

**Trump's NATO Initiative: Controversial Rhetoric or Necessary Reform?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines President Donald J. Trump's initiatives to enhance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) burden-sharing principle, focusing on his proposal for NATO members to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP – a significant escalation from the current 2% benchmark. Utilizing Toulmin's method for critical analysis, this paper seeks to explore the strategic, economic, and political implications of these initiatives, emphasizing their potential impact on NATO's operational stability and Europe's collective defense capabilities (Bergmann, 2025). While Trump's rhetoric was controversial and divisive among allies, this analysis argues that his proposals were timely and necessary given escalating global tensions and emerging security threats. This study also highlights the insufficiency of European NATO members' current defense contributions, which, if left unresolved, could undermine the long-term stability and security of the European continent (Hendrix, 2025). This paper suggests that a more equitable distribution of GDP investments across NATO member states could contribute to a stabilized geopolitical environment and strengthen the Alliance's capacity to address future challenges.

**Keywords:** NATO, burden sharing, Trump administration, defense spending, European security, collective defense, Toulmin's method.

## Introduction

On November 5, 2024, the world turned its attention to the United States (U.S.) for its 60th presidential election, a pivotal moment that carried significant implications for global politics. For the European Union (EU) and NATO, the election's outcome was particularly consequential, as transatlantic relations have long been shaped by U.S. foreign policy decisions. One of the most controversial aspects of President Donald J. Trump's approach to international relations was his insistence on redefining NATO's burden-sharing principle(s). His demand that NATO member states increase their defence to 5% of GDP marked a significant departure from the alliance's established expectations and reignited debates over financial contributions, security commitments, and transatlantic stability.

Although his predecessors also mentioned this, Trump pivoted it with consequences, embedding it within his broader "America First" doctrine, which prioritized reducing the U.S.'s financial burden in global security arrangements. While some NATO members, particularly in Eastern Europe, welcomed the idea as a means of strengthening collective defence, others, notably Germany and France, viewed it as an unrealistic and politically destabilizing demand (Posaner, Kayali, Brinkmann, & Noyan, 2025). This divide underscored deeper questions about NATO's future, the viability of European strategic autonomy, and the extent to which the alliance remains dependent on U.S. military leadership.

This paper applies Toulmin's model of argumentation to critically assess Trump's 5% defence spending proposal, evaluating its strategic, economic, and political implications. By dissecting the strengths and weaknesses of this initiative, this study seeks to determine whether Trump's approach constituted a necessary recalibration of NATO's financial obligations or a disruptive force that threatened alliance cohesion. Through this analysis, the paper aims to

contribute to the broader discussion on transatlantic security and the evolving role of the U.S. within NATO.

### **Methodology**

In academic research, the utilization of critical thinking models is essential for evaluating complex issues systematically. These models provide structured frameworks for dissecting arguments, allowing writers to present well-reasoned and evidence-based conclusions to their intended audience (The Center for International Relations and International Security, n.d.). In this study, Toulmin's model of argumentation is utilized to assess former President Donald J. Trump's proposal for NATO member states to increase their defense spending to 5% of their GDP. This method enables a critical analysis of the strategic, economic, and political implications of the initiative, helping to determine whether it constitutes a necessary recalibration of NATO's burden-sharing principle or a disruptive force that threatens alliance cohesion.

### **Comparing Descriptive and Critical Approaches**

According to (The University of Sydney, n.d.) traditional descriptive writing has been known to merely present facts, whereas critical writing evaluates their significance. Thus, to remain critical, this paper has adopted a balanced approach to NATO's burden-sharing debate, moving beyond a simple explanation of Trump's policy to an in-depth assessment of its feasibility and impact. The table below illustrates the distinction between these two approaches:

**Table 1***Key differences between descriptive and critical writing*

<b>Descriptive Writing</b>	<b>Critical Writing</b>
States what happened	Analyses the significance of what happened
Describes a policy	Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of a policy
Summarizes NATO's burden-sharing history	Examines how historical trends influence the current debate
Reports Trump's proposal	Assesses the geopolitical and economic feasibility of the proposal

(SkillsGuides, n.d.)

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This study relied on a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, including:

- NATO reports and official statements on defense spending.
- Policy analysis from international security think tanks (e.g., CSIS, RAND Corporation).
- Statements from European and U.S. policymakers and/or other key figures responding to Trump's proposal.
- Historical case studies on burden-sharing debates within NATO.

These sources are critically examined using Toulmin's model to construct a well-founded evaluation of Trump's policy and its broader implications for transatlantic relations.

**Limitations**

While this paper provides in-depth qualitative analysis, it likely will not include primary interviews or newly collected empirical data. Instead, it will embrace existing research and expert opinions to reach a conclusion. Furthermore, given the vast evolving geopolitical

landscape, the long-term effects of Trump's burden-sharing proposal remain uncertain and may require further study.

### Grounds

Burden-sharing — the extent to which NATO allies equitably shoulder the financial and operational costs of collective defense — has long been a subject of intense scrutiny among political figures, economists, and military strategists (Mattelaer, 2016). As one of the foundational principles supporting NATO's framework, burden-sharing is critical to the Alliance's integrity and operational effectiveness, particularly in the context of Article 5, a collective deterrent against those who seek to attack a member state (Collective defence and Article 5, n.d.).

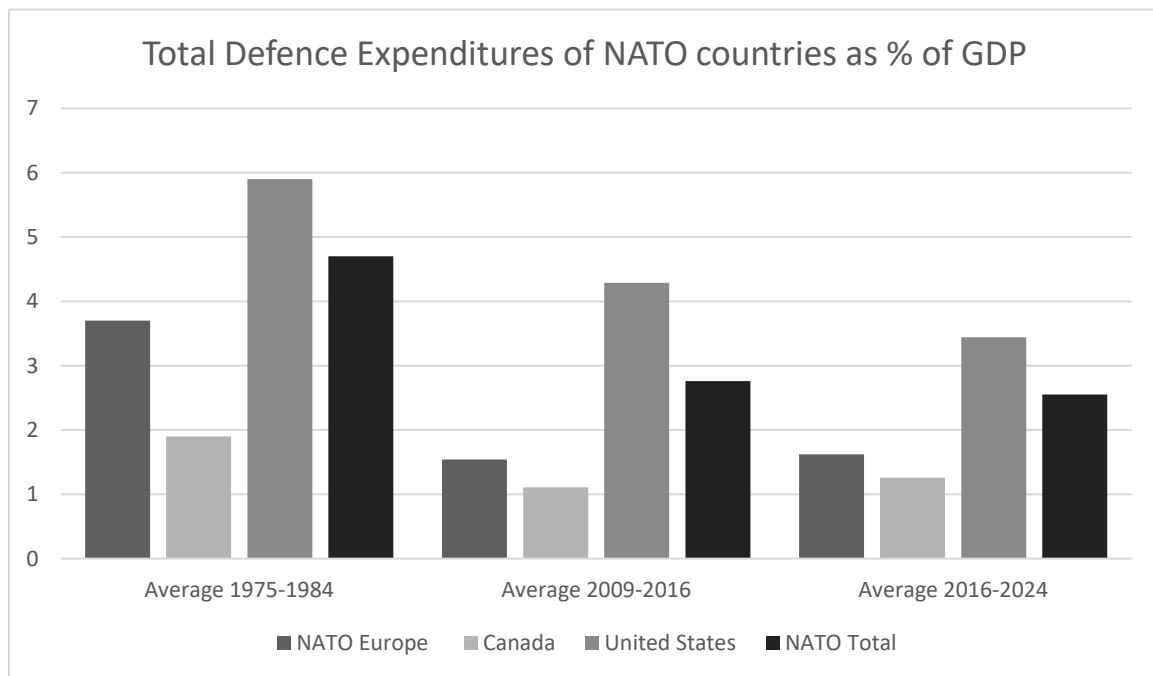
Despite NATO's principle of shared responsibility, defense spending has remained unbalanced, with the U.S. historically contributing the largest share. Many European allies have fallen short of agreed-upon commitments, leading to longstanding tensions over fair contributions. While the issue has gained renewed attention in recent years, the debate over who should bear NATO's financial and military costs has existed since the Cold War.

- **Cold War Era:** During the early years of the Cold War, President Harry S. Truman introduced the Truman Doctrine in 1947, which committed the U.S. to protect democratic nations from Soviet expansion through economic and military assistance (The Office of the Historian, n.d.). This policy laid the foundation for the U.S.'s leading role in NATO's defense structure, setting the stage for future burden-sharing debates (Little White House, n.d.). When his successor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, took office in 1953, he initially continued the Truman Doctrine's commitment to defending democratic nations against the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R). However, as economic concerns over defense spending grew, he introduced the

New Look Strategy – a shift toward a more cost-effective military approach that relied on nuclear deterrence & strategic airpower rather than large conventional forces (Wolk, 2003). With this, Eisenhower also urged European NATO allies to strengthen their conventional military capabilities to reduce the financial burden on the U.S. and create a more balanced defense posture within the Alliance. This marked one of the first explicit calls for greater European responsibility in NATO’s burden-sharing principle.

### Chart 1

#### *NATO Defense Expenditure: A Historical Perspective*



(North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1985; North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2017; North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, n.d.)

- Post-Cold War Era:** Following the Cold War, NATO faced a period of strategic realignment, shifting from its initial role as a deterrent against the Soviet Union to a broader security alliance (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022). However, this transition also led to a significant decline in defense spending, particularly among European member states.

With the disintegration of the Soviet threat, many NATO members saw reduced incentives to

maintain high military expenditures, leading to widespread budget cuts and force reductions (Zannella, 2020). This trend was particularly evident in the 1990s and early 2000s as NATO expanded its membership while overall defense contributions stagnated. The post-Cold War decline in NATO defense spending (as portrayed in Chart 1) can be further understood through Mancur Olson's theory of collective action (Hillison, 2014). Olson argues that in alliances providing public goods, such as NATO's collective defense, free-riding becomes inevitable – smaller states contribute less while still benefiting from security guarantees. As NATO expanded, this dynamic worsened, as individual nations had less incentive to increase spending while still receiving the benefits of U.S. protection (Hillison, 2014). Olson's "exploitation of the great by the small" concept applies directly to NATO's financial asymmetry. The U.S., as the largest economy, bore a disproportionate share of military expenditures, while smaller NATO members rationally reduced their contributions. The absence of legally binding burden-sharing obligations meant that NATO's financial disparities exist despite diplomatic pressure.

- **Donald J. Trump:** On May 25, 2017, President Donald J. Trump attended his first NATO summit in Brussels, Belgium, at the alliance's newly established headquarters (Herszenhorn, 2017). During this event, Trump delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of equitable burden-sharing among NATO member states. This principle, deeply rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, also known as The Washington Treaty, emphasizes the responsibility of member states to develop and maintain their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attacks (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949).

**"In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack."**



At the summit, Trump criticized what he described as longstanding inequities in NATO's financial structure. The United States having accounted for approximately 68% of NATO's total defense expenditures at the time, was a shocking figure that demonstrated its pivotal role as the backbone of the alliance's operational readiness (Stoltenberg, 2016). However, this outsized contribution also revealed disparities in financial responsibilities. According to NATO's Secretary General's Annual Report in 2016, only five NATO member states—the United States, Greece, the United Kingdom, Estonia, and Poland—met the 2% GDP defense spending target established at the 2014 Wales Summit (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2014; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2016). Meanwhile, major economies such as Germany spent just 1.2% of their GDP on defense, falling significantly short of the benchmark (Stoltenberg, 2016). Trump argued that these disparities placed an unfair financial burden on U.S. taxpayers, particularly given the broader economic capacity of NATO's European members. Additionally, he suggested that some nations owed significant amounts for years of underfunding, although NATO does not have a formal mechanism to make such a thing happen (BBC News, 2017; Kim & Ibssa, 2024).

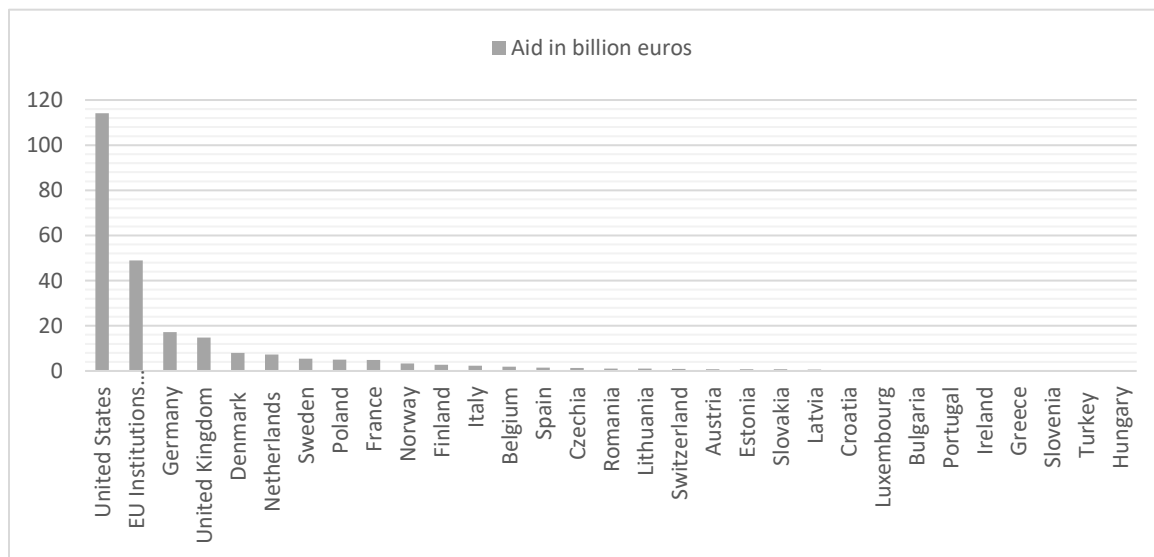
### **Warrant**

The catalyst behind increasing NATO members' defense spending from 2% to 5% of GDP stems from the principle of equitable burden-sharing itself, which is crucial for ensuring NATO's long-term defense and deterrence goals. Legally, articles 3 and 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty highlight the obligations of each member to contribute to the collective defense of the Alliance, not only through mutual assistance but also by maintaining individual defense capabilities (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949). However, historical defense spending trends show a significant imbalance. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2024), the U.S. has contributed more than any other NATO member, both in military expenditure and

support to conflict zones such as Ukraine. Chart 2 further demonstrates the disproportionate role of the U.S. in providing military aid to Ukraine, highlighting that despite NATO's collective defense obligations, the U.S. remains the primary contributor.

## Chart 2

*Total bilateral aid allocations to Ukraine since the start of the Russo-Ukraine war, till December 31, 2024, by donor and type (in billion euros) – Note: \*The original data categorizes aid into military, financial, and humanitarian, but this chart presents total aid without these distinctions\**



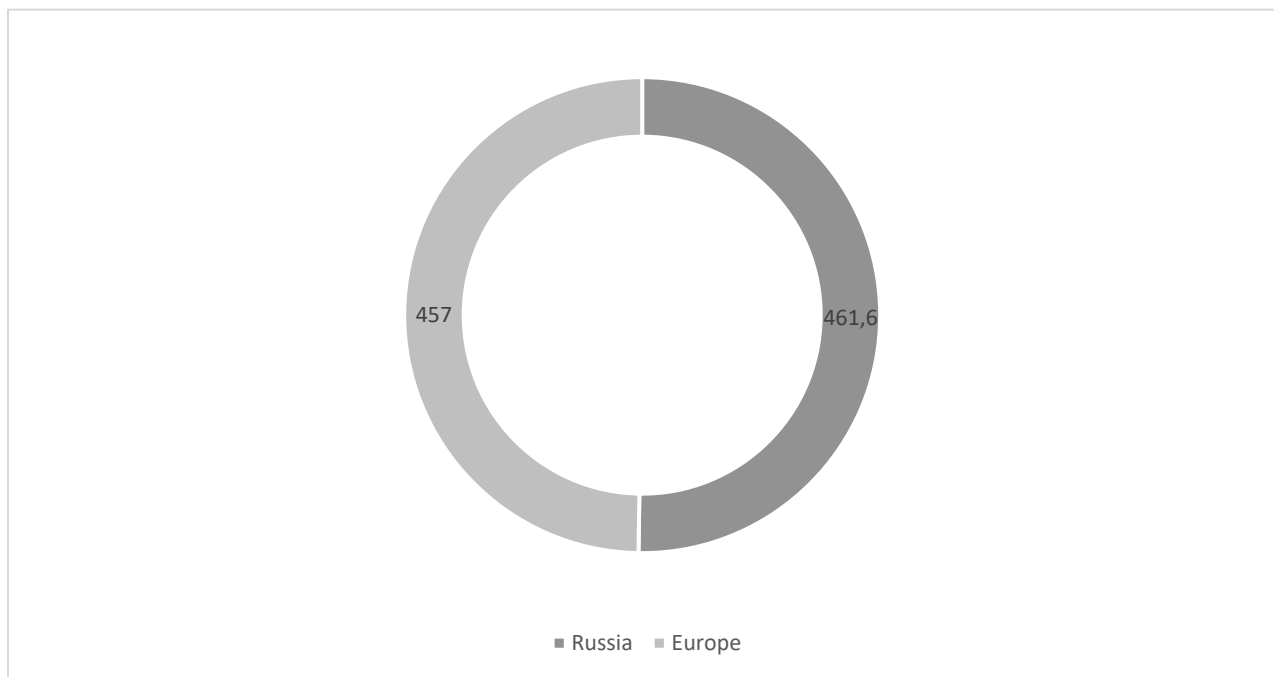
(Kiel Institut für Weltwirtschaft, 2025)

Thus, if all NATO members were to contribute at least 5% of their GDP to defense, the financial and military burdens would become even, reducing the overreliance on U.S. military resources. This would not only align with NATO's legal obligations but would also ensure that European counterparts remain self-reliant and capable of responding to current and future threats. As noted in the IISS (2023) report, European NATO members have made some progress in increasing defense spending, but these efforts remain insufficient to match the growing military threats, particularly from Russia and China (International Institute for Strategic Studies,

2023). For example, recent analysis as shown in (Chart 3), shows that Russia's defense expenditures now exceed the total defense expenditures of all NATO's European members combined (Mackenzie, 2025). By adopting a 5% defense spending target, NATO would ensure that all members are sufficiently prepared to defend against both conventional and hybrid threats, particularly those posed by Russia's increasing military expenditure and China's expanding military capabilities (Chen & Torode, 2025).

### Chart 3

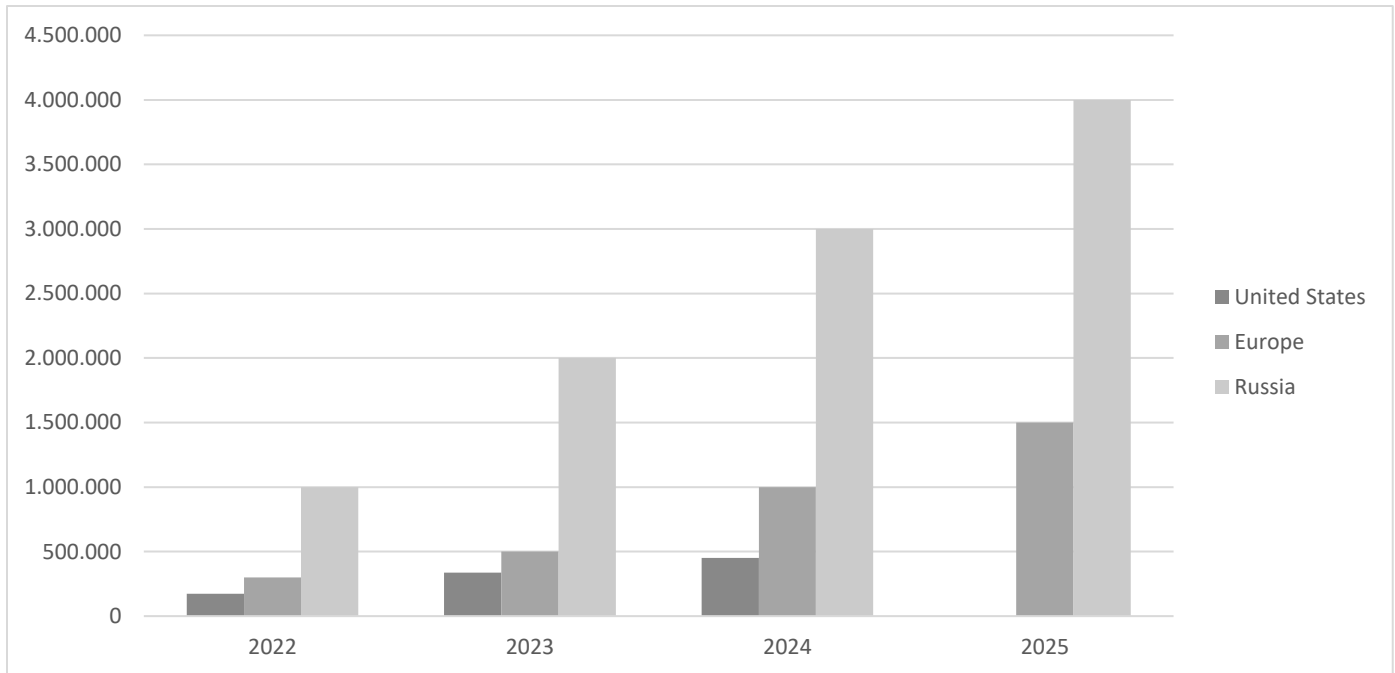
*Military Expenditure on Billions of Dollars*



(Kiel Institut für Weltwirtschaft, 2025)

### **Backing**

The necessity for NATO members to elevate their defense expenditure from 2% to 5% of GDP is underscored by intensifying geopolitical tensions, primarily stemming from Russia, China, and the evolving threat of terrorism. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 signaled a definitive shift in Europe's security dynamics, highlighting NATO's vulnerabilities. As indicated by (Cancian & Park, 2025), Russia has significantly outpaced NATO countries in artillery production throughout the conflict, which is a critical indicator of military preparedness (see Chart 4). This data underscores the Alliance's urgent need for increased investment in defense capabilities, specifically to replenish rapidly depleting stockpiles and enhance overall military readiness (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

**Chart 4***Artillery Production Estimates Throughout the Russo-Ukrainian War*

(Cancian & Park, 2025)

Moreover, the emergence of China as a global military power amplifies the need for enhanced NATO defense spending. According to recent figures, China is increasing its defense budget by 7.2% in 2025 alone (Chen & Torode, 2025), primarily focused on advanced military technologies and expanded naval capacity. This escalation directly challenges NATO's strategic interests, particularly as the Alliance begins to recognize security threats in the Indo-Pacific region. China's assertive military posture, notably in regions like the South China Sea and around Taiwan, necessitates that NATO invest significantly in military modernization and maintain technological superiority (Frank Hoffman, Neumeyer, & Jensen, 2024).

The threat posed by terrorism and hybrid warfare also reinforces the argument for increased defense spending. The rise of hybrid tactics - such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure – require NATO countries to enhance their non-conventional

defense capabilities (Frank Hoffman, Neumeyer, & Jensen, 2024). The proposal for NATO members to commit 5% of their GDP to defense would facilitate substantial investment in cybersecurity, intelligence-sharing, and rapid-response infrastructure, thus bolstering resilience against both conventional military aggression and asymmetric threats (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024).

Historically, NATO has successfully adapted its defense posture in response to similar existential threats. During the Cold War, the alliance consistently allocated approximately 3% of its GDP to defense to counter the Soviet military capabilities effectively (Grand, 2023). This historical example proves that elevated spending levels are both feasible and strategically justified during periods of heightened geopolitical tension. Furthermore, economic analyses suggest that increased defense spending can also yield economic benefits, stimulating industrial growth and innovation, particularly within defense-related sectors (Bahceli, 2025).

### **Qualifier**

While the argument for raising NATO's defense expenditure to 5% of GDP is strategically justified, achieving this target immediately may not be feasible for all member states. Economic constraints, domestic political pressures, and competing budgetary priorities are a few factors that could significantly hinder the pace at which certain NATO allies – particularly smaller or economically constrained countries – can realistically scale up their military budgets. Nations such as Germany, France, and Italy, despite their relative wealth, have already indicated potential challenges in rapidly expanding defense budgets due to entrenched domestic commitments and economic priorities (Posaner, Kayali, Brinkmann, & Noyan, 2025). Consequently, the implementation of this ambitious spending goal should follow a gradual and structured approach. NATO could adopt gradual benchmarks, allowing member states to

progressively meet higher spending targets over a set period. Such an approach not only acknowledges economic realities but also enables governments to allocate resources effectively, ensuring sustainable and politically viable increases in defense spending. And, while immediate achievement of the 5% GDP target might not be universally attainable, the strategic necessity of increased spending remains clear, warranting deliberate and sustained efforts from all NATO allies.

### **Rebuttal**

Despite the compelling rationale for raising NATO defense spending to 5% of GDP, critics have raised significant economic, political, and strategic concerns. Economically, many NATO members, particularly European states, already face considerable fiscal constraints, making immediate increases challenging without sacrificing investments in healthcare, education, or infrastructure (Posaner, Kayali, Brinkmann, & Noyan, 2025). Politically, this proposal has sparked notable resistance, with leaders like German Chancellor Olaf Scholz openly questioning its practicality, suggesting that such dramatic increases could destabilize domestic politics and strain social cohesion (Posaner, Kayali, Brinkmann, & Noyan, 2025).

Furthermore, from a strategic perspective, a rapid increase in NATO's defense budgets could inadvertently escalate geopolitical tensions. History illustrates how significant military buildups often trigger security dilemmas, leading adversaries like Russia and China to respond with similar military expansions, thus potentially igniting an arms race rather than ensuring long-term peace and stability (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). Therefore, critics argue that NATO must carefully balance increased spending with diplomatic engagement and strategic clarity, emphasizing targeted and coordinated investments rather than purely percentage-driven spending targets (Cordesman, 2023)

## Conclusion

In light of the analysis conducted through Toulmin's method, Trump's administration's proposal for NATO member states to increase their defence spending from 2% to 5% of GDP emerges as strategically justified, though ambitious. The central argument – rooted in the principles of equitable burden-sharing, enhanced deterrence capabilities, and increased military preparedness – is convincingly supported by current geopolitical realities, including heightened threats from Russia's assertive posture, China's expanding global military ambitions, and the evolving nature of terrorism and hybrid warfare. Historical precedents, notably during the Cold War era, further bolster the argument that substantial and sustained military expenditure can reinforce long-term stability and security in Europe.

Nevertheless, implementing this proposal poses significant practical and political challenges, particularly given the existing economic conditions and domestic priorities within NATO's European member states. Critics rightfully emphasize that abruptly mandating a 5% defence-spending target could disrupt national budgets, diverting crucial resources from social welfare programs, healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Politically, there is widespread reluctance across Europe, exemplified by statements from leaders such as Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italy's defence Minister Guido Crosetto, who have expressed scepticism regarding the financial feasibility and potential social consequences of rapidly increased military spending. Furthermore, the risk of unintentionally provoking adversaries like Russia and China into intensified military competition remains a credible concern, highlighting the necessity of a cautious and strategically nuanced approach.

While NATO's internal burden-sharing debates remain crucial, the European Union (EU) also has a significant role to play in reinforcing Europe's defence and security landscape. As



European leaders continue to advocate for greater strategic autonomy, the EU must take decisive steps to complement NATO's objectives, particularly by investing in defence research, enhancing military interoperability among member states, and strengthening collaborative security initiatives. The EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) provide valuable frameworks for addressing these challenges, yet their effectiveness depends on political will and financial commitment from all member states. A coordinated effort between NATO and the EU could help alleviate concerns regarding disproportionate financial burdens while ensuring that European nations enhance their defence capabilities in a manner that aligns with broader security imperatives.

To effectively navigate these complexities, NATO might consider implementing legally binding but carefully structured commitments. Such commitments, if developed thoughtfully, could prevent future disagreements over burden-sharing while accommodating each nation's unique economic capabilities and political contexts. By adopting progressive and differentiated spending targets, NATO would ensure steady progress toward enhanced collective defence without imposing undue fiscal pressures or inadvertently heightening geopolitical tensions.

Ultimately, Trump's proposal has merit in highlighting critical deficiencies and encouraging genuine discourse about the future of collective security within NATO. It serves as a valuable prompt for European policymakers to reconsider the balance between domestic priorities and the strategic imperatives of collective defence. While the exact 5% target may currently be impractical for many NATO allies, a gradual, structured increase in defence expenditure remains both strategically necessary and politically attainable. Such an approach would ensure NATO's continued credibility, resilience, and adaptability in an increasingly

uncertain international security environment, safeguarding peace, and stability in Europe for the foreseeable future.

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