

Mission Accomplished? Comparing the Strategic Cultures of the United States and Romania (1990–2024)

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<https://doi.org/10.33993/TR.2025.3.09>

America and Romania found common ground in defining the regional strategic dilemma and pursued a strategy that both thought was the best for addressing said dilemma: NATO expansion.

IN DECEMBER 1989, the Ceaușescu regime ended in Romania. For the United States, the downfall of the USSR represented both an opportunity and uncertainty. For Romania, one of the questions that needed answering was what the country’s future would look like’, especially in terms of international affairs. This article aims to analyze the evolution of both America and Romania’s strategic cultures, from 1990 until the end of the Biden administration in 2024. In comparing the two, the analysis will focus on three questions: firstly, are the US and Romania facing the same security dilemma? Secondly, are they adapting to Eastern Europe’s new security reality in a coordinated, coherent way? Thirdly, is the economic and political cooperation between the two evolving in a way that aids or hinders the alignment of their strategic cultures? In answering these questions, the article is divided into three chronological periods: firstly, 1990–2004, which covers

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the economic and democratic uncertainty that Romania faced, and America's help in ensuring the country's stability; secondly, the years from 2004 to 2016, which saw the emergence of Romania as a key NATO partner; finally, 2016–2024, which saw a noticeable rift concerning America's own security vision and Romania's challenge to stay relevant in it.

Comparing American and Romanian Strategic Cultures

THERE ARE multiple ways to analyze a country's strategic culture, but Jack Snyder's 1977 work, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations"¹ has given a few conceptual clues for this study. Snyder's analysis of American and Soviet strategic cultures paves the way to five core topics that divided Washington and Moscow: firstly, their different strategic dilemmas, secondly, their geographies, thirdly, asymmetries in civil defense, fourthly, political debates concerning the military's influence on policy, and fifthly, the impact of post-ww2 historical legacies on the US and USSR strategic cultures. The USSR is gone, but the EU has emerged as the dominant geopolitical bloc in Europe throughout the past three decades. In this case, a few words need to be said about the emergence of the EU's own strategic culture. Both Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards in 2001, as well as Christoph Meyer in 2005, have tried to analyze the emergence and evolution of the strategic culture of Brussels. Cornish and Edwards put forward the notion that the EU lacked a conceptual framework for its security and would rely heavily on political institutionalization as the path forward for developing its strategic culture. On more niche issues, there was more success, as the authors pointed out that the EU, trying to make up for its poor reaction to the war in Kosovo, for example, reached minor success in building a more coherent strategy for policing.² Meyer emphasized the importance of strategic norms, especially with regards to the goals and means of the use of force, as well as making room for learning through deeper institutionalization, and threat perception.³ Nevertheless, the EU's strategic culture is very much a work in progress, and the bloc has been reluctant to develop a fundamental security vision, largely due to a heavy reliance on NATO and the national militaries of its member states.

In this context, questions emerge about Eastern Europe specifically. Most countries in the region had moved away from Moscow's sphere of influence, and yet, they were confronted with a security situation where there was little clarity concerning the regional balance of power. This is what makes American strategic culture in Eastern Europe such a crucial factor. There has been considerable

debate on the US grand strategy for the region following the Cold War, much of it captured aptly by Hal Brands in Russel Glenn's book *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0*. Brands addressed what he calls the three misconceptions about US post-Cold War strategy: firstly, the notion that America shifted from its traditional Cold War strategy. Secondly, the idea that Washington's Cold War strategy had been ineffective, and thirdly, the argument that US primacy was over. Brands argued the contrary, whereby what followed after the end of the Cold War was an era of unipolarity, and the US acted logically given this security context: it extended its influence into Eastern Europe in order to prevent the emergence of any new geopolitical dangers to the US, and to reshape the region so as to make it more receptive to Washington's interests.⁴ Furthermore, Brands argued that the strategy of expanding the US network of alliances was a wise one, as it gave Washington more leverage over traditional challengers such as Russia and China.⁵ With the discourse over US strategic culture evolving, with an EU strategic culture constantly in flux, questions can be asked about Romania's own strategic culture. This article will now move on to the evolution of Romanian and American strategic cultures in the three aforementioned chronological periods.

1990–2004

The Beginnings of Alignment: The US and Romania's Challenging Road to Closer Cooperation

ROMANIA HAD a long history of skepticism and suspicion concerning the USSR and it was also dominated by an enduring sympathy for the idea of America and what it represented on the world stage. Now, with the Ceaușescu regime gone, Romania was presented with a key strategic choice: reshaping its security alignment. Similarly, the US was presented with an interesting opportunity as well: with its Cold War rival falling apart, how would Washington's approach to Europe evolve? This section aims to make the point that the United States coherently implemented a strategy of ensuring two key developmental outcomes with regards to Romania: stabilizing the country's economy so as to prevent an economic crisis, and making resources available to support Romania's difficult road towards democratization. These two strategic objectives marked the beginning of consistent alignment between the strategic cultures of the US and Romania. However, the nineties and the early 2000s were not without roadblocks to the emerging special relationship.

Concerning the first topic of analysis, the security dilemma, we need to consider the post-Cold War context: with the Warsaw Pact collapsing, the US em-

barked on a policy of improving ties with most of the USSR's former puppet states. This development was very fortunate for Romania, which would also pursue a policy of joining the American sphere of influence. This became clear in George Bush's London Declaration of July 1990, where all the former Warsaw Pact and USSR nations were invited to establish diplomatic relations with NATO.⁶ The Clinton years would mark the first serious attempt for Romania to join NATO, which ended in failure. Romania's insistence on being one of the first former Warsaw Pact countries to join NATO was endorsed by French President Jacques Chirac,⁷ however, the impression made on the French President was stronger than that made on Clinton, as National Security Advisor Sandy Berger suggested that Romania's progress in democratization and market liberalization was insufficient.⁸ Nevertheless, Berger, along with Secretary of Defense William Cohen and Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott would reiterate in July 1997 that Romania should not be discouraged, emphasizing that "the answer is not no, but no at this time." Berger alluded that Romania's strategic decision to pursue NATO integration in the mid-1990s was rather late, and it delayed its entrance into NATO, especially compared with a country like Poland, who had been consistent in its reforms and objectives since 1990.⁹ Furthermore, the American position vis-à-vis Russia's say on the matter was interesting. The US acknowledged the need to keep the big picture in mind but also claimed its cordial relationship with Russia meant a slow integration of the Eastern European countries into NATO would not be controversial.¹⁰

The roadblock to Romania's path towards NATO did lead to another positive development for the alignment of the two strategic cultures: the 1997 Strategic Partnership between Romania and the US. In 1992, the controversial but dominant National Salvation Front political movement published a document on Romania's foreign policy where it acknowledged the US as the sole superpower, arguing that Romania should pursue closer ties with Washington. Between 1993 and 1996 there were multiple institutionalized meetings between Americans and their Romanian counterparts that focused on improving bilateral ties. In these meetings, the Americans made it clear that should Russia's domestic situation deteriorate, Romania's path towards NATO would be accelerated. This was the time when Romanian political elites reached the conclusion that a strategic partnership with America was key to the country's security. The dissolution of the USSR and Romania's signing in 1994 of the Partnership for Peace made the country's path towards NATO unchangeable. What hindered Romania's thinking was the lack of strategic clarity from the governments that preceded the presidency of Emil Constantinescu. It was only from 1996 onward that it can be argued that Romania pursued a comprehensive, government-level, cohesive policy of Western alignment. With the Strategic Partnership comple-

menting Romania's NATO and EU ambitions, the country became part of what US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would later call "new Europe," a paradigm implying America's future reliance on what would become NATO's eastern flank rather than its traditional Western European allies.¹¹

Clinton did, eventually, have to confront the Romanian public in a visit to Bucharest in July 1997 and give the country the unwelcome news. Praising Romania's democratization under the Constantinescu administration, Clinton made sure to imply that NATO membership was a matter of when, not if.¹² The US also had made it clear that NATO membership for Romania was not a payoff aimed at ensuring Romania's economic development. Strobe Talbott made that clear during a press briefing in April 1999.¹³ It can be thus argued that, in spite of the failure to join NATO in 1997, Romania persisted with its strategic goal, and it would achieve it in 2004, during the George W. Bush administration. Bush gave an interview to Romanian national television in 2002 and contextualized the nature of the American strategic dilemma and how to solve it: expanding NATO further into Eastern Europe. Bush said he needed Romania to contribute to America's war on terror following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bush saw in Romania and other Eastern European countries an example of a success story: nations that made a full transition from totalitarianism to democratic societies. NATO membership was a guarantor of peace.¹⁴ Bush would address the security dilemma head-on in a March 2004 speech in Washington DC, honoring NATO's new members:

some questioned whether NATO could or should survive the end of the cold war. Then the Alliance proved its enduring worth by stopping ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and by ousting the armies of a tyrant in Kosovo. Some wondered whether NATO could adapt to the new threats of the 21st century. Those doubts were laid to rest on September the 12th, 2001, when NATO invoked for the first time in its history Article 5 of our Charter, which states that an attack against one NATO Ally is an attack against all.¹⁵

The second topic of analysis concerns the emerging military cooperation between the US and Romania. The argument here is that if the two countries agree completely on the matter of Eastern Europe's security dilemma, then they should act in coordinated fashion to address it. In this case, a review of the growing military interconnectedness between the US and Romania needs to be made, to appraise the degree of American commitment to the security of what had become its NATO ally, one of the key members of NATO's eastern flank. As of March 1993, given the ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia, the Clinton administration became increasingly aware of the advantages provided by cooperation with friendly countries around Serbia, Romania being one of them. Senior Clinton

administration officials made it clear that Romania was cooperating with the US in countering Serbian smuggling and allowing Washington to economically isolate Serbia, especially its commercial routes on the Danube.¹⁶ Romania's failure to join NATO in 1997 provided a geopolitical dilemma, with some arguing that it left NATO exposed on its southeastern flank. Cohen argued that enhancing NATO's Partnership for Peace program would provide the necessary compromise between accepting Romania in NATO in the future and having to reject it in 1997.¹⁷ HR 3610 of 1997 serves as an example of early US planning concerning Romania's security role in the future: it argued that the US should support the full and active participation of Romania and other Eastern European countries in "activities that will qualify them for NATO membership," a call for the US to pressure the EU to accept Eastern European countries that met the accession criteria as quickly as possible, and added that "the process of enlarging NATO to include emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe should not be limited to the consideration of admitting Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia as full members of the NATO Alliance."¹⁸ By 1998, Romania and the US had developed their own Strategic Partnership, which would pave the way for a quick and strong development of the bilateral relationship.¹⁹ This was the same year that Congress, through HR 1119, commended Romania for its democratization and economic reforms, and argued that the country should be invited to accession negotiations for NATO.²⁰ The following year, Congress designated Romania as eligible to receive assistance under the NATO Participation Act of 1994. Should Romania satisfy all the relevant accession criteria, Congress maintained the notion that the country should be invited to join "at the earliest possible date."²¹

The failure to join NATO also did not hinder Romania's attempts at aiding NATO's geostrategic endeavors with regards to Serbia. In a June 1999 press briefing, Berger commended Romania and other frontline states for dealing well with the economic and humanitarian fallout that resulted from the wars of the former Yugoslavia and remaining committed to the NATO effort. These developments convinced the US about adjusting its long-term thinking to better incorporate southeast Europe in NATO.²² The military relationship between Romania and the US would develop at a radically different pace once the Bush administration came to power and Romania's NATO acceptance became a formality. Following the 9/11 attacks, Romania committed itself fully to America's war on terror. Its troops participated in Operation Enduring Freedom as well as the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. To highlight the boldness of this development, after 9/11 Romania declared itself a "de facto NATO ally." Three years before formally joining the alliance, Romania signed up for sending troops to Kandahar and Kabul. The US welcomed this development in full, recalling Romania's history of supporting US military endeavors in Opera-

tion Desert Storm.²³ The US military footprint in Romania entered a process of accelerated consolidation in the 2000s. For the fiscal year 2002, Congress had already authorized \$11,500,000 for Romania in foreign military funding grants, more than for the Baltics, Slovakia, Slovenia, or Bulgaria.²⁴ Another \$12,000,000 was authorized for the 2003 fiscal year.²⁵ The point here is that the US was of the belief that Romania's entry to NATO was only a formality, and it planned accordingly. This is an example of America's strategic culture evolving so as to accommodate a heavier military footprint in Eastern Europe, and Romania's strategic culture evolving so as to take full advantage of that, in order to ensure the development of its own military, and to strengthen its own security by joining NATO. The greatest example of endurance in the alignment of Romanian and American strategic cultures was that both countries swiftly overcame the drawback of Romania's early NATO rejection in 1997.

In terms of the political and economic factors that have influenced the strategic culture of both the US and Romania, we need to understand the optimism and uncertainty of the 1990s and early 2000s. The American impression was that Romania lagged behind its Eastern European counterparts in terms of development. Throughout the 1990s, the United States committed themselves to a coherent strategy of economically invigorating Romania. This was evident since the days after the Romanian Revolution, in December 1989, when the US greenlit funds worth \$750,000 in emergency medical assistance.²⁶ By July 1990, Romania and the US were set on a path of reducing reciprocal tariffs and trade barriers.²⁷ Congress had greenlit financial aid aimed at: health assistance for children (\$5 million),²⁸ funding for fighting AIDS and ensuring access to abortion (\$3 million),²⁹ and education and cultural exchange programs that would improve knowledge of trade and democracy.³⁰ In July 1991, a White House report claimed the US had offered food assistance worth of \$112 million to Romania.³¹ In June of next year, president Bush informed Congress that the progress Romania had made warranted a change in the economic relationship: fewer tariffs, more rights for US businesses, and better safeguards for Romanian intellectual property, all while Bucharest would continue to "strive for a democratic, pluralistic society, particularly through the conduct of early, free, and fair national elections."³² This agreement from the Bush presidency carried over to the Clinton administration.³³ In November 1993, the Clinton administration awarded Romania the Most Favored Nation trading status.³⁴ The MFN status would be extended in 1995.³⁵ That same year, a Clinton administration memorandum categorized Romania as an "emerging democracy," thus making it eligible for funding programs of the US Department of Agriculture.³⁶ The year 1996 marked the end of Romania's ups and downs with the MFN status, as President Clinton would award it permanent MFN status, marking the moment as a victory for Romania's free market liberalization and democratization.³⁷ The

journey to MFN was a complex one. The US had been using trade agreements to ensure the democratization of its allies since the days of President John F. Kennedy. America and Romania had been experimenting with the ramifications of trade policy since the days of President Lyndon Johnson, when Romania's rebelliousness towards the USSR made it a tempting prospect for the US. Henry Kissinger had also been supportive of using trade to get a *quid pro quo* from USSR satellites. Nixon was skeptical, but the failure of a 1972 US–USSR trade deal made him more receptive to the idea. Romania already had MFN status since the days of President Gerald Ford. In 1975, the MFN had been a means for the US to draw insight into Romania's domestic machinations, with migration and human rights serving as key areas. With the downfall of the Ceaușescu regime, Romania renounced its MFN status in 1988, despite the Reagan administration still being tempted to keep it as a means of pressure on Bucharest.³⁸ These examples show how and why the MFN status was so important, acting as a facilitator for Romanian-American cooperation, and enabling a better alignment of the two countries' strategic cultures. A look at HR 3161 allows one to see the progress Romania had made until then: a new Constitution, economic reforms, especially in banking and taxation, the privatization of industry, a bilateral investment treaty with the US, compliance with the Trade Act of 1974, all were examples of the relatively quick progress Romania had made in the otherwise tumultuous 1990s.³⁹

As for the Romanian conception of the relationship with the US, optimistic sentiments prevailed. There was an initial period of confusion, lasting throughout the early 1990s, but eventually it receded, due to Romanian elites realizing that the country's geopolitical situation would be riskier if it remained unaligned. During a speech given on Europe Day in 1994, President Ion Iliescu argued that Romania would have to “return to Europe.” As of February 1993, the country had already established a governmental commission tasked to pursue European integration. These efforts would culminate in the June 1995 Snagov declaration, which called EU integration a national objective. This pursuit of closer ties with Europe did not derail Romania from its strategic culture alignment with the US. On the contrary, it cemented a Euro–Atlantic philosophy which would only be further codified in the country's legislative framework.⁴⁰ In July 1998, President Emil Constantinescu became the first, and only, Romanian head of state to address a joint session of the US Congress. His speech emphasized the symbolic value that the association with the US had for Romania. He called the United States “the country of freedom, and who stand as guardians of fundamental human rights” as well as “a beacon of hope for the oppressed and the needy, a source of inspiration for the creative, the courageous and the achieving.” He went on to give examples of Romanian immigrants and their contributions to America, as well as proclaiming Romania's desire to join

NATO, arguing that “the idea of joining NATO did not merely grow out of a need to be a part of a defensive military alliance. As a vector of a set of fundamental values of modern civilization, it has become the supreme expression capable of harnessing the major goal of human solidarity.” He also reminded Congress that Romania would be a key piece in the stability of southeastern Europe.⁴¹ Romania’s development was not forgotten in the George W. Bush years either. The US President argued that for a NATO member to be successful, it needed to have a flourishing economy, and said that Romania was “on its way to reform” and called for patience from the US in allowing Romania to transition to a market economy.⁴² At the end of 2003 the two countries signed an Investment Treaty. This ensured bilateral investments would continue in a manner that complied with the European Commission’s requirements for Romania’s EU membership application.⁴³ This made it clear that Romania’s path to the EU was not viewed as a hindrance by the US, quite the contrary.

The US also experienced a sense of optimism concerning Romania’s future. George Bush heralded the Romanian revolution as “the first time in public airwaves in some 40 years that a Christmas carol was allowed to be heard on TV.”⁴⁴ The next year, during a luncheon in Wisconsin, Bush claimed that, in spite of the country’s problems with poverty, a US visitor was informed by a Romanian woman that what Romania needed then the most was the US Constitution.⁴⁵ By March 1991, the US Peace Corps began their work in Romania.⁴⁶ Romania awarded George W. Bush the order of the Star of Romania in November 2002, and Bush’s statement upon receiving it could be summarized as follows: open markets, common values, shared challenges, war on terror, and a new chapter with Russia.⁴⁷ A July 2004 meeting between Bush and Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Năstase had Năstase claiming that Romania’s transition to democracy was reaching its final stages, and that he was looking forward to what the future held. Bush also said that given Romania’s market developments, it would be up to US business to decide where and to what extent they should invest.⁴⁸ This was a considerable leap from the years following the end of the Ceaușescu regime, when the US was focused on spending through government agencies in order to ensure that Romania’s economy would not collapse.

It can thus be argued that Romania and the United States embarked on a robust path of aligning their strategic cultures, on issues ranging from the economy to national security to democracy. Romania’s path forward encountered a number of roadblocks: slow reforms, domestic instability, America’s own skepticism about Romania being prepared for NATO membership, but all these worries did not deter the alignment, on the contrary, the roadblocks allowed Washington and Bucharest to adjust and ensure that their respective strategic cultures were even more aligned.

2004–2016

Romania's Growing Role in NATO

IF BY 2004 Romania had become a NATO member, taking an ever-greater role in America's involvement in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, just four years later it would host one of the most infamous NATO summits, in Bucharest. Furthermore, the Obama years would cement Romania's reputation as a reliable ally and pave the way for even more notable developments under the presidency of Obama's then Vice President, Joe Biden. The argument here is that from 2000 to 2016 Romania consistently pursued a deeper integration with NATO, a development that would be of considerable help to the US during the early stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after 2022. The alignment of Romanian and American strategic cultures continued at a steady pace, although drawbacks started emerging concerning the US goals of expanding into Eastern Europe.

Concerning the strategic dilemma, the US made its position clear in 2004: NATO would expand eastwards, and expansion meant stability. Holding the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest was viewed symbolically as a validation of that strategy, emphasizing Romania's transformation in a relatively short period of time.⁴⁹ During his speech in Bucharest, Bush hinted that US policy for the region would continue on the path started in the early 1990s, claiming that the doors of NATO were open to other states that were willing to join, emboldened by the successful integration of Romania and most of the Eastern Bloc states.⁵⁰ At a press conference with President Bănescu in Neptun, Romania, Bush reiterated the need for Croatia, Albania, and North Macedonia to join NATO. He also added that Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina would be expected to join, and that NATO would be expanding the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Ukraine and Georgia, despite backing down on inviting the two, a move that was viewed as a failure of the NATO summit.⁵¹ Bănescu gave his thoughts on the persisting issue of Russia's increasing opposition to NATO expansion, urging Russia to move past its Cold War logic and acknowledge the fact that independent states have multiple security options, and Russia cannot simply veto them. He also issued a reminder that the threat of terrorism, at the time, was the main security priority for both NATO and Russia.⁵² The US and Romania were, at those times, speaking with almost the same voice, however, the changing nature of the security dilemma would put a dent in America and Romania's ambitions. Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, just a few months after the Bucharest summit. The invasion paralyzed Georgia's plans for closer alignment with NATO. Six years later, Russia would also invade Ukraine, claiming the Crimean Peninsula. Ukraine, which was undergoing its own tumultuous domestic political disputes over its alignment with Europe and the US or Russia, would see itself engulfed

by a military conflict that would only escalate, making its own plans of closer relations with Europe and America harder to implement.

If one is to look at the evolution of the Romanian–American military ties, the presidency of Traian Băsescu comes across as a quite impactful. Băsescu met with George W. Bush in February 2005, and they pledged to continue work on the bilateral alliance, with the caveat that Băsescu made room for one of his own strategic interests: safeguarding the Black Sea region.⁵³ Băsescu then brought up another two core topics of his foreign policy: Moldova’s geopolitical position, and his own foreign policy vision of a Bucharest–London–Washington axis. Bush was receptive to Băsescu’s opinions on Moldova, but he, a Republican President, was instinctively wary of multilateral formats, not saying much on Băsescu’s vision for an axis.⁵⁴ During the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Bush expanded on one of America’s strategic interests, one shared by Romania and a few other states in Eastern Europe, namely, the establishment of a missile defense program and infrastructure. Bush invoked Iran as the source of the threat, claiming Tehran’s missiles could reach NATO’s eastern flank, and thus more defense was needed.⁵⁵ Romania was happy to acquiesce to this development. Băsescu also added context to how NATO was playing a role in the region. He said that NATO was building a partnership with the EU and UN, alluding that both would play a part in the talks concerning the future of Afghanistan.⁵⁶ Băsescu added that joining NATO “meant passing from the grey zone as a former communist country and entering into the club of the western countries,” and was Romania’s “first and a very important step in our democratic evolution.” He doubled down on the objective of expanding NATO, arguing that Macedonia and Albania needed to be the next countries to join the alliance, and that ties needed to be upgraded with Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁵⁷

In a September 2011 meeting between President Barack Obama, his Vice President Joe Biden, and Băsescu, Romania was praised by the US for advances in the missile defense program as well as its strategic partnership with Washington. Avoiding further antagonizing Russia, the framing for these new military developments was the need to counter 21st century threats.⁵⁸ During a May 2014 visit to Romania, Biden acknowledged that, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the security of Romania’s neighborhood had deteriorated, and he made it clear that his visit would be aimed at reassuring Romania. Biden emphasized the US commitment to upholding NATO’s Article V, implying that any attack on a NATO member would urge retaliation from all other NATO members, the US included.⁵⁹ The development of Mihail Kogălniceanu airbase also accelerated during the Obama term, with Congress authorizing the Army to buy land and pursue a military construction project at the base worth \$37,000,000. The Air Force also received funding (\$2,900,000) and instructions to establish

a base at Câmpia Turzii. Furthermore, \$20,800,000 were authorized for the Aegis Ashore Missile Defense System Complex at Deveselu in 2015.⁶⁰ Two years later, the Câmpia Turzii Air Base would receive another \$18,500,000.⁶¹ America's military footprint in Romania was expanding at a rapid pace, and Romania was doing its best to facilitate this, seeing in this expansion an opportunity for improving its own security.

The plans for expanding America's missile defense installation continued. The US was following a "phased adaptive approach" with deployments planned for 2011, 2015, and 2018. Phase One would consist of deploying Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense-capable ships to the Mediterranean, while Phase Two extended the coverage by placing an interceptor on land, in Romania. Phase Three improved the existing coverage with an interceptor placed in Poland. Phase Four, set for 2020, mentioned another interceptor, but the country that would host it remained unnamed.⁶² The Americans claimed that the Russians were briefed to a considerable extent on the ongoing military deployment plans, adding that Russia knew it was Romania who asked, for example, for the deployment of an SM-3 surface to air missile used by the US Navy.⁶³ The missiles the US was sending to Poland and Romania were intended to intercept ICBMs targeted at the US.⁶⁴ The source of the threat that the SM-3 was supposed to counter remained Iran,⁶⁵ and the US repeatedly refuted notions that the missile defense system was aimed at countering Russia, playing down the accusations of antagonism.⁶⁶ Russia accused the US of violating the INF Treaty by establishing the Aegis missile defense system. The US argued that it was simply boosting the security of its allies. Secretary Josh Earnest also made it clear during a press briefing that the US was aware that many of Russia's actions could also be viewed as a breach of international treaties, so the accusation made by Moscow was disingenuous.⁶⁷ By June 2015, plans for extending the ballistic missile program to include adding anti-air capabilities in Romania was questioned by the Senate, who was worried about the costs and potential implications for the planned deployments in Poland.⁶⁸ By the end of Obama's term, the strategy of increasing the US military footprint on NATO's eastern flank continued, with Obama stating in a speech in Warsaw that the US was adding 4,000 additional NATO troops to the armored brigade to be deployed in Poland and the Baltic States, while also stating that for the south, Romania and Bulgaria would also benefit from new deterrence measures.⁶⁹ It can be argued that throughout the second period discussed in this study, 2004–2016, Romania and America's military and security partnership changed fundamentally, and at an impressive speed, especially when compared to the status of this partnership in the previous time period.

In terms of Romania's economic and political evolution, during a speech in Neptun, Romania, Băsescu claimed that the economic ties between Washington

and Bucharest were becoming increasingly complex, highlighting investment from US corporations such as Oracle or Ford.⁷⁰ The 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession did little to hinder the Romanian–American economic relationship. A meeting between Bush and Prime Minister Călin-Popescu Țăriceanu brought news of future US investment, job creation and praise for Romania’s 16% flat tax.⁷¹ A September meeting between Obama, Biden, and Băsescu upheld the notion that Romania could still serve as an example of democratization, for both the Balkans and Middle East.⁷² The US went to some extent to collaborate with Romania and keep the EU in mind, especially in the area of security cooperation. For example, within the frame of the EU–US Energy Council, the US started working with Romania on extending an energy pipeline network into the Republic of Moldova.⁷³ This implied tacit US support for the Romanian foreign policy objective set up during the Băsescu years of ensuring deeper interconnectedness between Romania and Moldova.

In this second period we see a consolidation in both American and Romanian strategies. The two countries presently agreed on the best way to approach the security dilemma, expanding NATO. The military alliance consolidated and extended its presence in Romania, without any major political drawbacks. Apart from this, despite the economic hardship that came with the end of the 2000s, there was little anti-American sentiment in Romania, and the alliance with the US continued without major roadblocks. If the first period of this analysis saw the slow but steady emergence of the US–Romanian special relationship, this second period saw its consolidation.

2016–2024

Romania’s Adjustment to America’s Contradictory Foreign Policy

WHAT WAS viewed in 2015 as something unlikely became reality in 2016: Donald Trump was elected President of the US. Trump ran a presidential campaign as a disruptor and, with his election in 2016, his loss in 2020 and subsequent re-election in 2024, it became clear that America was poised for a rethinking of its foreign policy. This had notable implications for Romania and NATO, since the Trump administration can be regarded as skeptical of alliances and multinational cooperation. In this section, we can observe that Romania navigated the first Trump term quite well, aided to a certain extent by Trump’s own early inexperience in foreign policy. A case shall also be made to explain that the future for NATO is set to include much more

from Europe and much less from America, and that Romania is well-positioned to adjust to this reality.

The first challenge was to the very nature of the security dilemma: the US had been pursuing a consistent policy of slowly expanding NATO into Eastern Europe since the mid-nineties. This policy appeared to stall under Trump, who was much more receptive to the Russian point of view that NATO was encroaching into Moscow's backyard. One of the first changes brought about by Trump was a renewed insistence on NATO allies meeting the 2% defense spending criteria, a NATO recommendation that most of its members circumvented. For Romania however, this would not pose a problem, as the country quickly adjusted to the 2% requirement. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also added that he was not worried about Romania failing to meet the requirement.⁷⁴ Trump and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis met in June 2017, a meeting that was fruitful in several areas: Iohannis went for an anti-terrorism framing in order to best position Romania's security contributions. Romania's raise of its defense spending from 1.4% to 2% allowed Trump to present Romania as an example for other NATO members. Iohannis also tried to strike a more businesslike, transactional tone, describing Romania's actions as investments in its own security. Trump, in his first term, remained open to transform NATO into a strong alliance, despite his skepticism about it. He said "we're going to make NATO very strong. We need the money to make it strong. You can't just do what we've been doing in the past." More importantly, a key symbolic victory for Iohannis here was to obtain Trump's declaration that he committed the US to NATO's Article V, especially given that US allies were spending more on defense.⁷⁵ Another strategy of appeasing a more skeptical US administration was for Romania to emphasize the importance of burden-sharing, as Trump demonstrated that he was receptive to countries arguing that they would be willing to contribute more to NATO. Iohannis argued in favor of both Romania's belief in NATO as well as for the need for more burden-sharing during a NATO working lunch in the United Kingdom in December 2019.⁷⁶

Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election to Obama's former Vice-President, Joe Biden. Under Biden, the US pursued a policy of returning to the pre-Trump status quo. Given that Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the security implications for both NATO and Romania once again changed considerably. Biden had attempted to give a platform to NATO's eastern flank members, allowing them greater say in regional security affairs. This approach would cement America's proposed solution to the regional security dilemma, an argument in favor of NATO's endurance and a clear statement that the alliance was not going anywhere. This was another opportunity that Romania capitalized on, particularly through the Bucharest Nine (B9) format. Biden made it clear through the group

that the US, through NATO, would not only cooperate more with its allies on the eastern flank, but that he aimed for that cooperation to go beyond security, touching on economy, healthcare, energy, and many other areas.⁷⁷ This move had considerable implications for American and Romanian foreign policy: it was a brand-new level of multinational integration and cooperation, Biden essentially continuing on the building blocks that Obama had left before him.

Another layer of communication was elevated during the Biden term, between his National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, and Romania's own Foreign Minister and National Security Advisor, Bogdan Aurescu. The dialogue between them cemented Biden's ambitions for the B9 format.⁷⁸ Aside from urging Russia to deescalate its actions in Ukraine, Sullivan also made it clear that the US would "not make any decisions related to their (allies) security without them."⁷⁹ This was part of a broader push of the Biden administration to emphasize that US allies have agency, and do not just blindly follow the US in terms of foreign policy. The US would shift to a strategy of making Russia's invasion of Ukraine as costly for Moscow as possible, and this required the help of America's allies.⁸⁰ The Biden administration was adamant about its desire not to back down from Russia as far as the strategic dilemma went, and that the US expansion into Eastern Europe was a development that Washington strongly supported. Biden made this clear during a February 2023 B9 meeting in Warsaw, when he said that "the irony is that one of the last conversations I had with the—our friend in Russia was, I said: 'You keep asking for the Finlandization of NATO. You're going to get the NATOization of Finland.' Well, it happened. Not only are we strong as we were, we're stronger."⁸¹ Indeed, Finland joined NATO in April 2023, and Sweden would join the alliance in March 2024, giving NATO almost absolute control over the Baltic Sea. Biden and Iohannis met for a final time in May 2024. For Biden, Romania's evolution as a NATO member was more than satisfying, as he claimed, with a bit of humor, "back when I was a Senator, 180 years ago, I fought very hard for Romania's admission to NATO. And you've exceeded every expectation."⁸² In another sign of continuity on the American side, Biden also congratulated Romania on consistently spending 2% of its budget on defense, a grievance that Donald Trump had brought up before him. Biden not backtracking on that issue highlights how the Trump grievance was integrated into the US policy for NATO.⁸³

The Trump administration would also pose a challenge for the ongoing US military footprint in Romania, as Trump had repeatedly argued in the 2016 Presidential campaign that he believed the US had overextended itself in Europe. The missile defense project experienced a slowdown during the Trump years, not very surprising given that some signs had been evident since the Obama administration. The Senate specifically asked for a slowdown in invest-

ments around the Deveselu base, arguing that the technology being considered was untested, especially for a populated area.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, a meeting between Trump and Stoltenberg in May 2018 showed signs that the US was far from abandoning NATO's Forward Presence plans, with four new battalions set to be deployed to Poland and the Baltics, and a multinational brigade to be sent to Romania.⁸⁵ The election of Joe Biden in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 did not alter the growing US military footprint in Romania, on the contrary, as Jake Sullivan would argue in December 2021, a war so close to Romania's border signaled an even greater need of US military support.⁸⁶ Details on this emerged by February 2022: to reassure Romania, the US deployed 1,000 service members from the Army's 2nd Cavalry Regiment, repositioned from Germany. This was done just before the invasion of Ukraine. Romania and Poland were the first two NATO eastern flank beneficiaries of this troop repositioning, and spokesperson Jen Psaki argued that this was a result of consultations between Washington and its allies.⁸⁷ Following Russia's invasion, the US engaged in a show of force through NATO: a deployment of 40,000 troops to the eastern flank, along with a stronger naval presence. New battlegroups for Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. The measures, while described as preventive, sent a clear message that the invasion of a NATO country would have radically different implications than the invasion of a non-NATO country.⁸⁸ On the troop movements from Germany to Romania and Poland, Biden added that it was

*not something that Poland or Romania or Germany should carry on their own. This is an international responsibility. And the United States, as the leader—one of the leaders in the international community, has an obligation to be engaged—to be engaged and do all we can to ease the suffering and pain of innocent women and children, and men, for that matter, throughout Ukraine and those who have made it across the border.*⁸⁹

Romania became the headquarters for a NATO rotational brigade of 3,000 combat and 2,000 auxiliary personnel.⁹⁰ Romania's indirect contributions to the Ukrainian war effort continued in 2023, with a confirmation by NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby that Ukrainian F-16 pilots were being trained in Romania.⁹¹ In 2024, the Biden administration continued expanding and consolidating the Kogălniceanu Base, which was expected to be one of NATO's biggest bases in Europe, with another \$21,600,000.⁹²

Thirdly, the arrival of the pro-business Trump would raise questions about the economic and political relationship between the US and Romania, now with a more transactional president in the White House. Trump appeared supportive of Romania's attempts at energy diversification, urging the country at a Three

Seas Initiative Summit in Warsaw to continue the pipeline project traversing the Black Sea.⁹³ Iohannis met with Trump again in August 2019, and while Trump expressed support for Romania's trade with the US, he was ambivalent when the press asked him about strengthening the US military presence in the country.⁹⁴ Romania aligned with the US in taking a cautious approach concerning China's development of 5G infrastructure. Both countries opposed the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, as well as the entire idea of emergency dependence on Russia. Romania once again emerged as a suitable alternative in the energy sector, due to its own gas and oil resources. Trade had been increasing, and the trade relationship was bound to continue developing.⁹⁵

The strengthening of economic ties continued under Biden, but they took yet another logical step forward. Building on the growing possibilities found in the energy sector, Romania and the US began pursuing collaborations in nuclear energy. In November 2021, Biden and Iohannis announced plans to build a "first-of-its-kind" small modular reactor (SMR) in Romania, under the supervision of the American company NuScale Power. This move would bring civil nuclear technology to Romania and the region and was initially expected to generate somewhere between 6,000 and 30,000 American and Romanian jobs. This was part of Biden's broader green energy agenda.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the war in Ukraine presented Romania with another opportunity to show how it had evolved from its precarious position in the 1990s to a country that could act as a regional pillar in the 2020s: providing humanitarian support for the ongoing war in Ukraine. The war had led to an influx of Ukrainians at Romania's borders, and the country quickly became home to one of the highest numbers of Ukrainian refugees in Europe. For the accommodation and support in these times of crisis, Romania not only confirmed its continued evolution in terms of state capacity but also provided a type of support that was well-received in Washington.⁹⁷

Conclusions

A LOT HAS changed in the past 34 years in Euro–Atlantic affairs. American strategic culture itself seems poised for considerable change. What we can see in American-Romanian relations is a slightly more stable road than one would think. The nineties, marked by political and economic instability, presented some difficulties, but American support for the stabilization of those problems remained reliable. We see the consolidation of Romania as a security partner, during American presidencies that are a lot more contrasting at a first glance: from George W. Bush to Barack Obama then Donald Trump,

Joe Biden and once again Trump. In this period, Romania evolved from an unsuccessful NATO applicant to a dependable NATO ally, increasingly integrated in the affairs of the alliance's eastern flank. Finally, we see the emergence of a disruption under Donald Trump, especially concerning his second term, but even here we notice that Romania is well prepared to weather the change. For example, due to deeper integration with the EU, Romania should suffer less under Trump's 2025 trade war than if this had happened decades earlier.

In conclusion, American and Romanian strategic cultures have come a long way. They have found common ground in defining the regional strategic dilemma and pursued a strategy that both thought was the best for addressing said dilemma: NATO expansion. The success of this strategy pleased both countries, and its failures have deterred neither. Furthermore, to ensure Romania's entrance in America's sphere of security influence, both countries have facilitated a quick and decisive expansion of the American military footprint in Romania, and an ongoing modernization of the Romanian military. Thirdly, we notice a diversification of America's economic perception of Romania: from a country that needed humanitarian support to prevent its economic collapse, to an energy and security partner. In the economic and political area, as in the security area, the drawbacks to the alliance have not been strong enough to deter the process of deeper integration and alignment. Romania's status as a US ally has evolved and improved gradually over the years, peaking in the early 2020s, when Joe Biden elevated the country's role as a hub for US interests in the region. With the beginning of the second Trump term, uncertainty is on the rise. However, the Romania of 2025 is different from Romania of 1990. It is better equipped to handle that uncertainty, and the US itself realizes that disengagement with NATO's eastern flank, and with Europe in general, is a much costlier endeavor than it first appears.

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Abstract

Mission Accomplished? Comparing the Strategic Cultures of the United States and Romania, 1990–2024

This article aims to analyze the alignment of Romanian and American strategic cultures in the post-Cold War period. It looks at the evolving nature of Eastern Europe’s security dilemma, the growing security consolidation between the US and Romania, and the economic and political connections that have facilitated the strategic partnership between the two countries. The article is split into three chronological periods: 1990–2004, marked by Romania’s difficult path towards joining America’s security infrastructure, 2004–2016, when Romania became one of the more reliable NATO allies the US could count on, and 2016–2024, when in spite of an increasingly contradictory US foreign policy, Romania proved to be able to navigate the uncertainty, in a further display of the growing alignment of Romanian and American strategic cultures.

Keywords

foreign policy, strategic culture, international affairs, NATO, strategic partnership