

NATO, WITH OR WITHOUT AMERICA?

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Isabelle Lasserre, Rym Momtaz and Bruno Tertrais

It is fair to say that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has experienced conflicting currents for several years. It has been weakened as never before under Donald Trump, largely because of his questioning of the viability of Article 5, which states that an attack on one member will be considered an attack on all. But it has also been strengthened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By claiming to want to «kill NATO», Vladimir Putin has resurrected it. He brought about the integration of Finland and Sweden into the organisation, after more than 70 years of a tradition of neutrality. 'NATO, which had been searching for a new mission since the end of the Cold War and was drifting around a little without any idea of how to reform itself, has regained the focus of its efforts to counter the threat from the East', said Isabelle Lasserre.

The question of the historical and institutionalised support of the United States was topical, as the outcome of their presidential election was still uncertain. Who could say what would happen if Donald Trump was re-elected? Rym Momtaz, a former Politico correspondent and researcher at the IISS, be-

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lieved there are three likely foreign policy issues if the Republican candidate were to be re-elected. First, the traditional current of neoconservatives who were at the helm during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. 'They believe they must continue to be the major player in NATO.' Then a second camp would opt to prioritise the Chinese threat at the expense of everything else, and withdraw from the European theatre, as well as from the Middle East. Then there is

MODERATION

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SPEAKERS

Rym Momtaz, Editor in chief of the blog
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Foundation for Strategic Research, Senior
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a third camp that feels it is doing too much for Europe and wants to focus on its domestic problems, with a strong bias towards China that has an impact on the US economy. 'They believe more in bilateral partnerships with, for example, Poland and Germany, but no longer with NATO as a whole', added Rym Momtaz. This is where European governments must take over their own security. France has integrated this more than its European partners but does not have the means to act alone.'

Leaving aside Donald Trump's position, is it really possible that the United States will leave NATO? Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research, looked back at the fundamentals of the organisation, which historically operates with an American leader and where theoretically all members have the same weight, with decisions being taken by consensus and not

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by majority: 'The United States has a stronger influence there, but it is an informal, unwritten American leadership.' However, NATO could no longer function as it has since its creation in 1949, and a US withdrawal would have to be legally enacted. However, the American President could not make this decision alone. Another scenario put forward by Bruno Tertrais, and one that is more likely, would be not an official withdrawal, but a disengagement of their air and maritime forces to redirect them further east of the Eurasian continent to defend Japan, Korea and Taiwan. 'Until now, this transatlantic alliance was based on a



contract of trust. There are expectations among NATO members that the United States will help them if needed. This notion is central. If ever Donald Trump in January 2025, once re-elected, declares on Twitter that his country will no longer come to the aid of Europe if it is attacked, there will be a real rupture, which will also have effects on Europe's adversaries, including Vladimir Putin, who will take advantage of it.'

Donald Trump could also play a more subtle role by announcing, of course, a withdrawal of the 100,000 American soldiers stationed on European bases, but maintaining nuclear forces. But although the latter 'can withdraw in a few days, withdrawing the military forces would take months', estimated Bruno Tertrais. For Rym Momtaz, there is a consensus on the nuclear umbrella on the side of American diplomacy. 'In Con-



Bruno Tertrais

gress, a law was passed that the elected president could not withdraw from NATO alone, but only with a majority. So, a total withdrawal is very unlikely. On the other hand, he can undermine confidence in the deterrence that NATO represents for European security with a tweet. This weakening of the alliance has already begun.'

There is also a generational shift in the United States. Current President, Joe Biden, is the last to have experienced the Cold War 'in person', which Rym Momtaz believes explains his real commitment to European security. But if his camp's candidate, Kamala Harris, were to win the elections, it would be more likely that she



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would follow the line of Barack Obama, who also asked the European Union to engage more autonomously in its own defence. 'This idea transcends Democratic and Republican divides. There is a widespread feeling among the American people that they see the great European capitals as a social security system that is superior to their own, and that Europe is a vacation spot for the rich, so why should they pay so much for NATO? Of course, this is all false, but it is a perception.'

There is no prosperous America without a prosperous Europe

Bruno Tertrais

Bruno Tertrais questioned this threat of an American withdrawal from NATO, which has been bandied about since 1952. 'Finally, we can also say that if they are still there, it is because they have a real interest in selling more weapons and defence equipment to Europeans. I'm exaggerating a bit, but still', he said ironically. Rym Momtaz was less optimistic. In the Trumpist camp, it is said privately that some of his advisers are prepared to take the risk of seeing major security problems in Europe without intervening. 'It's a discourse that we're really hearing, and that we didn't hear before.' Some of his advisers do not have much sympathy for Donald Trump but would be ready to work with him in a patriotic sentiment, 'to prevent him from doing anything', said Bruno Tertrais, 'because they know that there is no prosperous America without a prosperous Europe.' Trade relations are perhaps more important than defence strategies on the American side. However, these are inseparable.