

**Trump's
Ukraine
Strategy as a
Wake-Up Call
for NATO:**

**Reassessing Alliance Commitment
Through Historical and
Contemporary Drift**

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Abstract

This paper posits that former President Donald Trump's policies toward Ukraine, particularly evident in its 2025 wartime posture, reflect a strategic effort to reawaken NATO to its foundational mission of collective defense. Far from signaling U.S. withdrawal, NATO members themselves have drifted from the alliance's original purpose, as demonstrated by declining defense spending since 1949 and uneven democratic standards today. Leveraging Ukraine's resilience as a foil, Trump's approach underscores NATO's internal disparities. This study analyzes 32 NATO countries, plus Ukraine and Russia, rated on free speech, judicial independence, electoral integrity, and defense spending, alongside a historical review of NATO's spending trends, revealing a persistent shift away from early Cold War commitments and positioning Ukraine as a catalyst for renewal.

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1949, NATO has aimed to ensure collective defense and uphold democratic values among its members. Yet, over 75 years, the alliance's unity has wavered, with member states increasingly diverging from these ideals. Former President Donald Trump's criticisms—labeling NATO “obsolete” and decrying unequal burden-sharing (Trump, 2016)—have fueled perceptions of U.S. disengagement, especially amid his Ukraine policies, such as delaying aid in 2019 or advocating self-reliance post-tenure. This paper argues the reverse: Trump's strategy uses Ukraine to expose NATO's drift, not to abandon it. Historical data showing a decline in average defense spending from 6%–7% of GDP in the 1950s to 2.7%–2.8% by 2025, coupled with contemporary disparities in democratic and military commitment, supports this thesis. Ukraine's wartime example serves as a call to realign NATO with its 1949 ethos.

Methodology

The study assesses 32 NATO members (as of March 2, 2025), Ukraine, and Russia across four metrics:

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- 01 Free Speech: Based on Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders indices.**

 - 02 Free Judiciary: Drawn from the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index.**

 - 03 Free Elections: Informed by Freedom House political rights scores.**

 - 04 Defense Spending: Measured as a percentage of GDP, benchmarked against NATO's 2% target, using 2024 NATO estimates and 2025 projections.**

Each category is scored from 1 (worst) to 10 (best), with totals (out of 40) ranking countries. Additionally, historical NATO spending trends since 1949 are synthesized from NATO reports, IISS data, and secondary sources, focusing on Europe and Canada averages, with U.S. integration for alliance-wide context. Data reflects trends up to 2024, projected into 2025, providing both a snapshot and a longitudinal view of NATO's evolution.

Analysis

NATO's Historical Drift from Its Mission

NATO's founding mission—collective defense under Article 5 and democratic solidarity—demanded robust military and governance standards. Historical spending trends reveal a marked decline from this ideal. In the 1950s, NATO Europe averaged 4%–5% of GDP on defense (e.g., UK at 7%, France at 6%), with the U.S. at 8%–10%, yielding a NATO-wide 6%–7% (NATO Review, 2020). This reflected Cold War urgency. By the 1970s–1980s, Europe stabilized at 3%–3.5%, with the U.S. at 5%–6.5%, averaging 4%–5% alliance-wide. The Soviet collapse in 1991 slashed spending: Europe fell to 2%–2.5% in the 1990s and 1.5%–1.8% in the 2000s, bottoming at 1.43% in 2014, while the U.S. dropped to 3.5%–4.5%. The NATO average sank to 2%–2.5% pre-2014, a far cry from early highs.

The 2014 Crimea crisis spurred a rebound, with Europe and Canada reaching 2.02% and the U.S. at 3.38% by 2024, lifting the NATO average to 2.71% (NATO, 2024), projected at ~2.8% for 2025. Yet, this remains half the 1950s level, signaling a long-term drift from collective defense readiness. Posts on X note a 20% spending drop post-2008, underscoring how peace dividends and reliance on U.S. power eroded NATO's original posture





Contemporary Disparities in NATO Commitment

The 2025 snapshot reinforces this drift. Top performers—Finland (38/40), Estonia (38/40), Sweden (37/40)—excel in democratic metrics (10s) and spending (7–9), while Turkey (15/40) and Hungary (22/40) falter, with free speech (3 and 5) and judiciary (3 and 4) scores reflecting authoritarian leanings despite meeting spending targets (4 and 7). Defense spending varies widely: 9 of 32 members remain below 2% (e.g., Spain at 1.28%, Canada at 1.37%), requiring an additional \$54.05 billion annually to close the gap. This gap—14% of Europe’s 2024 total—echoes Trump’s freeriding critique: “Countries aren’t paying their fair share” (Trump, 2016). Historically and presently, NATO’s drift is self-inflicted, not U.S.-driven.



Ukraine as Trump's Strategic Lever

Ukraine's 28/40 score—free speech (6), judiciary (5), elections (7), spending (10)—places it between Italy (29) and Bulgaria (27). Its defense spending, at 26.3% of GDP in 2025 (Wilson Center, 2024), dwarfs NATO's highest (Poland, 4.12%), driven by Russia's war. Trump's influence is evident: his 2019 aid delay (\$391 million) and 2024 rhetoric—"Ukraine must stand on its own" (Trump, 2024)—pushed Kyiv toward self-reliance, a stark contrast to NATO's laggards. This aligns with his NATO critique, using Ukraine's resilience to shame allies into action. Historically, NATO's spending drop from 6%–7% to 2%–2.5% pre-2014 mirrors this dependency; Ukraine's surge highlights what commitment looks like.

Russia as a Foil

Russia's 16/40—free speech (2), judiciary (2), elections (2), spending (10)—reflects authoritarian militarization (6.3% GDP). As NATO's adversary, it justifies the alliance's existence, yet the spending gap (e.g., Spain's 1.28% vs. Russia's 6.3%) underscores NATO's uneven response. Trump's Ukraine policy, amplifying Kyiv's defiance, indirectly pressures NATO to counter Russia more robustly, not retreat.

Trump's Wake-Up Call

The historical decline from 6%–7% to 2.7%–2.8% GDP, paired with 2025's disparities (e.g., 9 below 2%, Turkey's democratic slide), confirms NATO's drift. Ukraine's 28, propelled by a 10 in spending, contrasts with NATO's median (32), embodying Trump's vision of burden-sharing. The U.S. (36/40) remains a leader, suggesting Trump aimed to provoke reform, not exit. Closing the \$54 billion gap would signal a return to collective responsibility, a nod to 1949's ethos Trump seeks to revive.

Conclusion

Trump's Ukraine strategy—evident in its 2025 militarization—exposes NATO's drift from its original mission, a trend clear in the fall from 6%–7% GDP spending in the 1950s to 2.7%–2.8% today and persistent democratic and fiscal disparities. Rather than U.S. withdrawal, NATO members' historical and ongoing lapses drive this shift. Ukraine, under Trump's indirect push, serves as a wake-up call, urging the alliance to reclaim its founding vigor. Future research could test whether this pressure yields lasting NATO reform beyond 2025.



Appendix Table 1 - This details all 32 NATO countries (as of March 2, 2025), plus Ukraine and Russia, with their scores for Free Speech, Free Judiciary, Free Elections, and Defense Spending (each out of 10), along with the Total Score (out of 40). These scores reflect the state of each country as of March 2, 2025, based on trends up to late 2024 and reasonable projections. (Ranked by Total Score, Highest to Lowest)

Rank	Country	Free Speech	Free Judiciary	Free Elections	Defense Spend	Total
1	Estonia	10	9	10	9	38
2	Finland	10	10	10	8	38
3	Latvia	9	9	10	9	37
4	Netherlands	10	10	10	7	37
5	Sweden	10	10	10	7	37
6	Germany	9	10	10	7	36
7	Lithuania	9	9	10	8	36
8	United Kingdom	9	10	10	7	36
9	United States	9	9	9	9	36
10	Denmark	10	10	10	5	35
11	Norway	10	10	10	5	35
12	France	9	9	10	6	34
13	Luxembourg	10	10	10	4	34
14	Canada	9	10	10	4	33
15	Iceland	10	10	10	3	33
16	Belgium	9	9	10	4	32
17	Czech Republic	8	8	9	7	32
18	Poland	7	6	9	10	32
19	Portugal	9	9	10	4	32
20	Spain	9	9	10	4	32
21	Greece	7	7	9	8	31
22	Romania	8	7	9	7	31
23	Slovakia	8	7	9	7	31
24	Slovenia	8	8	10	4	30
25	Croatia	7	7	9	6	29