Europe After the Pentagon's Decision

Although not unexpected, the Pentagon's October 29 announcement to scale down the U.S. military presence in Romania resonated widely across Europe. According to the statement issued by the U.S. Department of War and confirmed by Romanian authorities, the number of soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division stationed in Romania will be reduced by less than half – to roughly 1,000 troops. The Pentagon emphasized that this is not a withdrawal from Europe, but a posture adjustment, aligning deployments with current strategic priorities and emerging challenges.

This marks the first tangible indication of the U.S. administration's evolving approach toward its military footprint in Europe – shifting from a forward-stationed presence to a flexible, readiness-based posture capable of rapid force projection when required. The change represents both a test of NATO's resilience and cohesion, and a clear signal of Washington's intent to increase allied burden-sharing in Europe's defense.

The central question is therefore not how NATO will respond, but whether the Alliance can sustain its current security architecture under President Donald Trump's vision of a more balanced distribution of responsibilities – and which European partners are truly prepared to bear the real costs of that transition.

It is worth noting that the Pentagon's decision may represent a turning point not only for Romania but for the entire Central European region. Several analysts had anticipated that, following the release of the forthcoming National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States could reduce its military footprint in Europe by as much as 30 percent.

At the same time, it should be underscored that – depending on current rotations and training cycles – the United States continues to maintain between 80,000 and 100,000 troops on the continent, a significantly higher figure than before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

This shift can be examined at three distinct levels. At the strategic level, it may signal a strengthening of NATO's northeastern flank – anchored by Poland and the Baltic States – potentially at the expense of the Black Sea region. Politically, it reflects a return to the doctrine of selective engagement, under which the United States maintains its alliance commitments but increasingly expects its partners to assume a larger share of costs and responsibilities.

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Symbolically, it may mark the transition from an era of passive dependence to one of shared responsibility, in which Europe not only invests more but also takes greater ownership of its own defense. Washington's long-term objective is to establish a model in which Europe provides for its conventional defense, while the United States continues to guarantee strategic deterrence through its nuclear umbrella.

Global Context of the U.S. Decision

The U.S. administration is currently finalizing three strategic documents that will shape national security policy and guide the future development of the armed forces: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Global Force Posture Review (GFPR), which assesses the global distribution of U.S. forces. The purpose of these documents is to align U.S. deployments with evolving strategic priorities and the spectrum of emerging threats.

Among these priorities – beyond the continued requirement for deterrence in Europe – are the consolidation of U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific and the growing need to defend the U.S. homeland against transnational threats such as drug cartels, smuggling networks, and challenges along the southern border. Although the details of these strategies have not yet been made public, they are widely expected to reinforce America's posture in Asia, particularly through expanded logistical, intelligence, and transport capabilities in the South China Sea region. The Indo-Pacific has become one of the primary theaters of strategic competition with China.

Washington stresses, however, that this is not a withdrawal from Europe, but part of a broader posture adjustment aimed at maintaining global readiness while increasing flexibility in force distribution. The adjustment also carries a fiscal rationale: sustaining a large and permanent U.S. presence in Europe requires billions in expenditures, and under current budgetary constraints the administration seeks to rationalize costs without diminishing deterrence.

The position of President Donald Trump's key advisers – Robert O'Brien and Douglas Macgregor – is also highly relevant. Both have long advocated limiting the U.S. military footprint in regions where allied nations possess credible self-defense capabilities. In this context, the Pentagon's decision to reduce troop rotations in Romania should be viewed as part of the broader strategic direction set by the White House.

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Notably, this move has drawn criticism from several Republican lawmakers, including Senator Roger Wicker, chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, and Representative Mike Rogers, who leads the House Armed Services Committee.

From NATO's perspective, the reduction of U.S. rotational forces in Romania – provided it remains a limited adjustment – should not undermine the Alliance's overall stability. The multinational battalion stationed in Romania is commanded by France, with European forces forming its core. However, this may well be the first in a series of decisions to scale back the U.S. footprint on the continent, creating a need to adapt NATO's defense posture to new realities.

U.S. European Command (EUCOM) continues to emphasize its high readiness for rapid redeployment between bases, yet smaller troop numbers inevitably shift a greater share of responsibility onto European allies. The discussion at the NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025, building on the conclusions of the 2024 Washington Summit, confirmed this logic. Allies agreed that each NATO flank must maintain its own first-response readiness, while U.S. forces provide the second wave of strategic reinforcement. In practical terms, NATO is expected to deter collectively but defend locally.

Given the global challenges confronting the United States and the parallel need to rationalize defense expenditures, this policy shift should come as no surprise. The actual U.S. troop presence in Europe is now more than 20 percent higher than it was before 2022, though its structure is evolving. While the current plan envisions a modest reduction in overall troop numbers, U.S. officials have emphasized the maintenance -and even enhancement – of force quality.

In place of permanent bases and long-term deployments, Washington is advancing a rotational model built on mobility and operational flexibility. It is worth noting that Poland, both President Karol Nawrocki and members of his government, has consistently advocated for the establishment of a permanent U.S. base on Polish soil, highlighting the logistical and social advantages such a decision would bring.

In parallel, the United States is focusing increasingly on its second major theater of operations – the Indo-Pacific. Under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, base infrastructure is being expanded, while U.S. military presence in Japan and Australia continues to grow. At the same time, Washington is integrating intelligence, surveillance, and communications systems

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into a new "deterrence chain" aimed at countering China's regional ambitions.

Europe remains a critical pillar of U.S. strategy but no longer its central theater. The drawdown of forces in Romania – and potentially in other European countries – fits squarely within the logic of aligning U.S. engagement levels with updated foreign policy and national security priorities.

Poland in the New Security Architecture

The U.S. decision to reduce troop levels in Romania does not automatically imply a weakening of NATO's eastern flank. It is more accurately understood as a shift in the center of gravity. While any reduction in allied forces along the eastern flank carries inherent risks, this development must be viewed in the context of Poland's expanding role in regional security.

For Poland, the issue goes well beyond the 10,000 to 12,000 U.S. troops currently stationed on its territory. It also encompasses a series of major infrastructure projects that enhance the region's overall operational capacity. These include the completion of key elements of the Powidz complex (Army Prepositioned Stocks-2), activation of the Aegis Ashore missile defense system in Redzikowo, and ongoing expansion of facilities in Drawsko Pomorskie. The volume of U.S.-made equipment entering service with the Polish Armed Forces continues to grow, boosting not only interoperability but also the collective defense potential of NATO's eastern flank. As a result, Poland is evolving from a frontline state into a genuine operational hub, reinforcing the Alliance's posture across the region.

In parallel, Poland's expanding civilian infrastructure enhances national resilience and complements its military capabilities. This includes not only the LNG terminal in Świnoujście and the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline, but also the modernization of key railway corridors and the planned construction of an oil pipeline linking Poland and Germany – projects designed to strengthen logistics capacity during crises and diversify energy supplies.

At the same time, the localization of U.S.-origin defense systems used by the Polish Armed Forces is steadily advancing. In Poznań, a Regional Maintenance Center for Abrams tanks is under development, while the HOMAR-A and HIMARS programs envision launcher integration on Polish chassis and the participation of Polish Armaments Group (PGZ) companies in component assembly. Both technology transfer and the establishment of a regional service and production hub for U.S.

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equipment in Poland are critical to achieving long-term operational independence and industrial depth.

At the same time, the expanding interoperability between the Polish Armed Forces and U.S. forces – rooted in the use of American-made equipment – warrants evaluation from two complementary perspectives. On one hand, it reflects the strength of transatlantic relations and a steadily growing level of mutual trust between Warsaw and Washington. Between 2024 and 2025 alone, Poland participated in dozens of joint exercises with U.S. forces, including the Steadfast Defender 2024, Cyber Flag 25-2, and Iron Defender 25 series.

On the other hand, this close integration raises questions about the scope of Polish authority over infrastructure and territories used by U.S. forces, as well as jurisdictional issues concerning those areas. Such risks, however, are mitigated by ongoing investments in national command and communications systems, the expansion of Poland's cyber forces, and new defense-capability initiatives such as the East Shield program.

Poland is also gradually redefining its role within NATO. From a security beneficiary and executor of alliance decisions, it is becoming one of the organization's genuine decision-makers, assuming an increasing share of responsibility for coordination across the eastern flank. This evolution is particularly evident in Poland's leadership within the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine, which Warsaw seeks to expand into a broader framework – Informally referred to as the "Warsaw Thirteen" – to include the Nordic countries.

A similar pattern can be seen in Poland's bilateral outreach. Warsaw is deepening regional cooperation, signing, among other instruments, memoranda on logistics and energy cooperation with Lithuania and Estonia, thereby creating a denser web of regional interconnections. From a frontline state, Poland is steadily transforming into a coordinator of institutional initiatives: it now spends the highest share of GDP on defense among NATO members and has shown readiness to assume growing commitments toward its allies.

This proactive approach contrasts sharply with that of certain partners – most notably Germany – which continue to favor multilateral caution built on political declarations. Poland, by contrast, prioritizes the development of tangible defense capabilities and mutual operational support. Increasingly, it is Warsaw, not Berlin, that serves as the regional reference point for NATO defense planning.

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The Key Role of President Karol Nawrocki

Since the beginning of his tenure, President Karol Nawrocki has consistently prioritized strengthening the transatlantic pillar of Poland's national security policy. His engagement with the White House has been regular and substantive, and his decision to make Washington the destination of his first foreign visit was meant to underscore not only the durability of the U.S.-Polish alliance but also the importance he personally attaches to relations with the United States.

This cooperation had been cultivated even before Nawrocki formally assumed office. His bilateral meeting on September 3 was followed by frequent phone consultations – among them, after the violation of Polish airspace by Russian drones a few days later – and a discussion on the sidelines of the 80th UN General Assembly in New York. The frequency and tone of these interactions directly influence how Poland is perceived in Washington.

Both the White House and the Department of War have repeatedly emphasized in official communications that Poland remains one of America's most important allies. In U.S. strategic assessments, Poland is described as the linchpin of NATO's eastern flank and, alongside the United Kingdom, a key security partner in Europe. This recognition is not only a reflection of Warsaw's performance but also the result of President Nawrocki's deliberate strategy to present Poland as a predictable, stable, and trustworthy ally.

Polish-American cooperation also extends into the economic and technological domains. Beyond the obvious defense programs, civil nuclear energy has become a key area of collaboration. In partnership with U.S. firms and using Westinghouse technology, Poland is constructing its first nuclear power plant. At the same time, the Orlen Synthos Green Energy and GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy partnership is advancing a program for small modular reactors (SMRs).

As a result, the practical dimension of transatlantic relations increasingly transcends the military sphere, positioning Poland as one of the United States' most significant economic and technological partners in Europe.

The close relationship between President Nawrocki and President Donald Trump, beyond its personal dimension, rests on a shared understanding of the allies' role and the need for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own security. On one hand, Washington continues to emphasize the importance of stronger European

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defense capabilities and higher defense spending. On the other, Poland stands as a model in this regard – demonstrating genuine responsibility and an active coordinating role along NATO's eastern flank.

In doing so, Poland reinforces its reputation as a predictable and effective partner, in contrast to Berlin's approach of balancing between Paris and Washington. Warsaw's clear alignment with the transatlantic partnership stems not from sentiment, but from strategic calculation: Poland is secure when the United States is present, and it gains influence when it can translate that presence into the growth of its own defense capabilities – for the benefit not only of itself, but of the entire region.

Strategic Implications for Poland

The shift in the United States' approach to its global role means that Poland must also redefine its objectives and methods of engagement within NATO and regional alliances. President Donald Trump's declared intention to maintain – and potentially increase – the current level of U.S. military presence in Poland represents not only a guarantee of security but also a responsibility. Washington increasingly views Warsaw not merely as an operational base – a role Poland has effectively fulfilled since February 2022 – but as a regional hub for coordinating allied activities.

This evolution requires Poland to move beyond political declarations and invest sustainably in the development of national defense capabilities, the modernization of its armed forces, the buildup of reserves, and the expansion of critical infrastructure. At the same time, in today's unstable international environment, security policy should remain as insulated as possible from domestic political disputes.

Equally important is the institutional consolidation of the U.S.-Polish alliance – one that extends beyond the personal relationship between President Karol Nawrocki and President Donald Trump. In this context, the nomination of Poland's ambassador to Washington becomes particularly significant. The candidate should command the confidence of both the government and the head of state. Following the presentation of credentials by the new U.S. ambassador, Tom Rose, the current asymmetry between the two embassies has become apparent and could carry diplomatic implications if left unaddressed.

At the same time, it remains essential to strengthen the formal mechanisms of

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transatlantic cooperation under the 2020 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the Host Nation Support framework, and the potential introduction of targeted ITAR relief for Poland. The latter initiative, in particular, would mark a significant qualitative step forward – enabling faster and broader access to U.S. military technologies and defense systems.

Poland must also continue to strengthen its resilience – not only in the military domain, but also at the institutional and societal levels. In this regard, the recommendations developed by the Sobieski Institute and the Eastern Flank Institute are particularly valuable. They include proposals for implementing a national service program, reinforcing the domestic defense industry, and engaging the private sector in building long-term strategic resilience.

From these analyses emerge the key strategic recommendations for Poland:

1. **Maintain defense spending at the highest sustainable level**, while leveraging instruments under the EU's SAFE program to finance the modernization of the Polish Armed Forces.
2. **Deepen the institutional dimension of transatlantic cooperation** through permanent coordination mechanisms between the Ministry of National Defense and the U.S. Department of Defense, and pursue relief from U.S. ITAR restrictions.
3. **Strengthen the domestic defense industry and secure supply chains**, utilizing technology transfers from the United States and NATO allies.
4. **Give real operational content to regional initiatives** such as the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine, transforming them into effective instruments for coordinating defense efforts along NATO's eastern flank.
5. **Foster strategic culture and societal resilience**, recognizing that security depends largely on civic awareness and institutional strength.

Conclusion

The Pentagon's decision to reduce the U.S. military presence in Romania does not, in itself, have a decisive impact on regional security. However, it is reasonable to expect that this will not be the last such adjustment in the coming months. The development should be viewed not solely through the lens of its local implications, but within the broader context of the United States' redefinition of its global role.

What the Pentagon calls a "technical adjustment" is, in practice, a recalibration of

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America’s posture in Europe to align with new strategic priorities and the real capabilities of its allies. This means that Europe will increasingly need to strengthen its own defense capacities and assume greater responsibility for regional security.

In this context, Poland’s role is naturally expanding. The country is evolving from a frontline state into one of the key coordination centers for NATO’s eastern flank. These ambitions are increasingly visible – both in President Karol Nawrocki’s policies and, to some extent, in the actions of government institutions.

However, translating these ambitions into a tangible increase in Poland’s strategic weight requires effective cooperation and coherence among the country’s centers of power. National security policy must remain insulated from partisan competition and grounded in a broad, national consensus.

The close and trust-based relationship between Presidents Nawrocki and Trump undoubtedly strengthens Poland’s position. Their frequent interactions and shared understanding of allied responsibility are reflected in the U.S. decision to maintain – and potentially even increase – the number of American troops stationed in Poland. Yet this development also entails a commitment: as Poland’s role within NATO grows, so too does the scope of responsibility Warsaw must assume.

Poland now has an opportunity to become one of the pillars of NATO’s cohesion – a nation that not only benefits from security guarantees but also actively shapes the mechanisms through which they are implemented. By strengthening its military capabilities, defense industry, and infrastructure, while simultaneously deepening transatlantic cooperation, Poland is emerging not merely as a key state on NATO’s eastern flank, but as one of its operational, decision-making, and planning centers.

The Sobieski Institute publishes commentary in both Polish and English to support the strategic debate at home and to present the Polish perspective to international partners. Both versions of this text are based on the same data and conclusions but differ in style and emphasis, tailored to readers in Poland and in the international environment.

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