French President Emmanuel Macron recently triggered quite a debate when he talked about the “brain death” of NATO. His remarks were exaggerated and, frankly, not helpful within the discussion about the future of this important political institution. They do, however, reflect the widespread uncertainty in Europe about the state of the Atlantic Alliance.

The overall picture implies different layers coexist

Uncertainties about the future of US security commitments in Europe are a major problem for NATO. But, the overall picture implies different layers coexist: On the one hand, the United States has strengthened its military presence in central eastern Europe after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, sending an additional army brigade and military equipment to sustain America’s commitment to European security.

On the other hand, US President Donald Trump has questioned NATO’s existence in a new way that goes beyond the usual level of transatlantic conflict. The US administration’s policy shifts in Syria have also created uncertainty about the reliability of the American partner.

Additionally, the deterioration of the European security environment, including the demise of such arms control instruments as the INF Treaty, and Russia’s military modernization programs have put stress on NATO.

European alternatives to the American protector are lacking

Uncertainties about NATO’s health are, as a result, deepening divisions within the European Union. But eastern European allies such as Poland and the Baltic states still see the US as indispensable for their security because, in their view, European alternatives to the American protector are lacking. In contrast, France is striving to achieve more “European sovereignty,” meaning more independence from Washington.

Germany’s position is somewhere in the middle: The current debate in Berlin about Germany’s contributions to European and international security should thus be put into this broader context: Not only as a hedge against external risks and threats but also as a highly relevant factor for both transatlantic burden-sharing and European coherence.