



Top 10 — GAC Essay Competition 2025

Essay Question

Germany, the United States, and the wider alliance are at a crossroads. We are entering a new era of international relationships, affecting dimensions such as global trade, defense, and security. This moment calls for a Transatlantic Transformation – a rethinking of how we collaborate, communicate, and confront global challenges together.

What are your ideas for redefining the transatlantic partnership in light of this transformation? How would you reinvigorate it for the future?

Title of the Essay

On the Rails to the Future: NATO Beyond Defence

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Essay

1 On the Train to NATO's Civic Future

"At last, on the train to Brussels!" I said to myself after catching my breath. I have been looking forward to this moment for what felt like an eternity, and now I barely made it onto the train. Who could have guessed that the entire city wants to go to the central station and my parents had to drop me off three blocks away? Anyways, I'm on the train now and just have to find my seat, so I can put away my overweight luggage. What's the seat number? 1949. "That's the founding year of NATO!", I said louder than I originally intended. I hurriedly entered through the first and only door I noticed. Now, I just need to locate my seat number so I can sit down. "Hopefully, it is a good sign for my time at the NATO Civic Campus."



2 NATO's Old Identity

Stop and go - the morning continues as it started in the car of my parents. Waiting for the people to stow their chubby bags and luggage, so they can sit down at a snail-like pace, and I just want to get to my seat. "Oh, what a beautiful badge," says a shaky old voice. An old woman is looking at the NATO logo I put on my travel bag and now looking at me. "Back in my young days, NATO was simply there for the collective defence of each other." "Yes, you're certainly right, ma'am," I replied and got a little push from behind, "it was nice meeting you!" Yes, she is certainly right, NATO was so different back then. It was a "distant military alliance," civil society had no touching points with it, established to secure peace and support against the threat from the communist east. A Military Assistance Pact, that's all it was.

3 The Turning Point - From Defence to Civic Engagement

A civil society NATO became necessary with the years. With the self-dissolving threat of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, the alliance had no real counterpart to balance the power equilibrium. In the following years, NATO focused and got involved in stabilizing the Balkans, counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, that were often legitimized by the UN Security Council. But times have grown to become more complex - at least my parents and the history books say so. Geopolitical crises like Russia's war against Ukraine, global supply chain security, and pandemics caused a serious need for a change in the understanding of the term "security". Security had to become more than supporting allies militarily; it evolved into something greater, something no one expected from NATO and its original purpose. With President Trump continuously questioning the stability and ultimate purpose of the alliance [1] and at that time French President Emmanuel Macron announcing the "brain death of NATO"[2], General Secretary of the alliance, Mark Rutte, and his staff were certain they had to set up NATO in a new way or risk it disappearing under lack of legitimacy support of its members. However, establishing NATO's "civic branch" required many more years.

4 People-to-People NATO

It all started back in 2029, when the Secretary General published his reform plan. I've read about it in history class: NATO had to stop being just a political football for member states and start building real connections between people. The EU had Erasmus, sure, but that stayed in Europe and the EU itself was tangled in bureaucracy. NATO had something bigger; it already linked two continents. The Ukraine war back then woke everyone up. People wanted security, but also a shared identity. That's when the Civic Branch was born, youth exchanges, resilience projects, even a NATO Youth Corps. Where young people up to the age of 25 can join and help rebuild flood defences in Portugal, set up cybersecurity workshops for high school students in Estonia, or coordinate a cross-border youth summit in



Montreal about renewable energy. Now, when I think of NATO, I don't picture generals at a conference table. I think of friends in different time zones, group chats buzzing about both politics and football scores. Weirdly, NATO feels like part of my everyday life — not just protecting borders but protecting the trust between us.

5 Back to the Present

The train jolted, pulling me back into the present. “Thank god,” I sighed, “that’s my seat.” I slid into it, letting the rhythm of the tracks carry my thoughts forward.

References / Bibliography

- [1] Spiegel, “Donald Trump “äussert erneut Zweifel an NATO-Beistandspflicht”, <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/donald-trump-aeussert-erneut-zweifel-an-nato-beistandspflicht-a-a1e241b9-c92f-4aac-921a-45f45127fc35>, accessed August 2024.
- [2] BBC News, “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming braindead”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50335257>, accessed August 2024.