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Desmaele, L.

Citation

Desmaele, L. (2024). Burden sharing for what?: NATO implications of three US visions. *The Washington Quarterly*, 47(4), 27-43. doi:10.1080/0163660X.2024.2432808

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Linde Desmaele (2024) Burden Sharing for What? NATO Implications of Three US Visions, *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:4, 27-43, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2024.2432808](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2432808)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2432808>



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Published online: 18 Dec 2024.



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Burden Sharing for What? NATO Implications of Three US Visions

European defense spending is among the most frequently and intensely debated topics concerning the future of NATO. American officials, in particular, have a long history of urging their European allies (and Canada) to increase their defense budgets, thereby distributing some of the United States' NATO cost burden among other allied members.¹ Despite these debates about burden sharing being as old as the alliance itself, recent years have seen unprecedented pressure from US policymakers on their European counterparts. In the current polarized US political climate, this push to get Europeans to spend more on defense may actually be one of the few issues on which many American politicians and observers agree.²

Existing research has examined when pressures for more burden sharing are likely to succeed.³ More recently, Brian Blankenship focused on whether the United States wants—or should want—its allies to become more self-reliant, outlining a set of dilemmas Washington faces as it pursues optimal burden sharing from its allies in Europe and East Asia.⁴ This article complements Blankenship's work by focusing on the dilemmas created by US burden sharing policies from the perspective of Washington's European protégés. To that end, the article unpacks

Linde Desmaele is an assistant professor in the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University. She can be reached at l.desmaele@fgga.leidenuniv.nl.

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The Washington Quarterly • 47:4 pp. 27–43
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2432808>

the diverging motivations behind US calls for greater European defense spending and better NATO burden sharing.

Specifically, I find three US visions for burden sharing that compete for political influence today. The first vision seeks increased burden sharing to achieve a more capable NATO in an increasingly contested security environment. Actors in this group argue for more European defense spending to strengthen the alli-

It is currently unclear which of the three US burden sharing visions will carry the day

ance's overall capabilities while maintaining US leadership.⁵ They do not wish to change the current US commitment to European security but simply want greater European support to navigate a more dangerous world. This raises questions for Europeans about the tradeoff between policy autonomy and security under US patronage, especially in light of their patron's competing interests in East Asia.⁶

The second vision proposes a more conditional NATO, where burden sharing becomes a tax on America's security protection. In this model, the United States would function like a defense contractor that provides military services to allies in exchange for financial compensation.⁷ Admittedly, important questions remain about how this model would function in practice given current US strategic priorities and resource availability. Additionally, any efforts to meet US demands by strengthening political, economic, and military ties with Washington on a bilateral basis risk undermining European unity in security affairs, as well as hampering progress toward a stronger European pillar within NATO.

Finally, the third vision promotes greater burden sharing to facilitate a partial US retrenchment from Europe,⁸ allowing the United States to devote more resources to other policy priorities. The goal here is to rebalance NATO by shifting more responsibility for Europe's defense to local powers, thereby altering NATO's current asymmetry and diminishing its reliance on US leadership. This model would require a paradigm shift in how Europeans generally think about defense strategy and would necessitate a long-term focus on the development of a true European strategic culture. It would also require strengthening the European defense industrial base rather than relying on imports from the United States.⁹

The recent victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election promises to make burden sharing an especially prominent issue once again. However, it remains unclear which vision will ultimately carry the day. Trump himself has, on various occasions, signaled a determination to shift toward a more conditional approach to alliances. Yet, even though the US president wields important authority as the military's commander in chief, he is far from immune from political and bureaucratic pressures on issues of alliance management. The Republican Party, in

particular, encompasses a range of perspectives on this matter, with adherents across all three visions. This diversity implies that any sharp departures from established practices are likely to encounter important obstacles, as such practices are often hard to alter—especially in the absence of a clear consensus on the best course of action.¹⁰ Still, even without drastic shifts, ongoing US debates about burden sharing could affect how reliable the United States is seen as a patron.

The key argument of this article is that, just as the United States faces a set of burden sharing dilemmas, so too do its European allies. Importantly, Europe is not a monolith, and the respective benefits, costs, and risks of each vision may be felt differently among allies. Thus, allies may also hold varying views on whether to maintain or increase their existing reliance on the United States, or explore alternatives.¹¹ Their resulting policies promise varied effects for the transatlantic alliance and European security more broadly.

In the following sections, I describe the three US visions for better transatlantic burden sharing in more detail, including their respective political bases of support. I then discuss the considerations that should guide Europe's approaches to these visions. Finally, I highlight the importance for Europeans to adopt strategic and long-term perspectives on these issues. No single solution will perfectly satisfy all parties at the same time, yet perfect should never be the enemy of the good in strategic thinking.

Three US Visions

For many decades, NATO has operated as an asymmetric alliance in which the United States has shouldered a disproportionate share of the defense burden. In return, Washington has traditionally expected a certain degree of loyalty or policy concessions from its allies. However, both the extent of these concessions and the willingness of allies to comply with them have varied. Even when the United States seeks to influence its protégés on a variety of policy issues, those protégés may resist making concessions to their patron if they feel relatively unthreatened or if they have doubts about their patron's reliability and seek more self-reliance.¹² Additionally, allies who are convinced of their own strategic importance to their patron may be less susceptible to fears of abandonment and therefore less susceptible to patron pressure on various issues.¹³ These factors influence US calculations about whether and how to pressure individual allies for more burden sharing and can lead to varying responses among them.

The US role within NATO and Washington's expectations in terms of burden sharing from its allies tend to evolve with the global security environment. Today, faced with an increasingly aggressive Russia and China's rising power, the cost of

protecting allies appears to be increasing for the United States. This has led Washington to call on its allies for better burden sharing.¹⁴ However, many European NATO allies are simultaneously expressing a greater demand for US protection.¹⁵ This puts Washington in a position where it calls for better burden sharing, yet some allies are also pressuring their patron for stronger security commitments.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that, despite these heightened costs, US alliances become more important for Washington if it wants to maintain a strategic advantage over its rivals. This intensified US focus on its allies may thus also influence how allies perceive their own strategic importance, potentially affecting their susceptibility to meet American demands for increased burden sharing. Overall, as the US room for maneuver in international affairs diminishes, it is likely to scrutinize its allies' defense spending and alignment choices more closely. Moving forward, Washington can be expected to adopt a more assertive approach, rewarding or punishing allied behavior rather than allowing shortcomings to go unnoticed.

Internally, not all US observers and policymakers are drawing the same conclusions on what they want from Europe or how NATO should adapt to the changing security environment. There are differing opinions on the precise value of the NATO alliance to US national security. These disagreements have led to distinct visions about roles and responsibilities within the alliance, each of which likely affects European assessments of the costs and risks of heavy reliance on the United States versus policy autonomy.

Status Quo: A More Capable NATO

The first vision within the US debate follows the country's long-standing tradition of calling on Europeans to supplement, but not replace, US security

The first vision seeks to improve NATO's abilities under US leadership

efforts in the Euro-Atlantic region. The goal here is for Europeans to increase defense spending to strengthen NATO's overall capabilities without altering the alliance's existing asymmetry, which favors the United States. This approach does not seek to change the US commitment to NATO but rather to improve NATO's ability to meet its goals under US leadership.¹⁶ While proponents of this approach may disagree on NATO's overall ambitions and military strategy, they

do endorse the alliance's asymmetry. The existing transatlantic bargain, in which the United States provides security in exchange for the other allies' loyalty, would thus remain intact.

One notable supporter of this vision is the Biden administration, which has pushed for more European defense investments while simultaneously reasserting Europe's security dependency on the United States.¹⁷ On one hand, President Biden has asked Europeans to spend more on defense.¹⁸ On the other hand, he has also emphasized that any European-promoted efforts should not duplicate existing NATO initiatives, discriminate against non-EU NATO members or decouple European security from a Euro-Atlantic framework. Despite talk of a watershed moment in transatlantic security, long-standing American political instincts to preserve the United States' veto over Europe's autonomy in the realm of collective defense are alive and well.¹⁹

This status quo group essentially believes that Washington can and must maintain leadership over NATO, despite also arguing that the United States has significant interests elsewhere, particularly in Asia.²⁰ Along with the Biden administration, it includes a substantial portion of the Democratic Party, as well as prominent figures of the former Republican establishment such as Nikki Haley, Mike Pompeo, and Liz Cheney.²¹ Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and Republican Ranking Member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee Roger Wicker can also be put in this category.²²

A de facto continuation of the status quo poses two sets of challenges for the United States' European allies. First, there is the long-standing cost of giving up some degree of policy autonomy, which makes junior allies susceptible to coercive pressure from their great power patron on a range of foreign policy issues.²³ US policymakers understandably oppose European efforts to have it both ways—relying on the United States for security while undermining it on issues related to China. For Europeans, exchanging security provision for acquiescence to broader US strategic designs—including US preferences in relation to China—makes sense when what is good for the United States is good for Europe. However, many European policymakers have repeatedly hinted that they do not share Washington's threat perception toward China, nor do they wish to fully align with the US approach. Yet, for as long as Europeans are dependent on Washington in security affairs, adopting an independent China strategy may prove very difficult.²⁴

Questions about the tradeoff between autonomy and security under US patronage are also intensified by a second set of challenges posed by the status quo scenario. While Washington may still be willing to maintain its security commitments across the globe, doubts persist on whether it can fulfill its promises given competing priorities elsewhere, especially in Asia. As the United States faces a more contested security environment and its relative advantage over its adversaries decreases, a critical question emerges: Can it credibly offer protection to all its allies and support its partners worldwide? Even if the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine elevated Europe high on Washington's policy agenda, the preceding period already saw the United States reevaluating the strategic significance of

various European subregions, most notably the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and the Caucasus.²⁵ In this regard, US analysts within and outside the Pentagon warn that, under current plans, significantly more resources are needed to meet US defense goals.²⁶

A related concern is that if the US were preoccupied with a conflict in one region, adversaries in another region might exploit the situation, raising the risk of simultaneous conflicts with Russia and China. Despite growing concern on both sides of the Atlantic about the risk of so-called “opportunistic aggression,” the actual likelihood of such a scenario materializing remains an open question.²⁷ If it were to happen, however, the bipartisan US consensus that East Asia is the most important theater for US security suggests that Europe is unlikely to be the priority if Washington is forced to choose between various flashpoints. According to a 2024 study from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States would likely shift a significant number of assets from Europe to East Asia in case of a China-related contingency. This could include the two F-35 squadrons from the United Kingdom and several destroyers currently stationed in Spain. Ground support in Europe is also expected to be cut back, especially assets such as long-range artillery and air and missile defenses. Other critical enablers, such as transport capabilities, refueling support, prepositioned stocks and munitions, would likely similarly be redirected from Europe to East Asia.²⁸

Discussions about tradeoffs between Europe and East Asia extend beyond military hardware. Indeed, US objectives in Europe and other parts of the world can sometimes be at odds with each other, creating political tradeoffs. In 2015, Richard Betts observed that “in the 1970s, realists welcomed American rapprochement with Mao Zedong’s China because it weakened the more formidable adversary, the Soviet Union. Today the relative power position of Russia and China are reversed, so realists should hope for a way to achieve rapprochement with Russia.”²⁹ Following this logic, the United States could, in theory, adopt a highly transactional approach in which it chooses to acknowledge Russian ambitions in parts of Europe in exchange for Russia’s assistance in curbing Chinese influence in Central Asia, the Arctic, or the Western Pacific. While this scenario may remain unlikely in the short term, it cannot be entirely ruled out.³⁰

Bilateralization: A Conditional NATO

The second vision calls for more European defense spending as a condition for Article 5 protection or assistance. In alliance systems, it is common for defense commitments to come with conditions as countries seek to avoid being entrapped or pulled into unwanted conflicts.³¹ For example, NATO’s founding Washington Treaty specifies that the alliance will aid an ally if that ally is under attack, and thereby excludes supports for offensive operations as a way of managing

entrapment concerns. In fact, as adherents of a more conditional US security commitment gladly underline, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty leaves much room for interpretation, as it does not explicitly require members' aid to be in the form of military support.³²

In early 2021, Keith Kellogg, a retired lieutenant general and former chief of staff for Donald Trump's National Security Council, suggested taking this notion of conditionality to another level, and envisioned a two-tier NATO system where only countries that spend at least two percent of their GDP on defense would receive Article 5 protection.³³ Importantly, this increased defense spending should be directed toward purchasing American military equipment. Rather than viewing NATO as a mutual defense pact, this vision suggests that the United States should behave more like a defense contractor that provides military services to allies in exchange for financial compensation.³⁴ President-elect Donald Trump and his advisors have repeatedly made comments to this effect, as have some Republican members of Congress. Ohio representative Warren Davidson, for example, recently stated that "if America is in fact an empire, now is the time to levy a heavier financial burden on those we protect."³⁵

The second vision suggests the US should behave more like a defense contractor

This approach of selling military services to the highest bidder would likely create varying effects across European allies and serve to undermine progress toward achieving a more unified European security front. For those allies who feel confident in their inherent strategic importance to the United States—Germany, perhaps—the threat of US abandonment may simply lack credibility.³⁶ However, countries in Europe that feel most vulnerable to attack—like the Baltic states and Poland—may prefer not to risk it. Instead, they may prefer to pay their membership dues and seek to placate the United States by strengthening their overall political, economic, and military relationships across the Atlantic.³⁷

Yet, resolutely hitching one's security wagon to the United States comes with its own set of challenges. The more a country relies on its patron for security, the more autonomy it sacrifices in relation to that patron, making it susceptible to US pressure and coercion. Moreover, if the US approach is truly one of supporting the highest bidder, there is also the perpetual risk of others, even adversaries, out-bidding individual allies in the race for limited US defense resources and attention. Relatedly, concerns about the availability of US resources—given the strain on its defense industrial base—do not simply vanish.

By aligning more closely with the United States, allies effectively entrust their future to US political dynamics, which can be unpredictable due to domestic divisions or the influence of anti-interventionist movements. This has at times led to

frustration among European observers. For instance, director of the EU Institute for Security Studies Steven Everts remarked in the lead-up to the 2024 US presidential election that Europe had “subcontracted its fate to a handful of voters in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.”³⁸ Admittedly, for many allies, the alternative to dependence on the United States is reliance on other European countries, each with their own political idiosyncrasies, and over which they also lack voting influence. Dependency relationships become particularly risky, however, when they are predicated on financial conditionality rather than a recognition of inherent shared interests.

This brings up the broader impact that closer ties with the United States could have on an ally’s relations with other European countries. While direct Russian military aggression is one concern, it may not be the most immediate threat for NATO allies in Europe. Russia is actively employing hybrid warfare tactics—like disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, sabotage and espionage—targeting several European allies without crossing the line into open invasion.³⁹ The question, then, is how to balance this need for European cooperation against these hybrid threats with a closer partnership with Washington. Choosing to strengthen ties with the United States could potentially undermine efforts by other allies to develop a stronger European pillar within NATO, including on the defense industrial front.⁴⁰ After all, by choosing US equipment over a European option, individual allies’ behavior may disadvantage local European competitors and serve to exacerbate the existing fragmentation of the European defense market.⁴¹ Furthermore, developing a closer bilateral relationship with Washington may also signal a lack of trust in European partners.⁴² Even though these issues may not seem directly related, addressing the political sensitivities of balancing these various priorities could prove to be quite difficult.

For now, it is also unclear how a shift to a regime of financially conditional support for Europe from the United States would occur in practice if an open war on NATO territory were to break out. Despite a growing number of bilateral and unilateral defense initiatives in the region, strategies have so far remained anchored in a centralized alliance command structure under US leadership.⁴³ How would a conditional approach to NATO impact the US role in the alliance’s command structure? And how would any multinational effort be organized if financially delinquent allies wanted or needed to be involved, for instance as necessary staging or transit areas for US overseas commitments to those who do “pay their fair share?” Relatedly, it is not clear that the United States would succeed in treating European security as a divisible issue, where the security of one European ally is not significantly linked to that of its neighbors. In theory, US policymakers could choose to ignore any of these considerations, leaving Europeans to deal with the implications.

Europeanization: A Rebalanced NATO

The third vision advocates for Europeans to take on greater responsibility in security and defense to enable some degree of US retrenchment from Europe. The purpose is to shift, rather than share, the burden of defending Europe to the region's local powers, and to alter the existing asymmetry of NATO to this effect. Drawing on Dwight Eisenhower's famous calls for a European "third force," adherents of this vision suggest that America should supplement European efforts, rather than the other way around.⁴⁴ This perspective views NATO primarily as an anti-hegemonic alliance. Given that the threat of a hostile power, such as Russia, controlling Europe is very low, they see no need for the United States to maintain its outsized role within Europe's security architecture.⁴⁵

The third vision is to shift, not share, the burden of defending Europe to Europe

Overall, this perspective is more concerned about the risks of American overreach than it is with missing out on the various benefits the United States enjoys by virtue of its leadership position in NATO and its influence over its European allies. Supporters of this approach also tend to be relatively optimistic about Europeans' ability to achieve a greater degree of strategic autonomy in security and defense, including on defense industrial matters.⁴⁶ Seen through this lens, any further steps toward more European autonomy are to be welcomed, not feared.⁴⁷

Proposals about the precise role of the United States and the timeline for this rebalancing vary.⁴⁸ Some advocate for a quick transition to a "dormant NATO" where the United States quickly withdraws most of its overseas presence in Europe to become "a logistics power of last resort."⁴⁹ Others have suggested a more gradual process, with the United States initially providing assets in which it has a comparative advantage, such as intelligence, nuclear matters, and naval power.⁵⁰ A full withdrawal could then follow over the long term. Proponents of a rebalanced NATO generally argue that Europeans should have a much more prominent role in NATO's command structure, suggesting, for instance, that the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) should be a European rather than an American.⁵¹

In this scenario, the breadth of NATO's goals would become contingent upon European contributions and preferences, with the United States playing a supportive role. US domestic support for this position has traditionally come from the ideologically diverse "restraint coalition" and has faced challenges in gaining traction among policymakers. This may be changing, however, as the restraint coalition appears to be finding common ground on European security with outspoken "China-firsters." Influential Republicans, including Senator Josh

Hawley (R-MO) and Vice President-elect JD Vance as well as former Department of Defense deputy assistant secretary Elbridge Colby, have advocated for a rebalanced NATO which would enable the United States to expand its military involvement in East Asia to counter China's power.⁵² These proponents dispute the notion that the challenges posed by Russia and China are inherently linked, and support a division of labor in which Europeans focus primarily on ensuring security in Europe. Others, from both the libertarian right and progressive left, have advocated for this vision as a potential means to reduce or limit US defense spending.⁵³

For Europeans, the prospect of US abandonment, or at least significant retrenchment, becomes much more real and credible in this scenario. After all, if US policymakers are no longer willing to maintain their current role in European security, they are highly unlikely to allocate resources and future investments to this end. The much-debated question of whether Europeans can overcome collective action problems to defend themselves would shift from an academic exercise to a pressing reality. Moreover, even if a US pullback from Europe does not include the US nuclear umbrella, increased doubts are likely to arise about the impact of such a pullback on the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence.⁵⁴

This scenario presents a key challenge for the allies: It would require Europeans to embrace a significant paradigm shift in how they approach defense and overcome institutional ambiguities to spend their resources more efficiently or effectively.⁵⁵ Under this scenario, Europeans should focus on strengthening their defense industrial base rather than relying on imports from the United States. But perhaps the most fundamental question raised by this scenario is how to define "Europe" and what form any proposed European defense pillar would take. Notably, "European pillar" and "EU pillar" are not automatically synonymous. Instead, discussions around a European pillar must examine how major actors—such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, Türkiye, but also, of course, the EU—would fit into this framework. Germany's precise role would likely be particularly contentious. While its involvement is arguably necessary, Berlin is at times viewed by its neighbors as part of the problem rather than the solution. During the Eurozone crisis, for instance, the German government faced accusations of prioritizing its own interest at the cost of those of other EU member states, contradicting the very notion of collective protection and solidarity.⁵⁶

Some European scholars and policymakers also worry that pursuing greater independence from the United States could jeopardize relations with the United States in the longer term, especially if political factions that favor a more asymmetric alliance or a conditional commitment to NATO regain prominence. They warn that moves toward a European pillar which exclude the United

States could accelerate American disengagement from Europe.⁵⁷ As Stephen Walt notes, “There is one issue where European elites typically display not cacophony but unity: They all want US forces to remain.”⁵⁸ This underscores the significant discomfort this scenario may create on the European side. Nonetheless, it would be unwise to dismiss its possibility, especially over the long term.

Europe’s Difficult Road Ahead

US pressures for better burden sharing have been a constant throughout NATO’s history. Yet, despite potential appearances, the philosophies driving these pressures are not uniformly shared across the US analytical community and body politic. This paper identified three visions that may be driving these pressures and their implications for Europe. While the first vision would essentially maintain the existing degree of European reliance on the United States, the second would increase it, and the third would decrease it. It is not the purpose of this article to recommend which of the identified risks and challenges are more acute. Rather, this article seeks to offer suggestions for Europeans on what to consider when navigating Washington’s burden sharing pressures going forward.

These visions could maintain, increase, or decrease European reliance on the United States

European assessments of both the willingness and ability of the United States to fulfill its promises to Europe will heavily influence their responses to Washington’s burden sharing demands. The costs and risks associated with each US approach—whether pushing for the status quo, a more conditional NATO, or a rebalanced NATO—must be assessed in relation to the available alternatives. The behavior of Russia and China will also impact these dynamics. Consequently, European allies should consider their positions holistically and strategically as they negotiate the future of their relationship with the United States.

Every defense investment shapes the fundamental choices European allies face in defining their security policy. They can either prioritize building a stronger, more autonomous European defense pillar within NATO, or they can double down on close bilateral ties with the United States. Developing a European pillar would give Europe more independence in foreign policy, including on issues like how to approach China. It would also provide some insurance against scenarios where Washington might be willing but unable to respond quickly to European crises. However, building this “European pillar” would be a long-term project requiring substantial political commitment, agreement on

roles and leadership, and wise resource allocation choices to address capability gaps. European allies are especially reliant on the United States for strategic enablers (e.g., logistics, intelligence, and air support), gaps that would be difficult to fill, let alone quickly. Moreover, moving toward a more balanced NATO could strain relations with the United States, depending on who holds power in Washington.

Alternatively, European allies could focus on deepening their individual security ties with the United States, leading to a NATO that functions more as a network of bilateral arrangements than a unified alliance.⁵⁹ By purchasing American equipment, European allies could more easily address short-term capability gaps, especially in high-tech areas where European defense industry players are often at a competitive disadvantage. Yet, this strategy also carries long-term uncertainties. Allies would remain dependent on the United States not only for critical military support but also for its political willingness to come to Europe's aid, an assumption complicated by the United States' strategic focus on China and the growing influence of anti-interventionist voices in US politics. Moreover, relying heavily on the United States could undermine European efforts to build a more local unified defense front, including the further development of its

defense industry, which may make it harder to pivot to autonomy later on.

Europe's burden sharing dilemmas therefore also have a temporal dimension, as allies must weigh the expected short-term benefits of close ties with the United States against the potential costs to their strategic flexibility and autonomy without the United States. Each path involves tradeoffs between immediate perceived security needs, independence,

and the future of European defense cooperation. Some allies might prefer to adopt a "wait-and-see" approach, hoping that the status quo will hold. However, maintaining the status quo comes with increasing costs and risks, particularly as the United States' ability to act freely on the global stage is shrinking—realities that cannot simply be ignored.

Even in a status quo scenario, allies will still likely face pressure from Washington to increase their defense spending, raising questions about how best to allocate resources and set strategic priorities. Perhaps most importantly, in an increasingly contested European security environment, allies that choose inaction risk being sidelined by others taking proactive steps. By failing to actively engage in shaping European and transatlantic security policy, these countries could lose influence within Europe and with the United States as others set the agenda. Ultimately, a "wait-and-see" approach may feel safer in the short

Europeans taking a wait-and-see approach run increasing costs and risks

term, but it also means sacrificing strategic control and leverage in the long run. Failing to acknowledge the difficulty of a challenging situation does not make those challenges magically go away.

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