

14 February (The Economist)

[Europe must hurry to defend itself against Russia—and Donald Trump \(economist.com\)](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/02/14/europe-must-hurry-to-defend-itself-against-russia-and-donald-trump)

Prepare for President Trump

## Europe must hurry to defend itself against Russia—and Donald Trump

The ex-president's invitation to Vladimir Putin to attack American allies is an assault on NATO. Ultimately, that is bad for America



image: getty images

Feb 12th 2024

If Donald Trump is [returned to the White House](#), which version will it be? The one who [cajoled allies](#) to spend more on defence, reinforced NATO troops on the eastern flank and began to arm Ukraine; or the one who threatened to leave the alliance and embraced Vladimir Putin? To judge from his latest election-campaign outrage, he is likely to prove the wrecker of the Western alliance.

At a rally on February 10th Mr Trump, the near-certain Republican presidential nominee recounted how the leader of a “big country” once asked him whether America would defend an ally that was “delinquent” on its payments, presumably one that was not meeting the NATO target of [spending 2% of GDP on defence](#). “No, I would not protect you,” Mr. Trump replied. “In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills.”

These words are Mr Trump's most damaging assault yet on NATO, and should set alarms ringing across the defence alliance. It does not much matter whether he was indulging in hyperbole or recounting an old conversation. Exhorting Russia to attack any NATO country in any way is to weaken the sacred promise of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty: that an attack on one ally is an attack on all; and that an attack on even the smallest ally is, in effect, an attack on America. Compare Mr Trump's demeaning of allies with President Joe Biden's warning to Russia that America will defend “every inch” of NATO territory.

The message of deterrence has worked since NATO was founded in 1949. After the end of the cold war NATO enabled the extension of democracy and economic prosperity to the countries of the former Soviet bloc. In the past two years Article 5, and the deployment of NATO forces in eastern Europe, has kept allies safe even as Russia has savaged Ukraine. NATO has given members confidence to help Ukraine defend itself. The alliance continues to attract members, most recently Finland and, soon, Sweden. But cast any doubt on Article 5, and the alliance is worth little. As deterrence is eroded, the risk of a future war will grow accordingly.

### **The Don**

Mr Trump is scarcely the first president to complain of freeriding allies—and to do so has been justified. But he is turning a democratic alliance into a mobster's racket: no money, no American protection. Mr Trump claims his bluntness succeeded in getting allies to spend billions more on their defence. In 2017, his first year in office,

just four of 29 nato allies met the 2% target, according to nato figures. By 2020, his last, this had risen to nine. Mr Trump certainly helped to push the allies. The bigger impulse was the growing threat from Russia: defence spending started to rise in 2015, before Mr Trump's time, and continued well after it. In 2023, with Mr Biden in power, 11 out of 31 allies made the 2% target; a majority will probably reach it this year.

If elected, Mr Trump's second-term policies would depend in part on whom he appoints to leading positions. But his baleful influence is already being felt. Against the better judgment of most Republicans, Mr Trump's "America first" devotees have for months blocked passage of a bill to renew military and civilian aid to Ukraine. Recent legislation requiring Congress to approve an actual American withdrawal from nato would not be much of a restraint. Congress cannot stop a president from undermining nato by, say, withdrawing American troops from Europe or simply refusing to stand by Article 5 and defend allies under attack.

Mr Trump and his apologists in Congress boast that he prevented major wars on his watch because foes were scared of him. Speaking after Mr Trump's latest outburst, Senator Lindsey Graham said, "Russia didn't invade anybody when he was president." Senator Marco Rubio said, "I have zero concern, because he's been president before." By condoning his words, supposedly security-minded Republicans are only adding to the harm. With Russia pushing against embattled Ukrainian defenders and stepping up its military output, any weakening of nato will raise the risk of a broader conflict.

The idea that you can disregard Mr Trump's remarks on nato, because his actual intent might be different, is fatally complacent. Deterrence works when the commitment to collective defence is absolute and unambiguous. By sowing doubt, Mr Trump has invited Russia and other enemies to test the West's resolve. The Danish defence minister recently warned that Russia could probe nato members' commitment to Article 5 within three to five years. His counterpart in Britain said the country had to prepare for wars involving Russia, China, Iran or North Korea in the next five years.

Europeans must [act urgently](#) to confront twin threats: attack by Russia and abandonment by America. Rather than moan about Mr Trump, they should get on with meeting the 2% target. They should also revise the threshold: 3% of gdp is probably what is now required to meet nato's existing defence plans, and it would have to be higher without American help. America spent nearly 3.5% of gdp on defence last year. Europeans face a far greater threat.

Europeans will need to invest in everything from ammunition to all the other things that America provides at scale: transport and refuelling aircraft, air defences, command-and-control systems and intelligence platforms ranging from satellites to drones. Europeans must not just spend more, but must spend better. They should buy more kit jointly and integrate their defence industries. To nudge laggards, they should agree that senior positions cannot be held by candidates from countries that do not meet minimum standards.

This will serve three purposes: strengthen Europeans' ability to help Ukraine and defend themselves against Russia; prove that Europeans are sharing the burden and that the alliance is a good deal for America; and create a hedge against abandonment by Mr Trump. The European Union has improved its defence capabilities in recent years but is not an alternative provider of security. Better for Europeans to think how to take over the existing structure of nato if America leaves (while holding open the possibility that a post-Trump America might eventually seek to rejoin). One question would be whether to revise unanimity rules. Decision-making is hard enough with a benevolent American hegemon—witness the delays in admitting Finland and Sweden. It will be impossible in a shrunken alliance of small and medium-sized allies.

The most sensitive issue will be how Europe's two nuclear-weapons states, Britain and France, can provide greater deterrence for European allies in the absence of an American nuclear umbrella. They currently have only about 500 warheads between them, compared with more than 5,000 for America and nearly 6,000 for Russia. And the creation of a European-wide nuclear deterrent would involve deeply sensitive questions: France would doubtless see its vital interests at stake in an attack on Germany, but would it extend its assurance to eastern Europe? How long could Britain maintain its nuclear warheads and missiles, the latter drawn from a stockpile shared with America, if the occupant of the White House were to sever co-operation?

The undermining of nato is a threat to all America's alliances. As the post-war system begins to crumble, and America's leaders cast doubt on their country's role as a guarantor of security, its allies around the world will feel more vulnerable. Frightened countries may go their own way, rearming and perhaps even seeking to acquire their own nuclear weapons. Even if this is defensive, it will be seen as threatening by their foes. That is why Mr Trump's comments threaten to make the world a much more dangerous place, not least for America itself.

In spite of this, Mr Trump's words mean that Europe has no choice but to rearm, not least because Europe's weakness is itself a cause of instability. The best way to preserve the Western alliance—and to limit the damage should a hostile Mr Trump come to power—is to prepare for a more insecure era. Even then, be under no illusion that rearming can fully replace the loss of American power.■