



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 8, 2023

Former Pentagon Chief Says Trump Will Leave NATO

Former U.S. President Donald Trump will remove American support for Ukraine if elected next year, setting in motion a series of events that would lead to the crumbling of NATO, former Defense Secretary Mark Esper has asserted.

In an interview with MSNBC on December 7, Esper, who headed the Pentagon from July 2019 to November 2020, was questioned on how a possible Trump presidency next year would affect NATO.

“I think one of the first things that would happen is he would withdraw support for Ukraine,” Esper replied. “And of course if that were to happen, the whole effort to support Ukraine in its war with Russia would eventually crumble. The United States is like the big block in the Jenga tower; you pull us out and everything collapses.”



AP Images

Trump has repeatedly pledged that he would end the conflict in Ukraine “within 24 hours” of his inauguration, should he beat current U.S. President Joe Biden in next year’s election. Moreover, the former president has indicated that he would leverage military aid to cut off the flow of weapons to Kyiv, effectively forcing the latter to negotiate with Moscow.

“His next move would be to begin pulling us out of NATO, certainly troops out of NATO countries,” Esper told MSNBC. “And eventually that could cause the collapse of the alliance ... and the next — does he start looking, as he would discuss with me and others at the time — does he look to pull troops out of Korea, out of Japan, out of other countries that are allied with us?”

Throughout his presidency, Trump lambasted NATO’s European members, castigating them for freeloading off the United States’ massive military presence on the continent while failing to meet the bloc’s requirements to spend two percent of GDP on defense. Trump used NATO’s yearly summits to pressure European leaders into boosting their military spending.

According to media reports, Trump also maintained that South Korea and Japan should pay the United States more to keep its forces based in both countries. While Trump conducted military strikes on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, he attempted to withdraw American troops from all three countries and declared that he did not want U.S. troops “to be the policemen of the world.”

With the 2024 election less than a year away and Trump leading Biden in most polls, a variety of newspaper articles and op-eds have been published in recent days alleging — often without evidence — that the former president would [abandon NATO, sic the military](#) on protesters, and try to [install himself](#) as “president for life” if successful in 2024. All of the articles’ authors were eminent opponents of Trump during his presidency.



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Two months before Esper's interview, anonymous sources told *Rolling Stone* that Trump and his advisors have discussed pulling the United States out of NATO, or at least drastically reducing Washington's commitment to the pact, if he defeats Biden. According to the magazine, Trump told his team that his second administration would not be staffed by "NATO lovers."

In October, *Rolling Stone* cited two sources who allegedly heard Trump make the aforementioned comments, claiming that Trump has voiced openness to leaving NATO altogether, or remaining in the military alliance if its European members ramp up their defense spending and remove Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which treats an attack on one member state as an attack on all 31.

"Starting World War III" over some of the bloc's smaller members makes no sense, Trump lamented to his advisors in mid-2018, contending that most Americans had never even heard of some of these countries.

Attributed to a "former senior administration official," this anecdote reinforced what former National Security Advisor John Bolton told the [Washington Post](#) in 2022, i.e., that Trump was ready to announce the U.S. departure from NATO at the bloc's 2018 summit, but ultimately backed down on Bolton's advice.

"In a second Trump term, I think he may well have withdrawn from NATO," Bolton said at the time.

With conflict underway in Ukraine and NATO's Eastern European and Baltic members calling for the bloc to increase military aid to Kyiv, Trump has repeatedly warned of the likelihood of "World War III" breaking out in Europe. If elected, Trump has promised to remove military aid to Ukraine and force President Volodymyr Zelensky to negotiate a peace deal with Russia.

In a campaign video published earlier this year, Trump blamed the conflict on "all the warmongers and 'America Last' globalists in the Deep State, the Pentagon, the State Department and the national security industrial complex," who he claimed were "obsessed with pushing Ukraine towards NATO."

The *Rolling Stone* sources said that Trump studied a policy proposal by conservative writer Dr. Sumantra Maitra earlier this year titled "Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO" and liked some of its ideas. In the paper, Maitra wrote that "the NATO bureaucracy" is "prone to push missions that are beyond NATO's core role and, at times, opposed to the domestic interests of the United States. Radically reducing the NATO bureaucracy should be a chief aim."

One Trump adviser told *Rolling Stone* that Trump might not actually follow through on this desire, but "wants a policy team around him nowadays that is much, much tougher on NATO than anything he's done in the past."

In October, Trump contended that the United States was sleepwalking into a new global conflict as Biden has no idea where he is leading the country.

Writing on Truth Social, Trump stated that "we are heading to World War III because of grossly incompetent leadership, headed by a President that doesn't have a clue."

Nonetheless, Trump mockingly praised Biden for joining Truth Social, a platform that he founded after he was banned on Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) in 2021 following the January 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol. "Congratulations Joe, at least, on that!" he quipped.

The Biden presidential campaign opened a Truth Social account called Biden-Harris HQ with a banner image reading "Malarkey ends here" recently. Posting on X, the president's team said they did that "mostly because we thought it would be very funny."



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“Well. Let’s see how this goes. Converts welcome!” the campaign wrote in its first post on the platform. Trump, who is regarded as the likely candidate for the Republican nomination in the 2024 presidential election, has repeatedly slammed Biden over his foreign-policy decisions, most notably on Ukraine, warning that arms shipments to Kyiv could ignite a global conflict.

Earlier this year, the former U.S. president also indicated that if he “were president, the Russia/Ukraine war would never have happened.” He also added that even if it did, he “would be able to negotiate an end to this horrible and rapidly escalating war within 24 hours.” Regarding these remarks, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov noted that Trump was “not far away from the truth” in the sense that the United States, which has been Kyiv’s key backer, could have quickly put an end to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.



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