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Trump 2.0 and Europe: Challenges in a Changing World Order[4]

This study examines the evolution of Donald Trump's second-term foreign policy up to November 2025, concluding with the publication of the U.S. National Security Strategy. It analyses the strategic priorities, policy instruments, and underlying assumptions shaping U.S. external action during this period, situating them within an increasingly fragmented global order. The study assesses the implications of these developments for Europe, particularly in the areas of transatlantic relations, security commitments, and debates on strategic autonomy. By analysing key policy decisions and official strategic documents, the paper offers insights into patterns of continuity and change in U.S. foreign policy and their consequences for Europe's role in the international system.

Keywords: *Trump, U.S. foreign policy, EU, sphere of influence politics, global order*

Introduction

The Munich Security Conference, held between 14–16 February 2025, proved to be a sobering moment for Europe. The speech delivered by U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance made clear that Donald Trump's second presidential term sets a fundamentally new direction for American foreign policy, one that affects the entire framework of transatlantic cooperation.[5] Tensions were fuelled by the sharply critical tone adopted toward European leaders, particularly regarding alleged backsliding on democracy and freedom of speech. This created the impression that the United States was questioning its own allies, thereby weakening the credibility of Western norms and the rules-based international order. Decisions taken in the weeks and months following the conference confirmed that Washington had indeed ushered in a new era.

The first measures of the Trump administration in early 2025 appeared unusual – and often norm-breaking – to European allies. While the presidential decisions to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement and suspend WHO funding were not entirely

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[4] This study is an extended version of the analysis "The Impact of Trump 2.0 on Europe's Position in the Transforming World Order" published in John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs, 2025/1. The full paper is available at: https://www.uni-nke.hu/document/en-jli-uni-nke-hu/JL%20Analyses%20on%20Global%20Affairs_2025%201.pdf

[5] Franke, Benedict ed.: *Munich Security Conference 2025. Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions*. Selected Key Speeches Vol. II. [online], Munich Security Conference, 2025. Source: securityconference.org [15.11.2025].

unexpected,[6] in the new context they signalled a clear departure from the multilateralist traditions that had guided U.S. policy since the Cold War.

Another source of friction was the issue of punitive tariffs, which culminated on 27 July in a trade agreement under which the EU – after internal debate – accepted that the United States would impose a 15% tariff on certain European products. According to Washington, the imbalances in alliance financing required correction, although the measure in practice modified the rules of global trade.[7]

Further tensions arose from the U.S. demand that NATO member states allocate at least 5% of their GDP to defence spending. Many European countries struggled to even meet the existing 2% target, making the proposed increase a significant financial burden.[8] The radical requirement was ultimately accepted at the NATO summit on 24–25 June,[9] indicating a reordering of the alliance's priorities and a further shift in asymmetry in favour of the United States.

A major surprise came when the United States sought at times to initiate Russia–Ukraine peace talks without involving Europe or Ukraine. This created the impression that Washington was willing to consider great-power bargains even at the expense of its allies.[10] This perception was reinforced by provocative moves such as the openly stated American intention to acquire Greenland, which some European interpretations saw as calling into question the respect for sovereignty.[11]

The deterioration of U.S.–EU relations was further exacerbated by the publication of the U.S. National Security Strategy, which marked a notable departure from previous documents. Rather than focusing primarily on traditional U.S. challengers, the strategy placed unprecedented emphasis on the European Union as a source of economic and strategic concern, contributing to a reframing of the EU within U.S. strategic discourse.[12]

Taken together, these measures and gestures indicate that the new direction in U.S. foreign policy poses a systemic challenge for Europe. The redefinition of transatlantic loyalty, the fragmentation of positions within the EU, the growing uncertainty surrounding future security guarantees, and the United States' increasingly frequent criticism of democratic norms all contribute to the erosion of trust. The transatlantic treaty framework is under strain not seen since the Cold War, casting uncertainty over the future of the entire European security architecture.

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6 Lazarou, Elena – Leclerc, Gabija: *US Withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and from the WHO*. [online], European Parliamentary Research Service, 02.2025. Source: europarl.europa.eu [22.12.2025].

7 European Commission: *The EU-US Trade Deal: Restoring Stability and Predictability*. [online], European Commission, s. a. Source: commission.europa.eu [05.12.2025].

8 World Economic Forum: *The Price of Security: Europe is Set Up for a Serious Challenge*. [online], 03.07.2025. Source: World Economic Forum [05.12.2025].

9 NATO: *The Hague Summit Declaration*. [online], 25.06.2025. Source: nato.int [21.12.2025].

10 Conesa, Elsa – Gatinois, Claire – Jacqué, Philippe: War in Ukraine: *Europe Finds Itself Sidelined and Humiliated by the Trump Administration*. [online], Le Monde, 05.12.2025. Source: lemonde.fr [05.12.2025].

11 European Parliament: *Greenland: Caught in the Arctic Geopolitical Contest*. [online], European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 07.10.2025. Source: europarl.europa.eu [05.12.2025].

12 The White House: *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. [online], The White House, 11.2025a. Source: whitehouse.gov [20.12.2025].

The overlapping crises and paradigm-shifting tendencies outlined in the introduction justify a deeper analysis of the situation. The central questions of this study are: What can we infer from the foreign policy steps taken in the first year of Donald Trump's second term? What kind of world order is emerging? How is the U.S.–European bilateral relationship being transformed, and what role can the EU play in the evolving global system?

The research is based on qualitative analysis with particular focus on Europe and transatlantic relations. The study first presents the context of the period under examination, highlighting the initial measures of the Trump administration. It then analyses the characteristics of the new American foreign policy through the lenses of transactional approaches, internal strengthening, the rethinking of alliance systems, and pragmatic and securitised strategies. Finally, the research concentrates on global effects, the transforming world order, and multipolar power dynamics, followed by a detailed examination of the two main dimensions of transatlantic relations: economic cooperation and security relations, especially in light of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The conclusions integrate these analyses, assessing the Trump administration's impact on Europe, the transformation of the transatlantic alliance, and the potential strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy.

The nature of the new American foreign policy

Although Donald Trump's relationship with the outside world is a constant topic on the news, even experts differ on the essence of Trumpian foreign policy. In the public discourse terms such as "isolationist" and "nationalist-populist" appear frequently yet their validity is debatable.[13] The term "transactionalist" is a popular description of Trumpian foreign policy, however, it is also perhaps the most impractical: firstly, *all* actors in international politics seek advantageous agreements typically on a *quid quo pro* basis, and secondly, the desire for deals in itself reveals nothing about why and how a given actor formulates its foreign policy objectives. Distinctly American terms also seem insufficient to highlight the Trumpian foreign policy rationale: the President's emphasis on making new business deals that are more favourable to the United States echoes the *Dollar diplomacy* from the turn of the 19th and 20th century, however, the latter focused on overseas expansion particularly regarding Latin America and the Far East, whereas the Trump administration has launched an across-the-board assault on the international trading system and some of its deals stress inward rather than outward-oriented investments. Similarly, the more assertive American engagement in the world resembles the *big stick policy* of the early 20th century, however, while this translates into speaking softly in diplomacy while carrying arms, the Trumpian policy seems to follow only the latter part of this formula. Apparently, the definition problem is not limited to the public and the academic discourse: even the

[13] Isolationism is a recurring theme in U.S. foreign policy; however, the United States has never truly been "isolated" from a trade perspective, only selective in choosing its political and military allies. In recent decades, Washington has been labelled "isolationist" typically by Europeans who resent the U.S. focusing more on other regions. A similar argument can be made about the "nationalist-populist" label: the significance of national identity and majority democracy is traditionally a larger and more powerful force in European parliamentary democracies than in the American federal republic.

Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy admits that the foreign policy of "America First" is difficult to describe, as it is "pragmatic without being 'pragmatist', realistic without being 'realist', principled without being 'idealistic', muscular without being 'hawkish', and restrained without being 'dovish'."[14]

Thus, Donald Trump's foreign policy should be examined from a different perspective, namely by reviewing why and how the United States chose the path of "America First". By 2024, American society was not only familiar but increasingly resonating with Trump's foreign policy views.[15] In fact, an increasing number of Americans felt that their country had been heading in the wrong direction for decades.[16] The once-dominant liberal internationalist perspective faced mounting criticism, with conservative,[17] progressive,[18] and left-wing[19] alternatives emerging since the late 2000s. Although these alternatives differ in many respects, they share a common critique: the influence of the so-called "establishment" – comprising intellectual and economic elites – is disproportionately large and potentially harmful to American foreign policy. This feeling of discontent became tangible on both sides of the political aisle: in 2016 and 2020, Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate unsettled the party establishment, just as Bernie Sanders, a Democrat who challenged numerous foreign policy fundamentals, nearly secured his party's nomination on both occasions. In other words, the often-noted polarisation in American politics does not only refer to the diminishing of bipartisanship, but also to the rise of party factions whereby populists on the left and the right alike clash with moderates (and sometimes with each other).

The leading critic of liberal internationalism has been Donald Trump. As early as 1987, he argued that certain trade partnerships and defence alliances were not beneficial for Americans,[20] as some countries were taking advantage of the liberal institutions established by the United States. Trump pinpointed a problem that international relations scholar Michael Doyle had previously identified: the liberal world order – built on democracy, international organisations, and free trade – could collapse if the United States begins to question its hegemonic role of "global policeman" or if the system undergoes a crisis. The latter materialised in the 2008 financial recession, and it is no coincidence that thoughts of U.S. retrenchment began to emerge in its aftermath.[21] The economic downturn exposed that globalisation had created domestic losers in America, the main driver of globalisation: for the sake of cost efficiency, production chains had

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[14] The White House 2025a: 8.

[15] Stokes, Bruce: *The Role of Foreign Policy in the 2024 US Election*. [online], German Marshall Fund of the United States, 20.02.2024. Source: gmfus.org [20.12.2025].

[16] YouGov: *Direction of the United States*. [online], YouGov, 18.02.2025. Source: today.yougov.com [22.02.2025].

[17] Nau, Henry R.: *Conservative Internationalism*. [online], Hoover Institution, 30.07.2008. Source: hoover.org [20.12.2025].

[18] Jackson, Van (2022): Left of Liberal Internationalism: Grand Strategies within Progressive Foreign Policy Thought. *Security Studies,* 31(4), 553–592.

[19] Walzer, Michael: *A Foreign Policy for the Left*. [online], Dissent, Spring 2024. Source: dissentmagazine.org [22.02.2025].

[20] CNN: *Donald Trump: "I Don't Want to be President" – Entire 1987 CNN Interview (Larry King Live)*. YouTube, 10.05.2016. [online], Source: youtube.com [22.02.2025].

[21] In 2008, Barack Obama campaigned under the slogan "change", which primarily meant that, instead of foreign military missions, Washington would focus on enhancing domestic infrastructure and access to health insurance.

been outsourced to such an extent that certain regions of the United States suffered from structural unemployment. A symbolic moment of the 2016 election was when Hillary Clinton referred to the victims of globalisation as "deplorables", a comment further encouraging many of them to vote for Trump. Later, Joe Biden learned from this mistake and promoted a foreign policy aimed at protecting the struggling middle class. Despite the Biden presidency's more favourable international perception, Washington abandoned efforts to negotiate classic free trade agreements (which focus on tariff reductions), as even the Congress started to advocate and provide protectionist legislation. Meanwhile, Trump solidified his dominance over the Republican Party – a feat that would have been impossible without significant social support.

What distinguishes Donald Trump from both his Republican and Democratic peers is his blunt critique of the excesses of the liberal world order. A key message of the first Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy was that the institutions of the liberal world order – particularly certain international organisations – had become corrupted over time. According to this argument, the infiltration of anti-Western and anti-American actors made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to assert its interests. At the time, this was a view primarily represented by hardline Republicans (including security hawks or "neoconservatives" and "nationalist" or "isolationist" factions), but today, it has become widespread across the American political right. While the outside world perceives the U.S. withdrawal from various organisations as Donald Trump's personal recklessness, these decisions are actually backed by a growing political support.[22] It is telling that in early 2025, Marco Rubio – who had been considered to be an internationalist and a critic of Trump – declared during his Senate confirmation hearing that Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis (i.e. the idea of liberal democracy's and market economy's global triumph) was not only "a fantasy" but a "dangerous delusion". Rubio, who secured unanimous Senate approval to become Secretary of State, argued that "the post-war global order is not just obsolete, it is now a weapon being used against us. [...] Eight decades later, we are once again called to create a free world out of the chaos."[23]

The first step in this process is destruction: Washington ruthlessly dismantles elements of the previous order that it no longer deems useful. Firstly, the Trump administration limits its attention to "core national interests" and a tiered geographic focus whereby Washington's concerns first and foremost relate to the Western Hemisphere and Asia – and only afterwards to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Although this specific order is not confirmed in the document, the first year of Trump's second term thus far has clearly revealed such a prioritisation. Secondly, the American foreign policy toolbox relies heavily on the leverage of hard power, or to be more precise, on persuasion through economic might (via trade and tariff policy) and political and military deterrence

[22] For instance, American funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees was already prohibited by an appropriations bill passed in the spring of 2024, just as it made funding for the UN Human Rights Council conditional. H.R.2882 – Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024. [online], Source: United States Congress 2024. Source: congress.gov [22.02.2025].

[23] *Opening Remarks by Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.* [online], U.S. Department of State, 15.01.2025. Source: state.gov [22.02.2025].

(via the securitisation of foreign relations). Although the 2025 National Security Strategy acknowledges the importance of soft power, again, the second Trump presidency's first year in office has proven this otherwise (inter alia through the personnel and budgetary cuts of USAID and the withdrawal from several international organisations).

The impact of the new U.S. foreign policy on the evolving world order

Even the Biden administration had to acknowledge that the decline of the post-Cold War liberal world order was irreversible.[24] While the official U.S. rhetoric continued to emphasise the rules-based international order, in practice, both the American foreign policy elite and global actors accepted that a return to the liberal world order was impossible. This was not primarily due to a decline in U.S. capabilities but rather the growing strength of competitors – above all, China – who benefited significantly from the advantages provided by the international system established by the United States. As a result of this assessment, the Biden administration pursued a foreign policy that sought to maintain U.S. leadership by sharing the costs of competition with China among its allies. Rather than reviving the previous multilateralism, the administration focused on strengthening regional alliances and strategic partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The reinforcement of alliances such as AUKUS and the Quad made it clear that the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy had shifted to addressing the strategic challenge posed by China.[25]

Biden's foreign policy steered the world order towards increased bloc formation – a kind of new Cold War under globalisation.[26] However, replicating the Cold War in a globalised world would be far more costly. Moreover, the United States could no longer provide public goods to its allies to the same extent as it did during the Cold War. While the U.S. military umbrella remained relatively credible (as evidenced by the Russian–Ukrainian war), the lack of economic incentives marked a significant difference from the Cold War era, when the U.S. was simultaneously the primary market and the centre of capital and technological dominance. U.S. economic strategy also took a protectionist turn: the Inflation Reduction Act and American industrial policy measures signalled that Washington was now prioritising its own economic and technological dominance over global economic integration.[27] This not only further eroded the classic elements of the liberal world order but also foreshadowed the long-term challenges of maintaining the Western unity. Overall, this period can be identified as a multipolar system, with two dominant poles primarily shaping international events. The main goal of Biden's foreign policy was to reinforce bipolarity between the U.S. and China, a relationship in which the

[24] Martonffy, Balázs – Nyström, John (2021): Az európai védelem integrációjának kihívásai. [online], *Külügyi Szemle,* (1), 43–59.

[25] Baranyi, Tamás Péter: The AUKUS Agreement from the Perspective of Anglophone Countries. [online], *KKI Elemzések*, 2021/61. Source: hiia.hu [18.02.2025].

[26] Hardy, Alfredo Toro (2022): *America's Two Cold Wars. From Hegemony to Decline?* Singapore: Springer Nature.

[27] Moutii, Mohamed: *Green Protectionism in Disguise: The Hidden Facets of the Inflation Reduction Act*. [online], IREF Europe, 03.04.2024. Source: en.irefeurope.org [17.02.2025].

U.S. leadership was ensured by a stable alliance system, even as it inadvertently strengthened the rapprochement between China and Russia.[28]

The concrete policy steps taken by the Trump administration – consistent with the logic later articulated in the U.S. National Security Strategy – aim to roll back core elements of the liberal world order, marking a dramatic shift in U.S. strategic orientation. Withdrawal from international organisations or a reduction in support for them would call into question the legitimacy of institutions originally established by the U.S., which once ensured its global leadership. Given the current power relations, the prospects for a new order do not seem realistic, while at the same time there are concerns about issues that cannot be resolved in the absence of commonly agreed rules.

Trump's new approach to American foreign policy is not merely a continuation of his predecessor's unilateralist, America-centred direction; it is based on an imperial logic with the following key characteristics:

- *Internal reinforcement:* The primary goal for the U.S. is to remain stronger than any potential challenger. This approach includes industrial development and maintaining technological leadership. The strategy focuses on building internal capacities, in contrast to the Biden administration's uncertain reliance on allies to share burdens. Closely linked to this is the strategy of reshoring industries, aimed at achieving economic independence and accelerating innovation. This also involves rethinking the transatlantic trade system and reducing trade deficits with the EU and China through tariffs.
- *A new approach to alliances:* Unlike the Biden administration, the Trump administration views alliances primarily as potential resource pools to be tapped. Allies receive protection, but in return, they must support the U.S. Nothing is provided as a public good; every benefit of alliance membership has a price, including the nuclear umbrella. A clear example of this is the proposal to increase defence spending of the NATO member states to 5% of GDP, effectively subsidising the American defence industry, given the limitations of European military capacities.
- *Pragmatic and securitised foreign policy:* American foreign policy is shifting from ideological principles to pragmatism. Since war weakens domestic capacities, the U.S. leadership avoids extensive military conflicts. Negotiation with all actors – even China – is part of this strategy, provided that a deal aligns with American interests. The introduction of drastic tariffs can cause economic turbulence, potentially jeopardising the grand plan for America's restoration. This explains the delay in implementing the announced 60% tariffs against China. In reality, tariffs are often not just trade or industrial policy tools but are used as national security leverage. Trump frequently invokes "national emergencies", particularly along the U.S. southern border, where the proposed 25% tariffs on Mexico (and Canada) were intended as punitive measures for what the U.S. perceived as insufficient efforts to curb cross-border human and fentanyl trafficking. Thus, securitisation and linkage politics become integral to this pragmatic approach: anything

[28] Eszterhai, Viktor (2022): The Russian–Chinese Axis in the Light of the War in Ukraine. *Külügyi Szemle,* 21(2), 43–66.

can be framed as a national security issue, and extraordinary measures can serve as bargaining chips across various domains.

- *Secure and defensible borders:* The new geopolitical guidelines aim to establish clear spheres of influence and defensible borders, following the principles of classical geopolitical strategies. In this context, regaining control over the Panama Canal and reinforcing strategic oversight of Greenland are rational steps.

The new Trump administration's foreign policy signals the strengthening of a multipolar world order, where each great power seeks to consolidate its own sphere of influence. It openly returns to a model of competing great powers, where the principle of self-help prevails, meaning that each state prioritises its own interests while international organisations and rules gradually lose significance. This model increases competition among global poles, heightening overall uncertainty and leading to proxy wars or smaller regional armed conflicts. While these conflicts are unlikely to involve direct clashes between major powers – given their relatively balanced military and economic capacities – their influence will be felt in geopolitical hotspots. For instance, the U.S. remains the world's leading military power, while China serves as the global manufacturing hub, making the outcome of a direct war highly uncertain. The Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and certain conflict zones in Europe will continue to serve as arenas for great-power influence and geopolitical manoeuvring. Within this framework, the shift in Washington's attitude toward the war in Ukraine can also be understood, as its primary negotiating counterpart remains Russia, which, due to its nuclear capabilities, is still regarded as a global power.[29]

On the international stage, great powers may engage in unpredictable, opportunistic agreements often lacking trust, common ideological foundations, or a stable value system. A country's bargaining position will depend primarily on its capacities and diplomatic leverage. These phenomena are not new – they have already surfaced in the crises of recent years and are likely to intensify. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the rules of a new international order will be established in the near future, meaning that fundamental global uncertainty will persist in the long run.

The most accurate historical analogy for the current world order is the period from the unification of Germany (1871) to the outbreak of World War I (1914).[30] This period saw the emergence of an unstable multipolar system, where the competition between two dominant poles ultimately led to global conflict. Germany, as a rising industrial power, and Britain, striving to maintain its leadership, closely parallel today's China and the United States. Whereas industrialisation was the focal point of competition in the late 19th century, today's equivalent is the advancement of digitalisation and artificial

[29] Danaher, Caitlin – Kennedy, Niamh: *Zelensky Warns Days of Guaranteed US Support for Europe are Over, as Kellogg Says Europeans Won't Be at Table for Peace Talks*. [online], CNN, 02.15.2025. Source: edition.cnn.com [20.02.2025].

[30] Others argue that the current situation is more reminiscent of the Yalta-type bipolar world order model, where federal systems functioned as effectively subordinate spheres of interest. At the same time, Russia and China are hoping for the emergence of a multipolar Yalta system, in which the great powers make deals with each other, respecting each other's fundamental interests and engaging in proxy conflicts only at the periphery of their spheres of interest. Ash, Timothy Garton: *Trump's Senseless Capitulation to Putin is a Betrayal of Ukraine – and Terrible Dealmaking*. [online], The Guardian, 13.01.2025. Source: theguardian.com [24.02.2025].

intelligence, domains where the U.S. and China lead. The era was characterised by an arms race and military competition, elements that remain central to today's international security dynamics.

The impact of the new U.S. foreign policy on transatlantic relations

Considering these developments, it is worth examining the role that Europe might play in the evolving world order and the implications this could have for the transatlantic relationship that has defined the past few decades.

The first Trump administration caught European leaders unprepared; several actions were taken that were unfamiliar to the European elite. This includes the transactional approach to foreign policy, the disregard for EU institutions and regulatory frameworks, and the open support for Brexit. Although the Biden administration also placed significant emphasis on advancing U.S. interests in transatlantic relations (e.g. the Inflation Reduction Act),[31] it was done within a completely different political communication framework, one that European politicians found easier to convey to their constituents. In contrast, Donald Trump's statements quickly entered European discourse at the level of EU citizens, which may influence the political stances of individual member states. The EU leadership faces a dual challenge: it must maintain transatlantic relations while also protecting its own economic and security interests.

The development of transatlantic relations is examined along two fundamental dimensions, which traditionally define the American–European relationship. The first is economic cooperation and the trade relations between the two blocs, particularly with regard to tariffs and the evolution of the trade balance. The second dimension is geopolitical and security cooperation, especially concerning European security issues, the possible resolution of the Russian–Ukrainian war, and Europe's place and role in the evolving world order. In addition to these two conventional dimensions, the second Trump administration has foregrounded a third – less material but potentially consequential – register of transatlantic relations: civilisational and constitutional affinity. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy contains an unusually direct critique of contemporary European governance and political identity, linking transatlantic reliability not only to Europe's defence effort and economic performance, but also to perceived deficits in democratic contestation and free expression.

Economic cooperation – A tariff war with Europe?

With his first actions, Trump did not impose tariffs on the European Union, but he made his intentions clear, asserting that the EU takes advantage of trade with the U.S. and generates a huge trade surplus.[32] Despite the shared interest in maintaining high-level

[31] Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA): Provisions Related to Climate Change. [online], Congressional Research Service, 26.10.2023. Source: congress.gov [19.02.2025].

[32] Starcevic, Seb – Ewing, Giselle Ruhiyyih: *Trump Vows to Launch Trade War on EU*. [online], Politico, 01.02.2025. Source: politico.eu [19.02.2025].

economic and trade relations between the two blocs, Trump threatened to impose tariffs on goods imported from the EU,[33] even though a tariff war within the alliance may have several negative consequences for the American economy. While the EU's trade deficit with the U.S. has exceeded 200 billion USD annually since 2021,[34] there is a significant American trade surplus in the services market, which could be negatively impacted by European measures.

The President seeks to use tariffs as a lever to encourage European partners to buy more American products, particularly energy resources. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in early 2025 stated that the EU will take "firm and proportionate" response if the U.S. imposes unfair tariffs.[35] During his previous term, Trump had imposed a 25% tariff on EU steel and a 10% tariff on aluminium, to which the EU responded with countermeasures.[36]

The escalation risk was partially contained by the EU–U.S. framework trade agreement concluded in late July 2025 and subsequently formalised in a Joint Statement of 21 August 2025.[37] The arrangement introduced a uniform 15% ceiling tariff for most EU exports to the U.S. (including, inter alia, cars), combined with zero or near-zero tariffs for selected product groups (e.g. aircraft and parts, certain chemicals), while leaving the sensitive metals file to be managed through a stricter regime.[38] The agreement primarily served U.S. objectives of predictability plus leverage: it averted a disruptive, open-ended tariff spiral while institutionalising a tariff baseline that Washington could present domestically as a corrective to alleged European free-riding. For the EU, the principal gain was the avoidance of even higher threatened tariff levels and a measure of legal–political stability for firms.

Notwithstanding this compromise, tariffs are likely to remain a credible coercive instrument in Trump's policy toolkit: tariff threats may function not merely as trade remedies, but as bargaining signals to induce European concessions in adjacent dossiers (energy, regulation, strategic alignment).

Another key goal for Trump is to significantly increase Europe's import of American energy resources, thereby improving the trade balance.[39] In 2023, the EU purchased 90 billion USD worth of U.S. LNG and crude oil, and under Trump's expectations, this amount would need to increase by an additional 130 billion USD.[40] However, this would

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[33] In 2023, the EU exported goods worth 576.3 billion dollars to the USA, accounting for nearly 20 percent of EU exports. United States Census Bureau: *Trade in Goods with European Union*. [online], United States Census Bureau, 01.2025. Source: census.gov [19.02.2025].

[34] Máthé, Réka Zsuzsánna: *Olajat és gázt a kereskedelmi deficitért*. [online], Ludovika.hu, 21.01.2025. Source: ludovika.hu [19.02.2025].

[35] Verhelst, Koen: *EU Vows 'Firm and Proportionate' Response to Trump's Tariffs*. [online], Politico, 11.02.2025. Source: politico.eu [19.02.2025].

[36] Vela, Jakob Hanke – Burchard, Hans Von Der: *EU Seeks to Hit Back at €3 Billion of US Exports from Bourbon to Jeans*. [online], Politico, 02.03.2018. Source: politico.eu [19.02.2025].

[37] European Commission: *Joint Statement on a United States-European Union Framework on an Agreement on Reciprocal, Fair and Balanced Trade*. [online], European Commission, 21.08.2025. Source: policy.trade.ec.europa.eu [22.08.2025].

[38] Reuters: *What's in Trump's Trade Deal with Europe?* [online], 21.08.2025. Source: reuters.com [22.08.2025].

[39] Gavin, Gabriel – Lefebvre, Ben: *The EU Rules that Risk Derailing a Gas Deal with Trump*. [online], Politico, 23.01.2025. Source: politico.eu [19.02.2025].

[40] Máthé 2025.

entail considerable energy dependency for the EU, which is striving for energy diversification. The American expectations, therefore, are constrained by European interests in this regard.

Moreover, EU regulations could hinder this process: from 2027, for example, the EU will introduce penalties on fuels with high methane emissions,[41] and from 2026, it will impose tariffs on carbon-intensive imported products, which may also affect U.S. exports.[42]

Trump is expected to prioritise bilateral economic relations with individual EU member states over EU institutions, as he did during his first term. However, it is important to note that within the EU, the common trade policy is an exclusive EU competence, leaving member states with limited room to engage in individual negotiations over tariffs.

Overall, the economic dimension of Trump's second-term policy suggests a shift from partnership to dependency: the EU is increasingly treated as a supplier of goods and resources rather than an equal economic partner. This undermines previously shared principles of free trade and may further weaken Europe in the U.S.–China strategic competition.

Geopolitics and security policy

A key element of the new U.S. foreign policy is the recognition that the U.S. cannot maintain its leading position indefinitely, and that allies will need to take on an increasingly larger role in bearing the costs of maintaining their own security. This is especially true for European security policy. In this context, Trump's demand for NATO members to spend at least 5% of their national GDP on defence becomes relevant. The 5% benchmark was codified at the June 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, where Allies committed to investing 5% of GDP annually by 2035 across "core defence" and broader defence- and security-related expenditure.[43]

For Europe, increasing defence spending is not just an American demand but increasingly an internal necessity. After enjoying the "peace dividend" for thirty years,[44] Europe's military vulnerability has become evident, particularly in light of the Russian–Ukrainian war. While U.S. security guarantees remain crucial, the European political elite must confront the reality that these guarantees cannot be provided indefinitely.

One of the key elements in the security and defence dimension of transatlantic cooperation is U.S. planning for the resolution of the Russian–Ukrainian war and the subsequent development of a new security architecture. For the U.S., the war presents not only a geopolitical challenge but also an opportunity to assert its newly defined strategic interests.

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[41] Regulation (EU) 2024/1787 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on the reduction of methane emissions in the energy sector and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/942. [online], European Union, 2024. Source: eur-lex.europa.eu [19.02.2025].

[42] Regulation (EU) 2023/956 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 establishing a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. [online], European Union, 2023. Source: eur-lex.europa.eu [25.10.2025]

[43] NATO: *Defence Expenditures and NATO's 5% Commitment.* [online], 18.12.2025. Source: nato.int [21.12.2025].

[44] Csiki Varga, Tamás: *Trump és a NATO: Mire lenne elég a GDP 5%-át kitevő védelmi költségvetés?* [online], John Lukacs Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatási Elemzések, 2025/3. 28.01.2025. Source: uni-nke.hu [20.02.2025].

From the outset of his second term, President Trump repeatedly signalled an intention to act as a broker for a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, framing mediation as consistent with the U.S. interest in strategic reprioritisation. These efforts were embedded in a broader attempt to restore high-level U.S.–Russia diplomatic channels, culminating in the Trump–Putin summit in Anchorage, Alaska, on 15 August 2025, where Ukraine's war and the parameters of a possible settlement were central agenda items, but no agreement was announced.[45] The Alaska meeting was followed by further U.S.-led contacts with Russian counterparts in which Ukraine-related issues were discussed alongside the wider architecture of U.S.–Russia relations – sanctions, strategic stability, and diplomatic re-engagement.

The resolution of the Russian–Ukrainian war and the establishment of a new European security architecture – particularly in light of the decade and a half-long trend of the U.S. reducing its military presence in Europe to lower its costs – are closely intertwined issues. European states have provided significant support to Ukraine over the past three years, with European financial aid exceeding U.S. contributions.[46] Consequently, Europe insists on playing an active role in the resolution of the war. In contrast, Keith Kellogg announced at the Munich Security Conference that, according to U.S. plans, Europe will not be involved in the peace talks to resolve the Russian–Ukrainian war.[47] This announcement shocked European leaders. The first U.S.–Russia negotiations on ending the war took place in Saudi Arabia – without Ukraine's participation for the time being (the primary aim of the meeting was to restore contact between the U.S. and Russia, and the parties discussed several issues beyond the potential settlement of the Russia–Ukraine war).[48] Subsequent rounds in Saudi Arabia in March 2025 focused on narrow ceasefire concepts (including maritime and energy-related arrangements), yet these contacts did not yield a comprehensive settlement by the end of 2025; moreover, much of the diplomacy proceeded in formats dominated by U.S.–Russia exchanges, often addressing the wider bilateral relationship rather than the war alone.

The American efforts to resolve the Russian–Ukrainian war may not only determine the war's outcome but also fundamentally shape the future of transatlantic relations.[49] The extent to which the U.S. involves Europe in decision-making may also provide an answer to whether U.S. foreign policy will shift towards sphere-of-influence politics or if it will find a new way to reinforce transatlantic cooperation.

Overall, the Trump administration's geopolitical strategy signals a downgrading of Europe's strategic relevance, using its defence shortfall – despite Washington's own

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45 Holland, Steve – Osborn, Andrew – Balmforth, Tom: *Trump Tells Zelenskiy that Putin Wants More of Ukraine, Urges Kyiv Make a Deal.* [online], Reuters, 17.08.2025. Source: reuters.com [22.12.2025].

46 Trebesch, Christoph: *Ukraine Support after 3 Years of War: Aid Flows Remain Low but Steady – Shift towards Weapons Procurement*. [online], Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 14.02.2025. Source: kielinstitute.de [20.02.2025].

47 Danaher–Kennedy 2025.

48 Lee, Matthew – Isachenkov, Vladimir: *A Deeper Look at the Talks between US and Russian Officials as Trump Suggests Ukraine is to Blame*. [online], AP News, 19.02.2025. Source: apnews.com [20.02.2025].

49 Bergmann, Max: *The Transatlantic Alliance in the Age of Trump: The Coming Collisions*. [online], CSIS, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 14.02.2025. Source: csis.org [24.02.2025].

responsibility for the long-term erosion of European military capabilities – as leverage while shifting the burden of European security onto the continent itself.

The transatlantic alliance in a civilisational perspective

Since the inauguration of the second Trump administration, concerns have intensified that the U.S.–Europe relationship is no longer strained solely by diverging material interests – such as trade and burden-sharing – but also by a growing misalignment in values and political self-understandings. This shift is evident in President Trump's public statements, which have repeatedly questioned the very existence and relevance of a shared transatlantic value base. In parallel, the U.S. administration has openly criticised specific European normative practices and constitutional choices that had previously been treated as internal European matters rather than as points of contention within the alliance. A prominent illustration was Vice President J. D. Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference,[50] which sharply criticised European approaches to hate speech and democratic "guardrails" against far-right parties, presenting Europe's primary vulnerability as internal – namely, a perceived erosion of free expression and democratic pluralism. These remarks were widely perceived in Europe not merely as policy criticism, but as a challenge to prevailing European constitutional and democratic self-understandings.

This line of argument is further systematised in the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy, which elevates civilisational and political identity concerns to a level comparable with economic decline and insufficient defence spending. Beyond material indicators, the document argues that Europe faces a deeper crisis rooted in political and cultural transformation, referring to what it describes as "civilisational erasure" and warning that the continent may become "unrecognizable in 20 years or less". As specific sources of concern, the Strategy highlights the "censorship of free speech", the "suppression of political opposition", and the role of the European Union and other transnational institutions that, in Washington's interpretation, undermine political liberty and national sovereignty. In this reading, Europe's internal trajectory is presented not merely as a domestic matter, but as a factor that directly affects its credibility and reliability as a strategic partner of the United States.

At the same time, the National Security Strategy suggests that these critiques coexist with a persistent sense of attachment to Europe. The Strategy explicitly acknowledges that Europe remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States and emphasises America's enduring sentimental ties to the European continent.

Taken together, this civilisational dimension adds a new layer of complexity to transatlantic relations. Even if economic interdependence and security cooperation continue to provide strong incentives for collaboration, the growing politicisation of values and identity risks eroding the symbolic and emotional foundations that have historically complemented material interests.

[50] The White House: *Vice President JD Vance Delivers Remarks at the Munich Security Conference*. [online], YouTube, 14.02.2025b. Source: youtube.com [02.21.2025].

Conclusions

Under the leadership of Donald Trump, the United States is striving to reshape the world order, ruthlessly dismantling elements that have become disadvantageous. The new U.S. foreign policy fundamentally affects transatlantic relations, with particular focus on European security. Europe must take on a greater role in its own defence, compensating for decades of neglect. However, a scenario can also be inferred from the actions of the American president, in which Trump seeks to fundamentally reshape the transatlantic (and Western) alliance; in place of the previous partnership approach, a sphere-of-influence-based model would emerge, within which the United States would unapologetically assert its own interests, even against European interests.

For the United States, China represents the primary competitor, and the new world order must be designed in such a way as to counterbalance China's rise and prevent the Asian power from undermining American dominance. However, this does not entail a bloc-like division similar to the Cold War, but rather a dynamic relationship with great powers. Donald Trump may reconsider his stance on Russia, potentially basing it on the view – debatable from several perspectives – that the Americans could separate the Russians from the Chinese. The Obama administration also attempted to reset relations with Russia, and now Donald Trump may be trying to do the same. There could be multiple benefits for the United States in this, including reducing the manoeuvring space of states like Iran, cooperating in Arctic oil extraction, and revitalising economic ties. Trump's sharp criticism of the Ukrainian leadership regarding the legitimacy of the Ukrainian president could be interpreted as a sign of approaching Russia.[51]

How might Europe, and specifically the European Union, respond to the appearance of sphere-of-influence politics and potential American actions detrimental to European interests? A key issue will be how the continent reacts to resolving the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, whether it is willing to continue its foreign policy even if American foreign policy takes a different direction in the coming weeks than previously anticipated. The European Union continues to aim at becoming an independent pole in the transforming world order. To achieve this, it must simultaneously increase its economic and defence capacities, strengthen its strategic autonomy, and preserve its diplomatic manoeuvring space. The development of defence capabilities should be carried out by member states but with European-level coordination, consciously aiming to ensure that future expenditures will address existing shortcomings. Within the NATO framework, this will entail a greater European voice but also a greater responsibility. Furthermore, it is essential to reconsider the strategy of nuclear deterrence, which could contribute to achieving greater autonomy and reducing coercive potential. The EU's manoeuvring space could be further expanded if pragmatism takes a larger role in its foreign policy. Key to this could be a less politicised relationship with China and strengthening ties with the Global South, which would

[51] Pomeroy, Gabriela – Wright, George: *Trump Calls Zelensky A 'Dictator' As Rift Between Two Leaders Deepens*. [online], 20.02.2025. Source: bbc.com [21.02.2025].

help the EU build strategic autonomy and preserve bargaining power in a transatlantic relationship that is becoming increasingly transactional. In the event of direct harm to its interests, the European economy could take significant countermeasures. However, this would require raising awareness about the political use of economic tools and effectively mapping and exploiting America's economic weaknesses (such as its debt and excessive dependence on the service sector). It is a flawed strategy to pursue goals that merely serve Washington's expectations. Instead, Europe must demonstrate strength to secure a more favourable negotiating position.

The steps outlined above are, of course, not aimed at dismantling transatlantic relations, but at effectively adapting to the transforming international environment and increasing Europe's self-defence capabilities and manoeuvring space. Moreover, loosening the transatlantic bond would be a step that breaks with decades of tradition, weakening the entire Western alliance and all of its members. For this reason, Trump's policy of "keeping Europe down" could face opposition from his domestic base, too.

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