

Trump and NATO

Low exit risk amid rising retaliation dynamics

- U.S. President Donald J. Trump is unlikely to pull the United States out of NATO, as the war with Iran has underscored the limits of unilateral action, highlighting the continued importance of allied support.
- Paradoxically, the same conflict has materially increased the likelihood of retaliation, as segments of Trump's support base that once defended NATO have grown more critical—particularly in response to European allies restricting U.S. access to military bases.

Under our base case scenario, U.S. President Donald J. Trump will not leave NATO. A NATO exit is legally and procedurally complicated, albeit in theory possible. Moreover, the U.S. – Iran war has shown Trump the limits of acting in isolation. According to political strategists in the United States, after a seemingly effortless victory in Venezuela, the recent conflict in Iran has shown that without allies, it is much harder to keep the Strait of Hormuz open, build coalitions, and share the burdens of war.

However, the domestic political equilibrium underpinning U.S. support for NATO is shifting, particularly within the Republican Party. Frustration toward European allies among segments of Trump's Republican base that were historically supportive of NATO has intensified, particularly in response to restrictions on U.S. access to bases and overflight rights during recent military operations targeting Iran.¹ As a result, while exit remains improbable, the risk of retaliation against allies has increased as the war has weakened the political opposition to such a move.

Strategically, the U.S.-Iran war shows Trump why the United States needs allies, which argues against exit. Politically, the war has also eroded pro-NATO support within his own party, raising the risk of retaliation, as Trump would face less opposition.

Feasibility of leaving NATO

Legally and procedurally, the United States can leave NATO, but it would not be simple. It is legally possible for the United States to withdraw from NATO because the alliance is treaty-based and under international law, a state can exit a treaty it has ratified. However, the process is not straightforward. The U.S. Constitution makes it clear that the U.S. Congress ratifies treaties, but it does not specify whether a president can unilaterally withdraw from treaties without Congressional consent.² This ambiguity creates a high likelihood of legal challenges to block a U.S. withdrawal. The Supreme Court would likely

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ultimately have to decide the case, and it has never addressed this kind of treaty withdrawal case before.³ Trump may not care about lawsuits or norms, but these frictions would prevent a fast and clean hard exit.

The United States also has binding obligations to its allies that cannot be easily unwound without diplomatic and strategic consequences. NATO is deeply integrated into U.S. defense architecture, meaning withdrawal would require renegotiating or terminating numerous agreements. Logistically, the United States maintains bases, facilities, troops, and equipment across Europe that are interoperable with NATO operations and needs and pursuant to NATO frameworks.⁴ Disentangling assets and bringing U.S. troops home would be costly and time-consuming.

How the U.S.-Iran war reframed the NATO question

Trump publicly portrays NATO as “useless” to the United States in this war. He claims NATO allies are of little to no help to support U.S. military operations in Iran, even though Europe would stand to benefit if the United States won the war or secured the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. The war demonstrates the costs of unilateralism. For example, Iran effectively shut down the Strait of Hormuz, and the United States requested support from allies for naval protection, burden sharing, and coordination.⁵ This creates a core contradiction. According to Trump’s narrative, NATO looks weak and ineffective. Yet for U.S. strategy, the war proves the value of allies and the difficulty of going it alone.

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Base politics and the shift in Republican support

Historically, there were Republicans who simultaneously supported Trump and NATO. This faction was a check on any move to leave the security alliance. Now, some of these pro NATO Republicans, such as war hawk Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, are frustrated at NATO because some of its members refused or restricted U.S. access to bases for this war, arguing they have effectively constrained the United States.⁶ Perceptions in Washington of limited cooperation from key allies stem from concrete operational constraints: Spain refused to allow U.S. forces to use its Rota and Morón bases and closed its airspace to U.S. aircraft, while the UK initially delayed or restricted the use of its bases for offensive operations, framing its support more narrowly around defensive and maritime security roles. According to media sources, discussions within the Pentagon indicate that retaliation could take targeted political and operational forms, differentiated by country. In the case of Spain, options reportedly discussed within the Pentagon include suspending “difficult” allies from key NATO roles or influence. For the United Kingdom, pressure would likely be more geopolitical and symbolic—such as reviewing the U.S. position on British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands—signaling that even close allies are not immune from conditional support. More broadly, such measures could be complemented by reduced access to NATO decision-making forums,

increased public criticism, and a more transactional approach to security guarantees, without altering formal alliance structures.

Thus, while Trump is unlikely to pull the United States out of the security alliance, the pro-NATO firewall in the Republican Party has been weakened and thus raises the prospects for retaliation. However, the firewall has not been destroyed. Roger Wicker and Mike Rogers, Republicans who chair the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, respectively, expressed their concern with Trump's recent decision to withdraw 5,000 U.S. troops stationed in Germany to punish Germany and, more broadly, Europe for Chancellor Friedrich Merz's comment that the United States had been "humiliated" by Iranian negotiators.⁷

Nevertheless, retaliation will be constrained by NATO's structure. Expelling members would be extremely difficult. The case of Turkey is instructive: despite serious disputes—including Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 system, tensions over Syria, and broader governance concerns—there has been no mechanism to suspend or expel it.⁸ Instead, responses have been indirect, such as sanctions outside NATO, limits on intelligence-sharing, and political pressure, while membership remained unchanged. This suggests that any action against allies like Spain or the United Kingdom would likely follow a similar pattern, including informal and selective measures such as reduced cooperation, loss of influence within NATO structures, or geopolitical signaling, rather than formal exclusion.

Conclusion

Despite frustration with the alliance, exacerbated by the current conflict with Iran, the base case is that the United States will not leave NATO. That said, current political support within the U.S. towards NATO is waning, particularly among former Republican supporters, making alliance weakening and retaliation, albeit within limits, a higher probability event.

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Notes

- ¹ <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5794447-graham-trump-iran-us-bases-middle-east/>
- ² <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/can-trump-pull-us-out-nato-2026-04-01/>
- ³ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48868>
- ⁴ <https://english.elpais.com/international/2026-04-11/the-united-states-needs-europe-and-nato-despite-trumps-onslaught.html#:~:text=In%20total%2C%20the%20U.S.%20has,is%20headquartered%20in%20Stuttgart%2C%20Germany.>
- ⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/17/world/europe/operation-aspides-strait-hormuz.html>
- ⁶ <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/5794447-graham-trump-iran-us-bases-middle-east/>
- ⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cewpx5yvwyxo>
- ⁸ <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/turkey-humiliated-nato-if-nato-cant-expel-it-heres-plan-b/#:~:text=Turkey's%20blackmail%20of%20the%20North%20Atlantic%20Treaty,his%20own%20image%20during%20his%2021%2Dyear%20dictatorship>
- ⁹ <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/budget/2026/04/trumps-budget-director-defends-white-house-plan-for-massive-boost-in-military-spending/>