



A European Strategy for a New Transatlantic Balance

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transatlantic relations are entering a period of profound uncertainty. Despite efforts by European governments to adapt to political shifts in the United States—including strategic outreach to American cities and a nuanced approach to Republican politics—Europe miscalculated the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The re-election of Donald Trump has reignited concerns over the future of NATO, European security, and shared democratic values. As Trump's administration signals a reduced commitment to traditional alliances, Europe must prepare for a future that may require greater autonomy and strategic cohesion without its long-standing partner across the Atlantic.⁶

II. OVERVIEW

For over seventy-five years, the transatlantic alliance has anchored global security, economic stability, and democratic values. But today, Europe faces a geopolitical landscape increasingly defined by American unpredictability. The reelection of Donald Trump, the consolidation of the "America First" doctrine, and the erosion of shared democratic norms mark a turning point in the *Overview* paragraph about the alliance shift.⁶ Europe must now prepare for the possibility of a more transactional, even adversarial, U.S. partner—one that challenges old assumptions and

demands a fundamentally different strategic approach.

This brief explores Europe's emerging imperative to build strategic resilience and autonomy in its relationship with the United States. It analyzes the consequences of Washington's shift away from multilateral commitments, and the alignment of populist forces across both continents. The core issue is not whether the alliance will formally collapse—but whether Europe will remain a subordinate actor within it. Without a cohesive strategy, the continent risks becoming reactive and fragmented, vulnerable to both external threats and internal division. This paper argues that only through deliberate coordination, investment in strategic capabilities, and a redefined transatlantic agenda can Europe preserve its sovereignty, security, and global influence in a post-Atlanticist world.

A. Relevance

The imperative for Europe to establish a coherent and autonomous strategy in dealing with the United States stems from a growing recognition of strategic imbalance and dependency.¹³ In moments of geopolitical crisis, such as Russia's war in Ukraine or tensions in the Indo-Pacific, Europe has repeatedly leaned heavily on American military, technological, and diplomatic capabilities.¹³ One need only look to NATO's 1999 campaign in Kosovo, where Europe's

operational limitations were laid bare.¹³ Despite the alliance's multilateral nature, it was the United States that provided nearly all critical military enablers—from intelligence and surveillance to precision strike capabilities and heavy airlift.¹³ With that, the reality remains stark: Europe is not yet capable of fully substituting for U.S. military power in the event of a major conflict – a strategic vulnerability in the context of a long-term Russian threat and the possibility of future transatlantic disengagement.

As Washington increasingly pivots its strategic attention toward China and the Indo-Pacific, the space for European strategic autonomy grows—yet so does the risk of marginalization if Europe fails to act.¹² Without a clear and unified approach, Europe's position risks being reactive, fragmented, and ultimately subordinate to U.S. interests. Therefore, crafting a European strategy that both complements and calibrates its alliance with the United States is not merely a political ambition—it is a strategic necessity.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Since the early days of the Cold War, the United States has positioned itself as the cornerstone of European security.¹³ Beginning in the 1950s, American leadership in the creation and maintenance of NATO anchored a transatlantic alliance based not only on mutual defense interests but on shared democratic values and a commitment to liberal order. For decades, Europeans saw the United States as their most reliable and indispensable ally—a partner whose global leadership was largely unquestioned.¹²

This foundational assumption, however, is now

unraveling.

While American strategic attention has increasingly tilted toward great power competition with China and a renewed focus on containing Russia, Europe has remained steadfast in its belief that the transatlantic bond is irreplaceable. Yet that conviction is being tested as U.S. domestic politics shift.¹² The rise of the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement, and its consolidation of power within the Republican Party, has upended long-standing certainties. With its growing skepticism toward international alliances, disdain for multilateral commitments, and collaboration with authoritarian figures, MAGA politics raise profound questions about whether the United States can still be counted on—not only in terms of defense commitments, but in the broader defense of liberal values itself.⁷

This uncertainty is no longer theoretical. It is actively reshaping the transatlantic landscape. The ongoing war in Ukraine, while initially a rallying point for Western solidarity, has exposed growing divisions. President Donald Trump had temporarily withdrawn U.S. support for Ukraine, undermining the united front that has so far sustained Ukraine's resistance.³ At the same time, he has made it clear that Europe must be capable of ensuring its own safety by demanding that NATO members increase their defense spending to an unprecedented 5% of GDP—a target not met by any NATO member state, including the U.S.—while casting doubt on the value of NATO itself.⁵

In response to these pressures, European nations are beginning to hedge. The emergence of the Weimar+ group—France, Germany, Poland, the

UK, Italy, Spain, and the European Commission—signals a deliberate move toward strategic autonomy.² These countries are now coordinating defense policy with a greater degree of independence from Washington, motivated in part by the unpredictable nature of recent U.S. foreign policy. As Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis put it, this marks the end of Europe’s “age of innocence,” and the beginning of a more self-reliant strategic era.²

Meanwhile, European leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to Ukraine regardless of Washington’s stance.² The Weimar+ group’s joint declaration to support Ukraine until a “just, comprehensive, and sustainable peace” is achieved—explicitly with or without U.S. involvement—highlights a profound shift.²

Economic tensions are compounding this geopolitical shift with tariffs previously proposed by the Trump administration. Progress in trade negotiations have stalled, and European policymakers are preparing for a potential return to protectionist U.S. trade policies that could further fracture transatlantic economic cooperation.²⁴

The intersection of technology and power further complicates this evolving relationship. The relationship between the U.S. government and corporate tech giants is growing stronger.¹ This raises urgent questions about Europe’s digital sovereignty and its control over critical infrastructure.¹⁷ At the 2025 Paris summit, Vice President JD Vance sharply criticized the European Union’s Digital Services Act and AI regulatory framework, arguing that such policies stifled innovation and ignored the priorities of ordinary voters.¹ His comments reflect a broader

ideological divide: while Europe seeks to rein in tech monopolies and protect digital rights through robust governance, key figures in the U.S.—particularly within the MAGA-aligned camp—view such regulation as elitist overreach and a barrier to American economic power. In this context, technology becomes not just an economic battleground but a geopolitical one, with Europe caught between the need to preserve autonomy and the gravitational pull of U.S. digital hegemony.

The divergence between the U.S. and Europe is also apparent than in the slow but significant drift of core values. For over seventy-five years, institutions like NATO and transatlantic dialogue forums sustained a shared commitment to liberal democracy, human rights, and multilateral governance. Today, that consensus is being challenged. At the 2025 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice President JD Vance asserted that Europe’s greatest threat stemmed not from foreign adversaries but from its unwillingness to respond to populist discontent — a statement emblematic of the ideological pivot occurring on the American right.⁴

Indeed, a new ideological axis is emerging. Trump’s political affinities increasingly align with Europe’s nationalist right — figures like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, Italy’s Giorgia Meloni, Germany’s Alice Weidel, and France’s Éric Zemmour.⁴ Their shared rejection of globalist norms, emphasis on national sovereignty, and hostility toward traditional liberal institutions has created the potential for a new, illiberal transatlantic alignment.⁴ If this vision prevails, the alliance would no longer be grounded in shared democratic ideals, but reduced to a set of transactional relationships governed by

short-term interests and strongman politics.

In short, the historical model of U.S.–Europe relations—grounded in stability, shared values, and predictable leadership—is being rewritten. A new era is emerging, one defined less by trust in American stewardship and more by European recalibration in the face of strategic uncertainty.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

For the United States, Europe is seen as being of lesser importance. Even before Donald Trump's return to office, Europe had slipped down Washington's list of strategic priorities.¹² Russia's aggression—first with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, then with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—briefly rekindled U.S. focus on the continent. While NATO reverted to its Cold War mission of deterring Russian power, that pivot was not fully mirrored in broader U.S. policy.¹² Still, a bipartisan consensus had long sustained the view that continued American leadership in Europe was central to the United States' global strategy.

However, that has now shifted. Trump's open hostility toward both the European Union and NATO during his first term—and again during the 2024 presidential campaign—has laid the groundwork for a radical reorientation of U.S. foreign policy.

Neither the president nor his administration has shown much interest in Europe. In Secretary of State Marco Rubio's initial round of calls, only Poland and NATO appeared in the top fifteen—and neither was among the top ten. The

United Kingdom, despite the special relationship between the two countries, was absent, as were France, Germany, and the EU. Furthermore, there are fewer, if any, traditional transatlanticists in the second Trump administration to speak in favor of the alliance, than there were in the first Trump administration.

President Trump's views match those of influential figures in the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement in the Republican Party, including technology moguls who, buoyed by Trump's electoral triumphs, are now intent on unraveling the European Union's regulations which they see as a thorn for their enterprises.¹ In their eyes, Europe matters less in the world, and yet Europe is taking advantage of the U.S. security guarantee to ignore its defense responsibilities, all the while targeting U.S. companies with their regulations.¹

Additionally, Trump does not value alliances as partnerships grounded in mutual interest or shared values. Instead, he views them as opportunities to assert dominance and expand his power. He wields extortionist threats to cement asymmetric relationships, where he must have the upper hand. His foreign policy relies on coercive tactics—threats and pressure—to forge highly asymmetric relationships in which the United States always holds the upper hand. This was evident in his threats to withdraw support for Ukraine and in his provocative suggestions about acquiring Canada or Greenland. Guided by an uncompromising “America First” doctrine, Trump seeks not cooperation but submission. His

vision is one where Europe and Canada are no longer allies, but vassals.

At the core of transatlantic tension is that Europe has very different views of the transatlantic alliance and of the world than Donald Trump and his administration. For Europe, relations with the United States have served as Europe's North Star and the foundation of Europe's foreign policy, and were treated with the utmost importance. Europe, today, desperately wants to preserve the alliance – at least for now – as it currently exists and ensure the United States' continued place as the guarantor of European security.

Ahead of the U.S. 2024 presidential elections one thought that Europe was prepared for either outcome so that the transatlantic relations aren't endangered. They cultivated ties with U.S. states and cities and pursued a quiet "donut strategy", creating a circle of influence around Trump within the Republican Party to later close if he becomes president.²³ And yet, European governments made the same mistake as in 2016: assuming Kamala Harris would be elected and endorsing her. Naturally, Trump was not pleased, and in the end, he was elected.

Now, both sides appear to be operating on entirely different historical wavelengths. The Trump administration approaches the world with the zero-sum, imperial logic of the 1890s, while European leaders remain anchored in the cooperative liberalism of the 1990s. The result is a growing strategic and ideological gap between the U.S. and its oldest allies.

B. Risks of Indifference

Indifference toward the transatlantic relationship poses serious global risks, including the erosion of democratic values and the weakening of human rights protections. Without a strong, unified stance from the United States and Europe, authoritarian regimes—particularly Russia and China—stand to gain greater influence on the global stage.¹⁷ If transatlantic powers fail to support countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa with viable alternatives, those nations may increasingly turn to authoritarian regimes that offer strategic investments with strings attached.

A key example is China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (also known as the "New Silk Road"), which aims to create economic dependencies that could later be exploited for political and strategic gain.¹⁷ If left unchecked, such efforts would allow geopolitical rivals to expand their influence, promote alternative governance models, and reshape international institutions in ways that challenge the liberal democratic order. Countering this requires a coordinated transatlantic strategy, including competitive economic offers and sustainable development initiatives that empower countries without compromising their sovereignty.

Another major risk of a weakened transatlantic alliance is the increase in security vulnerabilities. NATO, the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic defense, depends on close U.S.–European cooperation.¹³ A loss of cohesion could embolden adversaries like Russia, particularly in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine and the Baltic states. Moreover, diminished collaboration would undermine the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts, which

rely on shared intelligence, military coordination, and collective preparedness.¹³

Thirdly, climate action is another area where the transatlantic partnership plays a critical leadership role.²¹ As the transatlantic is key to driving climate action by setting global standards and mobilizing resources for a green transition, the weakened transatlantic relations can also result in climate inaction and progress toward climate goals will slow. This was evident when the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement under the first and second Trump administration, weakening global momentum.²¹

Finally, globalization itself functions as a key instrument of transatlantic power. The United States and Europe have historically shaped global economic norms, regulatory standards, and trade rules. A fractured alliance would lead to economic fragmentation and reduced influence in global governance. Without alignment, the West risks ceding strategic ground to China and other rising powers, particularly in trade, technology, and digital policy.¹⁷

In sum, the decline of the transatlantic relationship would not only weaken democratic resilience and global security but also diminish the ability of the West to lead on major global issues—from climate change to economic development. Only through cooperation can the transatlantic alliance remain a pillar of stability and a force for positive global change.

C. Non-partisan reasoning

A balanced transatlantic alliance is not a matter of partisan ideology, but a cornerstone of long-term

strategic rationality and mutual interest. As global uncertainty rises, a stable and functional relationship between Europe and the United States serves fundamental interests that transcend political divisions.

1) Shared strategic interests

Regardless of political orientation, Europe and the U.S. face common global challenges, such as geopolitical competition and instability due to Russia, China and the Middle East, climate change and disruptive technologies such as AI and cybersecurity.¹⁷

A balanced alliance would ensure burden-sharing of these challenges but would also avoid over-dependence on either side. Balance here doesn't imply symmetry but complimentary so that both sides carry proportional responsibility relative to their capabilities and interests.

2) Economic and technological sovereignty

A balanced alliance enables coordination on trade, technology standards, and supply chains, reducing dependencies on authoritarian states.¹⁷ Europe investing in its strategic industries (e.g., AI, defense tech, semiconductors) not only strengthens its global position but also makes the alliance more robust by contributing to collective security and innovation.¹⁵

3) Crisis resilience and responsiveness

From pandemics to climate change, crises are increasingly transnational. A more equitable partnership improves joint responsiveness to emergencies through harmonized policies, pooled resources, and coordinated civil-military capabilities. Balance here translates to

resilience—not only militarily, but also economically and institutionally.

4) Shared investment in the rules-based order
A balanced alliance helps sustain the liberal international order, which benefits both sides through open markets, multilateral institutions, and rule-based conflict resolution. When Europe is an equal actor, it can shape and defend these norms alongside the U.S., rather than being seen as a passive consumer of security.

5) Long-term U.S. partnership through mutual respect

From a pragmatic U.S. perspective, a capable and confident Europe is a partner worth investing in. If Europe demonstrates strategic seriousness, it strengthens the argument for continued American engagement rather than retrenchment. This also helps anchor U.S. foreign policy in multilateralism across administrations.

V. TRIED POLICY

For decades, Europe has depended heavily on the U.S. security umbrella through NATO, while consistently underinvesting in its own defense.¹² Despite commitments made at the 2014 Wales Summit and later at the 2019 London Summit to meet the 2% GDP target for defense spending, many European countries fell short, creating tensions with successive U.S. administrations.¹² These asymmetric defense contributions led to U.S. frustration and declining political support for the alliance.¹²

1) Strategic Autonomy Rhetoric

The EU has often invoked the idea of “strategic autonomy”—especially after Trump’s first term and Brexit—but implementation has been slow and fragmented. Initiatives like PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) aimed to build common capabilities but lacked funding, urgency, and political unity because of inconsistent political will, duplication with NATO, and divergent threat perceptions among EU members (e.g., East vs. South).¹⁰

2) Donut Strategy and Quiet Diplomacy

Ahead of the 2024 U.S. election, European policymakers pursued a “donut strategy,” engaging with U.S. state-level leaders, Republican moderates, and think tanks to build indirect influence around Trump.²³ This was paired with efforts to avoid overt alignment with the Democratic administration to maintain neutrality.

However, with multiple European leaders endorsing Kamala Harris and miscalculating the election result, they renewed hostility from the Trump administration and uncertainty.

3) Bilateral trade agreements by France and Germany

Some European states, notably France and Germany, have tried to secure bilateral arrangements with the U.S., rather than pushing a unified EU position.²⁸ While this sometimes yielded tactical gains, it has undermined EU cohesion and created a fragmented European

approach to transatlantic relations.

4) Trade and Tech Coordination Attempts

The EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established in 2021, aimed to coordinate positions on trade, semiconductors, AI governance, and critical infrastructure.¹⁴ While it made some early progress, it stalled due to political gridlock and divergent regulatory philosophies.¹⁴

These policies show that while awareness of strategic imbalance is not new, the responses have been reactive, fragmented, or overly reliant on outdated assumptions. What is now required is a forward-looking European strategy that combines unity, capacity-building, and selective alignment with U.S. interests, while ensuring Europe can act independently when necessary.

VI. POLICY SOLUTIONS

In light of enduring uncertainty in U.S. foreign policy and the erosion of the post-1945 transatlantic consensus, Europe must adopt a dual-track approach: (1) reducing structural dependencies on the United States and (2) institutionalizing principled, long-term mechanisms for engagement, regardless of who leads the White House.

Build European Strategic Autonomy Selectively

European autonomy should not aim to replace the United States, but to complement and reinforce collective resilience where U.S. commitment is

uncertain. This requires focused investment in three core areas:

- **Defense:** Europe must accelerate defense cooperation through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework and the European Defence Fund (EDF), targeting capability gaps such as air defense, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and logistics.¹⁰ The creation of a European Rapid Deployment Force under EU command would strengthen Europe's crisis response capacity and reduce its overreliance on NATO's U.S.-led assets.
- **Digital:** To assert digital sovereignty, Europe should invest in independent infrastructure for cloud computing,¹⁷ semiconductor manufacturing,¹⁶ and artificial intelligence.¹⁴ A 'Digital Sovereignty Initiative' would help counterbalance technological dependence on both American and Chinese tech ecosystems,¹⁵ and initiatives like the EuroStack model¹⁷ provide a practical foundation for achieving this vision.
- **Energy:** Ensuring energy resilience requires diversifying sources beyond the U.S. LNG and minimizing exposure to geopolitical chokepoints. Strategic energy partnerships with North Africa,¹¹ Norway, and expanded renewable capacity across the EU can bolster long-term autonomy.²¹

Engage the U.S. Through Institutional Mechanisms, Not Individuals

Europe must shift from personality-driven diplomacy to institutional engagement. Rather than depending on relationships with individual American leaders, Europe should deepen bureaucratic cooperation with the U.S. State Department, the National Security Council, and sub-national actors such as U.S. states, municipalities, and civil society organizations.²³

Creating joint task forces on technology, trade, and climate—designed to persist across administrations—can ensure policy continuity and reduce vulnerability to partisan fluctuations in Washington.

Strengthen Internal EU Unity

Europe's ability to act externally depends on internal coherence. The Weimar+ group (France, Germany, Poland, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the European Commission) should be formalized into a Strategic Autonomy Council to coordinate defense, technology, and foreign policy efforts among key actors.²⁸

To prevent strategic paralysis, the EU must also move toward qualified majority voting in foreign policy decisions, enabling swift and unified action in moments of geopolitical urgency.²⁹

A Coordinated Digital and Tech Sovereignty Agenda

Europe should finalize and enforce EU-wide standards on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital platform governance. It must also pursue mutual recognition agreements with the United States, particularly on data protection, to

ensure secure cross-border digital flows while maintaining GDPR principles. This dual approach safeguards both sovereignty and transatlantic interoperability in the digital sphere.

Diversify partnerships

To reduce vulnerability to U.S. political shifts, Europe should diversify its alliances. A formal Europe–Canada–Mexico coordination platform—an “Atlantic Quadrilateral”—could reinforce collective leverage in global trade negotiations, tech standard-setting, and supply chain resilience.²⁷

Simultaneously, Europe must deepen ties with Indo-Pacific democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and India, building a broader coalition of liberal powers committed to multilateralism, sustainability, and the rules-based order.²⁵

Reframe the Alliance Around Common Global Leadership

Rather than viewing the alliance as a security dependency, Europe should help reshape it as a platform for joint global leadership on key planetary challenges. This includes:

- Driving climate and energy transition through joint initiatives at COP and global development financing institutions.
- Leading on ethical, rules-based AI governance.
- Offering sustainable infrastructure alternatives to the Global South—building upon and refining initiatives like the G7's “Build Back Better World”.

Europe cannot wait passively for the return of a transatlantic consensus. It must act with deliberate strategic clarity, ensuring that the alliance is no longer based on romantic assumptions, but on mutual capacity, shared interest, and institutional resilience. A new transatlantic balance will only emerge if Europe is both strong enough to stand alone and confident enough to lead together.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The transatlantic alliance is at a historic crossroads. The reelection of Donald Trump and the deepening of America's inward-facing posture have revealed not only a shift in U.S. priorities but also the fragility of long-held European assumptions about the permanence of American leadership. While the alliance is unlikely to dissolve outright, its foundations—rooted in shared values, mutual trust, and multilateralism—can no longer be taken for granted.

Europe must move beyond nostalgia for a stable post-war order and confront the emerging reality with strategic clarity. This moment demands neither rupture nor retreat, but recalibration. As Europe needs the U.S. and U.S. can also benefit from a partnership with Europe, the United States may remain a partner — but no longer an anchor. Europe does not need to “decouple” from the United States. But it must prepare for a world in which cooperation is conditional, not guaranteed — and in which leadership means learning to navigate transatlantic tensions without being defined by them.

A transatlantic relationship fit for the 21st century must be based not on dependency, but on balance: a Europe that is capable, coherent, and confident enough to act independently where necessary, and to lead alongside the United States when possible.

By investing in strategic autonomy, institutionalizing transatlantic engagement, diversifying partnerships, and asserting leadership on global challenges, Europe can redefine its role—not as a junior partner, but as a co-architect of a renewed, resilient Western alliance. The path forward will not be easy, but it is essential. If Europe fails to act, it risks becoming strategically irrelevant in a world increasingly shaped by power competition. But if it does rise to the moment, it can help forge a transatlantic future that is not only more balanced, but also more durable, principled, and fit for purpose in an age of uncertainty.

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