

# Trump's Approach to Europe

by George Friedman - November 7, 2024

I intended to expand on [my column from earlier this week](#) on the conflict in the Middle East, but instead I think I'll address the foreign policy consequences of the U.S. election, which Donald Trump decisively won.

On the campaign trail, Trump focused on ending U.S. involvement in the Ukraine war. He has repeatedly said that the war is a European affair and that the responsibility for defending Ukraine is thus a European one, not an American one. He has, however, left open the possibility of extending U.S. support if it's in the U.S. interest.

The conventional wisdom is that Ukraine is of vital interest to the United States. Trump doesn't agree with this. Ukraine is of moderate interest but does not affect the future of the United States. For the Europeans, the appearance of Russia in Ukraine is a vital issue since Ukraine is in Europe. The conventional wisdom is not altogether false but does not weigh the necessities effectively.

But Trump considers Ukraine a European war because a Russian victory directly threatens Europe, not the U.S. heartland. Europe has a gross domestic product of over \$27 trillion, while the U.S. GDP is just slightly higher at \$29 trillion, so why can't Europe pay for the conflict itself? It's true that Europe does not possess the military assets needed to do so, but Trump sees this as just another excuse for having the U.S. foot the bill. For decades, this was a feature, not a bug, in the system. The structure of European defenses was created early in the Cold War. It was a time when Europe was shattered by World War II, when the U.S. was concerned that its own interests would suffer if Europe fell to the Soviet Union. The terminus of that train of thought is to pay whatever is necessary to defend Europe.

But time passes. Europe is now prosperous, heavily populated and, in theory, fully capable of defending itself. Yet European countries have not rebuilt their militaries, collectively or individually, to perform that task, and the U.S. continues to bear the financial brunt of the Continent's defense. Thus is the crux of Trump's argument: Put simply, he believes Europe is acting in bad faith. It isn't entirely new – Republicans have made such claims for years, and Trump himself noted it in his first presidency – but it isn't without merit.

Equally important is something Trump has not said: that there is no such thing as "Europe" except as a geographic concept. It is large, and it contains a multitude of nation-states and nations of people

that are linked, sometimes willingly, by a network of transnational organizations. This state of play breeds unpredictability and disunity. The basic idea of relationships between nations is somewhat at odds with the reality of Europe. This is an important point because when Trump talks about Europe and NATO, what he is really talking about is the U.S. relationship with Europe. His stance on Ukraine, then, is meant to force Europe to take responsibility for the war and, if it can't, to prove that its inability to do so means that the threat Russia poses isn't real.

Trump is skeptical of other alliances, too, and he said he will likely reexamine all of them, particularly legacy alliances without clear purpose, with the ultimate objective of minimizing U.S. exposure to wars. But changing entrenched policy is extremely difficult. Personally, I don't believe he will abandon the war in Ukraine outright; I believe he will have the U.S. remain in a supporting role while Europe takes the lead. Time will tell if he can impose his will.

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