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From U.S. Retrenchment to Regional Self-Reliance: The Recalibration of U.S. Security Commitments Across Taiwan, The Middle East, Latin America, And NATO Europe

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether recent changes in U.S. security commitments across Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe amount to uniform retrenchment or to region-specific recalibration and how far each region is moving toward self-reliance. It uses a qualitative, comparative multi-case design. A common codebook of four operational indicators (U.S. force posture and operational access, arms transfers and delivery backlogs, allied defense outlays and cost-sharing, and trade shares and monetary clearing) is applied to documentary and secondary evidence for 2025–26 and assessed against a 2020–24 baseline. Retrenchment is defined as a verified reduction of at least 25% in permanent personnel or military financing, together with base closures or formal abrogation of a guarantee. Self-reliance requires independent command, intelligence and strategic-lift capacity, a low share of U.S. weapons imports, and settlement outside dollar clearing at scale.

No case meets either threshold. U.S. engagement is instead being recalibrated through instruments that differ by region: burden-sharing targets within NATO's Article 5 framework; continued arms support without an automatic guarantee for Taiwan; access arrangements and crisis surges alongside regional hedging in the Middle East; and selective partnership, pressure and coercion in Latin America. Regional actors respond through hedging and partial capacity-building, but dependence on U.S. enablers, weapons and dollar-based financial networks persists. The paper concludes that U.S. influence is being renegotiated rather than withdrawn, and that regional self-

reliance remains uneven and constrained. The findings describe association, not causation, and are limited by uneven data across the four cases.
Keywords: U.S. security commitments; retrenchment; recalibration; hedging; self-reliance; Taiwan; Middle East; Latin America; NATO Europe

2. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. security commitments have helped shape regional order, deterrence and the choices available to allies and partners. Those commitments, however, do not take the same legal or strategic form everywhere. NATO Europe is anchored in a treaty-based collective-defense alliance; U.S. support for Taiwan operates through a distinct framework that does not promise automatic military intervention; and relationships in the Middle East and Latin America consist of different bilateral partnerships, access arrangements and security practices. This variation makes it difficult to treat every change in U.S. policy as evidence of a single, uniform retreat.

Recent policy documents and events make the question especially relevant. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy emphasize the Indo-Pacific, the Western Hemisphere, Middle East priorities and greater European burden-sharing. At the 2025 Hague Summit, NATO allies committed to 5% of GDP defense-investment benchmark by 2035: at least 3.5% for core defense and up to 1.5% for broader defense- and security-related investment (NATO, 2025). In the Western Hemisphere, Maduro's capture in January 2026 and the Shield of the Americas initiative signal a forceful approach (Reuters, 2026; White House, 2026), though neither alone proves a complete regional policy shift. U.S. access arrangements remain important in the Gulf, while Taiwan receives arms support without an automatic guarantee of U.S. military intervention.

These developments matter because partners make security decisions not only in response to capabilities, but also to their perceptions of the reliability, conditions and likely costs of U.S. support. Yet strategy documents state priorities and intentions; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate that a commitment has been reduced or that regional actors have become more independent. A spending increase may indicate investment in defense, for example, but not necessarily the ability to plan, command, sustain or conduct operations without external support. Likewise, cooperation with additional powers can widen diplomatic options without replacing

existing military or financial dependencies. The distinction between a change in the terms of engagement and an actual withdrawal is therefore central to the analysis.

Existing scholarship offers largely region-specific explanations. Research on NATO examines changing commitment terms, European burden-sharing and continued dependence on U.S. capabilities (Khan & Qadir, 2026; Podraza, 2025; Ossa, 2026). Taiwan scholarship addresses strategic ambiguity, deterrence and the costs of dependence on either great power (Chang-Liao & Fang, 2021; Wang & Tan, 2021; Yuan, 2023; Wang, 2025). Studies of Latin America describe security cooperation, economic pressure, selective force and weak regional coordination (Serbin Pont, 2018; Pellegrini & Breda, 2026; Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026; Magnotta, 2026). In the Middle East, debate centers on offshore balancing and the limits of reducing direct U.S. involvement while retaining access and partnerships (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). Together, these studies suggest change but do not establish that it is uniform across regions.

Three gaps motivate a comparison. First, studies often examine regions separately, making it difficult to determine whether similar pressures produce similar policy instruments. Second, the link between uncertainty about U.S. support and regional self-reliance remains difficult to establish, particularly for Taiwan and for European states with different security choices. Third, defense spending is often treated as a measure of burden-sharing without separating it from dependence on command systems, equipment, intelligence, logistics and financial infrastructure. Self-reliance may involve national capacity, alternative partnerships, regional coordination or the ability to act without U.S. assistance; these outcomes are related but not interchangeable.

The paper therefore asks: *Is the recalibration of U.S. security commitments across Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe a uniform cutback or a set of region-specific adjustments, and to what extent is each region moving toward self-reliance?* It has three objectives: (1) to examine the form and terms of U.S. engagement in each case, distinguishing stated policy from observable practice; (2) to analyse regional responses including hedging, balancing, bandwagoning, capacity-building and continued dependence; and (3) to compare the cases and identify patterns and differences without assuming that the same causes operate in every region.

The study contributes a shared comparative framework that distinguishes *retrenchment*, an actual reduction or withdrawal of support, from *recalibration*, a change in the instruments, conditions or distribution of responsibility within an ongoing relationship. The framework is made testable by a codebook of four operational indicators with explicit decision thresholds, assessed against a 2020–

2024 baseline, so that the distinction is evaluated against evidence and not assumed. The study also treats defense spending as one indicator rather than a direct proxy for independence. The analysis rests on documentary and secondary evidence for 2025–26 and compares four cases rather than claiming to represent every U.S. partnership. Because the cases differ in legal status, regional institutions and available evidence, the comparison is analytical rather than a claim that the four relationships are equivalent. These limits guide the interpretation of the findings that follow.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

During the post-Cold War era, U.S. security commitments created regional orders, deterred potential aggressors and limited the choices available to friends and allies. Recent research asks whether these commitments are now shrinking worldwide or changing form from one region to another. Four concepts are used throughout and are defined formally in Section 4.5. *Retrenchment* is an actual decrease or withdrawal of support. *Recalibration* is a change in the method, type or distribution of support within a continuing relationship. *Hedging* is building additional partnerships while maintaining an existing one. *Self-reliance* is the capacity to plan, equip, fund and sustain military action without significant external assistance; higher spending alone does not demonstrate it.

Recent work on Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe points more toward recalibration than retrenchment. Three bodies of theory help connect the four regions. Mearsheimer and Walt (2016) set out offshore balancing, a prescriptive grand strategy under which the United States would avoid a large permanent military presence abroad, rely on regional powers to maintain the balance, and intervene only when a hostile power threatens to dominate a strategically important region. It is used here as a benchmark for why burden-shifting is advocated, not as evidence that Washington is pursuing it. Khan and Qadir (2026) develop burden-sharing logic, under which U.S. support is tied to the contribution of friends and allies. Wang and Tan (2021) show that partners respond to pressure for greater self-reliance by widening their choice of partners rather than walking away. Each regional section asks three questions: how Washington engages the region, how regional governments respond, and what prevents them from relying wholly on themselves.

3.1. Taiwan: Ambiguity, Deterrence and Adaptation

The Taiwan case shows United States sustaining a commitment while leaving its exact form ambiguous. Under strategic ambiguity, U.S. supplies weapons to Taiwan but gives no guarantee to defend it. Chang-Liao and Fang (2021) argue that ambiguity serves two purposes: it deters China by reducing its confidence of winning a conflict, and it discourages Taiwan from provocative action. U.S. support still rests on three foundations: the One China Policy, the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances. Yuan (2023) observes that defense cooperation has increased and that there is a growing emphasis on asymmetric defense and therefore reads the change as recalibration rather than reduction. Wang (2025) agrees, suggesting that the degree of ambiguity should adjust to circumstances rather than be fully clarified. Kennedy (2026) adds a caution: friction between U.S. and Taipei may erode trust and so weaken deterrence. The same dynamic appears in NATO, where the guarantee remains but its credibility is questioned.

Taiwan's response is usually described as hedging. Wang and Tan (2021) show that Taiwan seeks to preserve its security relationship with the United States without becoming overly dependent on either U.S or Beijing. Rising Chinese military capability and grey-zone pressure make these choices pressing (Taiwan Ministry of National Defense, 2025c).

The effects of U.S. policy on Taiwan reach beyond the island. Hornung et al. (2023) find that if United States cut back its support for Taiwan, Tokyo, Seoul and Manila would all see the United States as less reliable, though each would react differently according to its own threats and its relationship with China. These concerns mirror the fears of abandonment that critics raise about offshore balancing in the Gulf.

Two limitations apply to this literature. Most of it predates 2025–26, and the RAND study draws on peacetime interviews conducted in 2022–23 (Hornung et al., 2023). None of the studies examines whether higher defense spending amounts to genuine self-sufficiency.

3.2. Middle East: The Limits of Stepping Back

The Middle East is where the idea of U.S. retreat is most openly contested. Mearsheimer and Walt (2016) propose offshore balancing: reducing the U.S. presence in the Gulf, conserving resources for economic and technological strength, and letting regional powers balance one another. Three problems arise. First, a smaller presence raises fears of abandonment, which can push partners to seek alternative patrons, as Taiwan's hedging shows. Second, presence generates influence:

safeguarding access supports arms sales, so it is more than a cost. Third, the idea gives no clear answer to gradually developing threats such as Iran's nuclear program (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2025).

The 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Défense Strategy place the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere ahead of the Middle East, yet both still depend on regional partners and access (White House, 2025; U.S. Department of Défense, 2026). This points to adaptation, not abandonment. Equilibrium among regional powers is also not automatic, since rivalries within West Asia coexist with Israel–Iran hostility (Taneja, 2023). Recent data show Arab states and China strengthening their relationship while Gulf trade spreads across partners (Taneja & Mankikar, 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). In August 2026 Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan issued the Makkah Joint Défense statement (Government of Saudi Arabia et al., 2026), which Drishti IAS Research Team (2026) reads as a shift in West Asian defense; one agreement, however, does not make a system.

Self-sufficiency is constrained by dependence on external equipment, of which the United States is among the largest suppliers (SIPRI, 2025a), and by dollar-based payment. The De-dollarization debate has begun (Tripathi, 2025), but the renminbi's share of global payments remains small (SWIFT, 2026). Data on this region are less available than for the others, so findings should be treated with caution.

3.3. Latin America: Pressure, Burden Shifting and Hedging

In Latin America, recalibration works through pressure more than through treaties. Serbin Pont (2018) explains that after the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) failed during the South Atlantic Conflict, South American states created UNASUR and the South American Défense Council. Grass (2022) argues that U.S. attention shifted after 9/11, giving China and Russia room to step in. Krivolapov and Stepanova (2021) show that cooperation continued in areas such as counter-narcotics, which suggests adjustment rather than withdrawal. The 2025 National Security Strategy now lists the Western Hemisphere as a top priority (White House, 2025).

Recent studies disagree on what this means. Pellegrini and Breda (2026) identify three approaches: cooperation with friendly governments, arrangements such as the Shield of the Americas, and pressure or force against those who resist. They frame this as burden-shifting, in which local governments take on the fight against criminal groups, and treat the capture of Maduro as an

exception. Felbab-Brown and Sisson (in Anderson et al., 2026) argue that the operation contradicts the preference for partnership, and Stuenkel (2026) sees the removal of leaders as now an accepted policy choice. Cabrera García and Lo Brutto (2026) add tariffs, sanctions, loan conditions and migration pressure as further levers, and Magnotta (2026) argues that access to U.S. depends on political loyalty. The same actions can therefore look like burden-sharing, as in NATO, or like coercion.

Country responses differ, as they do in the Gulf. Panama ended a Hong Kong firm's port contracts, and Venezuela's new leadership opened oil and minerals to the United States (Pellegrini & Breda, 2026). Argentina kept its currency swap with China (Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026). Mexico insisted on leading any action on its soil and stressed cooperation without subordination (Government of Mexico, 2026a). Colombia kept a bilateral security channel with U.S. Brazil, whose president Lula warned that intervention threatens the region's zone of peace, hedges with China, which bought US$55.3 billion of its farm goods in 2025, roughly one third of its agricultural exports against 6.7% for the United States (Magnotta, 2026). Magnotta frames the dispute as a struggle over sovereignty. Sims and Lee (2025) link hedging to domestic politics, and Herz et al. (2023) link it to U.S.–China rivalry. The weakness of UNASUR, ALBA and CELAC forces state to bargain individually, which encourages the self-help policing that the United States promotes (Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026; Pellegrini & Breda, 2026).

3.4. NATO Europe: A Changed Bargain Inside a Lasting Alliance

NATO Europe shows recalibration inside a formal commitment. The transatlantic bargain trades European contributions for a U.S. guarantee. Although Article 5 remains in place, Khan and Qadir (2026) argue that Trump's transactional style made the U.S. commitment appear conditional, the same logic that underlies burden-shifting in Latin America and the Gulf. Podraza (2025) shows how Russian actions between 2014 and 2022 first increased NATO's value, and Ossa (2026) shows how the war in Ukraine and U.S. uncertainty after 2025 pushed Europe toward greater independence. Desmaele (2024) asks what burden-sharing is for. Ashford and Rawlins (2024) chart scenarios of U.S. retrenchment, Maitra (2024) argues for a reduced U.S. role, and Martin (n.d.) for rebalancing.

As in Taiwan, Europe is expanding its capabilities while remaining in the alliance. The 2025 Hague Summit set a target of 5% of GDP by 2035: at least 3.5% for core defense and up to 1.5% for

related security (NATO, 2025). The European Union backed a White Paper on European Defence Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025) and a €150 billion SAFE loan instrument (Council of the European Union, 2025). The UK–France Northwood Declaration may offer a nuclear backstop (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). Macron has called on Europe to become a geopolitical power, and Ossa (2026) discusses a "coalition of the willing".

Europe is also divided: France promotes autonomy, Germany is more cautious, and eastern members are chiefly concerned about U.S. reliability (Crombois, 2025). Europe still relies on the United States for command, intelligence, logistics and strategic lift, and Meijer and Brooks (2021) argue that it cannot secure itself if the United States withdraws. Higher spending improves readiness rather than independence.

3.5. U.S. Policy Mechanisms for Encouraging Regional Self-Reliance

Offshore balancing is a prescriptive: it describes what some scholars think U.S. should do, not what it has done. To establish what U.S. policy documents actually say, this section reviews the official record across the four regions. The United States encourages allies and partners to assume greater responsibility for their own security to reduce American financial and military commitments, prioritize strategic challenges, preserve geopolitical influence and strengthen regional deterrence. U.S. policy that strengthens a partner's defense capability is not, however, automatically evidence that Washington is trying to reduce its own military commitment. Table 1 organizes the documentary record under four mechanisms: reducing the financial and military burden, strategic prioritization, maintaining influence while limiting direct involvement, and strengthening regional defense capabilities.

Table 1. Documented U.S. policy mechanisms encouraging regional self-reliance

Region	Mechanism	Documentary evidence
NATO Europe	Reducing financial and military burden	Wales Summit Declaration (NATO, 2014, para. 14): members committed to move towards spending 2% of GDP on defense and called for a more balanced sharing of costs and responsibilities. Pence (2019): criticised the disproportionate U.S. contribution to NATO defense spending and urged European allies to meet their commitments.
	Strategic prioritisation	Hegseth (2025a): European allies must take primary responsibility for conventional security on their continent, allowing the United States to increase its focus on the Indo-Pacific.
	Maintaining influence while limiting direct involvement	Hegseth (2025a): reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO while demanding that Europe assume greater responsibility for its own security.

Region	Mechanism	Documentary evidence
	Strengthening regional capabilities	Wales Summit Declaration (NATO, 2014, para. 103): stronger European defense capabilities would strengthen NATO and promote equitable burden-sharing.
Taiwan	Reducing financial and military burden	Taiwan Relations Act (1979), s. 3(a): the United States makes defense articles and services available to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability. Taiwan is a strategic partner, not a formal treaty ally.
	Strategic prioritisation	Hegseth (2025b), Shangri-La Dialogue: identified China as a major regional threat and called on Indo-Pacific allies and partners to upgrade their own defenses quickly.
	Maintaining influence while limiting direct involvement	Taiwan Relations Act, s. 3: continued arms transfers and defense cooperation keep Washington involved in Taiwan's security while strengthening Taiwan's own capacity. The approach combines continued U.S. support with greater reliance on Taiwan's defenses, rather than transferring full responsibility away from the United States.
	Strengthening regional capabilities	Taiwan Relations Act, s. 2: identifies peace, security and stability in the Western Pacific as a U.S. objective. Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (2022): strengthens military training, defense cooperation and Taiwan's ability to resist Chinese coercion.
Middle East	Reducing financial and military burden	National Security Strategy (White House, 2022a): the United States will ensure that regional partners can defend themselves against foreign threats.
	Strategic prioritisation	National Security Strategy (White House, 2022a): acknowledges the opportunity costs of earlier military-centric approaches and advocates a more balanced approach to global priorities. National Defense Strategy (U.S. Department of Défense, 2022): the United States will "right-size its forward military presence in the Middle East" after the Afghanistan mission transition, while cooperating with partners on integrated air and missile defense and maritime security.
	Maintaining influence while limiting direct involvement	Jeddah Security and Development Summit (White House, 2022b): President Biden reaffirmed an enduring commitment to regional partnerships and security cooperation, and the administration promoted regional integration.
	Strengthening regional capabilities	National Security Strategy (White House, 2022a): supports integrated air and maritime defense structures among regional partners. UAE Integrated Country Strategy (U.S. Department of State, 2022): identifies GCC interoperability, particularly in ballistic-missile defense, as important for partners to bear a larger share of the security burden.
Latin America	Reducing financial and military burden	Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (U.S. Department of State, 2020), Goal 3: promotes burden-sharing, local ownership and regional contributions. This is a global strategy, applied here to the Western Hemisphere. SOUTHCOM Posture Statement (2025): operational responsibility is being shared with regional partners.
	Strategic prioritisation	Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (U.S. Department of State, 2020), Goal 4: calls for better prioritisation, efficiency and effective use of American taxpayer funds.
	Maintaining influence while limiting direct involvement	Strategy (U.S. Department of State, 2020): partnerships, local ownership and regional contributions allow Washington to keep influence through institutional cooperation and capacity-building. SOUTHCOM Posture Statement (2025): International Military Education and Training fosters strategic relationships, strengthens partner self-defence and contributes to U.S. access and cooperation in peacetime and contingencies. SOUTHCOM Posture Statement (2024): Building Partner Capacity programmes are a major instrument of partner engagement.
	Strengthening regional capabilities	SOUTHCOM Posture Statement (Richardson, 2022): General Laura Richardson stressed military cooperation and the importance of regional partners developing their own capabilities against shared threats ("Our partners are our best defense").

Source: Authors' compilation from the official documents cited in each row.

Four statements illustrate the language of these documents:

> *"The United States will no longer tolerate an imbalanced relationship which encourages dependency." (Hegseth, 2025a, 12 February 2025, on NATO Europe)*
>
> *"U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific can, and should, quickly upgrade their own defenses." and "We want to empower you – as partners, not dependents." (Hegseth, 2025b, in Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific)*
>
> *"make sure those countries can defend themselves against foreign threats." (White House, 2022a, on the Middle East)*
>
> *"America's prosperity and security depend on peaceful, self-reliant, U.S. economic and security partners." (Pompeo, 2020, 18 December 2020, on Latin America)*

The documents span administrations from 2014 to 2025, which indicates that encouraging partner self-reliance is a long-running feature of U.S. policy and not a novelty of 2025. United States pursues it through a combination of burden-sharing, strategic prioritization, partner capability-building and continued engagement through security partnerships, and the approach takes a different form in each region. In NATO Europe it emphasizes higher European defense spending and a more equitable distribution of conventional security responsibilities. In Taiwan it combines continued arms transfers and defense cooperation with the development of Taiwan's own self-defense capabilities. In the Middle East it involves adjusting the U.S. military presence while encouraging partners to strengthen their defense and security cooperation. In Latin America it relies on security assistance, military training, institutional partnerships and regional cooperation to build local capacity and share responsibility for common security challenges.

A common feature is that the United States seeks to strengthen its partners' ability to address regional threats without necessarily ending its own involvement. Continued arms transfers, training, joint exercises and institutional partnerships show that regional self-reliance can coexist with an ongoing U.S. strategic presence. Encouraging partners to assume greater responsibility therefore does not necessarily mean abandoning existing security relationships; it can represent a recalibration of the form and distribution of security commitments. The evidence nevertheless does not establish that every instance of partner capability-building or higher defense spending is motivated by an explicit U.S. intention to reduce its military burden. Some initiatives primarily serve deterrence, regional stability, interoperability or the preservation of strategic access, and

partners' decisions may also reflect their own threat perceptions and domestic priorities. Whether a given case represents retrenchment or recalibration must therefore be assessed separately in each region, using changes in U.S. military presence, the nature of continued security assistance and the responsibilities that regional partners assume. Section 4.5 sets out how this assessment is done.

3.6. Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

The literature points to recalibration, not retrenchment, and the adaptation depends on the type of commitment: treaty obligations in Europe, ambiguity in Taiwan, access arrangements in the Middle East and pressure in Latin America. Across the regions there is hedging and partial capacity-building, and self-reliance remains limited by structural dependence: on American capabilities in Europe, on foreign weapons in Taiwan, on equipment and financial infrastructure in the Gulf, and on weakly developed institutions in Latin America. Self-reliance is therefore not yet demonstrated.

Three questions remain unanswered. First, few studies compare across settings, because most focus on a single area. Second, few verify whether and how increased spending, new partnerships or official statements lead to self-reliance, because there is no unified set of criteria. Third, data are unevenly distributed across regions, especially in the Middle East, where studies rarely consider country-specific cases. This study addresses these gaps by comparing four regions through a single framework with explicit indicators and thresholds.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This study follows a qualitative comparative approach to examine changes in U.S. security commitments across Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe. Comparing these four cases helps establish whether the changing nature of U.S. engagement reflects a common pattern or differs according to the strategic and political conditions of each region.

The comparison focuses on U.S. security engagement, regional responses, and efforts towards greater security self-reliance. Although these aspects are examined across all four cases, the study considers the differences in their political and institutional settings.

The study primarily examines developments during 2025–26, while drawing on evidence from earlier years to establish the background against which recent changes can be assessed. This longer perspective is important for distinguishing recent policy adjustments from existing patterns of U.S. engagement and regional dependence. The period 2020–24 serves as the baseline and 2025–26 as the observation window.

4.2. Nature of Research

The research is qualitative, empirical and documentary in nature. It draws on publicly available policy documents, official statements by governments and diplomats, and published academic and policy research to examine U.S. security commitments and regional responses. The study does not involve fieldwork, interviews or surveys; its analysis is based on existing documentary evidence. Figures relating to defense expenditure, arms transfers and trade are quantitative, but they are used to support the discussion and provide context, not as variables for statistical analysis.

4.3. Case Selection and Sampling Technique

The unit of analysis is the region or, where a region has no single actor, the regional grouping. The four cases were chosen deliberately. They are not alike; they were chosen because they represent different forms of U.S. security relationship. Selection therefore follows variation in the form of the U.S. commitment, which is the study's independent variable, and in how each region is responding to it. Taiwan represents strategic ambiguity without a formal alliance. NATO Europe represents a highly institutionalized collective-defense arrangement. The Middle East represents a region experiencing perceived U.S. retrenchment: the label describes the phenomenon under investigation and does not assume that withdrawal has occurred. Latin America represents a region with limited formal security commitments but persistent U.S. influence. Table 2 summarises the four cases.

Table 2. Case selection: type of U.S. commitment, perceived change and regional response

Case	Type of U.S. commitment	Perceived change in U.S. role	Regional responses
Taiwan	Strategic ambiguity under the Taiwan Relations Act	Uncertainty regarding future U.S. military involvement	Hedging and increased defense spending
Middle East	Security partnerships and military presence, but no collective guarantee.	Reduced priority and greater burden-sharing.	Hedging through diversified partnerships ("liquid alliances")

Case	Type of U.S. commitment	Perceived change in U.S. role	Regional responses
Latin America	Limited formal security commitment	Continued U.S. influence combined with strategic competition	Fragmented hedging and economic diversification
NATO Europe	Formal collective defense through NATO and institutionalized rules	Greater pressure for burden-sharing	Rearmament and increased defense spending

Source: Authors' compilation. "Liquid alliances" are flexible, non-exclusive, issue-specific partnerships between states, as opposed to fixed, long-term military alliances such as NATO.

The comparison needs a common yardstick, so self-reliance is defined once and applied identically to all four cases: the ability of a state or regional grouping to maintain credible deterrence and defense capabilities without requiring direct U.S. military intervention, critical command-and-control systems, intelligence support or essential weapons transfers. Section 4.5 operationalizes this definition.

The cases differ in the formal strength of the U.S. commitment, and Latin America has no security commitment comparable to a treaty or the Taiwan Relations Act. This does not undermine the comparison, because cases were selected for variation, not similarity. Latin America is included because U.S. engagement there takes informal forms that nonetheless affect regional security: financial assistance, bilateral agreements and status-of-forces arrangements, troop deployments, and training. Using such a case shows how different forms of commitment, from treaty to informal influence, relate to different regional attempts to reduce dependence.

Japan, South Korea and the Philippines are not included. They are treaty allies, so adding them would duplicate the treaty-based type already represented by NATO Europe and would add little variation in the form of the commitment. Indo-Pacific partners are considered only as context for Taiwan, where they shape perceptions of U.S. reliability (Hornung et al., 2023).

The study concentrates on 2025–26, with 2020–24 as the baseline. Sources were selected for relevance and availability, so the sample is not random, and the number of sources differs by region.

4.4. Data Sources and Collection

The study relies on publicly available secondary sources, including official government documents, policy statements, institutional databases, statistical reports, and academic and policy research. No primary data was collected.

Evidence was gathered separately by the four regional research groups, covering the 2020–24 baseline period and the 2025–26 observation period. The earlier period establishes the context against which recent developments are assessed, while the later period captures changes and continuities in U.S. security engagement and regional responses. The findings were consolidated through a common comparative matrix. The principal sources, the evidence examined across the two periods, and their analytical relevance are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Regional sources, evidence and analytical relevance

Region	Principal sources	Evidence examined	Analytical relevance
Taiwan	CRS; USCC; Taiwan MND/MOFA; SIPRI; RAND and academic studies on strategic ambiguity and deterrence.	2020–24: U.S. arms transfers, security cooperation and Taiwan defense expenditure. 2025–26: arms notifications, delivery developments, defense investment and preparedness.	Assesses whether domestic defense investment and preparedness reduce dependence while U.S. arms, training and deterrence support continue.
Middle East	U.S. DoD and strategy documents; SIPRI; GCC and national statistics; U.S. Census Bureau; central-bank and financial records; ORF; offshore-balancing scholarship.	2020–24: U.S. posture, basing, arms dependence and regional expenditure. 2025–26: deployments, procurement, localisation, cooperation and financial arrangements.	Distinguishes withdrawal from redistribution of security responsibilities and assesses limits to military and financial independence.
Latin America	U.S. National Security Strategy; official regional government records; U.S. government and diplomatic sources; trade and agricultural data; scholarship on regional security, BRICS+ and economic hedging.	2020–24: U.S. security relationships, regional defense arrangements and trade. 2025–26: initiatives, bilateral cooperation, diplomatic responses, trade diversification and monetary arrangements.	Assesses selective partnerships, pressure and burden-sharing, and whether economic diversification translates into security autonomy.
NATO Europe	NATO summit declarations, annual reports and expenditure statistics; Council of the EU SAFE documentation; U.S. and European policy documents; scholarship on burden-sharing and strategic autonomy.	2020–24: U.S. commitments, NATO expenditure and European dependence. 2025–26: spending, burden-sharing, procurement and capability gaps.	Assesses whether increased investment and joint procurement strengthen self-reliance or redistribute responsibilities within a U.S.-led alliance.

Source: Authors' compilation from the official, institutional and academic sources identified in the regional research matrices.

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy serve as common policy references across the four regional cases. They are examined alongside earlier policy documents and historical evidence to establish the context in which recent changes occurred. This common reference point helps identify differences in the stated priorities of the United States and the expected security responsibilities of its allies and partners across regions.

The collected material was organised around the study's four operational indicators: U.S. force posture and operational access; arms transfers and delivery backlogs; allied defense outlays and

cost-sharing; and trade shares and monetary clearing. Official records and institutional datasets were used wherever available, while academic and policy research provided additional historical and interpretative context. Where comparable quantitative evidence was unavailable, the limitation was recorded and was not treated as evidence of a reduction in U.S. engagement or an increase in regional self-reliance.

For comparative consistency, evidence from the four regional groups was consolidated using the same broad analytical structure. However, the availability and comparability of sources varied across cases. The study therefore distinguishes between verified developments, reported estimates, policy commitments, and areas where primary evidence remains incomplete. This allows the regional cases to be compared without assuming that differences in their legal arrangements, institutional structures or available data can be eliminated.

4.5. Analytical Framework, Indicators and Codebook

4.5.1. Conceptual Foundations and Definitions

To make the framework testable, this section fixes what each key term means. Section 4.5.5 then states what counts, and what does not count, as evidence for each interpretation.

Retrenchment is an actual reduction or withdrawal of an existing U.S. security commitment. It is judged by material change: fewer permanent troops, reduced military financing, closed bases, or formal abrogation of a defense guarantee. Statements, strategy documents and threats of withdrawal show intent, not retrenchment.

Recalibration is a change in the instruments, conditions or distribution of responsibility within a relationship that continues. U.S. presence and support remain materially in place, but the form shifts, for example towards burden-sharing targets, arms-sale and backlog management, rotational task forces, or tariff and sanction levers. Recalibration is not a softer word for retrenchment; it is a different outcome.

Dependence is continued reliance on external support. **Hedging** means widening partnerships while keeping the existing U.S. relationship. **Capacity-building** means strengthening domestic or regional capabilities. **Fragmented hedging** means state-level diversification without unified regional security coordination.

Self-reliance is a regional actor's capacity to plan, equip, fund and sustain military action without significant external assistance. It has four components: independent command, control and intelligence (C4ISR); equipment and industrial supply; logistics and strategic lift; and financial and payment capacity. Higher spending is an input to self-reliance, not proof of it. Hedging and capacity-building are not self-reliance; they are steps that may or may not lead towards it.

Conceptual and operational self-reliance

The four components map onto the codebook conditions as follows. Independent command and intelligence, and logistics and strategic lift, correspond to independent C4ISR and strategic lift; equipment and industrial supply corresponds to a U.S. share of under 30% of major weapons imports; and financial and payment capacity corresponds to settlement outside dollar clearing at scale. A region is coded self-reliant only when the operational evidence supports the conceptual claim, so rising budgets alone can never produce the label.

4.5.2. The Two Analytical Axes and Their Relationship

The framework uses two separate axes, shown in Figure 1. Axis 1 describes U.S. security posture: retrenchment, recalibration, or a mixed or inconclusive finding where evidence conflicts or is missing. Axis 2 describes the regional response: dependence, hedging and capacity-building, fragmented hedging, or operational self-reliance. Keeping the axes separate prevents the common error of reading one from the other.

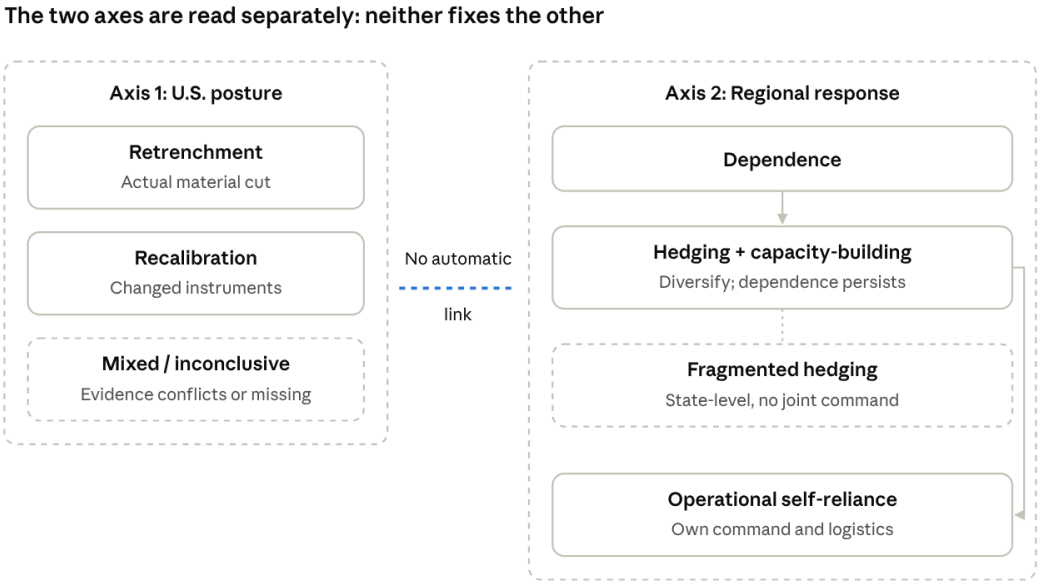


Figure 1. The two analytical axes are read separately: neither fixes the other.

A move on one axis does not place a region on the other; the self-reliance step needs the codebook conditions, not a bigger budget.

A change in U.S. posture does not automatically produce self-reliance, and regional diversification does not by itself demonstrate U.S. withdrawal. One axis is never inferred from the other. Four propositions follow.

- **Retrenchment and recalibration are distinct outcomes.** A relationship can show neither, one, nor a mix. Where posture contracts while economic coercion expands, the finding is *mixed*, and where records are missing it is *inconclusive*. Both are legitimate results.
- **Retrenchment does not automatically produce self-reliance.** Perceived U.S. unreliability may lead to hedging, bandwagoning or continued dependence. The paper therefore treats self-reliance as a question to test, not an expected destination.
- **Recalibration can encourage self-reliance but does not guarantee it.** Burden-shifting moves responsibility; it does not move capability. Responsibility shifted is not capacity gained.
- **Hedging sits between dependence and self-reliance.** It broadens options without replacing existing military or financial dependencies.

These propositions describe association. The paper does not claim that U.S. policy *caused* regional responses, since domestic politics, rivalry, economics and institutional strength also matter.

China's rise, Russia's war in Ukraine, domestic politics and institutional strength are treated as contextual factors and are not systematically tested.

Use of theory

The theories are used to interpret the findings, not to prove them. Offshore balancing (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016) is a prescriptive grand strategy; it is used here as a lens for why burden-shifting is advocated, not as evidence that U.S. is pursuing it or that it explains regional behaviour. Burden-sharing logic (Khan & Qadir, 2026) and hedging (Wang & Tan, 2021) are used to organise the two axis. Findings are linked to these ideas without causal claims. The U.S. policy documents reviewed in Section 3.5 provide the documentary background for what U.S. says it is doing.

4.5.3. Operational Indicators

The four operational indicators examine changes in U.S. security commitments, and the corresponding responses of regional actors, across military, defense-industrial, fiscal and financial dimensions. Collectively, they provide a framework for assessing both the material character of U.S. security engagement and the extent to which regional actors are developing the capacity to assume greater responsibility for their own security. No single measure can establish either strategic retrenchment or operational self-reliance, so a combined assessment is necessary to distinguish changes in U.S. engagement from the extent of regional capacity-building and autonomy. Table 4 gives the rationale for each indicator and Table 5 gives the sources and accounting rules.

Table 4. Rationale for the four operational indicators

Operational indicator	Rationale for selection	What it captures
U.S. force posture and operational access	Military presence and access are direct indicators of continuing physical and operational engagement. Examining permanent deployments, forward basing, rotational forces and joint operational mechanisms helps distinguish substantive withdrawal from the reconfiguration of military engagement.	The scale, distribution and nature of the U.S. military presence in the four cases, including permanent active-duty deployments, access to strategic facilities, continuity of forward basing, rotational deployments and participation in joint operational mechanisms. It enables an assessment of whether changes in the composition or deployment of forces indicate a reduction in enduring commitments or a shift towards alternative forms of military engagement.
Arms transfers and delivery backlogs	Arms transfer measure defense-industrial dependence and the U.S. role in supplying and sustaining regional capabilities. Supplier concentration, arms notifications and delivery backlogs help assess external procurement and the reliability of supply relationships.	The extent of reliance on U.S. suppliers for major conventional weapons, patterns of procurement, Foreign Military Sales notifications, security assistance and delays in delivery of contracted equipment. It also considers supplier diversification and the persistence of technological, logistical and sustainment dependencies.
Allied defense outlays and cost-sharing	Defense spending and cost-sharing indicate the distribution of financial responsibility. Actual outlays, alliance commitments, procurement and domestic industry	Changes in defense expenditure, the distribution of financial responsibilities within security partnerships, compliance with spending benchmarks, and implementation of new cost-sharing commitments. It also examines investment in domestic

Operational indicator	Rationale for selection	What it captures
	investment help distinguish financial contributions from the development of independent capability.	defense production, procurement and industrial capacity, to assess whether higher contributions strengthen indigenous capabilities or mainly support existing arrangements.
Trade shares and monetary clearing	Trade and monetary arrangements reveal broader economic and financial dependencies that underpin security partnerships. They help distinguish economic diversification from financial dependence.	The distribution of regional trade across major external partners, commodity and merchandise export destinations, trade-invoicing currencies, and the mechanisms through which cross-border transactions are settled. It distinguishes trade diversification, liquidity support (such as central-bank swap lines) and actual settlement outside U.S.-centred clearing systems.

Source: Authors' analytical framework, based on the four operational indicators and the study's comparative codebook.

The four indicators are examined against the 2020–24 baseline and the 2025–26 observation period to identify both changes and continuities. Their combined application provides a multidimensional basis for evaluating the relationship between U.S. security recalibration and regional responses, while avoiding the assumption that increased defense expenditure, alternative partnerships or trade diversification necessarily constitute evidence of operational self-reliance. Supplier shares are disaggregated by exact geographic coverage and five-year reporting windows (SIPRI, 2025a, 2026). Where comparable primary series do not exist or definitions diverge, the indicator is recorded as *Unavailable* or *Unverified* and is not inferred.

Table 5. Operational indicators: sources and accounting rules

Operational indicator	Primary institutional sources	What is measured	Comparability and accounting rules
1. U.S. force posture and operational access	U.S. DoD Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC, 2025); USCENTCOM, USINDOPACOM and USSOUTHCOM releases; IISS (2026).	Permanent active-duty personnel, forward basing extensions, rotational task forces and joint command cells. Tests material physical withdrawal against operational adaptation.	Separate enduring peacetime stationing from temporary crisis surges (for example, dual carrier deployments) and short-term advisory or training rotations. Media estimates without a matching DMDC series are flagged Unverified.
2. Arms transfers and delivery backlogs	SIPRI (2025a, 2026); DSCA Major Arms Sales (DSCA, 2025); CRS (2026c); USCC (2025).	Single-supplier concentration ratio (CR1) for major conventional weapons; Foreign Military Sales (FMS) notifications; FMF and PDA aid; open case backlogs.	Disaggregate SIPRI windows (2020–24 vs. 2021–25). Distinguish full notified FMS case values from physically undelivered hardware. Keep Ukraine support separate from NATO ally transfers.
3. Allied defense outlays and cost-sharing	NATO (2025, 2026); SIPRI (2025b); Taiwan MND (2025b); Council of the EU (2025); GAMI (2026).	Enacted defense budgets, real-terms spending growth, alliance GDP targets, industrial loan pools and domestic procurement localisation rates.	Separate historical benchmarks (2% of GDP), actual real outlays, and future pledges (5% of GDP by 2035). Keep core MND budgets separate from broader NATO-standard accounting.
4. Trade shares and monetary clearing	Federal Reserve (Bertaut et al., 2025); SWIFT (2026); MAPA (2026); CBUAE (2026); GCC-STAT (2024).	Commodity and merchandise export destinations, trade-invoicing currency shares, SWIFT payment percentages and bilateral central-bank swap lines.	Export destination, trade invoicing and final settlement clearing are distinct metrics. A central-bank swap line provides liquidity but does not prove that trade is settled outside USD rails (Fedwire/CHIPS).

Source: Authors' codebook.

4.5.4. Classification Codebook and Decision Thresholds

To prevent circular reasoning, whereby any observed policy shift is reflexively labelled recalibration or higher defense spending is automatically equated with self-reliance, the codebook turns continuous economic and military variables into mutually exclusive, discrete categories. Numerical cutoffs anchored in the international political economy and defense economics literature make the classifications falsifiable across all four regional groups. Classification runs along two independent axes: U.S. security posture (Axis 1) and regional response (Axis 2). The classification thresholds adapt established benchmarks from the international security and macroeconomic literature into explicit decision rules. The 25% troop or financing drawdown cutoff follows MacDonald and Parent (2011) and separates structural retrenchment from routine unit rotations (±5–15%). The under-30% and over-50% arms-supplier concentration cutoffs apply defense-industrial dependency criteria (Hartley, 2011; Meijer & Brooks, 2021), on the reasoning that reliance on one patron for over half of major weapons gives that patron sustainment and spare-parts veto power. The over-80% dollar-invoicing cutoff draws on the Dominant Currency Paradigm (Gopinath et al., 2020; Bertaut et al., 2025). These thresholds are analytical conventions and not natural boundaries (see Section 6). Mixed and inconclusive findings are handled as exception categories for asymmetric or immature data. Table 6 sets out the decision rules.

Table 6. Classification codebook and decision thresholds (2025–26 evidence against the 2020–24 baseline)

Classification	Axis	Required empirical threshold and decision rule
Retrenchment	Axis 1: U.S. posture	Verified reduction of at least 25% in permanent active-duty U.S. personnel (DMDC) or direct military financing below the 2020–24 baseline, accompanied by permanent base closures or formal abrogation of mutual defense guarantees. The 25% cutoff separates structural withdrawal from routine maintenance cycles and scheduled unit rotations (±5–15%).
Recalibration	Axis 1: U.S. posture	Permanent troop shifts remain below 25% of the baseline, or core physical basing hubs persist, while the instruments of engagement are actively modified: institutionalised burden-sharing mandates (NATO 5% of GDP), rotational task forces (JTF-WHEM), managed FMS backlogs, or systematic use of coercive economic levers.
Operational self-reliance	Axis 2: Regional response	Cumulative three-part threshold: (1) independent C4ISR and strategic lift capabilities; (2) U.S. supplier share below 30% of major weapons imports (SIPRI), which indicates immunity to external sustainment vetoes; and (3) verified cross-border trade settlement outside USD clearing rails at scale (over 20%). Failing any one condition precludes this classification.
Hedging + capacity-building	Axis 2: Regional response	Domestic defense outlays rise by at least 10% relative to the baseline (or meet binding alliance targets), or non-U.S. diplomatic and trade ties verifiably expand, while structural reliance on U.S. major weapons platforms (over 50% supplier share) or USD trade invoicing (over 80%) remains intact, which signals exposure to financial shocks and supply constraints.
Fragmented hedging	Axis 2: Regional response	Individual states diversify commodity exports (an extra-hemispheric partner absorbs over 25% of sector exports) or establish central-bank liquidity swaps, but regional security institutions (UNASUR, CELAC) lack unified command structures or pooled procurement budgets, which prevents collective action and perpetuates bilateral vulnerability.

Classification	Axis	Required empirical threshold and decision rule
Mixed / inconclusive	Both axes	**Mixed:** military posture contracts at the same time as economic coercion expand. **Inconclusive / unverified:** policy announcements under six months old that lack enacted budget outlays, or comparable primary data series (such as unverified deployment estimates or non-dollar settlement volumes) are explicitly unavailable.

Source: Authors' codebook. Thresholds adapted from MacDonald and Parent (2011), Hartley (2011), Meijer and Brooks (2021), Gopinath et al. (2020) and Bertaut et al. (2025).

4.5.5. Evidence Hierarchy and Cross-Regional Resolution Protocol

To limit subjective bias and keep coding uniform across four different regions, the study applies a two-tier evidence hierarchy. The central difficulty in assessing U.S. security commitments is the frequent gap between declaratory strategy and actual resource allocation. Regional classifications are therefore determined by material empirical data and not by executive rhetoric.

Tier 1: binding material evidence. Primary evidence carries determinative weight in the codebook. This tier is restricted to official, verifiable quantitative and institutional records: enacted national defense budgets, U.S. Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) personnel deployments, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) and SIPRI arms-transfer records, Federal Reserve and SWIFT monetary data, and ratified treaties and signed agreements (for example, the NATO Hague Summit Declaration). A region cannot be coded as achieving operational self-reliance or as experiencing U.S. retrenchment unless the threshold conditions in Table 6 are met by Tier 1 data.

Tier 2: contextual and declaratory evidence. Secondary evidence comprises strategy documents (for example, the 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy), ministerial speeches, academic literature, think-tank analysis and diplomatic press releases. These sources are essential for understanding the intent behind policy shifts, such as the stated wish for European burden-sharing or Indo-Pacific prioritization, but they are strictly contextual. Declaratory statements cannot on their own trigger a structural classification change. Table 7 applies the two tiers to each interpretation.

Table 7. Evidence rules for each interpretation

Interpretation	Counts as evidence (Tier 1)	Supporting only (Tier 2)	Not sufficient on its own
Retrenchment	Permanent troops or military financing down 25% or more from the 2020–24 baseline, with base closures or formal abrogation of guarantees	Official statements of reduced priority	Strategy documents, withdrawal rhetoric, reported scenarios, pending reviews or pauses
Recalibration	Permanent troop shifts below 25% of baseline (or basing hubs persisting), with instruments shifting to burden-sharing mandates, arms-sale and backlog management, rotational forces, or coercive economic levers	Strategy texts, scholarship describing changed terms	Rhetoric of change with no change in instruments or resources

Interpretation	Counts as evidence (Tier 1)	Supporting only (Tier 2)	Not sufficient on its own
Self-reliance	Independent C4ISR and strategic lift, under 30% of major arms imports from the U.S., and settlement outside dollar clearing at scale	Domestic industry initiatives	Rising defense budgets, new partnerships, joint declarations
Hedging and capacity-building	Spending up 10% or more (or binding alliance target met), or expanded non-U.S. trade or diplomatic ties, while U.S. platform or dollar dependence persists	Scholarship on hedging behaviour	Trade diversification alone, which does not show military capacity
Mixed / inconclusive	Contracting posture alongside expanding economic coercion (mixed); announcements under six months old without enacted outlays, or missing primary records (inconclusive)	None	Choosing the closest label when data are missing

Source: Authors' framework.

A framework is testable only if it could return a different answer, and this one can. A region would be coded **retrenchment** if Tier 1 data showed the drop and the closures or abrogation set out above, and its recalibration reading would be rejected on the same evidence. A region would be coded **self-reliant** only if the independent-capacity conditions were met, so a spending rise alone could never produce that label. If Tier 1 evidence is absent or too recent, the correct finding is *inconclusive*, not recalibration by default. Missing evidence is never read as proof of withdrawal or of autonomy.

The falsifiability test above rests on a four-rule resolution and audit protocol. Because four regional groups coded the evidence, these rules govern conflicts between tiers, mixed findings and cross-group consistency:

- **Rule 1, material primacy over political rhetoric.** Where secondary rhetoric conflicts with primary material evidence, Tier 1 data override it. Enacted budgets verified DMDC deployment series, SIPRI and DSCA arms ledgers, and central-bank invoicing records carry binding weight. Executive speeches, prospective media scenarios (for example, unverified European troop-drawdown estimates) and strategy announcements without matching resource shifts never satisfy the coding thresholds for retrenchment or operational self-reliance. For example, the May 2026 hold on a proposed US$14 billion arms package for Taiwan points to a possible pause in arms sales, but Tier 1 records show continued operational training and active FMS case processing, so Taiwan is coded as recalibration and not retrenchment. Material action outweighs diplomatic signalling.
- **Rule 2, separation of financial outlays from operational autonomy.** Rising defense budgets (Taiwan's NT$949.5 billion NATO-standard budget; NATO Europe's 20% real-terms increase and €150 billion SAFE loans; Saudi Arabia's US$83.2 billion budget and 27.30% localization rate) establish capacity-building, not operational self-reliance, so long as states depend on U.S. C4ISR, satellite cueing, sustainment and over 50% U.S. major-weapons sourcing.

- **Rule 3, separation of trade destination from monetary settlement.** Commodity export redirection (Brazil's 32.7%–33.3% farm exports to China; GCC–China trade of US$288–297.9 billion) and central-bank swap lines (the UAE's RMB 35 billion and Argentina's RMB 130 billion) establish economic hedging but cannot be coded as monetary autonomy where dollar trade invoicing remains at 96%–99% or settlement-currency breakdowns are unverified.
- **Rule 4, explicit treatment of missing data and cross-group audit.** Where comparable primary series are absent or not comparable (disaggregated FMS backlogs and defense outlays as a share of GDP for Latin America; UAE and Qatar SIPRI spending after 2020; Taiwan and Gulf non-USD settlement volumes; official pre- and post-2025 NATO Europe troop series), the indicator is recorded as Unavailable or Unverified and is never used to infer withdrawal or autonomy. To apply the hierarchy consistently, every regional matrix is independently audited by two authors from an external regional team before the synthesis in Section 7.5. The auditors check that primary datasets were correctly disaggregated (for example, NATO-standard budgets separated from core MND budgets, and trade-invoicing shares separated from central-bank swap lines) and that the quantitative thresholds (the 25% drawdown cutoff and the 30% arms-supplier ceiling) were applied without regional bias, against Tables 4–7.

In the 2025–26 evidence reviewed, no case meets the retrenchment threshold, and none meets the self-reliance threshold. That result comes from applying the rules and not from the definitions.

4.5.6. Scope

The concepts are applied identically to all four cases, but the cases differ in legal form: a treaty in NATO Europe, statute-based ambiguity for Taiwan, bilateral access arrangements in the Middle East, and hemispheric influence in Latin America. A shared definition therefore does not mean the relationships are equivalent, and country-level observations are not generalised to a whole region. The case labels and unit of analysis follow Section 4.3. The findings apply to the four regions and to 2025–26 only.

5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study uses only published and publicly available material, and no human participants are involved, so consent and anonymity do not apply. All sources are cited accurately, and each author's argument is attributed to that author. Peer-reviewed findings, official statements and opinion commentary are kept separate in the analysis so that the weight of each is not overstated. The evidence tiers in Section 4.5.5 formalize this separation.

6. LIMITATIONS

6.1. Source type

The sources include news, analysis and opinion, while official statements represent the perspective of the authorising figures or organisations. Neither is entirely objective, and both may carry bias in how they select or use evidence. The Tier 1 and Tier 2 distinction limits, but does not remove, this problem.

6.2. Uneven evidence across regions

The kind and amount of evidence differ by region. Some cases rest more on spending and other quantitative indicators, others on policy documents and scholarship. Several series are unavailable or unverified: Latin American arms transfers and defense outlays; UAE and Qatar spending after 2020; non-dollar settlement volumes for Taiwan, the Gulf and NATO Europe; and an official pre- and post-2025 U.S. troop series for Europe. These gaps are recorded in Section 7 and limit how directly the four cases can be compared.

6.3. Indicators and time frame

The indicators differ across regions in source and temporal scope (for example, SIPRI's 2020–24 and 2021–25 windows) and are used mainly as supporting evidence.

6.4. Provisional figures

Some figures, particularly 2024–25 defense expenditure in certain regions, may be projected and are subject to revision. Others refer to a point in time, such as the Taiwan arms-sale backlog values for September–November 2025 and March 2026. Backlog figures measure notified case values and not undelivered hardware.

6.5. Recent period

The study covers 2025–26, so the developments it examines are still unfolding. Announcements such as the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement and EU SAFE financing are too recent for their operational effects to be judged, and some of the studies and reports used date from 2025. The findings may need to be revisited as more evidence appears.

6.6. Stated policy versus practice

The 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy state U.S. strategic intentions. They do not by themselves show actual regional change, which is assessed separately against enacted budgets, deployment records, arms ledgers and regional responses (Rule 1, Section 4.5.5).

6.7. Thresholds, coding and generalisation

The codebook thresholds are analytical conventions adapted from the literature and not natural boundaries; alternative cutoffs could shift borderline classifications. Coding was done by four regional groups and checked through the cross-group audit described in Section 4.5.5; no statistical reliability coefficient is reported. Country-level observations (for example, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia in Latin America) are not generalized to whole regions, and the findings apply only to the four regions and to 2025–26.

7. RESULTS

Results are presented region by region using the three-part template of Section 3 (the form of the U.S. commitment, the regional response, and the limits on self-reliance), applied through the four operational indicators and the codebook of Section 4.5. Each regional subsection reports the 2020–24 baseline, the 2025–26 observations and the status of the evidence. Section 7.5 compares the cases. The principal dated developments of 2024–26 is set out first, in chronological order.

Principal dated developments, 2024–26. In 2024, U.S. use of Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar was extended for ten years on 3 January (IISS, 2026), and on 23 September the UAE was designated a U.S. Major Defense Partner (regional matrix).

In January 2025 the MEAD Combined Defense Operations Cell opened at Al Udeid under USCENTCOM, and Turkish TB2/Akıncı UAV deliveries reached the UAE (IISS, 2026; Janes Defence News & Reuters, 2025). In February, Taiwan received US$870 million of exempted aid (CRS, 2026c), and in May over 500 U.S. military personnel were training in Taiwan (USCC, 2025). On 25 June the Hague Summit Declaration reaffirmed Article 5 and set a target of 5% of GDP by 2035 (NATO, 2025). On 1 October Taiwan announced a planned 2026 MND budget of NT$949.5 billion (3.32% of GDP) (Taiwan MND, 2025b). In November a US$330 million FMS notification followed (CRS, 2026c). In December the U.S. National Security Strategy was published (White House, 2025), and on 17 December DSCA notified eight FMS cases for Taiwan worth about US$11.1 billion (DSCA, 2025; Taiwan MND, 2025a).

On 3 January 2026 Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was captured (Lyn, 2026; Anderson et al., 2026), and on 23 January the U.S. National Defense Strategy was published (U.S. Department of Defense, 2026). On 23 February Panama's Supreme Court finalised the annulment of the Hutchison Ports canal-terminal concession (Tico Times, 2026), and on 24 February the PBOC and CBUAE renewed their RMB 35 billion swap line (CBUAE, 2026). The Shield of the Americas Summit and the 19-nation Counter Cartel Coalition followed on 5–7 March (Wilson Center, 2026). In May a proposed US$14 billion arms package for Taiwan was held in abeyance after the Trump–Xi meeting, and it was still under review on 3 June and 23 September (Rubio, 2026). On 7 August Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan concluded the Makkah Joint Defense

Agreement (Government of Saudi Arabia et al., 2026), and on the same day U.S. activities in Michoacán partially resumed, with Mexico commanding on its soil (Government of Mexico, 2026b). SOUTHCOM's Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere (JTF-WHEM) is recorded for August 2026 (regional matrix), and on 5 October the Makkah agreement's steering committee met (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2026).

7.1. Taiwan

U.S. support for Taiwan continues under the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and the Six Assurances (CRS, 2026a, 2026b), which provide for defense articles and services but not for an automatic military guarantee. Strategic ambiguity is intended to deter Chinese aggression and to restrain Taiwan from provocation (Chang-Liao & Fang, 2021). The December 2025 National Security Strategy gives priority to access along the First Island Chain (White House, 2025). The evidence for each indicator is set out below.

Force posture and access. In 2020–24, U.S. support was governed by the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances (CRS, 2026a, 2026b), with no automatic guarantee of intervention. In 2025–26, over 500 U.S. military personnel trained in Taiwan as of May 2025 (USCC, 2025, p. 624). Regional deterrence activity also expanded: the USMC deployed the NMESIS anti-ship missile system to Batan Island (26 April 2025), the USAF held the REFORPAC agile-dispersion exercise (July–August 2025), and B-52s deployed to Guam (May and July 2025). The December 2025 NSS (pp. 24–25) prioritizes First Island Chain access (White House, 2025). Net permanent change is unverified: public data do not establish a net change in permanently stationed forces, although training is active.

Arms transfers and backlogs. The reported open-case backlog stood at US$19.1 billion (2022 baseline), US$20.5 billion (2024), US$330 million (13 November 2025) and eight FMS cases worth about US$11.1 billion (17 December 2025). In 2025 total enacted aid reached US$1.5 billion in PDA packages, US$1 billion Senate TSCI authorization and US$870 million in FMF loans/grants (CRS, 2026c; USCC, 2025). Reported FMS backlog estimates were US$21.54 billion in September/November 2025 (USCC, 2025) and US$31.72 billion in March 2026. In May 2026 a proposed US$14 billion package was held in abeyance after the Trump–Xi meeting; the Secretary of State said on 3 June and 23 September 2026 that it remains under review alongside defense-industrial capacity constraints (Rubio, 2026). The notifications are verified, but backlog figures are full notified case values of open FMS cases and not the value of undelivered hardware.

Defense outlays. The 2024 budget was NT$606.8 billion (2.5% of GDP), and the requested 2025 budget was NT$647 billion (2.45% of GDP) (USCC, 2025). The planned 2026 core MND budget is NT$800 billion (+25%) on 2025, announced on 1 October 2025, before the May 2026 arms review. The broader NATO-standard budget is NT$949.5 billion (3.32% of GDP). An additional NT$108.1 billion (2026–27) is planned

for resilience, alongside a proposed US$40 billion multi-year special budget (November 2025). These figures are verified, and the two-accounting series (core MND and NATO-standard) are kept separate.

Trade and clearing. No 2020–24 series was compiled for this indicator. In 2025 the United States absorbed 30.9% (US$198.27 billion) of Taiwan's exports and mainland China 26.6%, which indicates dual exposure. Trade exposure is verified, but settlement-currency data are insufficient to establish any non-dollar clearing share.

Axis 1. Taiwan is classified as recalibration, with supply and review uncertainty. Material support continued in 2025 through training, exercises and arms notifications, and no permanent troop series shows a reduction, so the retrenchment threshold is not met. The May 2026 hold on a proposed US$14 billion package shows, however, that arms supply has become conditional on review and on U.S. industrial capacity. **Axis 2.** Taiwan is classified as hedging plus capacity-building. The planned 2026 core budget is 25% above 2025, exceeding the 10% threshold, but reliance on U.S. weapons, training and strategic deterrence persists, and personnel shortages and infrastructure vulnerability also prevent independent self-reliance. Rising outlays therefore establish capacity-building and not operational self-reliance (Rule 2). Two cautions apply: notified FMS case values must not be read as undelivered hardware, and Taiwan-specific settlement-currency data are insufficient to assess the monetary indicator.

7.2. Middle East

U.S. engagement in the Middle East rests on bilateral access arrangements and security partnerships, with no collective guarantee. The 2025 National Security Strategy (pp. 28–32) and the 2026 National Defense Strategy (pp. 14–18) place the region behind the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere and stress burden-sharing (White House, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2026). A change in relative priority does not, however, establish military withdrawal. The evidence for each indicator is set out below.

Force posture and access. After the August 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal, enduring peacetime USCENTCOM posture averaged about 30,000–34,000 personnel across permanent hubs: Qatar (about 8,000–10,000 at Al Udeid, extended for ten years on 3 Jan 2024), Bahrain (about 8,000–9,000, Fifth Fleet HQ), Kuwait (about 13,500), the UAE (about 2,000–3,500) and Iraq/Syria (about 3,400) (IISS, 2026, Ch. 7). In 2025–26 core basing was retained. Temporary crisis surges reached 40,000–50,000 personnel with dual Carrier Strike Groups, and partner operations expanded through CMF Task Force 153 (Red Sea) and the MEAD Combined Défense Operations Cell (opened January 2025 at Al Udeid under USCENTCOM). Peacetime continuity plus crisis surges is verified; the surges are not a new permanent baseline.

Arms transfers and suppliers. In 2020–24 the United States supplied 52% of Middle Eastern major arms imports, including 74% of Saudi imports, and the region's share of total U.S. arms exports fell from 49%

(2015–19) to 33% (2020–24) (SIPRI, 2025a). The UAE was designated a Major Defense Partner on 23 Sep 2024. In 2021–25 the U.S. share of regional major arms imports was 54% (26% of global imports) (SIPRI, 2026). Turkish UAV purchases (Saudi Akıncı local-production deal, Aug 2023; Kuwait US$367 million TB2 contract, June 2023; UAE TB2/Akıncı deliveries, Jan 2025) are coded neutrally as vendor diversification (Janes Defence News & Reuters, 2025). The SIPRI shares are verified, but a regional FMS backlog total is unavailable because DSCA and GAO records do not disaggregate one.

Defense outlays and cost-sharing. Regional spending reached US$200 billion (2023 baseline). Saudi outlays moved from US$65–75 billion (2020–23) to US$71 billion in 2024 and US$83.2 billion in 2025 (6.5% of GDP), with military-spending localization reaching 27.30% in 2025 (GAMI, 2026). UAE and Qatar post-2020 defense-spending series are unavailable. Israel's defense expenditure increased substantially during 2023–25 (from US$23–27.5 billion (2020–23) to US$30.5 billion in 2024, with U.S. aid providing US$3.8 billion annually under the MOU and over US$14 billion in supplemental funding; 2025 projected above US$22–25 billion).

Trade and clearing. Arab–China trade reached US$400 billion; GCC–China trade was US$288–297.9 billion in 2023–24 against US$77 billion with the United States, and Saudi–China trade was US$107 billion (GCC-STAT, 2024). On 24 Feb 2026 the PBOC and CBUAE renewed their RMB 35 billion (about US$4.9 billion) swap line (CBUAE, 2026). Global SWIFT payments show 3.89% RMB against 48.68% USD (SWIFT, 2026), and GCC currencies remain USD-pegged and settle on Fedwire/CHIPS. The trade shift is verified, but non-USD oil settlement is unavailable: Gulf central banks and Aramco do not publish settlement-currency breakdowns, and a swap line does not prove RMB settlement.

Axis 1. The Middle East is classified as recalibration. Core basing persisted, the surges were temporary, and new partner mechanisms such as CMF Task Force 153 and the MEAD cell show burden-sharing instruments at work, so the retrenchment threshold is not met. **Axis 2.** The region is classified as hedging plus capacity-building. Regional actors expand partnerships through what is sometimes called "liquid alliances", flexible, non-exclusive, issue-specific arrangements, and invest in domestic capacity (Saudi Arabia's 27.30% localization rate; the Makkah agreement). One agreement does not make a security system, and the three signatories' interests and wider relationships remain distinct. Four dependencies still block self-reliance (IISS, 2026): interceptor resupply for Patriot PAC-3 and THAAD; U.S. SBIRS satellite and AN/TPY-2 radar cueing; U.S. contractor logistics (reflected in the 52%–54% U.S. arms share); and dollar pegs and clearing. Hedging is therefore better understood as an effort to broaden options and manage uncertainty than as a break with the U.S.-centric security and financial architecture. Data availability is weaker here than in the other cases, so the findings should be read with caution.

7.3. Latin America

No treaty or statute comparable to NATO or the Taiwan Relations Act governs U.S. security engagement in Latin America (Section 4.3). U.S. influence operates through bilateral cooperation, counter-narcotics arrangements and, increasingly, pressure and selective force. The 2025 National Security Strategy elevates the Western Hemisphere as a top priority (White House, 2025, p. 12). The evidence for each indicator is set out below.

Force posture and access. In 2020–24, official DMDC records confirm that permanent U.S. personnel remained minimal (under 250 regionally), alongside ad hoc counter-drug task forces (DMDC, 2025). In 2025–26 permanent troops remain minimal: 86 in Mexico, 66 in Colombia and 63 in Brazil (DMDC, 2025). Engagement shifted to selective coercion and coalition tasking: boat strikes; the capture of Maduro on 3 Jan 2026 (Lyn, 2026; Anderson et al., 2026); the 5–7 March 2026 Shield of the Americas Summit and 19-nation Counter Cartel Coalition (Wilson Center, 2026); and SOUTHCOM's Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere (August 2026). This evidence is fully supported by official DMDC records.

Arms transfers and suppliers. Exact 2020–24 DSCA and SIPRI delivery quantities and FMS backlogs for Latin American states are missing, so no decline or increase is inferred, and the indicator is unavailable for quantitative comparison. Security-linked leverage operated instead through infrastructure and law: on 23 Feb 2026 Panama's Supreme Court finalised a ruling annulling the Hutchison Ports canal-terminal concession (Tico Times, 2026), alongside the post-transition opening of Venezuelan energy and minerals (Pellegrini & Breda, 2026).

Defense outlays and cost-sharing. Comparable multi-year defense-spending (% of GDP) series are not compiled for the principal Latin American states. In 2025–26 U.S. shifted policing burdens through tariff, sanction and migration conditionality (Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026; Pellegrini & Breda, 2026). Mexico mandated sovereign domestic command on its soil during the 7,Aug 2026 resumption of coordinated activities in Michoacán (Government of Mexico, 2026b), while Colombia maintained bilateral security alignment. Financial series are unavailable, but operational burden-shifting is verified.

Trade and clearing. No 2020–24 series was compiled for this indicator. In 2025 China purchased US$169.2 billion agribusiness exports (MAPA, 2026), or 33.3% of core farm commodities against 6.7% for the United States (Magnotta, 2026). Argentina's central bank kept its RMB 130 billion (about US$4.8 billion active) swap line. The dollar accounts for 58% of global reserves and 96%–99% of Latin American trade invoicing, against under 4% for the RMB on SWIFT (Bertaut et al., 2025). This evidence is verified: Brazil exceeds the 25% commodity threshold, but settlement dependence on the dollar persists

Axis 1. Latin America is classified as recalibration through selective coercion and burden-shifting. Because the permanent U.S. presence was already minimal, personnel counts say little about change; the informative evidence lies in the instruments, such as boat strikes, the Maduro operation, coalition and task-force arrangements, and legal and economic pressure. Pellegrini and Breda (2026) read the Maduro capture as an exception within a burden-shifting approach, while Stuenkel (2026) and Felbab-Brown and Sisson (in Anderson et al., 2026) read it as a shift away from partnership; the evidence here does not settle that debate.
Axis 2. The region is classified as fragmented hedging. Responses are national and not collective: Mexico insists on sovereignty and leads action on its soil, Brazil diversifies towards China, and Colombia keeps a bilateral channel with U.S. Regional bodies (UNASUR, ALBA, CELAC) lack joint command or procurement budgets, so states bargain individually (Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026). Trade diversification widens economic and diplomatic options, but 96%–99% dollar invoicing keeps the practical cost of financial diversification high, so economic hedging cannot be coded as monetary autonomy (Rule 3).

7.4. NATO Europe

NATO Europe is the only case anchored in a treaty. The 2025 Hague Summit Declaration reaffirmed Article 5 while setting a target of 5% of GDP by 2035, made up of at least 3.5% for core defense and up to 1.5% for related security investment (NATO, 2025). The 5% figure is a combined commitment, not a target for conventional military expenditure alone. The evidence for each indicator is set out below.

Force posture and access. For the baseline, June 2025 reporting cited an estimated 80,000 U.S. troops in Europe, including about 20,000 post-2022 surge personnel (Palasciano et al., 2025). A prospective analyst scenario of about 65,000 was discussed (Palasciano et al., 2025). Other snapshots (65,754 in June 2024; 68,064 in December 2025; about 63,000 after a reported May 2026 drawdown in Germany) have not been reconciled against an identical official pre- and post-deployment series. The evidence is unverified and is not treated as confirming reductions.

Arms transfers and suppliers. The United States supplied 64% of major arms imports by European NATO members in 2020–24 (SIPRI, 2025a), and its share was 58% in 2021–25 (SIPRI, 2026), which confirms structural reliance on U.S. defense production. The SIPRI shares are verified but dated 2025–26 before-and-after series for U.S. deliveries and open backlogs to NATO allies (kept separate from Ukraine assistance) are incomplete.

Defense outlays and cost-sharing. The historical benchmark is the 2014 Wales Summit 2.0% of GDP guideline; a full 2020–24 actual outlay series remains an evidence gap. The future commitment is the Hague Summit Declaration of 25 June 2025, reaffirming Article 5 and pledging 5.0% of GDP by 2035 (NATO,

2025). In actual 2025 outlays, European allies and Canada raised defense spending by 20% in real terms against 2024, and three allies met the 3.5% core target; the United States still accounted for 60% of combined NATO nominal defense expenditure (NATO, 2026, p. 23). The EU endorsed the €150 billion SAFE loan facility (Council of the European Union, 2025). The evidence is verified, with benchmark, real growth and future pledge kept distinct.

Trade and clearing. This indicator is not applicable at NATO level in the baseline. EU–U.S. bilateral trade statistics are public, but EU membership does not map onto NATO Europe (for example, the United Kingdom, Norway and Türkiye), and comparable data on non-dollar settlement by European NATO allies are unavailable. It is recorded as an evidence limitation.

Axis 1. NATO Europe is classified as recalibration: burden-sharing within an enduring Article 5 guarantee. Maitra (2024) offers one version of this logic, in which U.S.retains a nuclear umbrella and naval presence while Europeans take more responsibility for conventional defense. Because the troop series is unverified and prospective scenarios never satisfy a coding threshold (Rule 1), no retrenchment is coded. **Axis 2.** The region is classified as hedging plus capacity-building. The 20% real-terms increase exceeds the 10% threshold and the U.S. arms share (58%–64%) exceeds the 50% dependence threshold. EU initiatives such as SAFE may improve European capabilities, but their contribution depends on implementation, procurement choices and whether the resulting capacity closes operational gaps. European governments also differ on how much defense should be organized through NATO as opposed to the EU, according to geography, threat perception, domestic politics and capability (Crombois, 2025), so regional labels should not obscure differences among states. Self-reliance remains limited because NATO's command, planning and enabling capabilities still depend heavily on the United States (MacKenzie, 2026): C4ISR, strategic airlift and the nuclear umbrella (Meijer & Brooks, 2021). Purchases of U.S.-made equipment may strengthen European forces while also sustaining dependence, so spending and structural autonomy are assessed separately (Rule 2).

7.5. Comparative Analysis

The comparison of Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe indicate that U.S. security commitments during 2025–26 underwent region-specific recalibration and not uniform retrenchment. The nature of this adjustment varies with the institutional setting, strategic importance and capacity of regional actors. The outcome of applying the codebook is reported first, followed by a case-by-case summary against the common 2020–24 baseline.

Table 13. Codebook outcomes, 2025–26

Classification	Cases that fit	Result and evidence
Retrenchment (Axis 1)	None	No verified reduction of 25% or more in permanent personnel or financing, paired with closures or abrogation, in 2025–26. This falsifies the claim of uniform U.S. withdrawal.
Recalibration (Axis 1)	Taiwan, Middle East, Latin America, NATO Europe	Fits all four cases through differentiated instruments: arms review and backlog management (Taiwan), crisis surges and partner task forces (Middle East), selective coercion and coalition tasking (Latin America), and burden-sharing targets (NATO Europe).
Operational self-reliance (Axis 2)	None	None achieved: higher budgets have not replaced U.S. enablers or dollar clearing.
Hedging + capacity-building (Axis 2)	NATO Europe, Taiwan, Middle East	NATO Europe: +20% real spending, 58%–64% U.S. arms share. Taiwan: +25% core MND budget. Middle East: 52%–54% U.S. arms share; Makkah Joint Defence Agreement.
Fragmented hedging (Axis 2)	Latin America	Brazil sends 32.7%–33.3% of farm exports to China; Argentina holds a swap line; Mexico and Colombia diverge; regional bodies lack joint command.
Mixed / inconclusive	Indicator-level gaps	NATO troop series; operational readiness of the Makkah agreement; Latin American arms transfers and outlays.

Source: Authors' application of the codebook (Table 6) to the regional evidence (Tables 9–12).

Table 14. Cross-regional comparative findings matrix

Case	2020–2024 baseline	2025–2026 observations across the four indicators	Regional response and provisional classification	Principal evidence limitation
Taiwan	Security support rested on the Taiwan Relations Act, arms transfers, training and strategic ambiguity. The United States did not provide an automatic guarantee of military intervention.	**Force posture:** exercises, deployments and training continued, but a comparable permanent troop series is unavailable. **Arms:** December 2025 notifications covered proposed sales worth approximately US$11.1 billion; delivery delays and uncertainty over a proposed US$14 billion package persisted. **Outlays:** planned 2026 MND budget reached NT$806 billion, 25% above 2025; the broader NATO-standard figure was NT$949.5 billion, or 3.32% of GDP. **Trade/clearing:** export destinations indicate economic exposure to both the United States and China, but comparable settlement-currency data are unavailable.	Recalibration with hedging and capacity-building. Taiwan is increasing defence investment and preparedness while continuing to rely on U.S. arms, training and deterrence.	Notified FMS case values must not be treated as the value of physically undelivered equipment. Permanent force changes and non-dollar settlement shares remain unverified.
Middle East	U.S. peacetime presence across the USCENTCOM region averaged approximately 30,000–34,000 personnel, supported by enduring access arrangements. The United States supplied 52% of major arms imports during 2020–24, including 74% of Saudi Arabia's imports.	**Force posture:** permanent access and basing continued, while crisis deployments raised personnel levels to approximately 40,000–50,000 during escalations. **Arms:** the U.S. share remained substantial; the 2021–25 SIPRI figure was 54%. A reliable regional FMS backlog total is unavailable. **Outlays:** Saudi expenditure rose from US$80.3 billion in 2024 to US$83.2 billion in 2025; military-spending localisation reached 27.30% in Saudi Arabia in 2025. **Trade/clearing:** GCC–China trade and the UAE–China RMB swap line indicate diversification, but do not establish large-scale non-dollar settlement of energy trade.	Recalibration with hedging and capacity-building. Regional actors are expanding domestic defence production and external partnerships, while continuing to rely on U.S. military enablers and financial infrastructure.	Crisis deployments are not equivalent to permanent force increases. Comparable spending data for some Gulf states and actual non-dollar settlement volumes are unavailable. The Makkah agreement establishes defence dialogue and industrial coordination, not verified operational integration.
Latin America	U.S. influence operated through differentiated bilateral security cooperation, counter-drug arrangements and hemispheric relationships rather than a common treaty-based defence guarantee. Regional institutions did not develop unified command or procurement structures.	**Force posture:** permanent U.S. personnel remained limited; available 2025 country figures include 86 in Mexico, 66 in Colombia and 63 in Brazil. **Arms:** comparable regional arms-transfer and delivery-backlog data are unavailable. **Outlays:** a comparable regional defence-expenditure series is also unavailable; burden-shifting is more visible through bilateral conditions and operational arrangements. **Trade/clearing:** Brazil's 2025 agricultural exports to China demonstrate trade diversification, while available evidence indicates continued high dependence on dollar invoicing. Argentina's RMB swap line represents a liquidity arrangement, not proof of independent settlement.	Recalibration with fragmented hedging. States pursue differentiated responses: Brazil diversifies trade and diplomatic partnerships, Mexico emphasises sovereignty in security cooperation, and other governments retain or deepen bilateral alignment.	Country-level trade and security developments cannot automatically be generalised to the whole region. Arms, expenditure and actual settlement-currency comparisons remain incomplete.
NATO Europe	The relationship rested on the North Atlantic Treaty and Article 5, with the 2014 Wales Summit establishing the 2% of GDP defence-spending	**Force posture:** reports discussed possible U.S. troop reductions, but a comparable official pre- and post-2025 series does not establish a confirmed regional withdrawal. **Arms:** the U.S. share was 58% during 2021–25, indicating continuing supplier dependence.	Recalibration through burden-sharing, with hedging and capacity-building. European states are increasing expenditure and industrial investment while retaining NATO's collective-	The possible troop-drawdown figures are not confirmed official reductions. The 5% commitment is a future target, not current expenditure;

Case	2020–2024 baseline	2025–2026 observations across the four indicators	Regional response and provisional classification	Principal evidence limitation
	guideline. U.S. forces and enabling capabilities remained central to collective defence. The United States supplied 64% of major arms imports by European NATO members during 2020–24.	**Outlays:** European allies and Canada increased defence expenditure by approximately 20% in real terms in 2025; the Hague Summit established a future 5% investment commitment by 2035, while the EU's SAFE instrument supports defence financing. **Trade/clearing:** comparable NATO-wide data on non-dollar settlement are unavailable.	defence framework and significant reliance on U.S. capabilities.	NATO-wide monetary-settlement comparisons are unavailable.

Source: Authors' compilation from the regional research matrices and the sources identified in Tables 3 and 9–12.

Overall pattern. U.S. influence persists, but its form varies with each region's institutional setting, strategic importance and capacity. NATO Europe faces stronger pressure to share responsibilities within an established treaty alliance; Taiwan continues to rely on U.S. arms, training and deterrence; Middle Eastern states combine enduring U.S. access with wider partnerships and defense localisation; and Latin America remains characterised by selective bilateral cooperation.

Military and Défense-industrial dimension. The force-posture evidence does not establish a common pattern of permanent U.S. withdrawal. Enduring access continued in the Middle East, while crisis deployments represent temporary surges and not a new permanent baseline. Taiwan's exercises and training indicate continued engagement but do not establish a change in permanently stationed forces. Possible reductions in NATO Europe remain unverified, while U.S. personnel levels in Latin America are limited and country specific. Arms transfer also point to continuing defense-industrial dependence in Taiwan, the Middle East and NATO Europe, despite procurement diversification and domestic-production efforts. For Latin America, the absence of comparable arms-transfer and delivery data limits conclusions.

Fiscal and economic dimension. Higher defense outlays and localization efforts in Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and Europe indicate capacity-building, but not necessarily independent operational capability. NATO's future Hague spending commitment does not replace its collective-defense framework, while Middle Eastern localization has not removed reliance on external systems and enablers. In Latin America, burden-sharing is more visible through bilateral arrangements than through a measurable regional increase in defense expenditure. Economic diversification must likewise be distinguished from monetary autonomy: wider trade with China, currency swaps and changes in trade partners do not by themselves demonstrate settlement outside dollar-based clearing. Comparable evidence of large-scale non-dollar settlement remains insufficient across the cases.

Regional responses and overall assessment. The four cases are best characterised by combinations of hedging and capacity-building, not by achieved strategic self-reliance. Taiwan and NATO Europe are strengthening capabilities while retaining close U.S. security ties; Middle Eastern states are diversifying partnerships and expanding domestic production but remain reliant on external enablers; and Latin American responses remain fragmented. None of the cases demonstrates operational self-reliance during 2025–26. Increased spending, industrial investment and alternative partnerships indicate adaptation, but do not establish the replacement of U.S.-linked command, intelligence, logistics, weapons supply or financial infrastructure. The evidence consequently supports region-specific recalibration, not uniform U.S. retrenchment.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the United States is changing how it maintains its security commitments across NATO Europe, Taiwan, Latin America and the Middle East. This section explains the pattern, connects it to the literature review and discusses its limits.

8.1. Recalibration, not a uniform cutback

U.S. engagement is changing in all four regions, but the legal and strategic basis of the relationships differs. NATO rests on a collective-defense treaty; U.S. support for Taiwan follows a different framework that does not guarantee automatic military intervention; and in the Middle East and Latin America, security relationships vary according to the partners and the agreed conditions. The comparison therefore does not show that formal commitments are maintained in the same way everywhere. It shows that the methods, conditions and reliability of U.S. engagement differ from one region to another. The changes include shifting more defense responsibility to European countries, maintaining strategic ambiguity and arms support for Taiwan, continued access arrangements alongside burden-sharing in the Middle East, and selective partnerships, pressure and access arrangements in Latin America. This interpretation agrees with the region-specific literature reviewed above (Khan & Qadir, 2026; Cabrera García & Lo Brutto, 2026; Pellegrini & Breda, 2026; Podraza, 2025; Yuan, 2023).

Applying the codebook, no case meets the retrenchment threshold. Where permanent presence can be measured, core basing and hubs persist; where it cannot be verified (the NATO Europe troop series, Taiwan's permanent stationing), the finding is recorded as unverified and is not read as withdrawal. China's rise, Russia's war in Ukraine, domestic politics and the strength of regional institutions may help explain why similar U.S. objectives take different forms across regions, and their weight probably varies by region. This study does not test that connection; the factors are treated as context and as a direction for future research.

8.2. Declared priorities and observed practice

Strategy documents state U.S. priorities, but they do not demonstrate that the United States has scaled back its security commitments. Observed practice partly supports the stated priorities: the Hague spending target in Europe, access hubs and partnerships in the Gulf, and the increased use of pressure and coercion in the Western Hemisphere. Scholars differ on the capture of Maduro. Pellegrini and Breda (2026) view it as an exception within a broader approach in which the United States expects other countries to take greater responsibility. Stuenkel (2026) and Felbab-Brown and Sisson (in Anderson et al., 2026) contend instead that it marks a shift away from the partnership-oriented approach in the U.S. strategy. The evidence here

indicates that the United States is increasingly willing to use coercive tools while keeping selective partnerships, collaboration and influence, but it does not settle the debate between these interpretations.

8.3. Hedging, not independence

A common response across the four regions is hedging and partial capacity-building, not a break with the United States. Europe is raising its defense ambitions while remaining in NATO. Taiwan is spending more on defense while depending on U.S. support. Middle Eastern states are expanding relations with China while maintaining defense relationships with the United States. In Latin America, Mexico, Brazil and Colombia follow different approaches and not a common strategy, so each state hedges in its own way. Taiwan's effort to manage dependence on both the United States and China (Wang & Tan, 2021) and Brazil's use of China as an additional strategic option (Magnotta, 2026) support this reading, and the Middle East supports the argument that uncertainty about U.S. involvement can encourage states to build relationships with other major powers (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016).

Hedging helps states manage risk by broadening their choices should U.S. assistance become unpredictable, and the states studied are preserving their U.S. ties while they diversify. The evidence does not, however, show that a reduced U.S. presence is the only reason for hedging. Domestic concerns, local rivalry and economic preferences also shape these choices.

8.4. Why more spending is not independence

Higher spending does not always mean greater independence. European allies raised real defense spending by 20% in 2025, yet the United States supplied 58% of European NATO arms imports in 2021–25 and still accounted for 60% of combined NATO nominal defense expenditure, and Europe depends on U.S. command, intelligence, logistics and strategic lift. In Taiwan, a 25% increase in the core defense budget does not remove the challenge of China's military strength or the need for external support. In the Middle East, Saudi spending and localization are rising, but interceptor resupply, satellite and radar cueing, contractor logistics and dollar pegs remain external dependencies. In Latin America, 96%–99% dollar invoicing means that trade diversification toward China does not translate into monetary autonomy. These dependencies differ in kind and should not be treated as identical, but together they show why self-reliance should be judged by operational capacity, institutional cooperation and economic sustainability, not by defense expenditure alone.

8.5. Regional variation and fragmentation

European countries differ on how much defense should be managed through NATO and how much through EU-led initiatives, and on how they see security threats and how far they trust the U.S. guarantee. In the

Middle East, states have different national interests, rivalries and relationships with outside powers. In Latin America, states take different approaches to security and international relations, which complicates a shared regional approach. Regional cooperation becomes harder when states have different priorities and their institutions struggle to align their actions, and these differences limit the capacity for collective self-reliance.

8.6. Implications and caution

The findings have two implications. Analytically, self-reliance should not be judged only by increases in defense spending, new partnerships or official statements; it requires evidence of actual capabilities, independent decision-making and the ability to sustain action. From a policy perspective, the different forms of U.S. engagement suggest that regional responses should be assessed according to each region's situation, not through a single model of burden-sharing or withdrawal.

These findings rest on documentary evidence and show a relationship between U.S. policy and regional responses, but they do not prove that U.S. policy caused those responses. They apply only to the four regions studied and to the period 2025–26.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper asked whether changes in U.S. security commitments across Taiwan, the Middle East, Latin America and NATO Europe amount to uniform retrenchment or to region-specific recalibration, and how far each region is moving towards self-reliance. Applying a common codebook against a 2020–24 baseline, it finds that no case meets the retrenchment threshold and none meets the self-reliance threshold. U.S. commitments are being recalibrated, not uniformly withdrawn, and regional self-reliance is partial and uneven.

Three patterns recur across the cases. First, the instruments of U.S. engagement have shifted, toward arms support, access arrangements, selective pressure and burden-sharing targets, so that support increasingly depends on partners' contributions and responsibility is redistributed to regional actors. Second, regional responses take the form of hedging and partial capacity-building: governments invest more, diversify economic and diplomatic ties, or seek new defense arrangements while keeping their relationships with U.S. Third, self-reliance cannot be read from a single indicator. Defense spending supports procurement and readiness, but operational autonomy also depends on command, intelligence, logistics, industrial capacity and the ability to sustain operations. Economic diversification widens choices but does not replace payment and credit systems, and new partnerships do not by themselves create the institutions needed for joint action. U.S. influence has not disappeared; its terms are being renegotiated.

These conclusions are limited in scope and evidence. They cover four cases with uneven evidence, a recent period, and patterns and plausible interpretations and not proven causation. Future research can extend the same indicators and thresholds to further cases, including the Indo-Pacific treaty allies not studied here; distinguish policy announcements from demonstrated capabilities as the 2025–26 commitments mature; test the contextual factors (China, Ukraine, domestic politics and institutional strength) systematically; and examine whether regional institutions can coordinate security responses in practice.

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