



Chris Donahue - the Last Soldier Who Defended NATO

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The sudden step back of General Chris "CD" Donahue has triggered a real shockwave within the American armed forces and among NATO partners. Donahue, who until a few days ago led the United States Army in Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) as well as the Allied Land Forces of the Atlantic Alliance, **is an almost legendary figure: a highly decorated veteran of the Rangers and Delta Force, he went down in history as the last American soldier to board the airliner that evacuated Kabul in 2021.**

Behind what has been presented as a voluntary discharge actually lies the hand of Pete Hegseth. The Secretary of Defense has indeed unilaterally downgraded Donahue's European command, transforming the position from a prestigious four-star role to a three-star one. According to the *Washington Post*, Hegseth even vetoed any alternative proposal to relocate the general to an equivalent role.

"We are facing the best soldier in service. His extraordinary reputation speaks for itself. I can only say that in Moscow and in the dens of international terrorism, they will celebrate his exit."

— Ben Hodges, former Lieutenant General leading USAREUR

The "targeted removals" strategy at the Pentagon

Donahue's removal is not an isolated case. Since his appointment in January 2025, **Hegseth has removed about twenty-four of Washington's most esteemed generals and admirals from active duty**, without providing public reasons. Although turnover is customary with the change of presidency, the scale of this purge is fueling deep unease among officers.

Paul Eaton, a retired general and Iraq veteran, has openly compared the Trump administration's operation to a **Soviet-style purge**, orchestrated with the sole aim of installing loyalists in key positions. Other observers, like Afghan General Sami Sadat, see in the Pentagon chief's moves **a sort of personal resentment towards officers with impeccable records**, in contrast to Hegseth's decidedly less brilliant military career.

Donahue's profile, on the other hand, seemed untouchable: having entered the infantry in 1992 after his path at West Point, he spent twenty years in elite corps operating in hot theaters like Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Since 2022, he has also successfully coordinated strategic support to Ukraine against the Russian invasion, so much so that many analysts considered him a favorite to lead the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The real reasons for the clash: Iran and NATO

The first signs of wear were publicly evident a month ago in London, where Donahue appeared unusually gloomy during a conference at the *Royal United Services Institute*. Today it is clear that the general was already aware of the downsizing of his role.

The deep reasons for the rupture rest on two fundamental geopolitical issues:

- **The lack of an anti-Iran axis:** During the last Defense Ministers' summit, Hegseth harshly attacked NATO partners, accusing them of not wanting to support the United States in a potential conflict against Tehran.

- **The disengagement in Europe:** The administration has planned a significant reduction of the American contingent in the Old Continent. Donahue firmly opposed a linear cut that would have weakened the units under his responsibility.

As highlighted by colleague Jonathan Hackett, Donahue found himself in open ideological contrast with the new isolationist defensive posture imposed by the Secretary of Defense. His strong international connections likely also weighed on his political fate. Ed Arnold, an analyst at the British think tank RUSI, recalled how Donahue spent much of his life fighting side by side with British, French special forces, and the Polish GROM: a dense network of European alliances that the current American Defense leadership views with suspicion.