

ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

NATO's Leader Is Totally Lost

What does Mark Rutte think he's doing?

FEBRUARY 4, 2026

By **Stephen M. Walt**

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte is an energetic, dedicated, and experienced politician. “Teflon Mark” was the longest-serving prime minister in Dutch history, and if it were 1955, 1975, or even 2005, his character and adroit political instincts would be ideal for the post that he now occupies. But timing is everything, and his worldview and approach are the opposite of what NATO needs today.

Since becoming secretary-general, Rutte's central objective has been to keep the United States fully committed to NATO and European security more broadly. If that requires shamelessly flattering U.S. President Donald Trump and pouring cold water on European efforts to achieve greater strategic autonomy, so be it. One can understand his motivation—having the United States play the role of Europe's first responder is a pretty good deal—it's his understanding of the overall strategic situation that is wanting.

His latest effort was to tell the European Parliament that Europe simply cannot defend itself without lots of U.S. help, saying that those who disagree with him should “keep on dreaming.” His remarks can only be interpreted as a thinly veiled riposte to Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's justly celebrated Davos speech calling for medium powers to come together to defend their interests and values in a world of increasingly predatory great powers whose ranks—unfortunately—now include the United States.

Carney never mentioned Trump by name, but everyone in the audience at the World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, knew who he was talking about (as did Trump himself). Rutte will have none of this, however, and appears to believe that NATO's members have no choice but to remain dependent upon and subservient to the United States no matter how erratic or greedy it becomes.

There are at least four serious problems with his conclusion.

First, Rutte is wrong about Europe's ability to defend itself. Yes, Europe is overly dependent on the United States *today*, but this is not a permanent condition that NATO's European members cannot fix. They don't have to try to develop a global power projection capability akin to that of the United States (or even China); they simply need to develop the capacity to deter an attack on their own territory or defeat it if one were to occur.

If we ignore Trump's bizarre fixation with Greenland for the moment, the only serious military threat to Europe arises from Russia (which is not exactly in great shape these days). NATO'S European members have more than a 3-to-1 edge in population, a nearly 10-to-1 edge in GDP, and they spend more on defense each year than Russia does. They don't spend that money very efficiently, but the claim that Europe lacks the basic wherewithal to mount an effective defense is false. Add to that the defensive advantages created by drone warfare, and it becomes clear that a robust European defense that is not heavily dependent on U.S. help is not out of reach, as several serious defense analysts have recently argued. Maybe Rutte should give a few of them a call and talk it over.

To be sure, Europe does face collective action problems and national jealousies that undermine shared defense efforts, and it is undoubtedly tempting to keep relying on Uncle Sam, save some money, and avoid all the intra-alliance politicking that strong U.S. leadership helps minimize. And that is undoubtedly why Rutte has chosen to appease Trump and dismiss European autonomy: He wants to keep things as quiet as possible, preserve the status quo, accommodate Trump, and hope it all works out.

But that's the second problem: Appeasing Trump isn't working. Rutte has gone to enormous lengths to appease and flatter Trump (at one point likening him to a benevolent "daddy"), and what did it get him? A U.S. National Security Strategy that portrayed Europe as a bunch of decadent countries facing civilizational decline (which is perhaps a more apt description of what the White House is encouraging in the United States) and a renewed U.S. push to take over Greenland. Given how often Western leaders have cautioned about the dangers of appeasement, it is ironic that the behavior of the putative alliance leader is now demonstrating that this tactic sometimes fails.

Third, emphasizing European weakness and dependence just reinforces the MAGA-world's contempt for the United States' democratic allies, diminishes their perceived strategic value, and reinforces those who want to leave the alliance entirely and maybe seize territories such as Greenland while they're at it.

By contrast, an increasingly capable Europe would be a more valuable partner and better able to push back when U.S. leaders were headed in dangerous directions. At this point, anyone with a triple-digit IQ has figured out that Trump respects strength and exploits weakness,

which is why he routinely bullies weak countries and tends to back down when resolute leaders push back. Given this pattern, it is not clear why Rutte is so eager to keep Europe weak and compliant.

Lastly, as I noted above, the United States' NATO allies do face a collective action problem, and getting them to pull together to increase their weight within the alliance is not an easy task. But in the present era, it is the job of the secretary-general to make the alliance more effective by working 24/7 to overcome those obstacles instead of reinforcing them. In the old days, accommodating and managing U.S. preferences was a key part of the secretary-general's job; today, it means preparing the alliance for a world where the United States is either not as central to the alliance or possibly absent entirely.

Unlike Carney, Rutte has yet to fully grasp the structural changes that have taken place in world politics and how those changes are going to affect trans-Atlantic relations going forward. During the Cold War, Europeans could count on U.S. support because the United States was focused, laser-like, on containing the Soviet Union, and Europe was a critical arena in that competition. It could free-ride even more during the unipolar moment, because the risk of war seemed remote, the United States was promoting liberal ideals *à outrance*, and Washington's foreign-policy establishment was willing to do most of the heavy lifting.

Things are radically different now. The Trump regime has precisely zero commitment to so-called liberal values, engages in predatory behavior toward allies and adversaries alike, and cannot be trusted to keep any agreements or pledges that it might make. China is now a sizable great power with considerable economic and military clout, drawing U.S. attention away from Europe but also giving other states tempting options. Russia is a far weaker great power and one that Washington may be tempted to mend fences with as a way of trying to complicate life for Beijing.

In this emerging multipolar world, Europe no longer enjoys pride of place, and it will be forced to chart its own course. That need not lead to a full trans-Atlantic rupture, but it does suggest the need for a major rebalancing. Trying to preserve NATO's old formula of U.S. dominance and European submission is an increasingly bad bet.

The safest course would be a new division of labor within NATO, where its other members build up their own defense capabilities as rapidly as possible and the United States gradually becomes their ally of last resort but not Europe's "first responder." That won't happen overnight, but a more unified and capable Europe would find itself getting more respect and attention from Washington (which might begin to realize that preserving these ties were in the United States' own self-interest) and would be better prepared should the United States continue its efforts to alienate as many former friends as possible.

If I were NATO's secretary-general, the last thing I'd be doing right now is doubling down on an increasingly erratic (if not downright hostile) United States.

Stephen M. Walt is a columnist at *Foreign Policy* and the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University.

Easy to share PDFs are a benefit of your Foreign Policy subscription.

Not an FP subscriber? Unlock unrivaled global news and analysis, including 50+ years of Foreign Policy coverage online and in the magazine, when you become a paying subscriber.

[View membership offers.](#)