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Europe

Summary and Key Points

Policy Proposals

1. Ensure that The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains focused on its core mission—mutual defense with the capabilities needed to deter Russian aggression against a member state. Revitalize collaboration between U.S. and U.K. conservatives to safeguard the Special Relationship. Forge ties between British conservatives and the Trump Administration.

2. Develop strong bilateral relationships with individual European countries instead of reflexively supporting the European Union.

3. Strengthen transatlantic conservative networks defending freedom of speech and conscience, and combatting mass migration and woke green and transgender agendas.

4. Maintain and increase the U.S. strategic deterrent for NATO, and shift some of the remaining U.S. troops in Europe to the Indo–Pacific as U.S. troop levels in Europe are reconfigured to support the U.S. pivot to Asia.

Quick Facts

1. In 2014, only three NATO members—Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States—spent 2 percent of GDP on defense; by 2025, all NATO members were projected to have met the 2 percent minimum with many moving toward the new minimum of 3.5 percent on core defense spending.

2. Non-U.S. members of NATO added a cumulative total of $350 billion to their defense budgets from 2014 to 2022.

3. The United States and the member states of the European Union account for approximately half of the global economy.

What to Say About Europe

- A strong, stable, and sovereign Europe is important to American security, prosperity, and global leadership. When Europe is weak or divided, instability spreads and American interests are put at risk.

- Strong alliances work best when all partners contribute fairly and invest seriously in their own security.

- The United States and Europe share deep economic ties that support jobs and growth on both sides of the Atlantic. Economic cooperation with Europe should promote free markets, fair trade, and national sovereignty.

- American military presence has helped keep Europe secure and prevent major conflict for decades. But, Europe must take greater responsibility for its own defense as threats from Russia continue to grow.

- The U.S.–U.K. relationship offers new opportunities to strengthen ties through trade and cooperation.

The Issue

Europe is vitally important to the United States economically, diplomatically, militarily, and politically. The continent has geographical proximity to some of the world's most dangerous and contested regions, bordering, or in close proximity to, Russia, the Arctic, Iran, Asia Minor, the Caspian Sea, and North Africa. China would clearly like to drive a wedge into the transatlantic relationship, thus weakening the United States while continuing to access Europe's market and technology in service of the aims of the Chinese Communist Party. Russia's ongoing brutal and unprovoked full-scale war against Ukraine directly affects the security interests of Europe as well as those of the United States. Europe and the United States face similar challenges moving forward: an aggressive Russia, the rise of an assertive and bellicose China, Islamist terrorism, and economic and social challenges compounded by decades of reckless spending and divisive social policies pursued by the Left.

The United States and Europe share a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy. During the 20th century, millions of Americans fought for a free and secure Europe, and hundreds of thousands died for it. America's economic ties to the region are likewise important. A stable, secure, and economically viable Europe is in America's economic interest. For more than 70 years, the U.S. military presence has contributed to regional security and stability, and both Europeans and Americans have benefited economically. The United States and the member states of the European Union account for approximately half of the global economy, and the United States and EU member countries are generally each other's principal trading partners and primary sources of foreign direct investment, all of which benefits both the U.S. economy and, by extension, the American worker.

On January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom left the EU. Brexit has given rise to a host of opportunities for enhancing the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship, one of which is negotiating and signing a free trade agreement. The United States and the United Kingdom have long championed economic freedom and have the world's largest and sixth-largest economies, respectively. Their economies are closely intertwined, and each partner is the other's top foreign direct investor. While an agreement that lowers tariffs would generate some gains, tariffs between the nations are already low; therefore, any agreement must also address non-tariff barriers to trade. A trade agreement would have the important added benefit of renewing the close cooperation between the two nations and reaffirming their shared commitment to economic freedom and national sovereignty. Negotiations stalled under President Joe Biden, but have advanced under the second Trump Administration with a bilateral "framework" trade agreement that maintained a 10 percent baseline tariff which was lower than that set for the European Union (15 percent).

NATO has been the foundation of European security for more than 70 years. Its founding mission was to protect the territorial integrity of its members and, if required, to defeat the Soviet Union. NATO members are no longer worried about the spread of communism, but many—especially given Russia's unprovoked second invasion of Ukraine—are worried about protecting their territory from Russian expansion. This makes NATO just as crucial to the maintenance of transatlantic security today as it was at the end of the Cold War. The United States benefits from a NATO that can deter aggression and defend the territorial integrity of its members.

As an intergovernmental security alliance, however, NATO is only as strong as its member states. After the end of the Cold War, many European nations cut defense spending, and the inevitable result has been a significant loss of capability. In 2006, NATO set a target for member states to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense. At the 2014 Wales Summit, member states recommitted to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense and 20 percent of defense budgets on "major equipment" purchases, a commitment reaffirmed at the Vilnius Summit in 2023. NATO defense spending continues to trend upward with non-U.S. members adding a total of $350 billion to their defense budgets from 2014 to 2022. In 2025, NATO members agreed to a new defense spending goal of

5 percent, broken down into 3.5 percent for core defense spending and an additional 1.5 percent of national-security-related spending for infrastructure. Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, additional members have pledged and taken action to attain the NATO benchmarks, with Poland, Germany, the Nordic states, and the Baltic states, now at or well above the 2 percent benchmark and moving toward the new 3.5 percent core military spending benchmark.

In addition to investing in necessary capabilities, NATO should establish a robust permanent force structure in the Eastern European member states to deter potential future Russian aggression against an Alliance member. Members across the Alliance should contribute to this force structure, and U.S. troops are a vital component. A permanent U.S. presence in Europe shows that the United States is willing and able to live up to its NATO treaty obligations, thus making it less likely that Russia will make a miscalculation. In addition, this proximity to global hot spots in the Middle East gives U.S. policymakers more options for responding to incidents in the region.

The ongoing war in Ukraine underscores the need for Europe to move away from its reliance on Russia and China (via, for instance, production of solar panels and wind turbines) for its energy needs. Europe has begun to re-evaluate ill-considered policies, such as the phaseout of nuclear power and the curtailed use of important sources of domestic fossil fuels, due to the need for secure substitute energy supplies. U.S. exports of LNG are an important component of future European energy security. The U.S. should expand its domestic production of LNG and its capacity to export it, just as Europe should expand its ability to import LNG, as rapidly as possible.

It is essential that the U.S. and Europe work together on addressing the challenge of China. The degree to which Europe is aligned with the U.S. on responding to China will go a long way toward determining the success of U.S. efforts. American policymakers would do well to shift Europe's views of China from an economic lens to one with a clear focus on the security risks of dependence. The U.S. will find little success in seeking to browbeat Europe into alignment. Rather, U.S. officials should consistently and resolutely argue that getting closer to China is not in Europe's long-term self-interest, and that dependence on China would be even more dangerous than dependence on Russia.

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) launched in 2016 is useful in strengthening trade, infrastructure, energy, and political cooperation among countries bordering the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. It is a force multiplier that bolsters security in Europe and strengthens transatlantic trade ties by marrying private capital with some of Europe's most dynamic and growing economies while also helping to block Chinese and Russian efforts to make inroads in the region.

Recommendations

In order to maintain a secure European theater, the U.S. should:

Remain committed to America's NATO Treaty obligations. NATO has served as the bedrock of transatlantic security for more than 70 years. If the European members meet their stated pledges to invest in collective defense, it should be clear that the United States remains committed to NATO, including Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that an attack on one NATO member is considered an attack on all.

Ensure that NATO remains focused on its core mission—mutual defense with the capabilities needed to deter Russian aggression against a member state. NATO does not have to be everywhere doing everything, but it does have to be capable of defending its members' territorial integrity. Everything else it does is secondary to this core goal.

Push for European NATO members to take primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe. The U.S. will remain in NATO, but wealthy European allies need to take primary responsibility, especially because the U.S. needs to focus on deterring China.

Focus on developing strong bilateral relationships with individual European countries instead of reflexively supporting the European Union. The EU is a supranational, undemocratic organization that infringes on the national sovereignty of its members, wastes taxpayer money, distorts European immigration policies, and champions a radical leftist energy and social agenda. The U.S. should re-examine its unthinking support for the EU and focus instead on building and sustaining closer relations with individual European governments, particularly those led by conservative leaders, such as Italy and Poland. Efforts should be made to strengthen transatlantic networks of conservative politicians, policymakers, and think tank leaders to promote freedom of speech and sane migration policies and push back on anti-growth "green transition" ideology.

Refuse to back European Union defense integration. Nothing would strain the transatlantic bond more—and undermine NATO faster—than EU defense integration. "EU strategic autonomy" in defense is a Brussels-driven chimera, not a panacea. A robust U.S.-led NATO remains the only guarantor of transatlantic security. The United States should continue to focus on advancing a "NATO first" agenda that ensures American engagement and influence in European defense issues. NATO has been the cornerstone of transatlantic security for almost seven decades. It affords the United States a level of influence in the region that is commensurate with the number of troops, equipment, and funding that it commits to Europe.

Speak with a united voice on Chinese and Russian abuses. The United States and Europe must be clear, consistent, and timely in highlighting Chinese and Russian violations of human rights, including Russia's indiscriminate brutality and targeting of civilians in Ukraine. The West's moral standing rests on maintaining this unequivocal consistency rather than, for example, making exceptions to or watering down criticism to ease business dealings or—in the case of China—securing never-to-be-realized promises of climate change mitigation.

Enhance investment screening mechanisms in Europe. Acquisitions by adversarial powers in European nations will affect the United States. Examples abound, such as the acquisition of ports or airfields that are needed to reinforce European defense in the event of a major conflict; acquisitions of companies working on advanced technologies that would allow China to acquire valuable intellectual property instantly (leapfrogging) rather than producing it from scratch domestically; or simply the accumulation of acquisitions that give China greater political clout in a European country. The United States should encourage allies to adopt more stringent national investment screening mechanisms.

Encourage allies to leave China's 14+1 initiative. While largely defunct, some NATO allies remain part of China's 14+1 engagement format. The 14+1 initiative is an attempt by China to expand its business and investment opportunities in Eastern and Central European nations. For economic, political, and security reasons, some countries, such as the Baltic states, have already withdrawn, and most others have downgraded their participation. Remaining participants should follow suit and abandon the 14+1 initiative for preferable alternatives like the Three Seas Initiative, thus signaling to China that its predatory lending practices and pernicious political influence are not welcome in their nations.

Facts + Figures

FACT: U.S. troops are in Europe first and foremost to protect U.S. national interests.

- U.S. forces are not based in Europe to allow Europeans to create an elaborate welfare state on the backs of American taxpayers.

- U.S. bases in Europe provide flexibility, resilience, and options for America's leaders in a dangerous world.
- The garrisons of American service personnel in Europe are no longer the fortresses of the Cold War; they are the forward operating bases of the 21st century.

FACT: European NATO allies did not spend enough on defense, although the trends in 2025 and 2026 have been quite favorable.

- In 2014, only three NATO members—Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States—spent 2 percent of GDP on defense.
- In 2025, all NATO members are estimated to have spent at least 2 percent of GDP on defense.
- American conservatives should praise the moves by European countries to increase their defense budgets and take more responsibility for their own defense. President Trump deserves credit for having pushed them to do so.

FACT: The United States and Europe are each other's principal trading partners and sources of foreign direct investment.

- Europe is by far the largest source of foreign direct investment in the United States, with Europe's direct investment position in the U.S. totaling nearly $3.6 trillion in 2024.
- More than 55 percent of total U.S. global investment is in Europe.
- European companies operating in the United States, and U.S. companies operating in Europe, are directly responsible for millions of American and European jobs, respectively.

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