Manoj Mohanan:

In the coming weeks, the United States foreign policy will be undergoing an adjustment as President Trump returns to the White House after a four-year hiatus. Coming with Trump is a revival of his America first approach, which prioritizes United States' interests, a strategy that critics often say comes at the expense of international allies and multilateral commitments. One of the alliances that has come under scrutiny in Trump's first term and will likely face even greater challenges in his second, is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, also known as NATO. I'm Manoj Mohanan, Interim Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Welcome to Policy 360. To help us better understand the implications of a second Trump term on NATO and the world, we are joined by Duke Professor Susan Colborn, a historian specializing in NATO. She's the author of Euro Missiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO, and she's also Associate Director of the Duke Program in American Grand Strategy. Thank you for joining us, Susie.

Susan Colborn:

Thank you for having me.

Manoj Mohanan:

Well, let's start by setting the stage. Many experts and practitioners have labeled NATO as the most powerful and successful security alliance in history, and since you are currently working on a book on the evolution of NATO, let's go back to the beginning. Can you help our listeners understand how it started and what its main purpose was?

Susan Colborn:

Absolutely. So NATO is a product of the immediate period after World War II. So it's over 75 years old now. It's part of why it has been called so successful, so enduring. The Alliance was really a project that policymakers in Europe and in North America pursued, because of their own recent lived experiences. If you were a policymaker in 1946 or 1947 or 1948, you had lived through and maybe fought in the First World War, and then you had lived through the Second World War.

If you were European, that meant that your homes, your neighbor's homes, your town, your country had probably been destroyed by that war. And so, understandably, you were desperate not to see that happen again. And in that immediate period after the war, there is concern about two big things, but both of them really about communism, right? You had had a wartime alliance, where the Soviet Union fought alongside Great Britain, the United States and the other Allies to defeat Nazi Germany. But that alliance starts to break down. And the old anxieties about communism as an ideology that had been popular in the interwar years, those start to seep back in.

The fact that the Soviet Union comes to dominate most of Eastern Europe and changes their system of rule doesn't help. And so, you have this growing concern that communism will gain ground, that the Soviets might put pressure on governments to change, but that also the poverty across Western Europe, the destruction of the war might make it fertile ground for Western Europe to become communist. And so, Allied leaders, people like British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, start to come up with plans for some sort of collective mechanism, really looking to pool the strength of all of the countries of Western Europe, and critically to have the power of the United States underpin that.

And so, it's about building up confidence, harnessing the sort of spiritual resources, this is the phrase Bevin used to use a lot. And so, it's those conversations that form the backbone of the North Atlantic Treaty that ends up signed in April of 1949, between Canada, the United States, and 10 countries across

Western Europe. And it's premised in part on a fear of the Soviet Union, and in part the hope that collective strength that pooling their capabilities will help create a safer world order and preserve the peace.

Manoj Mohanan:

Wonderful. So since then, has the purpose evolved? And NATO, I believe has also grown a little bit since then as well?

Susan Colborn:

Yeah, NATO has grown more than a little bit. So from that original 12, NATO is now 32. So more than double, we got a few more states, including many former adversaries, who used to be members of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. There's a really common quip that is often used to explain NATO's purpose or goals, that it was designed to keep the Soviets out, the Americans in and the Germans down. This is always attributed to the first leader of NATO, the first Secretary General, Lord Ismay. He never actually said this, but it is a really good shorthand, because even though Ismay didn't say it, many of his successors did. And those ideas appear time and again, both during the Cold War and after, to explain why many see NATO as so valuable.

Manoj Mohanan:

So in terms of being valuable in today's geopolitics, you mentioned, if I recall correctly, the role of the us, the Soviet Union and Germany, and all the roles have changed. So in today's geopolitics, what is the role of NATO? Is it still important? How should we think of it?

Susan Colborn:

Yeah, I think there are a few different ways that we could answer this question. The first is that NATO, since its founding, has really come to form a critical cornerstone of the international order more broadly. And so, the world we know is one where NATO plays a central organizing function, it helps coordinate countries in the transatlantic space. It serves as an actor that helps experts convene, that helps tackle a wide range of topics from climate change to cybersecurity. But it also speaks to broader underlying partnerships. For the United States, I think the United States still has an interest in the same things that drove it to be invested in NATO 70 years ago. It has an interest in a prosperous, stable Europe, with whom the United States can trade, right? The European Union is a market of 450 million people. That is a big market that matters deeply for the United States.

Manoj Mohanan:

And so, for our listeners, what might surprise our listeners, one thing when it comes to NATO and the role it plays in the world, something that most people might not know about?

Susan Colborn:

I think one thing that might surprise folks is that there's a lot of talk right now about NATO focusing on climate change, that this is a new issue. But NATO in the late 1960s and early 1970s formed a whole committee to deal with what they called the challenges of modern society, which included scientific exploration to deal with things like climate change. And so, this was a product pioneered at NATO's 20th anniversary in 1969. So this is the Nixon administration.

Manoj Mohanan:

Right.

Susan Colborn:

Maybe not someone we often associate with pioneering environmental and climate change related things, but so there's a long history of even these things that seem new. NATO has been involved in a wide array of activities for many years.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fascinating. Well, going back to the point we started with today, which is Trump's reelection, so much of the recent discussion on NATO is centered around the uncertainty of the alliance's future, given Trump's reelection and the agenda that the administration has stated will be coming up for the next four years. So Trump has leveled harsh criticism on NATO, as you know, but as your book Euro Missiles highlights, these uncertainties and criticisms are not necessarily new. In fact, they almost destroyed NATO at one point. So can you tell us a little more about the threats that NATO has seen in the past, the parallels between previous administration's approach to NATO and the Trump administration's upcoming approach, if you can foresee that?

Susan Colborn:

Yeah, absolutely. I think when we think about NATO as an alliance and what might threaten it, it's in many respects a very fragile institution. Whether it is the original size of 12 or its current size of 32, it is made up of independent nation states, and all of them have their own domestic political debates and priorities, and outlooks shaped by differences in history, tradition, and the like. It's a really complicated organization and that means that there is a lot of friction.

Over the years, there has been friction about plenty of things. About the best strategy to deter the Soviet Union or prevent war, whether or not to add new members, whether or not to engage outside the treaty area. So outside the North Atlantic, they've debated about everything. Some of those debates have been small, some of those debates have been large. But there's a reason why historians of NATO often joke that the history of the Alliance is really a history of crisis. The greatest source of continuity is that the Alliance is always in some form of crisis, but that doesn't mean that every crisis is created equal.

And this is I think where Trump and Trump's re-election poses some interesting challenges for anyone trying to figure out what's next, is to what extent he and the issues he raises will inflame or pick at old scars, but will ultimately be fleeting challenges, and in what ways his approach or style or his priorities might actually pose new challenges.

And so, when I think about what Trump, the sort of Trump approach, I see one major similarity that I would put Trump in a long line, and then maybe two major differences that I would flag. The similarity is in the burden sharing space, if you turn on the news, if we think about the common critiques, Trump has leveled against the alliance. It is often that the European allies, the Canadians, they're not paying their fair share. They should pay more. We all know this soundbite. We've heard it since 2015. It's a very popular one. That issue is one that virtually every one of Donald Trump's predecessors as President of the United States, it's a charge that virtually all of them have made.

Manoj Mohanan:

I see.

Susan Colborn:

Democrats and Republicans alike, back to Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s. And so, that concern about the degree to which the United States is shouldering the burden in the alliance, that's a really old issue. And there, Trump has a striking continuity with his predecessors, but this is where the differences really matter. Trump's style it seems to me is very different. The way he conveys his frustration with that, the sources, why he is frustrated about burden sharing, seem very different than a John F. Kennedy or a Ronald Reagan, or a Barack Obama.

And that style, the sort of public brow-beating that he has become so famous for, really threatens to do long-term and lasting damage to some of the foundational elements that bind the allies together. And there I'm thinking about really fuzzy stuff. The alliance is this big sprawling bureaucracy, but its fundamental core is actually about confidence and trust and faith. The core of the treaty is article V, the premise that an attack on one will be seen as an attack on all. Well, when Donald Trump goes on the news and says, "Why should we defend Montenegro?"

A thing that he did in his first term, he understandably chips away at that trust for many people. And so, that style has the potential to do long-term damage. And I think that's particularly so, because Trump has made it very clear that his general outlook is one that we might describe as transactional. He sees the relationship not as a pooling of collective strength or a coming together, that there's a solidarity. He tends to see it as a, "I do this for you and you do this for me."

Manoj Mohanan:

As a deal.

Susan Colborn:

It's a deal. He loves the deal, the art of the deal, and NATO is no different. And that is remarkably consistent in Trump's thinking. We talk a lot about how he is uncertain and unpredictable, but there are a few issues on which he has remarkably consistent opinions, and this is one of them. In 1987, he took out full-page advertisement, paid nearly a hundred thousand dollars for a full-page advertisement in three different major newspapers, that was an open letter critical of US foreign policy for paying to defend countries that could pay to defend themselves.

So over 30 years, that he has done this. In the context of the '80s, his main target was Japan. But the same logic we can easily see applying to the Europeans that he is so fond of criticizing. The one other thing that leaves me with questions about much, about what we might see in Trump's second term is the clear differences of personnel between his first term and his second term. So in his first term, at least with respect to NATO, he appointed people who had pretty traditional US foreign policy views.

The ambassador to NATO that he appointed and sent to Brussels was K. Bailey Hutchison, a prominent senator from Texas. And so, his second term appointees don't seem cut from quite the same cloth. And so, there is the potential for even some big daylight between Trump one and Trump two based on that. But I think that's a little bit of reading the tea leaves right now.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah, yeah. Well, we'll have to wait for a few more weeks to see how this plays out.

Susan Colborn:

Exactly.

Manoj Mohanan:

So in a recent talk, this is keeping with the topic you were just talking about, the alliance and its members. This talk you gave at Notre Dame International Security Center, you said, and I'm quoting here, "NATO is an alliance of unequal equals." Tell us more what you mean by that, and is it about the financial burden that the members carry, or is there some other aspect to it as well?

Susan Colborn:

So part of it is financial, but part of it is about the general structures of how the alliance operates. So if you go to the headquarters in Brussels and you happened to be there for a meeting of the North Atlantic Council, the sort of central decision-making body there, you would see representatives gathered around a table and each one of them would be sitting behind a placard. And you all get a seat around the same table, whether you are Iceland or you are the United States, whether you are spending many millions on your defense or whether you have no standing army, right? You are equal. And the treaty makes no specification about types of membership.

Manoj Mohanan:

I see.

Susan Colborn:

Right? Some individual states make carve outs, but for the most part, everyone's membership looks the same. But of course we know in how the alliance functions that the United States is unquestionably the most powerful country in NATO. It has been since 1949. And so, the United States does wield more power than many of the other member states. If the United States presses on something, it's probably going to have a little bit more impact than if Luxembourg presses on something. So there's an interesting duality that the alliance operates on principles of consensus and of equality around the table, but international politics doesn't always work in that way. And so, they're trying to blend this equality and power imbalance into something that works.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. So let me ask you about the power, because in some sense we are talking about two aspects. One is the influence that the US has on foreign policy globally, and the second part is around the military might. So when we take an America first approach and say, "This is only our problem, we are going to invest in our own military," you might build the might. Do you worry that that also has the chance of diminishing our foreign policy impact, because of the alliance and the threat to the alliance as well?

Susan Colborn:

Yeah. There are a number of different ways that the United States wields power in the alliance. And I think even if we take military might as one source of power, how you wield that military power really matters. So in the old alliance framework or the traditional alliance framework of NATO, one of the key sources that has made the United States so influential, is that its nuclear arsenal has undergirded all deterrence. The United States when they signed the North Atlantic Treaty was the only nuclear power. Very quickly, the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb that same year.

But the premise has always been that the United States would extend the protection of those nuclear weapons to all of its allies across Western Europe and Canada. So having the capability alone is not enough, because if the United States decided to stop extending that deterrence, it creates a very

different security situation for all of the allies in Western Europe. And though the United States is no longer the only nuclear power in NATO, both Britain and France have nuclear capabilities of their own, British and French nuclear arsenals are much smaller than American ones. And so, there is a potential to really reshape or do serious damage to the bargain by changing the messaging that an administration sends about when, where and how it might dedicate its military resources to the alliance.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you. So thinking about the US influence, I'm thinking about Ukraine. So the Russian invasion of Ukraine, February 22, alarmed all of our NATO allies. And two years later the war continues, and the US is far and away the largest primary funding source for Ukraine. But Trump's nominee for Secretary of State, Senator Marco Rubio, said in his confirmation hearing that ongoing aid to Ukraine is not, "realistic or prudent." So what would be the implications for Ukraine and NATO if the US reduces or cuts off its aid to Ukraine?

Susan Colborn:

I think there are a few levels of implications should the United States decide to cut off the aid that it has provided the Ukrainians. The first is of course for the Ukrainian war effort itself, though Ukraine has received support both in military aid and financial assistance from a number of countries, many dozens. The United States has played an outsized role, and the United States, particularly in forms of military assistance, is able to provide much more to the Ukrainians than other suppliers could. The Europeans, for instance, cannot easily backfill and take up the role that the United States has played. Should the Trump administration decide to walk away from that, that has clear knock-on consequences for the Ukrainians ability to fight and continue fighting the Russians. Most of the estimates suggest that the Ukrainians might be able to continue fighting to the end of the calendar year, to the end of 2025.

But those are estimates, and of course the Russians will still be able to continue waging their war. So there are, I think, clear concerning, at least from my vantage point, implications for the Ukrainian war effort. And then we need to set them, it seems to me in a larger context, it's sort of two levels. So one of the questions that I would have is about the terms on which or the context in which a Trump administration decision to cut off aid to Ukraine happens. We know that Trump has talked on the campaign trail about ending the war on day one.

Day one has come and gone, it has not been ended, but the administration is still talking about is sort of in the first a hundred days plan to broker a peace agreement. And the terms of that peace agreement, if the Trump administration pursues one will matter a lot for what the future of European security and what Ukraine's place in Europe looks like. And so, I think there's a bunch of unknowns there about what the administration decides to pursue. And then, there's a larger set of questions that maybe more directly relate to US foreign policy, which is what the impact of a decision to cut off aid might, what signal that sends to our allies, and also to US adversaries about US credibility, about the consequences of territorial wars of expansion. And those are sort of the rules of the road, the norms of the international system. And those I think have very, very broad and sweeping consequences, not just in Europe and European security. Of course, people have made a number of links to the message it might send say to China about Taiwan in the future.

Manoj Mohanan:

So you mentioned territorial expansion, which was what I was going to ask you about next. It's almost like you can read my mind, but Trump recently said that annexing Greenland, which is currently controlled by Denmark, is, and I quote, "an absolute necessity." So he cited its importance to America's

economic and national security, but do you see the connection and what's the connection in the concern that you have when you think about the imperialist approach towards annexing Greenland, and NATO priorities when it comes to US Arctic strategy in general?

Susan Colborn:

Yeah, I think there's a few pieces of Trump's talk about Greenland that are maybe a little bit concerning, but also have a longer history. The first I think, relates to this idea of territorial expansion. There's an element of Trump's rhetoric in the last few weeks that has been remarkably like the late-19th century, in his willingness to talk openly and of allies of his to talk openly about the desirability of territorial expansion. And Greenland, of course, is only one piece of these talking points, talking about the need to secure the Panama Canal, and that the deal made in the 1970s and the Carter administration to give back control of the Canal to the Panamanians was a mistake. He has joked openly about Canada being the 51st state and referred to the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a governor, as though he is the same as the governor of Texas or of North Carolina, or anywhere else.

And so, Greenland kind of fits in this broader loose talk of territorial expansion, which maybe takes us back to an older era of US foreign policy. But Greenland itself, I think then also raises some interesting questions about its strategic significance. And so, historically, Greenland has been seen as a strategically significant location for many US policymakers, was true in the Cold War, true during World War II and true today. And that's for a number of reasons. So the first is about the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap of, the GIUK gap, which is a choke point for Russian transit between the Arctic Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. So very strategically significant for how the Russians navigate Europe. Those navigation lanes are also opening up. We have the prospect of new shipping lanes as a result of climate change.

And so, there is a sort of interesting tension in Trump's emphasis on Greenland, because though he has been quite hesitant to acknowledge the climate change is a real national security problem or even a real problem, his emphasis sort of shows that they are attuned to the fact that climate change is creating new strategic problems. And Greenland is one case of that.

But as I said, that strategic significance has long been recognized in the lead up to the Second World War. Before the United States entered, American policymakers gradually expanded their definition of the Monroe Doctrine, the old 19th century doctrine, framing US sort of ownership, I use scare quotes around that, that the United States was the predominant force in the Western Hemisphere. They expanded their definition of the Western Hemisphere to include Greenland in the lead up to World War II, recognizing its strategic significance. When Harry Truman was president in 1946, his Secretary of State James Byrne made an offer to buy Greenland in gold and cash, an offer the Danes found incredibly insulting.

So some historical parallels there, but Trump, again, is not the first American President to recognize the importance of the Arctic. But the challenge it seems to me, and this comes back to something we talked about a few minutes ago, is that it's really emblematic of Trump's transactional style, right? He doesn't seem to be concerned about the fact that making an offer and that publicly saying you're going to buy Greenland from a treaty ally, he doesn't seem concerned about any friction that might cause in the US relationship with Denmark. It doesn't matter that the Danes sent soldiers to Afghanistan, that Danes were lost in combat. Those old ties, those are sentimental fluff to Trump. And so, it does give us a good sort of capsule of some of the trends we're dealing with and how he thinks about alliances.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fascinating. So before we wrap up, I have one more question for you, a million-dollar question, if you will. So if you can put on your magical cap that allows you to see into the future, given all the concerns we have about the NATO alliance, if you were to give the incoming Trump administration and the future Secretary of State about some advice when it comes to dealing with NATO, what would that advice look like?

Susan Colborn:

I think my message would be an incredibly simple one, which is that the very fact of having an alliance like NATO, made up of voluntary association of like-minded countries is an unparalleled asset and a force multiplier, right? US adversaries do not have comparable alliances or arrangements or alignments. There's a lot of talk right now about the axis of autocrats or whatever the sort of term of the day is, linking Russia and China and North Korea and Iran. But those are, in many respects, transactional relationships.

Having an alliance that is deeply embedded is a force multiplier in every respect, diplomatic, economic, military, cultural, normative. And so, the balance sheet, who pays what, is not the end all and be all way to judge how valuable, how much benefit the United States gets and its interests get from the alliance. And I think that's particularly important today as the incoming administration is talking about a pivot to Asia, right? They're not the first, but they're going to be the latest to talk about a pivot to Asia, to focusing on China as the pacing challenge, as the biggest threat. Having allies, a market of 450 million people allied with you is huge, right? It's not worth throwing it away in the name of making a sort of false either or choice.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you. I hope our policy policymakers will listen into this podcast. And thank you so much for joining me today, Susie. It's also particularly insightful hearing your comments today being January 21st, the first day after the new President was inaugurated yesterday. For our listeners, Susie Colborn is an associate research professor here at the Sanford School of Public Policy and Associate Director of the Duke Program in American Grand Strategy. Her most recent book is Euro Missiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO, and be on the lookout for her upcoming new book on NATO's history.

Susan Colborn:

Thanks for having me.

Manoj Mohanan:

And before we go, I also want to say thanks and goodbye to a master of public policy student, Quincy Foster, who has been working as a researcher and writer for this podcast for the last couple of semesters. And a big welcome to Rush Patel. He's also an MPP student and is our new contributing researcher and writer. And as always, thanks to our engineer Trey Matthews and longtime producer Carol Jackson. That's all for today. I'm Manoj Mohanan. Thanks so much for joining me.