



Shifting Dynamics in Transatlantic Relations: Implications for Mediterranean Security

by **Stephen J. Flanagan**

The 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS) signals a major shift in global military posture, prioritising “American pre-eminence” in the Western hemisphere alongside deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. This realignment necessitates a significant reduction of US forces in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. While the Administration reportedly expects European allies to assume primary responsibility for continental defence by 2027, the US Congress has implemented legislative barriers to prevent precipitous withdrawals. In the Mediterranean and Middle East, the United States is transitioning toward a “burden-shifting” model, relying on enhanced naval cooperation among European powers and the growing expeditionary capabilities of regional actors like Türkiye. Ultimately, the strategy reflects a transactional approach to alliances, favouring bilateral security arrangements and increased regional self-reliance to facilitate the US pivot toward Western hemispheric and Pacific priorities.



TRANSATLANTIC
LEADERSHIP
NETWORK

With the Trump administration’s publication of its National Security Strategy (NSS) on 4 December 2025,¹ to be followed soon by the National Defense Strategy and likely further adjustments in the US global military posture, we have more clarity on the administration’s strategic priorities over the next three years.

Most observers were expecting the administration to focus on accelerated efforts to rebalance US military engagement from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region, a process initiated by the Obama administration’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance,² and continued to varying degrees under the first Trump and Biden administrations. Indeed, prominent members of the Trump administration and independent analysts have argued in recent years that “the pivot” to the Indo-Pacific never fully materialised and that more urgent steps

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¹ US, *National Security Strategy*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

² US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA554328>.



The 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) identifies reasserting unfettered “American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere”, as its top foreign policy objective

were needed to counter China’s growing military capabilities and assertiveness.³

1 THE PIVOT TO THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Instead, the NSS identifies reasserting unfettered “American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere”,⁴ as its top foreign policy objective and essential to maintaining the security, prosperity and cultural cohesion of the US homeland. The document presents an expansive “Trump Corollary” to the 19th Century Monroe Doctrine declaring that the United States “will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to [deploy forces] or control strategically vital assets” in the region,⁵ and reward governments and political parties aligned with US policies and strategy. To address “urgent threats” in the hemisphere the NSS calls for enlisting regional partners in controlling migration and drug flows and readjusting the US global military presence to the region away from “theaters whose relative import to American national security has declined”.⁶

The US Department of Defense has already ordered a significant redeployment of forces to the Western hemisphere⁷ and undertaken command changes. The US Navy has increased its presence in the Caribbean basin in recent months to support the counter-narcotic operations and to intimidate the Maduro regime in Venezuela. This has included redeployment in November of the Gerald Ford Carrier Strike Group from a two year-long mission in the Eastern Mediterranean, along with an amphibious assault ship and other vessels totalling roughly 15-20 percent of the 100 or so ships (of a total fleet of 295) normally deployed globally at any time. In addition, 15,000 military personnel have been deployed in the region along with F-35 fighter jets and other aircraft and combat and reconnaissance drones, together with periodic bomber flights off the coast of Venezuela. The US Army has also established a new Western Hemisphere Command unifying three existing headquarters to support US Southern and Northern commands in the conduct of various homeland security missions.⁸

³ Blackwill, Robert D. and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade. The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024.

⁴ US, *National Security Strategy*, cit., p. 15.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷ Ledur, Júlia and Susannah George, “These Are the U.S. Ships and Aircraft Massing off Venezuela”, in *The Washington Post*, 1 November 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/01/venezuela-us-military-aircraft-carrier-ships-strikes-caribbean-trump-maduro/>.

⁸ Welch, Carley, “Army Stands up Western Hemisphere Command Prioritizing Homeland Defense, Consolidation”, in *Breaking Defense*, 8 December 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/?p=72229>.



2 THE INDO-PACIFIC REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY

The NSS focuses heavily on rebalancing US economic relations with China and differences over the tone and content of that section reportedly delayed the documents completion. It affirms strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific as a top priority. The Turmp administration proposes to achieve that goal through a combination of defence innovation, redeployment of military assets from the Middle East and Europe, and pressuring East Asian allies and partners to grant the United States greater access to their ports and facilities as well as strengthening their national defence capabilities.

3 POSSIBLE ACCELERATED BURDEN SHIFTING IN EUROPE

Notwithstanding the jarring criticisms of European economic decline, “civilizational erasure” and insecurity vis-à-vis Russia, the NSS concludes that Europe remains strategically, economically and culturally vital to America and that US policy should work with “aligned countries that want to restore their former greatness”.⁹ The document makes clear that the Trump administration expects European and other allies to assume primary responsibility for defence of their regions. It proposes to organise a burden-sharing network with like-minded allies to realise this goal, offering them more favourable terms on commercial matters, technology sharing and defence procurement.

European governments and the European Union have been preparing for this proposed burden shifting over the next five years or so through significantly increased investments in national military capabilities and the Readiness 2030 plan. However, senior Pentagon officials have reportedly informed European allies privately earlier this month that the United States expects them to assume the bulk of responsibility for conventional defence of the continent by 2027,¹⁰ citing the urgent need to bolster the US military posture in the Indo-Pacific. This demand was allegedly accompanied by a threat to disengage from key alliance planning processes including the NATO Force Model and the NATO Defense Planning Process if this goal is not met. This timetable represents a much faster shift in defence burdens than most European governments expected or would be able to achieve.

It was anticipated that following the issuance of the NSS and the National Defense Strategy, the Secretary of Defense would follow past practice and announce the results of a global military posture review.

⁹ US, *National Security Strategy*, cit., p. 25-26.

¹⁰ Raufoglu, Alex, “US Promises Pre-Christmas Arms Boost for Ukraine, Pushes for Europe-Led NATO by 2027”, in Kyiv Post, 5 December 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/65690>.



There is strong bipartisan support in Congress for maintaining an effective NATO deterrence and defence posture and avoiding precipitous, ill-considered withdrawals of US armed forces from Europe

However, there are media reports that the Pentagon is no longer undertaking a global review and will make incremental adjustments to existing deployments. This is consistent with the Pentagon's decision in early October to terminate a two-year deployment of an Army brigade combat team (about 700-800 soldiers) in Romania and elsewhere in southeastern Europe. Termination of this deployment came as a surprise to many allies and senior members of Congress. The Republican chairs of the Armed Services committees in the Senate and House of Representatives decried the administration's failure to consult Congress on this decision despite clear guidance in pending legislation.¹¹ They and other colleagues also said the move undermined President Trump's announcement of additional sanctions on Russia over Ukraine and jeopardised relations with key European allies.

There is strong bipartisan support in Congress for maintaining an effective NATO deterrence and defence posture and avoiding precipitous, ill-considered withdrawals of US armed forces from Europe.¹² To that end, and to avoid a repeat of the way the withdrawal from Romania was executed, sections of the 2026 National Defense Authorisation Act signed into law on 18 December¹³ withholds funds to: 1) reduce the total number of US military personnel permanently stationed or deployed in Europe below their current level of 76,000; 2) close or transfer to host countries military bases and facilities in the region; or 3) withdraw or redeploy from Europe major pieces of military equipment until the Commander of US European Command and the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with other senior officials, each provide certifications and assessments to the Congressional defence committees that any of the aforementioned actions are in the US national interest and that NATO allies and relevant partners have been fully consulted. Congress would then have 60 days to review the reports and take further action. The legislators are also mandating detailed assessments of the impact of any of those three actions on: US national security; NATO's overall deterrent and defence posture; the US contribution to the NATO Force Model, capability targets and regional defence plans; and the ability of the armed forces to execute US contingency plans and support operations of US Central Command and US Africa Command in the Middle East and Africa.

¹¹ Chutel, Lynsey, "U.S. Says It Will Cut Troops in Eastern Europe", in *The New York Times*, 29 October 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/29/world/europe/us-troops-eastern-europe-romania.html>.

¹² Bednarczyk, Philip et al., "The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act: What Europeans Need to Know", in *GMF Insights*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/24910>.

¹³ Mineiro, Megan, "Senate Passes Defense Policy Bill, Clearing It for Trump", in *The New York Times*, 17 December 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/17/us/politics/senate-defense-bill-trump-military.html>.



This legislation applies similar conditions to restrict the Department of Defense from relinquishing the role of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. While the US ambassador to NATO recently mused at the Berlin Security Conference that he looks forward to the day when Germany might ask to assume the SACEUR position, he and other American officials have assured allies that the United States plans to retain the SACEUR position for some time. Nevertheless, there are reports that the Pentagon plans to reduce the number of high-ranking US officers assigned to the NATO command structure to support the transfer of further responsibilities to European officers. These measures are by no means not ironclad, but they do reflect a strong reassertion of Congressional oversight and use of its power of the purse to block undesirable adjustments in the US military posture and command structure in Europe.

4 GUIDANCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

The NSS asserts that American foreign policy has prioritised the Middle East above all other regions for decades because of its importance as an energy supplier, a locus of great power competition and an area of endemic conflicts that have impacted US and global security. The document contends that first two factors driving this focus on the region are no longer salient. Energy supplies, including the US emergence as net exporter, have become more diverse. Deepening US partnerships with Israel, the Gulf states and other Arab governments have given the United States an edge in managing the involvement of other great powers in the region. On the third factor, the NSS argues that Israeli and US military actions have degraded Iran's nuclear programme and other destabilising activities in the Middle East, and that while the Israeli Palestinian conflict remains "thorny", there has been progress toward a more permanent peace. It also suggests that with US, Arab, Israeli and Turkish support Syria can be stabilised and reintegrated into the region.

The NSS then casts the emerging Middle East as a source and destination for new investment and technological innovation. It concludes that the main US interests in the region going forward will be safeguarding Gulf energy supplies, maintaining freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, ensuring the security of Israel and combatting terrorist groups. This assessment provides a justification for a reduction and realignment of the US military presence in the Middle East.

The US Armed Forces maintain roughly 30-40,000 personnel at bases and facilities across the Middle East with levels fluctuating in response to changing security conditions. There are deployments in Qatar (Al Udeid Airbase – including US Central Command's forward headquarters), Bahrain (the Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters), UAE

The NSS provides a justification for a reduction and realignment of the US military presence in the Middle East



(Al Dhafra Air Base), Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan and Syria. These forces are engaged in maritime security, air defence and counterterrorism missions in support of US Central Command. US forces based in Türkiye and Djibouti under the US Europe and Africa commands respectively also provide important support to operations in the region.

On Africa, the NSS calls for the United States to partner with select countries to mitigate conflicts, expand trade relationships and promote investment to develop the continent's abundant natural resources. It calls for support to negotiated settlements of ongoing conflicts (e.g., DRC-Rwanda, Sudan) and preventing new ones (e.g., Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia), and for remaining “wary” of a resurgence of Islamist terrorist activity in parts of Africa while avoiding any long-term US presence or commitments.

The NSS does not articulate specific goals for relations or security cooperation with the Maghreb countries. However, during his first term, President Trump recognised Rabat's full sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco reestablishing diplomatic relations with Israel as part of the Abraham accords. Regional experts expect that Rabat will remain a willing partner with Washington in countering Iranian influence and terrorism.¹⁴ More recently, the Trump administration has signalled that it might try to broker reconciliation between Morocco and Algeria on the basis of Rabat's autonomy plan for Western Sahara.¹⁵

5 OTHER POSSIBLE US FORCE REDUCTIONS IN EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

Further reductions or adjustments in the US military presence in Europe and the Mediterranean remain likely

Given this strategic guidance, further reductions or adjustments in the US military presence in Europe and the Mediterranean remain likely. Many analysts have predicted that the some or all of the 20,000 US personnel that were deployed to Europe by President Biden in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine would be reassigned elsewhere. However, President Trump publicly assured the Polish President Nawrocki in September that the US military presence (about 10,000 personnel) in their country would be retained and might even be expanded.¹⁶

¹⁴ Zaaimi, Sarah, “Iran has Ambitions in Western Sahara. Trump Can Contain Them by Bolstering Ties with Morocco”, in *New Atlanticist*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=807732>.

¹⁵ Riboua, Zineb, “Why the Trump Administration Is Right to Pursue a Morocco-Algeria Peace Deal”, in *Hudson Institute Commentaries*, 31 October 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/node/50817>.

¹⁶ Madhani, Aamer and Michelle L. Price, “Trump Assures Polish Leader of a Continued Robust US Military Presence in the European Nation”, in *AP News*, 4 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/6fcedb0f7c24ee8652b047cf508e7f4a>.



Reductions in the US naval and air presence Italy and air force deployments in Germany would not be surprising. Redeployment of some of the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers in the Forward Deployed Naval Force-Europe, homeported in Rota, Spain, also seems likely. There are currently five ships that have undertaken NATO deterrence and defence missions in the Mediterranean, Black and Baltic seas and provided critical support to Israel's missile defence over the past year,¹⁷ together with a US Army THAAD anti-missile system deployed in Israel. In August 2024, the Navy announced plans to deploy a sixth destroyer to Rota in 2026,¹⁸ but that move appears to be on hold.

Deployments of US carrier strike groups (CSGs) are reviewed periodically based on the regional requirements as generally only 3-4 of the 12 carriers can be deployed at sea simultaneously given maintenance and overhaul requirements. The US Navy has generally maintained one CSG in the Mediterranean under command of the Sixth Fleet, but there have been surges of two or more during heightened tensions in the Middle East and Africa.

6 CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS AHEAD

The US Navy regularly conducts combined carrier operations with the French, Italian,¹⁹ UK and Spanish navies²⁰ in the context of NATO and other multilateral missions and exercises. Those four European navies, along with five others that can provide escort vessels, established the European Carrier Group Interoperability Initiative (ECGII) in 2008²¹ to improve the ability of European navies to deploy and operate together as part of a combined carrier strike group in support of multinational, EU or NATO operations. If there were fewer deployments of US carriers and other naval vessels to the Mediterranean region, combined operations by these and other capable allies could fill some of the gaps. In July 2025, the UK, French and Italian navies conducted sequential carrier operations in the Indo-Pacific to reinforce Europe's commitment to security in that

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¹⁷ Lagrone, Sam, "5 U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense Destroyers Now in the Mediterranean Sea", in *USNI News*, 20 June 2025, <https://news.usni.org/?p=116549>.

¹⁸ Suciu, Peter, "Russia Is Watching: The Navy Is Sending Arleigh Burke-Class Guided-Missile Destroyers to Europe", in *The Buzz*, 21 August 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/?p=261761>.

¹⁹ US Sixth Fleet, *American, French, Italian Carrier Strike Groups Sail Together in the Mediterranean Sea*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/2925036>.

²⁰ "The Joint Deployment of Aircraft Carriers of Spain and the United States in the Ionian Sea", in *Defense and Aviation Blog*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.outono.net/elentir/2022/09/29/the-joint-deployment-of-aircraft-carriers-of-spain-and-the-united-states-in-the-ionian-sea>.

²¹ Italian Navy website: *European Carrier Group Interoperability Initiative – ECGII*, https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/facts/Pagine/ECGII_en.aspx.



region.²²

The US Navy and Marine Corps have also conducted combined amphibious operations in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Gulf of Aden for many years with five NATO countries – France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom.²³ Each of these allies, and also Türkiye following the activation in 2023 of the Anadolu amphibious assault ship/light aircraft carrier²⁴ (which was built in partnership with Spanish defence industry, are capable of conducting brigade-level and smaller amphibious operations. US Marine Corps Europe has actively promoted since 2016 enhancement of allied amphibious cooperation through the NATO Amphibious Leaders Expeditionary Symposium (ALES)²⁵ and since 2019, NATO has been examining ways to better utilise these forces in allied defence plans. These units comprised of large ships and onboard landing forces, have engaged in maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and noncombatant evacuation missions. European naval and marine forces have also been increasing combined amphibious exercises to enhance their ability to operate together effectively, including a recent exercise under the control of the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force.²⁶

Turkish naval and amphibious forces have grown significantly in recent years and demonstrated their ability to undertake a range of expeditionary operations in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf and Horn of Africa. Under the National Ship (MILGEM) project²⁷ more than 15 new vessels are planned for completion by the end of the decade including a mix of corvettes, frigates, destroyers and submarines. Turkish defence industry is also building warships for Pakistan, Malaysia and Ukraine.²⁸ The Anadolu, now serving as the Turkish Navy's flagship, can launch UAVs and VSTOL aircraft. The Turks are also building a full-sized aircraft carrier and a new class of submarines²⁹ both based on indigenous designs. The Turks have made

²² Suciu, Peter, "The UK, France, and Italy Coordinate an International Indo-Pacific Aircraft Carrier Operation", in *The Buzz*, 7 July 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/?p=447465>.

²³ Williams, J.D. et al., "Unlocking NATO's Amphibious Potential. Lessons from the Past, Insights for the Future", in *RAND Perspectives*, November 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA695-1.html>.

²⁴ Ozberk, Tayfun, "Turkish Navy Welcomes Its New Flagship, TCG Anadolu", in *Naval News*, 10 April 2023, <https://www.navalnews.com/?p=43765>.

²⁵ Hooker, Justin and Michael Meyer, "NATO Needs a Multinational Amphibious Task Force", in *USNI Proceedings*, Vol. 145/10/1,400 (October 2019), <https://www.usni.org/node/50969>.

²⁶ "Exercise CATAMARAN Phase of POLARIS 2025", in *Joint Forces News*, 7 June 2025, <https://www.joint-forces.com/?p=82927>.

²⁷ Nugent, Bob, "The MILGEM Programme: Turkish Naval Procurement and Exports", in *European Security & Defence*, 31 May 2023, <https://euro-sd.com/2023/05/articles/31367>.

²⁸ İstikbal, Deniz, "MILGEM's Rise: How Türkiye Is Building a Global Navy", in *Daily Sabah*, 20 November 2025, http://sabahdai.ly/_2hbg.

²⁹ Ozberk, Tayfun, "Turkish Navy Starts Construction of 3 Major Projects: MUGEM



impressive progress in the production of unmanned surface and unmanned underwater vehicles for maritime reconnaissance, mine countermeasure operations and fleet protection. The Turkish navy has cooperated effectively with the US and other NATO allies in maritime security and counterterrorism operations in the Mediterranean and counterpiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden. However, Ankara's engagements in Libya and Syria³⁰ serve as key elements of its efforts to expand its influence in the region and have reflected aspects of its balancing relations with Russia and NATO allies. Türkiye's interests in the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula³¹ are also sometimes at odds with those of its allies.

7 US COOPERATION WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

Going back to the initiation of the Barcelona Process in 1995, previous US administrations have welcomed EU efforts to promote development and stability in the Maghreb and the Western Mediterranean as Washington took the lead in managing the Arab Israeli conflict and various crises in the Eastern Mediterranean. Washington viewed this as helpful burden sharing in advancing mutual interests in the wider region.

Considering the Trump administration's hostile view of the activities of the European Union in and around its neighbourhood, it's unlikely to offer much support for the Pact for the Mediterranean³² or other aspects of the Union's regional engagement. However, the administration may appreciate aspects of the Pact's third pillar on security, preparedness and migration management to the extent that the EU takes on burdens of disaster assistance and countering terrorism and produces improvements on border security and constraining migration and smuggling. Given the style of its diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine this year, it's unlikely the Trump team would see much scope for cooperation on the Pact's proposed forum with the Southern Mediterranean countries on peace and stability. But there may be mutual interests in supporting implementation of any forthcoming resolution of the Morocco-Algeria conflict.

Aircraft Carrier, TF-2000 Destroyer, MILDEN Submarine", in *Naval News*, 2 January 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/?p=66509>.

³⁰ Badi, Emadeddin and Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Turkey's Syria and Libya Strategies Add up to a Mediterranean Power Play", in *MENASource*, 13 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=817612>.

³¹ Cafiero, Giorgio, "NATO Member Turkey Takes Role of 'Active Neutrality' in Red Sea Crisis", in *Responsible Statecraft*, 14 March 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/turkey-houthis-red-sea>.

³² European Commission, *Pact for the Mediterranean – One Sea, One Pact, One Future – A Shared Ambition for the Region*, 16 October 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2384.



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