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Is This the End of the Atlantic Alliance?

by Gordon G. Chang | January 2026

Lindsey Graham cringed when U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Blaine Holt, America's deputy military representative to NATO, presented him in the summer of 2015 with "a truth the senator did not want to hear."¹

"The clear and present danger to Europe is unchecked Islamist migration, which threatens to destroy European culture, values, economy, and security," Holt told the South Carolina Republican. "The threat to European security posed by Russia is a distant second."²

A decade later, the general has not changed his mind. And President Donald Trump's National Security Strategy, released December 4, adopts Holt's view. The document refers to Europe's "economic decline" being "eclipsed by the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure." Erasure is the result of various factors including

"migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife."

"Should present trends continue," the strategy statement tells us, "the continent will be unrecognizable in 20 years or less." The document also states this: "We want Europe to remain European, to regain its civilizational self-confidence."

The National Security Strategy follows the February comments of Vice President JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference, where he, in the words of London's *Guardian*, "launched a brutal ideological assault on Europe, accusing its leaders of suppressing free speech, failing to halt illegal migration, and running in fear from voters' true beliefs." Vance, as the paper reported, also "openly questioned whether current European values warranted defense by the U.S."³

Europe went into shock. “America can no longer be considered an ally of Europe,” said Dominique de Villepin, once France’s prime minister, to Swedish journalist Martin Gelin after Vance’s harsh comments. The French politician, who launched a political party in 2025 with an eye toward a presidential run in 2027, believes America, like Russia and China, is an “illiberal superpower.”⁴ Friedrich Merz, then the incoming German chancellor, called for “real independence from the U.S.A.”⁵ As Chancellor Merz declared in December, “The decades of Pax Americana are largely over for us in Europe.”⁶

Many Americans are over Europe. “Your hubris overflowing and with no behavior change in sight, our president drew up the papers,” Holt, now a *Newsmax* contributor on foreign affairs, wrote in December. “It may be titled officially ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States,’ but after one read, surely you know that this is really a divorce filing.”⁷

For some, the divorce is final. Reps. Thomas Massie (R. Ky.) and Anna Paulina Luna (R. Fla.) introduced legislation in December to end U.S. participation in NATO.⁸ Moreover, the Defense One site reports that a longer and classified version of the National Security Strategy advocates the “withdrawal from Europe’s defense.”⁹ James K. Galbraith of the University of Texas at Austin writes about the necessity of breaking “America’s longstanding ties to Russophobic European elites.”¹⁰

European elites, who have good reason to be Russophobic, may not be happy with Trump, but he has acted not a moment too soon. Even after

Russia’s seizure of Crimea and parts of Donbas in 2014 and its all-out attack on the rest of Ukraine in 2022, the continent has not been able to mount, either with military force or sanctions, a sufficient effort to save the former Soviet republic from further dismemberment.

In fact, some Europe elites now support Trump. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in December declared him to have been good for the alliance, calling the recent pledge of member countries to spend at least 5% of their economic output on defense Trump’s “biggest foreign policy success.” He also said NATO was “stronger than it ever was” and that the American president “is good news for collective defense, for NATO, and for Ukraine.”¹¹

Rutte is correct. For decades, American presidents sweet talked, pleaded, and cajoled their European counterparts to devote greater resources to their militaries, with almost no effect, so after two invasions of Ukraine Trump finally decided to roll out threats, including the biggest one of them all. Europe had abandoned its own defense, the theory went, so Trump was willing to abandon Europe. No one should have been surprised: The continent had decades of warnings from Washington.

As Walter Russell Mead writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in December put it, “Jolting our allies out of their deep slumber so they can again be useful partners is fundamental to America’s fortunes in the next stage of global politics.”¹²

The National Security Strategy itself makes this crucial point: “We will need a strong Europe to help us successfully compete, and to work in concert

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with us to prevent any adversary from dominating Europe.”¹³

Although Trump’s document does not explicitly say so, it essentially announces a strategy of getting America ready to defend itself, if necessary, from powerful bad actors, China and Russia.

Not many read the strategy statement this way, especially regarding Trump’s approach to China. “Under the Biden administration, China was explicitly named as the U.S.’s primary foreign-policy challenge,” the *Wall Street Journal* reported after the issuance of the landmark document.

On the surface, that is no longer the case. “The White House’s new national-security strategy,” the paper pointed out, “signals a softer approach to competition with Beijing, playing down ideological differences between the two superpowers and marking a break from years in which China was singled out as posing the U.S.’s greatest challenge.”¹⁴

Without question, the Communist Party of China poses the No. 1 challenge to the United States. The substance of the National Security Strategy makes that clear. No other country is mentioned more in its text. More important, in numerous places throughout the document there are statements about others posing threats, and China is the only state fitting the descriptions.

For instance, the National Security Strategy mentions “the potential for any competitor to control the South China Sea.” “This,” the document states, “could allow a potentially hostile power to impose a toll system over one of the world’s most vital lanes of commerce or—worse—to close and

reopen it at will.” It’s clear that China—and only China—is the “hostile power” that has both the ambition and capability to do this.

To meet the Chinese and other challenges, the National Security Strategy divides the world into regions and essentially prioritizes them. Europe is mentioned third, after the Western Hemisphere and Asia but before the Middle East and Africa.

There are a number of problems with Trump’s implicit ranking of regions. First, it has undermined the Atlantic Alliance. “I increasingly hear in Europe questions about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, including the viability of Article 5,” Andrew Michta of the Atlantic Council told me in December, referring to the NATO treaty’s mutual-defense obligation. “Alliances are force multipliers for the U.S., and our goal should be to preserve our influence in Europe while lowering the cost.”

Second, the world is not subject to such easy division and prioritization. “I do not share the view implied in the National Security Strategy that Asia and Europe can be treated as separate,” Michta, also a University of Florida professor, added. “On the contrary, the Atlantic and Pacific are not an either-or proposition but one problem set. If we lose credibility in the Atlantic, we also lose credibility in the Pacific.”¹⁵

Whatever happens in Europe affects more than just Europe. Chinese policymakers certainly understand that. On July 2, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Kaja Kallas, the EU foreign policy chief, that Beijing does not want to see Russia lose in Ukraine because then the U.S. would be able to focus on China in East Asia.¹⁶ China, by implication, believes

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that the battle for the future of the world is now being fought on European soil. As Michta notes and as China evidently believes, it is not possible to disaggregate Asia and Europe, which after all, are part of the same landmass.

European nations may be feeble, out-of-touch, and relatively unimportant, as Trump apparently believes, but Europe is nonetheless critical.

Take Ukraine. Trump wants to end the war there, as he has said many times and as his National Security Strategy states. Yet how the conflict is resolved matters greatly. His original 28-point framework is a land-for-peace deal rewarding Russia, which started the war with no justification. Xi Jinping could see that framework as a signal that Trump would similarly let him keep territory he grabbed in future acts of naked aggression. Anything short of a complete expulsion of Russia from Ukraine, therefore, will suggest to the Chinese leader that there can be a payoff for invasion. So Trump's drive for peace in Europe could—and probably will—trigger war at the other end of the Eurasian landmass.

In any event, Ukraine is crucial to the control of the world. That embattled Eastern European state is part of what Halford John Mackinder identified as the Heartland. In the first decade of the 20th century, Mackinder proposed his Heartland theory. The Heartland—a portion of Eastern Europe and the interior of Asia not including China—was in his view the center of the world.

His theory is simple, as he summarized it in 1919. Mackinder thought whoever commanded Eastern Europe commanded the Heartland; whoever commanded the Heartland commanded the “World Island,” in other words, Asia, Europe, and Africa; and whoever commanded the World Island commanded the world.

“Halford John Mackinder, arguably the founder of the modern school of geopolitics, believed that the rise of a unified Eurasian ‘Heartland’ would eventually threaten the dominance of the Western maritime powers,” Leonard Hochberg, coordinator of the Mackinder Forum-U.S., told *Newsweek* in 2021.¹⁷ “As Russia wages war against Ukraine with China’s assistance, we see his prediction coming true today,” Hochberg said to me in December.¹⁸

At the same time, Ukraine is part of the Rimland identified by Nicholas John Spykman. Spykman, who followed Mackinder, believed that the control of the societies bordering Russia—the Rimland—confers control of Eurasia and the control of Eurasia confers control over “the destinies of the world.”

China and Russia together dominate the Rimland, and they look to be the predominate powers in the Heartland as well. Even if one is not a devoted follower of the theories of Mackinder or Spykman, Chinese and Russian activities in Ukraine should cause alarm.

More modern thinkers also see great significance in that part of the world. For instance, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s national

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security advisor, believed that control of the landmass of Eurasia was critical, the thesis of his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*.

Whether one agrees with any of these theories, the world's worst actors are joining together in a powerful grouping. After all, Beijing and Moscow are fighting as one in Ukraine. Although a China-Russia partnership is not as strong as the United States, the pair is beginning to dominate territory that geopolitical thinkers believe is central to the control of the future.

Trump, however, does not view Europe in general and Ukraine in particular as that important. There is even talk that he will ditch the G-7 grouping, which includes, in addition to the EU itself, four Western European nations, for either the "Core 5," which includes no European country other than semi-European Russia,¹⁹ or the G-2, which is comprised of only China and the U.S.

It's not clear that the Core 5 is actually under consideration—the Trump administration denies the existence of a longer and classified version of the National Security Strategy that reportedly mentions the new grouping²⁰—but Secretary of War Pete Hegseth in November publicly mentioned the G-2.²¹

Rutte in December 2024 said NATO's members needed to "shift to a wartime mindset."²² With China and Russia in fact waging war—directly and through proxies in the Heartland and elsewhere—the West and friends are finally realizing how close they are to catastrophe. At this consequential moment, the Trump administration, which is tying to balance many interests, is nonetheless in no position to ditch any friend, especially those in the Atlantic Alliance, the most successful grouping of its kind in history.

"One of the great achievements of the generation that founded the world order at the end of the Second World War was the creation of the concept

of an Atlantic Community," Henry Kissinger wrote in 2011.²³ Now, it is time to rework the alliance, not walk away from it. After all, the last time America turned its back on Europe—in the 1930s—the world descended into war.

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ENDNOTES

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