

Politics over Geopolitics: The Domestic Roots of Transatlantic Relations

by **Riccardo Alcaro**

Domestic politics has become a structural driver of transatlantic relations, reshaping how political forces in the United States and Europe interpret the alliance. In the United States, the traditional liberal-internationalist consensus now competes with a nationalist and increasingly civilisational vision of the West, while progressive thinking remains less developed and institutionally connected across the Atlantic. In Europe, the renewed Atlanticist-Europeanist debate intersects with the rise of nationalist forces that share strong ideological affinities with the US new right. These political cleavages complicate strategic convergence even as Russia, China and broader geopolitical pressures continue to create strong incentives for cooperation. The future of the transatlantic relationship will therefore depend on how political actors reconcile domestic ideological preferences with structural security and economic imperatives, and on whether Europe can build greater capacity without severing its enduring strategic links with the United States.

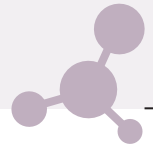
Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the 'Global competition and political risk' programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

This paper was produced in the context of the 2026 Transatlantic Symposium, IAI's annual forum bringing together diplomats and experts from the United States and Europe to discuss the main issues on the transatlantic agenda behind closed doors. The 2026 edition was organised in cooperation with the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, which hosted the event on 28 September 2026. The Symposium was made possible thanks to the support of Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

It is no secret that Donald Trump's arrival on the political scene in 2016, and even more so his re-election in 2024, jolted decades of broad transatlantic consensus about the strategic relevance of the US-European alliance. Trump's pursuit of US primacy through narrow and ever-changing transactional deals, combined with his and his supporters' strongly nationalistic outlook, has prompted a reappraisal of the relationship with Europe among US foreign policy thinkers. In parallel, the uncertain standing of US security commitments has prompted similar reassessments in Europe. Thus, the once boring and predictable transatlantic relationship has become the source of much political and intellectual wrangling.

The debate about transatlantic relations remains unfinished business. Still, it is possible to identify the driving themes prevailing in the different and fractious political families in America and Europe. In the former, the debate runs along two political cleavages, with the nationalist-liberal divide intersecting with the more established conservative-progressive cleavage. In Europe, the debate unfolds within a more complicated picture, in which the nationalist-liberal divide intermingles more with the Atlanticist-Europeanist cleavage than it does with the left-right one. To be clear, 'liberal' is used here to refer to a commitment to democracy and internationalism and not to a partisan political agenda.

The future of transatlantic relations will depend in large part on whether political forces will lean on geopolitical imperatives or ideological preferences to settle such debates.



Europe is appreciated as a pillar of America's system of alliances and a transmission belt of US power abroad

1. LINGERING MAINSTREAM THINKING

The traditional narrative about transatlantic relations as a community of states linked by common strategic interests and a shared commitment to liberal democratic principles is still very much present in US political debates, albeit arguably on the defensive. Proponents encompass mainstream forces across the political spectrum, which continue to channel widespread, if somewhat tepid, public goodwill. Attesting to this are the limits imposed by Congress on the president's authority to withdraw the United States from NATO¹ and order troops reductions in Europe,² as well as the support for the alliance consistently shown by a majority of US citizens over the years.³

Europe is appreciated as a pillar of America's system of alliances and a transmission belt of US power abroad. European states are critical to efforts to contain Russia's imperial designs and to US military projection into the surrounding regions from the High North to the Gulf and Africa by hosting military bases and other facilities. Furthermore, Europe's commercial and regulatory power is appreciated as an asset in sustaining the geoeconomic rivalry with China. Internationalists of different political strands also continue to emphasise the transatlantic relationship's capacity to bolster the global standing of the United States as the leader of a mostly liberal democratic coalition.

Naturally, differences of opinion and emphasis, at times significant and consequential, exist within the general contours of liberal mainstream consensus. Biden-aligned Democrats have embraced the notion of a broad struggle for democracy that starts at home and extends to the contest with illiberal and anti-Western powers increasingly working together – notably Russia, China, Iran and North Korea.⁴ In these terms, the transatlantic relationship is framed as a barrier against the autocratic powers as well as a platform for democratic forces on both shores of the Atlantic to close ranks against domestic authoritarian risks.

With Trump's hostility to Europe recast in not just nationalist

¹ Sokol, Karen, "The North Atlantic Treaty: U.S. Legal Obligations and Congressional Authorities", in *CRS Legal Sidebars*, No. LSB11256 (6 January 2025), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/LSB11256.html>.

² Bednarczyk, Philip et al., "The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act: What Europeans Need to Know", in *GMF Insights*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/24910>.

³ Smeltz, Dina, "Strong Bipartisan Support for NATO Ahead of 2026 Summit", in *Chicago Council on Global Affairs Public Opinion Surveys*, 30 June 2026, <https://globalaffairs.org/node/44238>.

⁴ White House, *Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference*, 19 February 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference>.



**Continued support
for relations with
Europe does
not amount to
enthusiasm**

but illiberal terms, this ‘democracy vs autocracy’ framework for transatlantic relations⁵ (and US alliances in general) has invariably injected a further dose of politicisation into the US debate on Europe. Atlanticist Republicans, especially if elected officials, generally refrain from indulging in the ideational dimension of the transatlantic alliance and instead emphasise its strong value as strategic competition with America’s rivals heats up. An example was the late Senator Lindsay Graham, a foreign policy hawk who de-emphasised his historic support for US global leadership but continued to strongly support confronting Russia.⁶ Still, the nature of hostile countries’ political regimes is regularly brought up by conservative members of the US foreign policy establishment, especially in Beltway think tanks and legacy media.⁷ This suggests that Republican reticence on the value dimension of transatlantic relations (and US foreign policy in general) may recede if Trump’s grasp on the conservative electorate eases.

Continued support for relations with Europe does not amount to enthusiasm. On the contrary, Europe is often a source of criticism within mainstream American thinking. Especially since the early 2000s, the European socio-economic model has been a negative reference point for supply-side-oriented conservatives, to the extent that it has served as a warning against the excesses of welfare-state expansion. The mainstream left is considerably less critical, although it too has doubts, fuelled by Europe’s lag in technological innovation, demographic decline and relative economic stagnation.

On foreign policy issues, which for traditional conservatives and liberals alike are by far the most relevant to the transatlantic alliance, Europe’s approach to China is a major focus. In general, mainstream forces tend to push for tighter alignment with US controls over exports of sensitive technologies and, potentially, tariffs too. This said, Russia features much more prominently in American debates on Europe, as continental defence is the one area in which strong frustration is felt equally on both the right and the left. Europeans are expected to shoulder a much greater burden. In this respect, the increases in defence budgets by almost all European NATO members, and the commitment to raising them further to a combined 5 per cent of GDP by 2035 – 3.5 per cent for core defence and 1.5 for security-related

⁵ White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

⁶ Albert, Victoria, “Sen. Lindsey Graham Urges Greenland Deal”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 January 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/greenland-trump-tariffs-trade-eu>.

⁷ Brands, Hal, “The Renegade Order”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (March/April 2025), p. 22-35, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1132714>; Trofimov, Yaroslav, “The Fault Lines in the Autocratic Axis”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/the-fault-lines-in-the-autocratic-axis-6b0af76e>.



The mainstream left and right do differ over how Europeans should strengthen their role in defending NATO territory

infrastructure – have been welcomed and are regarded as a genuine achievement of the Trump Administration.

The mainstream left and right do differ, however, over how Europeans should strengthen their role in defending NATO territory, particularly in the conventional domain. European efforts to coordinate at EU level by further integrating defence markets and giving preference to EU actors are at odds with the view of traditional conservatives. Like Trump himself, the latter favour strengthening European military capabilities in ways that also deepen industrial ties with the US defence sector through direct purchases of American weapons systems or joint ventures. Unlike Trump, however, the US mainstream right is opposed to a significant reduction of US military assets on the Old Continent. Instead, it favours stronger ties with those countries, such as the United Kingdom and the Nordic-Baltic coalition, that are more willing than others to spend on defence and coordinate with the United States to deter Russia and support Ukraine's defence.

Mainstream left forces are equally supportive of such ties, but they are also open to forms of intra-European cooperation that would reduce the burden of continental defence on the United States while preserving US leadership within the alliance. In this sense, US Democrats believe that greater European integration can help strengthen a transatlantic relationship in which European freedom of action is expanded but also kept within acceptable limits.⁸

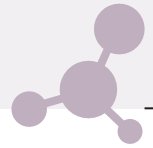
While the value of European integration has long been a matter of discussion amongst traditional conservatives and progressives, the issue has hardly generated much passion. The picture changes, however, when one turns to Trump and the new right's views of Europe.

2. THE TRUMP CHALLENGE

The traditional framing of transatlantic relations has been questioned in US academic circles for years, especially by thinkers falling into the so-called 'restrainer' camp, who advocate downsizing the United States' role in the world – including Europe – to avoid the risk of imperial over-extension.⁹ The challenges posed by Trump and the national conservative movement – which, oversimplifying, can be referred to as the 'new right' – are of a different nature and, above all,

⁸ Bergmann, Max, "Embrace the Union. A New Progressive Approach for Reviving the Trans-Atlantic Alliance", in *Center for American Progress Reports*, October 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=46243>.

⁹ Kavanagh, Jennifer and Justin Logan, "Leave Europe to the Europeans", in *Foreign Affairs*, 28 August 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135477>.



The Trump challenge stems from his nationalistic, personalistic and nakedly hierarchical understanding of international affairs

magnitude.¹⁰ They involve a reframing of transatlantic relations that, if sustained over time, would fundamentally transform the nature of the alliance – if it were still possible to speak of an alliance.

The Trump challenge stems from his nationalistic, personalistic and nakedly hierarchical understanding of international affairs. The president is keen on maintaining America's global primacy, ensuring unchallenged US hegemony over the Western hemisphere, and more generally projecting strength abroad. His personalistic approach is reflected in a preference for leader-to-leader engagement. But it is also visible in the pursuit of deals that purportedly combine US interests with the accumulation of leverage and wealth for his close entourage, as shown by his family's lucrative ties with Arab Gulf monarchies.¹¹

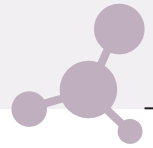
Pushing foreign governments into uneven deals is admittedly easier to do for Trump with America's traditional allies than it is with rivals. The latter tend to fight back, like China did with export controls on rare earths and rare-earth magnets in response to US tariffs in 2025, and Iran with the targeting of US bases in the Persian Gulf and disruption of traffic in the Strait of Hormuz after being attacked in early 2026. On the contrary, allies are reluctant to antagonise Washington and therefore have incentives to give in.

The Trump Administration has leveraged Europe's multiple dependencies on the United States in defence, finance, AI services and energy to deter retaliation and ensure alignment. It has pressed the Europeans on such issues as defence spending, which it wants to be directed towards more purchases of US weapons; imports of US LNG, which it expects to grow; and green and digital regulations, which it wants repealed.¹² In doing so, Trump is also responding to the demands of domestic interest groups that have lent him critical support, such as the hydrocarbons and high-tech industries.

¹⁰ Field, Laura K., *Furious Minds. The Making of the MAGA New Right*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2025.

¹¹ Protess, Ben et al., "Trump Pulled in at Least \$2 Billion after Returning to the White House", in *The New York Times*, 30 June 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/30/us/politics/trump-financial-disclosure-crypto-windfall.html>; Steakin, Will, "Trump's Businesses Received Millions from Foreign Entities during His Presidency, House Report Says", in *ABC News*, 4 January 2024, <https://abcnews.com/US/story?id=106106433>; Brown, Elliot, "Trump Family Rakes in Cash from Middle East Deals", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 July 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-family-rakes-in-cash-from-middle-east-deals-b91a9927>.

¹² Slattery, Gram et al., "US Officials Object to European Push to Buy Weapons Locally", in *Reuters*, 2 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-officials-object-european-push-buy-weapons-locally-2025-04-02>; Ambrose, Jillian and Kalyeena Makortoff, "Donald Trump Tells EU to Buy More US Oil and Gas or Face Tariffs", in *The Guardian*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xx6qkj>; Schwartzkopff, Frances, "US Ready to 'Take Any Actions Necessary' to Fight EU ESG Rules", in *Bloomberg*, 14 August 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-08-14/us-revives-pressure-on-europe-to-relax-its-corporate-esg-rules>; Volpicelli, Gian et al., "Trump Administration Pressures Europe to Ditch AI Rulebook", in *Bloomberg*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-25/trump-administration-pressure-europe-to-reject-ai-rulebook>.



Trump's actions have helped consolidate a conservative constituency that is, at a minimum, distrustful of Europe

Results have been mixed. Europeans have indeed refrained from adopting countermeasures and pledged greater purchases of US weapons and LNG. But they have distanced themselves from the war in Iran, pursued diversified military procurement options, and concluded trade deals with Mercosur, India and Australia.¹³ They have also, for the time being, kept intact EU regulations aimed at limiting the concentration of power in digital markets and governing content moderation on social media platforms.¹⁴ Regardless, Trump's actions have helped consolidate a conservative constituency that is, at a minimum, distrustful of Europe. Although a minority view, it is sufficiently widespread to influence conservative foreign-policy thinking in the future.

The official articulation of this approach can be found in the Europe chapter of the National Security Strategy (NSS) released in late 2025, which spells out the apparent intent to undermine the EU through support for “patriotic” – that is, Eurosceptic – forces across the continent.¹⁵ For Trump, the EU is an obstacle to US influence because it can potentially mobilise the combined weight of 27 member states. But it is also an experiment in supranational and inclusive governance that runs counter to his starkly nationalist and hierarchical conception of power. It is here that the Trump challenge to the foundations of the transatlantic relationship, recently captured by Secretary of State Marco Rubio's Athens speech on the roots of western civilisation,¹⁶ converges with that posed by the US new right.

3. THE CIVILISATIONAL FRAMEWORK

For American national conservatives, Europe is a source of nostalgia as the cradle of Western civilisation, which they understand as a community of nations defined less by the nature of their relations than by their common ancestry.¹⁷ Centuries of intra-European warfare

¹³ Ruitenberg, Rudy, “European NATO Nations Reduce Reliance on US Arms Imports: SIPRI Data”, in *Defense News*, 9 March 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/03/09/european-nato-nations-reduce-reliance-on-us-arms-imports-sipri-data>; Nahm, Jonas, “Europe's Hidden Trade Advantage”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 14 September 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135509>.

¹⁴ European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of 14 September 2022 on Contestable and Fair Markets in the Digital Sector (Digital Markets Act)*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/1925/oj/eng>; and *Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act)*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng>.

¹⁵ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁶ US Department of State, *Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks, Athens*, 7 October 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesman/2026/10/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks>.

¹⁷ Samson, Samuel D., “The Indispensable Civilizational Alliance”, in *The American Mind Salvos*, 1 July 2026, <https://americanmind.org/?p=22761>.



The significance of the transatlantic relationship for the new right is not strategic but political

may have been immensely damaging to European peoples but did not affect what the new right portrays as their common civilisational traits: their history and above all their Christian and ethnic homogeneity. But such nostalgia is coloured with bitterness as Europe is also an object of deep scorn amongst national conservatives, who contend that it has turned its back on its civilisational background, opening its borders and pursuing the cosmopolitan project of a partly supranational and technocratically led EU.¹⁸ This is the ideological source for the support for “patriotic” forces in Europe that the NSS has elevated to doctrine.

The dismantling of the EU, or at least its reduction to irrelevance, would be an event of great international consequence. But while Trump and other power-obsessed members of his coalition may view such an outcome as cementing America’s clout across the Atlantic, this is not necessarily true for the new right. Aside from a certain fascination for US hegemony over the Western hemisphere, power politics is not the main lens through which it looks at the United States’ role in the West and the world at large.¹⁹ For the new right, the preservation of Western civilisation does not hinge on a grand foreign policy design, but on the protection of jobs and industry and the sealing of borders, an approach it applies to the United States but considers vital for European countries too. Long-term binding commitments and military interventions abroad are generally regarded with suspicion, not least because of their heavy impact on public finances and debt.

The significance of the transatlantic relationship for the new right is thus not strategic but political. The focus is on engendering convergence on political battles to be fought mostly at home against migrants, woke culture and globalist and technocratic elites.²⁰ At play here is less a foreign policy platform than the need to create a transnational infrastructure through which nationalist forces on both sides of the Atlantic help one another advance their ideological agendas by winning and retaining power.

4. RIGHT-WING CROSS-POLLINATION

Europe’s far right shares most of the cultural and political battles waged by the US new right as well as the civilisational framing of the

¹⁸ White House, *Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference*, 14 February 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/key-speeches-volume-ii-jd-vance-msc-2025>.

¹⁹ Drolet, Jean-François, “Populist Realism, Civilizationalism, and the Right: On the Intellectual History of Contemporary US Foreign Policy”, in *Review of International Studies*, 3 August 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052610206X>.

²⁰ Schuette, Leonard A., “The New Right’s Grand Strategy after Trump”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135470>.



Europe's far right shares most of the cultural and political battles waged by the US new right

West underlying them. In fact, no section of the political spectrum has shown more dynamism and transatlantic cross-pollination than the right end of it. Reciprocal influence has been built over the years through party-to-party links but also through intensified ties amongst think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation or the America First Policy Institute in the United States, Hungary's Danube and Mathias Corvinus institutes or Poland's Ordo Iuris.²¹ Such networks provide visiting fellowships, platforms for exchanges among right-wing politicians, and support for highly visible events, including the Conservative Political Action Committee events in Budapest. This infrastructure is critical to expanding the reach of the identity-based nativism espoused by the right and to giving it heavier intellectual weight.²²

The shared ideological framework goes hand in hand with a sustained assault on mainstream, largely pro-EU political parties, institutions and media. Culture-war issues, particularly those concerning the traditional family and deep hostility towards Islam, are largely a corollary of this broader worldview. Political mobilisation is built around a narrative of siege: far-right forces portray themselves as under attack from the political, media and institutional mainstream, just as European nations and the United States are portrayed as having been captured by globalist elites seeking to erode Western cultural identity. Digital platforms – most notably X, which under Elon Musk's ownership has become a main conduit for right-wing voices²³ – enable direct, largely unmediated communication without the editorial filters and fact-checking associated with mainstream media. This allows far-right leaders to present themselves as forces capable of disrupting established elites as well as agents of national renewal and state transformation. An undercurrent of authoritarian tendencies has sprung out of this, which in some cases have resulted in constraints on media pluralism and judicial independence. The illiberal practices pioneered by Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2010-26) and Poland under the Law and Justice Party (2015-23) have become a point of reference in both America and Europe in this respect.²⁴

²¹ Besch, Sophia and Tara Varma, "Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship", in *Survival*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April-May 2025), p. 7-38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2481768>; Balfour, Rosa et al., "The European Radical Right in the Age of Trump 2.0", in *Carnegie Papers*, September 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/research/2025/09/the-european-radical-right-in-the-age-of-trump-20>.

²² Buzogány, Aron and Mihai Varga, "Western Civilisation's Eastern Defenders. Transnational Right-Wing Networks from Ideas to Action", in *European Politics and Society*, 17 February 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2026.2619610>.

²³ Torreblanca, José Ignacio, "Musk's War on European Democracy: How to Open Up X and Fight Back", in *ECFR Policy Alerts*, 12 June 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=155883>.

²⁴ Buzogány, Aron and Mihai Varga, "Western Civilisation's Eastern Defenders", cit.



Thanks to Trump, the US new right has helped bring previously taboo ideas, such as the notion of remigration, into mainstream political debate

The transatlantic dimension is central to this process. It acts as a multiplier of ideas, political themes and strategies that are debated before a wider audience and, particularly in the United States, within a political environment with considerable experience in electoral and mobilisation strategies. This contributes to the intellectual and strategic dynamism of far-right movements. Furthermore, transatlantic interaction provides a source of mutual legitimisation: political forces can point to similar concerns and narratives in other Western countries as evidence that their own positions reflect broader Western anxieties rather than national peculiarities.

Mutual legitimisation is naturally strengthened when these forces win elections. In this regard, the importance of Trump's return to power is impossible to exaggerate, irrespective of his actual policies. Thanks to Trump, the US new right has helped bring previously taboo ideas, such as the notion of remigration, into mainstream political debate, forcing established parties to confront concepts and practices from a defensive position as the social stigma surrounding them has weakened. This explains why Trump's deep unpopularity in Europe has not resulted in a surge for liberal-leaning and pro-EU forces, even though it has compelled right-wing leaders in France, Italy and Germany to distance themselves from him. For the far-right, Trump ultimately matters less for his foreign policy than as a conduit for an ideological agenda that is meant to outlive him.

5. A DESTRAATEGISED ALLIANCE

Notably, a civilisational alliance does not presuppose automatic convergence on strategic threats, which creates fundamental tensions. The question of whether Russia should be confronted or accommodated, for instance, looks very different from the perspective of nationalist forces in Poland or the Baltic states than it does from that of the far right in France, Germany or Italy. Likewise, policies aimed at protecting national industries and jobs can harm other European countries when pursued in purely nationalist terms. European governments, including far-right forces, have already encountered this tension when confronted with the Trump administration's tariff policies and its challenge to Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland. US nationalists may believe that America's sheer power makes it possible for a right-wing US president to sustain such contradictions. While European far-right forces do not enjoy the same luxury, they have so far focused primarily on gaining or retaining power rather than developing a strategic vision for their countries' foreign policies and relations with the United States.

By intention or default, American and European far-right forces envisage a highly politicised and destrategised transatlantic relationship. Despite its inherent contradictions, a transatlantic



At the left end of the US political spectrum, Europe is something of a moving target

coalition of nationalists can hold together on the basis of ideological convergence and the shared priority of winning and preserving political power to advance that ideology. This is not sustainable indefinitely, but the reckoning has so far been postponed – and is likely to remain so as long as political incentives allow it. One helping factor in this regard is that the non-mainstream left has not produced a comparable transatlantic alternative to the old liberal consensus.

6. LEFT-WING UNCERTAINTIES

At the left end of the US political spectrum, Europe is something of a moving target. The generally affordable healthcare and education systems of western Europe are held in high regard and Scandinavian countries are at times construed as the gold standard of a viable welfare state.²⁵ Nor do progressives show pronounced hostility towards Europe's integration project. While no fans of technocratic governance, they tend to see the danger of sovereignty erosion as originating elsewhere, namely the ever-more symbiotic relationship of illiberal forces with private capital, most notably the 'oligarchs' in the tech sector.²⁶ In this respect, the US left very much sympathises with the EU's efforts to regulate digital markets and corporations, and broadly aligns with the – arguably declining – energy transition agenda of the EU.²⁷ The latter's rhetorical support for multilateralism and international law also fits with progressive views that war and hegemonic coercion are illegitimate instruments of foreign policy.

Because they associate all of this with the Trump administration, left progressives see Europe through a political lens as a natural partner. However, they have not engaged in a conceptual re-articulation of Europe's role in the United States' wider international relationships that goes beyond the conventional Atlanticism of a Joe Biden. Perhaps more importantly, the left lacks the transnational dimension of cross-pollination and institutional structuring that has instead emerged on the right.

This partly reflects the still embryonic state of progressive thinking on the strategic relevance of transatlantic relations. It also reflects the absence of a counterpart for the American left comparable to the European right's role as a partner and interlocutor for American conservatism. The European far left is much narrower and has

²⁵ Moody, Chris, "Bernie Sanders' American Dream Is in Denmark", in CNN, 17 February 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/17/politics/bernie-sanders-2016-denmark-democratic-socialism>.

²⁶ Klein, Naomi and Astra Taylor, *End Times Fascism. And the Fight for the Living World*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2026.

²⁷ Carlock, Greg with Emily Mangan, *A Green New Deal. A Progressive Vision for Environmental Sustainability and Economic Stability*, Data for Progress, September 2018, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/green-new-deal-report>.



much less political momentum than the US progressive movement. In addition, large sections of it have neither shed their deep-rooted mistrust of the United States nor felt the need to reinterpret the transatlantic relationship in light of new geopolitical realities, including an openly aggressive and right-wing authoritarian regime in Moscow. Hence, it has been largely absent from relevant debates about transatlantic relations, which has left mainstream forces as the only viable alternative to the mounting right.

7. A RE-OPENED ATLANTICIST-EUROPEANIST DEBATE

As in the United States, in Europe too the transatlantic relationship has for decades relied on widespread support across political mainstream forces. There have surely been plenty of disagreements over whether Europe should carve out a greater role for itself in global affairs through a more integrated EU. But this Europeanist-Atlanticist debate has unfolded more in political statements and expert commentary than in the everyday management of the foreign and defence policies of European countries, even those keener on European autonomy such as France.²⁸ In the post-Cold War era, no European government has actively pursued transatlantic detachment, not even during the difficult years of the George W. Bush and first Trump Administrations. Despite the occasional noise, the debate seemed to have been settled in favour of Atlanticists from the start.

Trump's second term has changed the picture. His hostile policies – from tariffs to the termination of direct military transfers to Ukraine, territorial claims to Greenland and uncertain commitment to NATO – have brought the Atlanticist-Europeanist cleavage into sharper focus. The Atlanticists still hold the edge, but on a more tenuous basis. Yet the distance between the two parties has, perhaps counter-intuitively, reduced rather than widened. To understand how this has occurred, one can look at the multifaceted response to the Trump challenge mounted by Europeans.

One response – largely a continuation of Europe's approach during Trump's first term in the White House – has been damage limitation through flattery, cost absorption and appeasement.²⁹ EU leaders mostly refrained from openly criticising Trump for as long as they could, accepted an unequal tariff deal, and agreed to military spending levels that for most of them are impossibly high

Trump's hostile policies have brought the Atlanticist-Europeanist cleavage into sharper focus

²⁸ French Presidency, "Europeans Are Investing More and More and Taking More and More Action to Defend Themselves." - President, 8 July 2026, <https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/europeans-are-investing-more-and-more-and-taking-more-and-more-action-defend-themselves-president>.

²⁹ Alcaro, Riccardo, "Europe's Strategic-imagination Deficit", in *Survival*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (August-September 2026), p. 59-65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2704389>.



Playing along with Trump has yielded limited or no returns

and politically damaging.³⁰ A second response has involved stronger intra-European coordination in ad hoc formats. European leaders' diplomatic initiatives to restore some trust between Trump and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky is one example.³¹ Another is the Franco-British initiative for a coalition of willing European states to deploy a reassurance force in Ukraine to reassure Washington of their strong resolve to take on more responsibility for continental security.³² The Nordic-Baltic effort to systematically coordinate on defence as well as civilian and economic resilience is another instance in which greater preparedness is meant to incentivise US re-engagement.³³ The third European response has been a deliberate push by the EU to reduce structural vulnerabilities to foreign pressure in such areas as defence (including through such tools as the SAFE funding instrument), trade via new trade deals, and technology with the launch of a new 'sovereignty package'.³⁴

Playing along with Trump (the first type of response) has yielded limited or no returns because it failed to take account of the negotiating style of the US president, who regularly doubles down on his demands when faced with unforced concessions.³⁵ Investing in EU integration (the third response) invariably meets with the immense practical difficulties that a hybrid supranational-intergovernmental entity faces in generating consensus and resources to reduce long-standing structural dependencies. Increased cooperation within ad hoc European groups, the second response, has been more effective because it addresses the short-term need to connect Europe's greater proactiveness and stronger capabilities with an enduring framework of cooperation with the United States in NATO and other platforms. It is worth underlining that this latter course of action also reflects the political room for manoeuvre that Europe's mainstream political forces see for themselves. Trump's profound unpopularity in Europe

³⁰ Berg, Aslak, "Three Hard Lessons for European Trade", in *CER Insights*, 10 November 2025, <https://www.cer.eu/node/11777>; Wakin, Michael, "What Gives? The Painful Realities Europe Faces After NATO's Pledge to Increase Military Spending", in *Oxford Political Review*, 17 July 2025, <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2025/07/17/what-gives-the-painful-realities-europe-faces-after-natos-pledge-to-increase-military-spending>.

³¹ Birnbaum, Michael et al., "How Ukraine's Allies Helped Zelensky Recover His Standing with Trump", in *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/07/18/trump-zelensky-ukraine-weapons-putin>.

³² Ebert, Niklas and Claudia Major (eds), "Coalition of the Willing", in *GMF Insights*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/24340>.

³³ Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (Nordic-Baltic 8)*, <https://vm.ee/en/NB8>.

³⁴ European Commission DG for Defence Industry and Space website: *SAFE: Security Action for Europe*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/node/832_en; European Commission DG for Communications Networks website: *Strengthening Europe's Tech Sovereignty*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/node/16669>.

³⁵ Matthijs, Matthias and Nathalie Tocci, "How Europe Lost", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (January/February 2026), p. 154-165, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1134219>.



Europe's mainstream political forces have not been entirely at a loss in responding to the Trump challenge

makes acquiescence politically damaging, as European leaders from British former Prime Minister Keir Starmer to Italy's Giorgia Meloni, the targets of Trump's broadsides despite their appeasement-oriented approach, have learned firsthand.³⁶ At the same time, the thrust for greater European integration, however compelling its strategic rationale, gives Europe's nationalist right a powerful mobilising message to which mainstream forces have so far struggled to offer a convincing alternative.

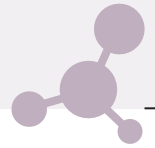
In conclusion, Europe's mainstream political forces have not been entirely at a loss in responding to the Trump challenge. EU leaders have combined ad hoc forms of cooperation with longer-term EU-wide initiatives with the dual goal of avoiding a dangerous rupture in the transatlantic relationship and strengthening their fall-back options in case that occurs. In this sense, the Trump challenge has brought the two sides of the Europeanist-Atlanticist debate to better appreciate each other's arguments. However, the challenge from the US new right has been harder to address because of the concomitant and mutually reinforcing rise of European right-wing nationalists.

8. THE CLASH BETWEEN REALITY AND IDEOLOGY

The combination of highly polarised domestic contexts with geopolitical shifts, the development and diffusion of disruptive technologies and the geoeconomic competition for their supply chains makes it hard to envisage the future of transatlantic relations. Nonetheless, the analytical compass can be oriented towards a fundamental principle of international affairs, namely that foreign policy results from the way in which political actors translate structural factors into state preferences.

The bite of competitive geopolitics may force domestic politics to adapt, notwithstanding pressing nationalist expectations of change. Future US leaders will have strong incentives to reinvest in alliances and partnerships to manage relations with rival powers, irrespective of whether they want to maintain global primacy or seek a new balance of power. The strengthening of individual European states' military capabilities is, in this respect, crucial to countering Russia's aggressive revisionism. However, it is not enough to ease the US burden and place European security on a solid footing. European countries need to generate resources and integrate defence capacities to a degree far exceeding anything achievable through bilateral ties

³⁶ Rigby, Beth, "Trump's Chagos Broadside Leaves Starmer Walking an Even Thinner Tightrope", in *Sky News*, 22 January 2026, <https://news.sky.com/story/trumps-chagos-broadside-leaves-starmer-walking-an-even-thinner-tightrope-13496652>; Alcaro, Riccardo, "Giorgia Meloni Clung to Her Relationship with Trump – Now It's Starting to Look Like a Liability", in *The Guardian*, 28 April 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/x4q78n>.



**Domestic politics
can bite just as hard
as geopolitics –
especially in major
powers**

with Washington, while also investing in non-military capabilities for civilian preparedness and democratic resilience. A similar logic applies to the geoeconomic competition with China, as Europe needs structural cohesion to sustain a common front with the United States and reduce its exposure to pressure from Beijing.

The dual framework of NATO and intra-European ad hoc cooperation formats can provide strategic coordination, operational cooperation, and flexibility in responding to contingencies in Europe. Ad hoc formats can also facilitate cooperation on economic security issues. But the Europeans need the greater financial and institutional depth that a deeper concentration and management of resources within the EU can provide. In this scenario, the transatlantic relationship would unfold on multiple levels – bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral within NATO and at the EU-US level – as warranted by the practical needs of renewed strategic convergence. Greater military, financial and institutional capacities would eventually lend Europe more weight and ultimately autonomy but would not alter the asymmetric nature of the relationship. It would reinforce the latter's interdependent character, whereby the United States would rely more on Europe than it does currently.

The political context on both shores of the Atlantic is fluid enough to make it plausible that geopolitical imperatives will prevail over the ideological priorities of parties in power. The experience of Prime Minister Meloni in Italy, who has followed a mainstream foreign policy course and in fact stood out for her support for Ukraine, eloquently attests to this being a real possibility. Ruling parties would still shape specific choices, especially concerning the degree of EU integration, but they would not change the overall direction of a reconstituted alliance.

Still, this is far from a given. Domestic politics can bite just as hard as geopolitics – especially in major powers. This obviously holds true for the United States if future US administrations continue to follow the confrontational line of the current one. But it is equally possible that a nationalist-run France or a German government heavily influenced by the hard-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) could fracture or at least severely weaken the EU. The spectre of a destrategised transatlantic relationship would thus become all too real, with EU member states regaining sovereign powers from Brussels only to end up more vulnerable and consequently more susceptible to intra-EU infighting. The transatlantic relationship could turn into a hub-and-spoke system of dependence on Washington or, alternatively, Europe could end up becoming an arena of competition for, and resource extraction by, larger powers.

A word of caution is needed before concluding. The rise of nationalist forces and the weakness of European leftist parties create the impression that the nativist civilisational framework of the far-



right is the only alternative to the liberal-internationalist mix of continuity and adaptation. However, one lesson of the last decade of transatlantic politics is that new political demands and leaderships can emerge and establish themselves relatively quickly, including outside the nationalist camp or in opposition to it. The dichotomy between liberal continuity and nationalist disruption seems like the only game in town today. Tomorrow might be different.



References

- Albert, Victoria, "Sen. Lindsey Graham Urges Greenland Deal", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 January 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/greenland-trump-tariffs-trade-eu>
- Alcaro, Riccardo, "Europe's Strategic-imagination Deficit", in *Survival*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (August-September 2026), p. 59-65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2704389>
- Alcaro, Riccardo, "Giorgia Meloni Clung to Her Relationship with Trump – Now It's Starting to Look Like a Liability", in *The Guardian*, 28 April 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/x4q78n>
- Ambrose, Jillian and Kalyeena Makortoff, "Donald Trump Tells EU to Buy More US Oil and Gas or Face Tariffs", in *The Guardian*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xx6qkj>
- Balfour, Rosa et al., "The European Radical Right in the Age of Trump 2.0", in *Carnegie Papers*, September 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/research/2025/09/the-european-radical-right-in-the-age-of-trump-20>
- Bednarczyk, Philip et al., "The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act: What Europeans Need to Know", in *GMF Insights*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/24910>
- Berg, Aslak, "Three Hard Lessons for European Trade", in *CER Insights*, 10 November 2025, <https://www.cer.eu/node/11777>
- Bergmann, Max, "Embrace the Union. A New Progressive Approach for Reviving the Trans-Atlantic Alliance", in *Center for American Progress Reports*, October 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=46243>
- Besch, Sophia and Tara Varma, "Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship", in *Survival*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April-May 2025), p. 7-38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2481768>
- Birnbaum, Michael et al., "How Ukraine's Allies Helped Zelensky Recover His Standing with Trump", in *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/07/18/trump-zelensky-ukraine-weapons-putin>
- Brands, Hal, "The Renegade Order", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (March/April 2025), p. 22-35, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1132714>
- Brown, Elliot, "Trump Family Rakes in Cash from Middle East Deals", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 July 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-family-rakes-in-cash-from-middle-east-deals-b91a9927>
- Buzogány, Aron and Mihai Varga, "Western Civilisation's Eastern Defenders. Transnational Right-Wing Networks from Ideas to Action", in *European Politics and Society*, 17 February 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/023745118.2026.2619610>
- Carlock, Greg with Emily Mangan, *A Green New Deal. A Progressive Vision for Environmental Sustainability and Economic Stability*, Data for Progress, September 2018, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/green-new-deal-report>
- Drolet, Jean-François, "Populist Realism, Civilizationalism, and the Right: On the Intellectual History of Contemporary US Foreign Policy", in *Review of International Studies*, 3 August 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052610206X>
- Ebert, Niklas and Claudia Major (eds), "Coalition of the Willing", in *GMF Insights*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/24340>
- European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of 14 September 2022 on Contestable and Fair Markets in the Digital Sector (Digital Markets Act)*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/1925/oj/eng>
- European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act)*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng>
- Field, Laura K., *Furious Minds. The Making of the MAGA New Right*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2025
- French Presidency, "Europeans Are Investing More and More and Taking More and More Action to Defend Themselves." - President, 8 July 2026, <https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/europeans-are-investing-more-and-more-and-taking-more-and-more-action-defend-themselves-president>
- Kavanagh, Jennifer and Justin Logan, "Leave Europe to the Europeans", in *Foreign Affairs*, 28 August 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135477>
- Klein, Naomi and Astra Taylor, *End Times Fascism. And the Fight for the Living World*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2026
- Matthijs, Matthias and Nathalie Tocci, "How Europe Lost", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (January/February 2026), p. 154-165, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1134219>
- Moody, Chris, "Bernie Sanders' American Dream Is in Denmark", in *CNN*, 17 February 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/17/politics/bernie-sanders-2016-denmark-democratic-socialism>



- Nahm, Jonas, "Europe's Hidden Trade Advantage", in *Foreign Affairs*, 14 September 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135509>
- Protest, Ben et al., "Trump Pulled in at Least \$2 Billion after Returning to the White House", in *The New York Times*, 30 June 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/30/us/politics/trump-financial-disclosure-crypto-windfall.html>
- Rigby, Beth, "Trump's Chagos Broadside Leaves Starmer Walking an Even Thinner Tightrope", in *Sky News*, 22 January 2026, <https://news.sky.com/story/trumps-chagos-broadside-leaves-starmer-walking-an-even-thinner-tightrope-13496652>
- Rutenberg, Rudy, "European NATO Nations Reduce Reliance on US Arms Imports: SIPRI Data", in *Defense News*, 9 March 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/03/09/european-nato-nations-reduce-reliance-on-us-arms-imports-sipri-data>
- Samson, Samuel D., "The Indispensable Civilizational Alliance", in *The American Mind* *Salvos*, 1 July 2026, <https://americanmind.org/?p=22761>
- Schuetz, Leonard A., "The New Right's Grand Strategy after Trump", in *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1135470>
- Schwartzkopf, Frances, "US Ready to 'Take Any Actions Necessary' to Fight EU ESG Rules", in *Bloomberg*, 14 August 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-08-14/us-revives-pressure-on-europe-to-relax-its-corporate-esg-rules>
- Slattery, Gram et al., "US Officials Object to European Push to Buy Weapons Locally", in *Reuters*, 2 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-officials-object-european-push-buy-weapons-locally-2025-04-02>
- Smeltz, Dina, "Strong Bipartisan Support for NATO Ahead of 2026 Summit", in *Chicago Council on Global Affairs Public Opinion Surveys*, 30 June 2026, <https://globalaffairs.org/node/44238>
- Sokol, Karen, "The North Atlantic Treaty: U.S. Legal Obligations and Congressional Authorities", in *CRS Legal Sidebars*, No. LSB11256 (6 January 2025), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/LSB11256.html>
- Steakin, Will, "Trump's Businesses Received Millions from Foreign Entities during His Presidency, House Report Says", in *ABC News*, 4 January 2024, <https://abcnews.com/US/story?id=106106433>
- Torreblanca, José Ignacio, "Musk's War on European Democracy: How to Open Up X and Fight Back", in *ECFR Policy Alerts*, 12 June 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=155883>
- Trofimov, Yaroslav, "The Fault Lines in the Autocratic Axis", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/the-fault-lines-in-the-autocratic-axis-6b0af76e>
- US Department of State, *Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks*, Athens, 7 October 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesman/2026/10/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks>
- Volpicelli, Gian et al., "Trump Administration Pressures Europe to Ditch AI Rulebook", in *Bloomberg*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-25/trump-administration-pressure-europe-to-reject-ai-rulebook>
- Wakin, Michael, "What Gives? The Painful Realities Europe Faces After NATO's Pledge to Increase Military Spending", in *Oxford Political Review*, 17 July 2025, <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2025/07/17/what-gives-the-painful-realities-europe-faces-after-natos-pledge-to-increase-military-spending>
- White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>
- White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>
- White House, *Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference*, 19 February 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference>
- White House, *Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference*, 14 February 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/key-speeches-volume-ii-jd-vance-msc-2025>

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 6976831
www.iai.it



Latest IAI Papers

Editor: **Lorenzo Bianchi** (l.bianchi@iai.it)

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-417-0 | 10.82088/IAIp2616

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 26 16 | Riccardo Alcaro, <i>Politics over Geopolitics: The Domestic Roots of Transatlantic Relations</i> |
| 26 15it | Gruppo di lavoro sulla Politica industriale, <i>Una politica industriale per l'autonomia strategica europea</i> |
| 26 15 | Working Group on Industrial Policy, <i>A European Industrial Policy for Strategic Autonomy</i> |
| 26 14 | Rosaria Puglisi, <i>The Security Risks of State Capture: Georgia's Cautionary Tale</i> |
| 26 13 | Cinzia Alcidi, <i>When the Rules No Longer Rule: The EU and Canada's Responses to Trump's Tariffs</i> |
| 26 12 | Franco Passacantando, <i>Building a Competitive European Market for Stablecoins</i> |
| 26 11 | Sarah Logan, <i>Mining in DRC and Ghana: A Legal Overview</i> |
| 26 10 | Pietro Rinaldi, Filippo Simonelli and Darlington Tshuma, <i>Beyond Extraction: Aligning European and African Interests to Unlock the Full Potential of the Lobito Corridor</i> |
| 26 09 | Polina Sinovets and Adérito Vicente, <i>Securing Ukraine after the War: Nuclear Deterrence and Four Models of Security Guarantees</i> |
| 26 08 | Margherita Bianchi and Pier Paolo Raimondi, <i>Trading Green: How the EU Can Align Climate and Trade in a Fractured World</i> |