit-washington-bill-clinton-barack-obama-second-term-elections-2024/>.

<sup>101</sup> "EU chief unveils 800-billion-euro plan to 'rearm' Europe," *France 24*, March 4, 2025, available at [https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250304-eu-chief-unveils-800-billion-euro-plan-to-rearm-europe](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250304-eu-chief-unveils-800-billion-euro-plan-to-rearm-europe;); and Adam Easton, "Donald Tusk announces military training plan for all Polish men," *BBC News*, March 7, 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy83r93l208o>.

<sup>102</sup> "Poland's president vows to spend 4.7% of GDP on defence this year," *EuroNews*, February 5, 2025, available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/05/polands-president-vows-to-spend-47-of-gdp-on-defence-this-year>.

<sup>103</sup> Tim Ross, "The EU is doing exactly what Trump wants. He still doesn't care," *Politico*, March 7, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-council-summit-donald-trump-war-in-ukraine-peace-talks/>.

President Trump's rhetoric, defense increases on the part of other NATO members are a good start to counter the narrative that Europe does not contribute to its own defense.

Defense spending by European allies and Canada rose by 11 percent in 2023 and 18 allies spent more than 2 percent of GDP on defense in the same year.<sup>104</sup> The number of allies meeting or exceeding their commitment is up to 23 in 2024.<sup>105</sup> The deterioration in the security environment since allies made the political commitment to 2 percent of GDP has caused NATO's Secretary General Mark Rutte to argue recently that member states must spend "a lot more than two percent" to address the worsening threats.<sup>106</sup> President Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called upon allies in Europe to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense.<sup>107</sup> While significant capability gaps remain, increasing allies' own ability to defend their territories is a worthy long-term investment. It would be very difficult for European NATO members to fight a war in the near-term without U.S.

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<sup>104</sup> "Secretary General welcomes unprecedented rise in NATO defence spending," February 14, 2024, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_222664.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222664.htm).

<sup>105</sup> Clara Falkenek, "Who's at 2 percent? Look how NATO allies have increased their defense spending since Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *The Atlantic Council*, July 8, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/whos-at-2-percent-look-how-nato-allies-have-increased-their-defense-spending-since-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>106</sup> Mark Rutte, "To Prevent War, NATO Must Spend More," *Speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Concert Noble, Brussels*, December 12, 2024, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_231348.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_231348.htm).

<sup>107</sup> Department of Defense, "Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)," February 12, 2025, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>.

support, including in logistics, intelligence, and air and missile defense.

While it is impossible to fully insulate alliance management from the effects of domestic polarization (either in the United States or in allied countries), one way of making alliance relationships more resilient is to keep good relations with leaders within different political parties and different presidential campaigns. Some countries, like the United Kingdom, were reportedly doing just that in the lead up to the 2024 elections.<sup>108</sup> But many European countries adopted a counterproductive attitude when it came to working with the Trump team prior to the 2024 elections, disparaging his policies that turned out to be correct and using what at the time appeared to be hyperbolic language with regard to the potential effects of Trump's possible second term.<sup>109</sup> Such actions contribute to worsening polarization, because a leader that has become associated with good relations with only one political party is at risk of being perceived negatively by members of the other party. For example, in the United States, liberals are more than twice as likely as conservatives to express confidence in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.<sup>110</sup>

Next, European countries can strengthen mutual military and defense cooperation, and make processes like

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<sup>108</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, "'It's Nearly Impossible to Prepare': How Europe Is Bracing for a Potential Trump Return," *Time*, July 8, 2024, available at <https://time.com/6995863/trump-europe-nato-summit/>.

<sup>109</sup> Nadia Schadow, "Europe should stop hand-wringing about Trump — and be more constructive," *Politico*, July 23, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-donald-trump-us-presidency-nato-summit-washington-bill-clinton-barack-obama-second-term-elections-2024/>.

<sup>110</sup> Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala and Jacob Poushter, "Confidence in Zelenskyy and support for Ukraine," *Pew Research Center*, July 2, 2024, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/02/confidence-in-zelenskyy-and-support-for-ukraine/>.

support for Ukraine independent of direct U.S. participation, thus lessening the polarization potential of the issue in the United States.<sup>111</sup> In the near-term, these steps can only go so far because the Europeans' military capabilities and economic resources remain limited relative to the help that the United States has been able to provide. NATO would likely be incapable of fending off a large-scale Russian attack against an alliance member without U.S. help. Moreover, countries themselves are not unified over how much of a threat Russia is to their existence, which has the potential to further fracture alliance relations.

Lastly, European NATO members are discussing options for complementing or replacing the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent with their own nuclear "umbrella." This is the most extreme proposition, and fraught with political, economic, and diplomatic difficulties.<sup>112</sup> France and the United Kingdom have their own nuclear forces, but their arsenal numbers are low relative to both Russia and China. Coming up with a workable political arrangement that would suit other European countries appears to be at present a rather long-term proposition, if achievable at all.

France, which is not a part of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, has been discussing using its nuclear forces to protect other European allies.<sup>113</sup> A spokesman for British

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<sup>111</sup>Sean Monaghan, "Beyond 'Trump-Proofing': NATO's Real Adversaries," *Center for International and Strategic Studies*, July 18, 2024, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-trump-proofing-natos-real-adversaries>.

<sup>112</sup>Michael Rühle, "German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent," *Information Series*, No. 571 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 3, 2024), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/).

<sup>113</sup>Sylvie Corbet, "Poland and Baltic nations welcome Macron's nuclear deterrent proposal," *Associated Press*, March 6, 2025, available at <https://apnews.com/article/france-nuclear-deterrent-umbrella-russia-55e91ab65d13559dfc55dfe376ba5268>.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Tom Wells, stated that “The U.K. already commits its nuclear forces to NATO, helping to safeguard European Euro-Atlantic security.”<sup>114</sup> Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk pointed out that Ukraine was invaded after it gave up nuclear weapons and that “Today, it is clear that we [Poland] would be safer if we had our own nuclear arsenal, that is beyond doubt.”<sup>115</sup> He added that Poland “must pursue the most advanced capabilities, including nuclear and modern unconventional weapons.”<sup>116</sup> Debates about independent nuclear capabilities are even more pronounced in Japan and South Korea.<sup>117</sup> In South Korea, public polls consistently show high levels of support for an independent nuclear weapons program and the idea is becoming a part of the political mainstream.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Easton, “Poland announces military training plan for all men,” *op. cit.*

<sup>116</sup> Corky Siemaszko, “Poland to require all adult men to take military training and consider nuclear weapons as Trump shifts on Russia,” *NBC News*, March 7, 2025, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/poland-full-military-training-nuclear-weapons-russia-trump-rcna195357>.

<sup>117</sup> Michaela Dodge, “Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy,” *Information Series*, No. 578 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 15, 2024), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-allied-assurance-south-korea-japan-and-band-aid-diplomacy-no-576-february-15-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-allied-assurance-south-korea-japan-and-band-aid-diplomacy-no-576-february-15-2024/).

<sup>118</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Doubting America’s ‘Nuclear Umbrella,’ Some South Koreans Want Their Own,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/17/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-arsenal.html>.

## Recommendations

The U.S. government can take several important steps to mitigate the effects of polarization on allied perceptions of the United States and U.S.-allied alliance relations. At the forefront of these efforts ought to be a competent domestic communications effort aimed at making the case to the public for why the United States benefits when it is engaged globally. Lessons of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War are becoming forgotten at the risk of a collapse of the world order that the United States has upheld since the end of World War II. U.S. post-World War II efforts were informed by a bloody and expensive experience that taught the United States that if it does not fight abroad, it will have to fight at home—sooner or later.

The president has a unique role in communicating this message to Americans and to allies, particularly because he has an exceptionally strong position as an actor in foreign and defense policy. This, of course, presumes that the president shares the sentiment. While Congress holds the purse strings and the Senate's advice and consent process is essential to ratification of international treaties, its relative position to the executive branch has weakened overtime, which makes the president's opinions and approach that much more important.<sup>119</sup>

For a policy to survive an administration, bipartisan involvement is necessary. Otherwise, U.S. credibility will suffer as policies change from administration to administration and party to party.

Fluctuations in U.S. policy lead allies to perceive Washington's commitment as both uncertain and

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<sup>119</sup> E.g. as documented in Kenneth R. Mayer, *With the Stroke of a Pen - Executive Orders & Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, January 1, 2002).

unpredictable, and thereby undermine their assurance and their alliance with the United States.

Some of the West's last effective national security communicators were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who, as David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull, pointed out in an interview, "had principles and clear positions" and "were excellent communicators."<sup>120</sup> Both made the case for strong globally engaged alliances at home and abroad. The United States has been lacking in this effort, partly lured to complacency by the "unipolar" moment after the end of the Cold War, from which the United States emerged as the undisputed winner.

Making the case to the American people regarding why global engagement and U.S. alliances matter, how they benefit from them, and what it takes to maintain them in today's contentious if not adversarial environment, is the first order of (a rather urgent) business with regard to overcoming domestic polarization and its effects on foreign policy. Parties can overcome polarization by moderating their positions. A well-crafted communications strategy would have a valuable side effect of making it harder for adversaries' influence operations and disinformation efforts to succeed.

Structurally, the ongoing U.S. homeland vulnerability to peer and near-peer adversaries' long-range missiles remains a major potential source of polarization in a crisis in which the United States may need to act decisively on behalf of an ally to prevent conflict from getting worse and more costly. A president would be in the extremely difficult position to have to decide whether to intervene on behalf of an ally at the cost of a potential attack on the U.S. homeland. A president would be hard pressed to make such a trade-

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<sup>120</sup> Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024, quoted in Dodge, "Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions," *op. cit.*, p. 13.

off. U.S. relations with NATO have historically helped make U.S. retaliatory threats credible in the face of the difficulties stemming from protecting the U.S. homeland. They included significant short- and intermediate-range nuclear force deployments to allied states, a large conventional forward presence, and a robust nuclear modernization program. By making U.S. extended deterrence and assurance more credible by protecting the U.S. homeland, the United States would eliminate one potential avenue of polarization that adversaries could exploit in a crisis.

U.S. allies ought to continue to increase their defense budgets and capabilities commensurate with the unprecedented threats they face. Because they, too, face a challenge of sustaining domestic support for this spending, they ought to communicate with their respective publics regarding its necessity and importance in the context of alliance relations. U.S. allies contributing to their own defense commensurate with the threat they face would eliminate one of the main sources of an argument whether the United States should support those allies that seemingly do not care about their own defense.

Lastly, politicians and decision-makers in allied countries ought to strengthen their understanding of the workings of the U.S. government to be able to understand the different actors and dynamics that come into play in the formulation of U.S. foreign and defense policy. Sensationalist headlines and media-driven hyperbole may skew perceptions and introduce a degree of unnecessary misunderstanding into already complex bilateral and multilateral relations. Minimizing this “noise” is a prerequisite to more effective management of relations.



## Conclusion

Polarization makes it more difficult to sustain a consistent foreign and defense policy and distracts the U.S. government from the global engagement upon which allied security depends. At worst, polarization prevents policy issues from being discussed on their merit rather than through the uncompromising lens of partisanship. It is causing U.S. allies to question U.S. credibility as a guarantor of their security as they ponder whether there will be enough American public support to make good on U.S. alliance commitments if allies need U.S. help in defeating a potential aggressor.

In the long run, if allies do not perceive the United States as a reliable and credible guarantor of their security, they will work to obtain alternative means to strengthen their security, potentially becoming more autonomous in the process. For example, to increase their sense of security, states could become cooperative or even collaborate with America's adversaries. Increasingly authoritarian and pro-Russian governments in Hungary and Slovakia appear to be placing a bet that the West will lose in a long-term competition with Russia; other allied governments are only waking up to the need to minimize their economic dependence on China. They could also develop their own nuclear weapon capabilities, thwarting decades of U.S. nonproliferation efforts.

## *About the Author*

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. Before joining the National Institute, Dr. Dodge worked at The Heritage Foundation from 2010 to 2019. She took a leave of absence from Heritage to serve as Senator Jon Kyl's Senior Defense Policy Advisor from October to December 2018. Her last position at Heritage was as Research Fellow for Missile Defense and Nuclear Deterrence.

Dr. Dodge's work focuses on U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense policy, nuclear forces modernization, deterrence and assurance, and arms control. She was a Publius Fellow at the Claremont Institute in 2011 and participated in the Center for Strategic and International Studies' PONI Nuclear Scholars Initiative. Her 2020 book, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action*, details factors that contribute to ballistic missile defense cooperation between two states in the context of alliance cooperation, as well as Russia's influence operations.

Dr. Dodge received her Ph.D. from George Mason University, and earned a Master of Science in Defense and Strategic Studies from Missouri State University. At Missouri State, she was awarded the Ulrike Schumacher Memorial Scholarship for two years. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations and defense and strategic studies from Masaryk University, the Czech Republic.



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