

**ROMANIA: FROM “NATO 2.0” TO “NATO 3.0”
- STRATEGIC ELEMENTS OF ROMANIA’S NATIONAL
TRAJECTORY IN THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL
GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT –**

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Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of the North Atlantic Alliance from the conceptual paradigm of “NATO 2.0” to that of “NATO 3.0,” in the context of the transformations affecting the international security environment, driven by strategic competition among the major powers, the Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine, and the reconfiguration of the United States’ strategic priorities.*

The analysis highlights the implications of this transition for Romania, with particular emphasis on strengthening its role on NATO’s Eastern Flank, developing defense capabilities, enhancing national resilience, and leveraging its geostrategic position in the Black Sea region. The conclusions underscore that adaptation to the new security paradigm must be pursued in full alignment with the objectives of Romania’s National Defense Strategy for 2025–2029, by maintaining the Strategic Partnership with the United States, strengthening NATO’s European Pillar, and consolidating Romania’s position as a relevant actor within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Keywords: *“NATO 3.0,” Euro-Atlantic security, Romania, Eastern Flank, Black Sea, resilience, Romania - United States Strategic Partnership.*

DOI 10.56082/annalsarscimilit.2026.3.86

I. Prolegomena

National security is an essential concept for the existence and sovereignty of any state, defining its capacity to protect its system of values, institutions, territory and, above all, its population against threats of either an internal or external nature. Situated at the intersection of major geostrategic interests in the Black Sea region, Romania shapes its security policy in accordance with the dynamics and evolution of the international environment. Thus, the Strategic Partnership with the United States and membership of the European Union constitute two essential pillars of Romania’s foreign and security policy. This paper analyses Romania’s position in the transition from “NATO 2.0” to “NATO 3.0,” highlighting

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both the areas of convergence and the challenges involved in maintaining an effective strategic balance.

The international order has undergone significant changes in recent years. The international system has evolved from the bipolar dynamics of the Cold War towards a multipolar world in which major powers such as the United States, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation and the European Union compete for influence and power. The *Joint White Paper for European Defense Readiness 2030* itself outlines the main security challenges facing EU Member States. The document was first published on March 19, 2025. Its introduction states that "a new international order will be formed in the second half of this decade."¹ Security threats generated by actors outside the European Union have had a profound impact on the European political system, while also adversely affecting economic growth, as "people are concerned about the consequences of the breakdown of the international order caused by hostile actors."² The White Paper identifies the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China as states posing threats to European security, while also highlighting the importance of trade relations between the People's Republic of China and most European countries.

This constantly evolving environment has presented NATO with new challenges. Although NATO was originally established to counter the Soviet threat, it has evolved into an organization which, while preserving its founding principle of collective defense, increasingly emphasizes Article 3 of the Washington Treaty, concerning the individual capacity of each member state to defend itself. President Donald Trump's return to office in 2025, together with his persistent skepticism regarding NATO's usefulness and the costs it entails for the United States, led to a fundamental reassessment of the Alliance. The concept of "NATO 2.0" was developed as a solution aligned with Donald Trump's vision, while simultaneously addressing Europe's growing need for greater autonomy.

II. What does the concept of "NATO 2.0" represents?

"NATO 2.0" represents a reformed Alliance that redefines the respective roles of the United States and Europe. Its main characteristics include:³

¹ European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defense Readiness 2030*, p. 1, available at: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/30b50d2c-49aa-4250-9ca6-27a0347cf009_en?filename=White%20Paper.pdf, accessed July 20, 2026.

² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³ Ingo Piepers, Understanding War Dynamics and Global Developments, "NATO 2.0: A New Foundation for Transatlantic Cooperation," January 11, 2025, available at: <https://global4cast.org/2025/01/nato-2-0-a-new-foundation-for-transatlantic-cooperation/>, accessed on July 20, 2026.

- **Greater responsibility for Europe:** European member states develop their defense capabilities and assume primary responsibility for their own security, including countering threats posed by the Russian Federation;
- **A reduced but still significant US role:** the United States scales back its direct operational involvement in Europe but continues to provide support in areas where Europe still lacks sufficient capabilities, such as strategic air power, advanced intelligence capabilities and nuclear deterrence;
- **Preservation of Article 5:** the collective defense clause remains fully intact, guaranteeing the security of all member states;
- **A European SACEUR:** the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), traditionally held by a US general, would eventually be assumed by a European general. This change would underscore Europe's growing responsibility for regional security while maintaining operational continuity;
- **Flexible cooperation:** Europe gains greater autonomy in regional defense planning, while the United States focuses on its priorities in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, with both sides maintaining a strong transatlantic partnership.

While the European Union has traditionally been established and perceived primarily as an economic instrument, against the backdrop of a major geopolitical crisis - the war in Ukraine - it has begun to emerge as an increasingly significant military actor. This development is partly attributable both to the United States' new policy towards the European security environment, characterized by a war unfolding on Europe's borders, and to Washington's at least permissive relationship with the Russian Federation. It also reflects the need for EU Member States to be adequately prepared in the event of an unwanted expansion or escalation of the conflict.

II.1. What benefits has "NATO 2.0" brought?

"NATO 2.0" has brought a series of benefits aimed at easing tensions between the United States and the European Union and providing the EU with new opportunities to transform in line with its own interests. The partial reduction of Europe's military dependence on the United States - through both the withdrawal of US troops from certain European bases and the increase in the share of GDP allocated to defense - has strengthened the capabilities of individual EU Member States and contributed to the development of a relationship based on *strategic hedging*.

In this context, Europe is moving towards greater strategic autonomy, as it has the opportunity to develop its defense capabilities and assume greater control over its own security policies. This strengthens

Europe's political and strategic autonomy while preserving the benefits of US support wherever necessary.⁴ At the same time, the cost of US involvement in European defense has been reduced, in line with Donald Trump's "America First" agenda. A smaller troop presence and fewer infrastructure commitments in Europe translate into significant cost savings.

At the same time, "NATO 2.0" has prevented a complete rupture between the United States and Europe by preserving transatlantic cooperation. The Alliance has maintained its solidarity and collaborative framework while respecting the autonomy and interests of each side. Last, but not least, the adaptation of roles was intended to enable NATO to respond more effectively to the complex challenges of a multipolar world. The United States has been able to focus, and continues to focus, on the People's Republic of China, the Indo-Pacific region and, more recently, the conflict in the Middle East, while Europe continues to manage stability at the regional level. In other words, this reflects a flexible approach to a multipolar world. Given their direct impact on Euro-Atlantic security, global actors such as the EU and NATO cooperate closely with partners in the region, collectively known as the *Indo-Pacific Four (IP4)* - Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand, - to maintain stability and uphold the *rules-based international order*.

Nevertheless, certain challenges, many of them readily foreseeable, have emerged and continue to persist.⁵ These include the time required to build capabilities, political divisions within Europe, trust and coordination among states and, above all, domestic opposition in the United States. Europe requires time to address its capability gaps in areas such as air power, cyber defense and nuclear deterrence. Moreover, not all European countries share the same vision regarding autonomy in the field of defense.

Success continues to depend on mutual trust between the United States and Europe, as well as on effective coordination to avoid duplication or conflicting initiatives. In this regard, some US political and military leaders continue to regard NATO as an essential component of the United States' global primacy. They may, therefore, oppose the transfer of key positions, such as that of SACEUR, to European officials.

II.2. The transition towards "NATO 3.0"

The concept of "NATO 3.0" emerged on 12 February 2026, at the meeting of NATO defense ministers⁶ in Brussels, where the United States

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ This was the first NATO Defense Ministers' Meeting of 2026, held at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. The US Secretary of Defense did not attend and the US delegation was led by Elbridge Colby.

was represented by Elbridge Colby, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, who has also been described as the architect of the US National Defense Strategy.⁷ “Now it’s time to march out together ... for a NATO based on partnership rather than dependency.” This message was interpreted as expressing the US administration’s new approach, according to which the European Allies must assume substantially greater responsibility for the continent’s conventional defense, while the United States increasingly focuses its attention on the Indo-Pacific region, as previously noted. Elbridge Colby presented the concept of “NATO 3.0” by dividing NATO’s evolution into three periods:⁸

- **The “NATO 1.0” period** - from the establishment of the Alliance in 1949 until the end of the Cold War;
- **The concept of “NATO 2.0”** - the redefinition of the Alliance, including its subsequent rounds of enlargement;
- **“NATO 3.0”** - the stage in which the Alliance either currently finds itself or is about to enter. Under this concept, the European Allies, both within the EU and across Europe more broadly, must be capable of ensuring the continent’s conventional security, namely its land, air and maritime defense. The United States, meanwhile, would remain engaged, including in the non-conventional dimension, particularly through strategic nuclear deterrence.

Following the Summit of the Bucharest Nine (B9) and Nordic countries, co-chaired by Romanian and Polish President on May 13, 2026, particular emphasis was placed on close cooperation between the Allies and the United States within NATO. The Russian Federation was also reaffirmed as the most significant threat to the North Atlantic Alliance. Accordingly, the participating countries agreed to support the “NATO 3.0” concept at the NATO Summit in Ankara on July 7–8, 2026. The theme of the B9 meeting, “*Delivering More for Transatlantic Security*,” once again highlighted both the conventional military warfare conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the hybrid and cognitive warfare it wages against targeted societies and infrastructure.

In the same vein, the United States completed its plans to review its troop presence in Europe, with US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, advocating what he described as “NATO 3.0.” Two months earlier, the

⁷ On 18th of June 2026, the second NATO Defense Ministers’ Meeting of the year was held, also in Brussels. Once again, the United States was represented by Elbridge Colby, who participated in the meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group and in the session of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) at the level of defense ministers.

⁸ Radio România Cultural, *Timpul prezent: What Does NATO 3.0 Mean? - A Discussion with Robert Lupițu*, 14 May 2026, available at: <https://www.radioromaniacultural.ro/-emisiuni/timpul-prezent/timpul-prezent-ce-inseamna-nato-3-0-o-discutie-cu-robert-lupitu-id53577.html>, accessed 20 July, 2026.

Trump administration had announced the withdrawal of 5,000 troops from Germany and the cancellation of the planned deployment of a Long-Range Fires Battalion and an Air Defense Battalion assigned to the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force, a US Army unit focused on multi-domain operations.⁹ The Typhon system, operated exclusively by the United States and capable of launching both Tomahawk cruise missiles and SM-6 air-defense missiles, is considered a potential capability-gap solution.¹⁰ The subsequent Ankara Summit focused on managing NATO's orderly transition into its next phase.

*"Our unity, solidarity and collective strength remain the foundation of peace, security and prosperity."*¹¹ Likewise, *"Here in Ankara, Allies reaffirmed their ironclad commitment to collective defense under Article 5 - that an attack against one is an attack against all and that we will stand together. Our unity, solidarity and collective strength remain the foundation of peace, security and prosperity."* These were among the statements delivered by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Ankara Summit on July 7–8, 2026.¹²

According to some analysts, the NATO Summit in Ankara will be remembered not for what it decided, but for what it refused to discuss: **peace**. Under the grandiose label of "NATO 3.0," the Alliance announced the relocation of certain US military production capabilities to Europe, thus bringing them considerably closer to the Ukrainian front, and an increase in logistical and financial support for Kyiv. In other words, preparations are being made not for negotiations, but for a potentially longer war.

Production lines for Stinger, AMRAAM and ATACMS missiles are being actively relocated to the European continent through strategic partnerships, for example, between Lockheed Martin and Rheinmetall in Germany, while supply chains are being shortened and the target of allocating 5% of GDP to defense is turning European budgets into extensions of the defense industry. Europe is officially becoming the war's supply base, while its defense industry remains dependent on US technology and the approvals issued by the Department of Defense (the Pentagon).

⁹ Ștefana Radu., *Tranziția spre NATO 3.0: SUA vor prezenta la Ankara mai multe măsuri care să atenueze impactul reducerii forțelor din Europa*, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/tranzitia-spre-nato-3-0-sua-vor-prezenta-la-ankara-mai-multe-masuri-care-sa-atenuze-impactul-reducerii-fortelor-din-europa-3845815>., accessed on July 20, 2026.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Marius Bâtcă, *"NATO 3.0" in Ankara—Strengthening Transatlantic Unity*, July 16, 2026, available at: <https://presamil.ro/nato-3-0-la-ankara-intarirea-unitatii-transatlantice/>, accessed on July 20, 2026.

¹² NATO, *2026 NATO Summit in Ankara*, July 8, 2026, available at: <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/2026/07/overview-2026-nato-summit-in-ankara->, accessed on July 20, 2026.

III. Romania: from "NATO 2.0" to "NATO 3.0"

Using the terminology that began to take shape before and during the NATO Summit in Ankara, "NATO 3.0" represents the transition from an Alliance in which the United States provided most conventional capabilities to a model in which the European Allies assume substantially greater responsibility for Europe's conventional defense, while the United States remains the strategic guarantor, particularly in the nuclear field and in relation to high-technology capabilities. Mark Rutte summarized this idea with the phrase "*a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO*," stating at the conclusion of the Ankara Summit that "*this is what 'NATO 3.0' is all about.*"

Over time, Romania has focused its efforts on integration into Alliance structures, interoperability and participation in military operations in theatres such as Afghanistan, the Western Balkans and Iraq. Under the new "NATO 3.0" paradigm, Romania should become a pillar of the defense of the Eastern Flank, rather than merely a state protected by it, by developing national capabilities geared towards deterrence and collective defense in the Black Sea region. One strategic dimension of Romania's national trajectory in the current international security environment is its national contribution, measured not only in terms of troop numbers, but also through infrastructure, industry and resilience.

Although "NATO 3.0" entails Europe assuming greater responsibility, this does not mean that the Strategic Partnership with the United States, concluded in 1997, has become less important. On the contrary, Romania should simultaneously pursue the strengthening of its Strategic Partnership with the United States, the development of NATO's European Pillar and the avoidance of any perception of competition between the EU and NATO.

The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine has shifted Europe's strategic center of gravity towards the Eastern Flank. For Romania, this means consolidating its status as a NATO *regional hub*, while also developing its naval and surveillance capabilities. One of the defining features of "NATO 3.0" is the recognition that defense no longer begins solely at the border. It encompasses energy security, cybersecurity, the protection of critical infrastructure, efforts to counter hybrid threats and so-called FIMI activities (*Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*), malign foreign influence, continuity of government and other related areas. For Romania, this means integrating the *whole-of-society* concept into national planning.

The Ankara Summit emphasized that NATO is seeking not only to increase defense expenditure, but also to expand industrial production, remove barriers to trade in defense equipment and deepen cooperation with industry. For Romania, this may entail revitalizing the national defense

industry, integrating it into European and transatlantic production chains, expanding ammunition production, developing drone and counter-drone capabilities, and providing regional maintenance services for NATO equipment,¹³ among other measures.

Another aspect worth highlighting is that “NATO 3.0” places particular emphasis on artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, drones, space capabilities, military cloud infrastructure, electronic warfare, signals intelligence (SIGINT), data and analytics. In this context, Romania could become a regional center for dual-use innovation and, potentially, a provider of expertise in the field of cybersecurity. It should be recalled that, in 2021, Bucharest was selected to host the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre (ECCC), the first European cybersecurity body headquartered in Romania.

The transition from the “NATO 2.0” paradigm to “NATO 3.0” reflects the need to adapt Romania’s strategic trajectory to a security environment characterized by strategic competition, high-intensity conflict and hybrid threats. In full alignment with Romania’s National Defense Strategy for 2025-2030, Romania seeks to strengthen national resilience, develop its defense capabilities and assume a more active role as a security provider on the Eastern Flank and in the Black Sea region. The National Defense Strategy for 2025-2030 emphasizes strengthening resilience, developing defense capabilities, reinforcing the Strategic Partnership with the United States and deepening Romania’s role within NATO and the European Union.¹⁴

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The transition towards the “NATO 3.0” paradigm reflects the North Atlantic Alliance’s adaptation to transformations in the international security environment, characterized by strategic competition among major powers, complex warfare and the proliferation of hybrid threats. In this context, responsibility for Europe’s conventional defense is increasingly shifting towards the European Allies, while the United States is redirecting its strategic priorities towards the Indo-Pacific region, without necessarily diminishing, or, at least in theoretical terms, renouncing, its commitment to collective defense.

For Romania, the emerging security architecture represents both a challenge and a strategic opportunity. Its geographical position on the Black

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Romania’s National Defense Strategy for 2025–2030: Independence and Solidarity—Romania’s Vision for a Changing World*, available at: <https://www.presidency.ro/files/-userfiles/Strategia%20Na%C8%9Bional%C4%83%20de%20Ap%C4%83rare%20a%-20%C8%9A%C4%83rii%20pentru%20perioada%202025-2030.pdf>, accessed on July 20, 2026.

Sea and NATO's Eastern Flank requires an accelerated development of military capabilities, national resilience and the defense industry, so that Romania may evolve from being primarily a beneficiary of collective security into a regional security provider.

In the new geopolitical context, security can no longer be defined exclusively in military terms. Areas such as societal resilience, energy security, critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and the countering of hybrid threats are becoming increasingly important components of deterrence and collective defense.

Strengthening the Strategic Partnership with the United States should remain a central element of Romania's foreign and security policy, in complementarity with the reinforcement of the European dimension of defense. Adapting to "NATO 3.0" does not require choosing between the United States and Europe; rather, it entails simultaneously leveraging both dimensions of Romania's Euro-Atlantic membership.

Romania's successful adaptation to the "NATO 3.0" paradigm will depend on its ability to transform its geostrategic advantages into operational capabilities. Implementing the objectives set out in Romania's National Defense Strategy, in conjunction with developments within the Alliance, could consolidate the country's position as a pillar of stability and a relevant actor within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and the wider Black Sea region.

At the same time, the transition towards "NATO 3.0" should be understood not merely as an adjustment of defense expenditure, but as a comprehensive transformation of Romania's security posture. Increased investment must generate deployable and interoperable forces, sustainable logistics, adequate strategic mobility and a national defense industry capable of supporting both peacetime deterrence and operations in a high-intensity conflict. Romania's integration into European and transatlantic defense production chains could therefore strengthen national security while also contributing to the Alliance's overall capacity for reinforcement and long-term resilience.

Technological innovation will constitute another essential component of Romania's strategic trajectory. The development of capabilities in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, drones and counter-drone systems, cybersecurity, electronic warfare and space-based services could reduce existing capability gaps and enhance Romania's contribution to NATO. By combining its expertise in cybersecurity with investment in dual-use technologies and cooperation among government institutions, the armed forces, academia and private industry, Romania could position itself as a regional center for defense innovation.

Finally, Romania should seek to play an active diplomatic and strategic role in preserving transatlantic cohesion throughout this transition.

A stronger European contribution to defense must remain complementary to NATO and firmly anchored in the transatlantic relationship. By promoting a coherent approach to the security of the Eastern Flank, supporting a sustained Allied presence in the Black Sea region and strengthening cooperation with regional partners, Romania can help ensure that “NATO 3.0” develops as a more balanced, capable and resilient Alliance rather than as a framework for strategic disengagement.



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