

CHAPTER 1



Overview and Background: Right-wing Nationalism, Trump and the Future of US–European Relations

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Abstract

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States is often seen as a threat to the transatlantic relationship. This movement challenges the internationalist, institutional and liberal principles that have long underpinned US–European ties and sustained American leadership. In the United States, Donald Trump has pushed conservatism toward nationalism and nativism. His administration’s multiple – often conflicting – approaches make both transformation and rupture of the transatlantic bond plausible outcomes. Traditional Republicans still see alliances as tools to contain rivals; MAGA conservatives advocate isolationism and protectionism, and the nativist right envisions a ‘civilizational alliance’ of Christian nation-states in the West opposing liberal internationalism. Trump himself treats alliances as client relationships, rewarding loyalty and punishing defiance. Understanding this interplay of forces is essential to interpreting the volatility of Trump-era policies toward Europe and evaluating their implications for the European Union (EU) and the continent’s security.

Keywords: *transatlantic relations, national conservatism, New Right, Trump foreign policy, European strategic autonomy*

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Introduction

There is a growing sense amongst experts and policymakers that the transatlantic relationship, as we have come to know it in the 80 years since the Second World War, has run its course (Fahey 2023). In part, transatlantic change reflects broader systemic change, as the United States adapts irregularly but inexorably to a global context in which the centre of geopolitical gravity has shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Equally important, however, is the questioning of the ideational and strategic foundations of the transatlantic relationship in the domestic landscapes of the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Hence, while the transatlantic relationship will evolve in light of global structural shifts, the interplay between domestic political dynamics across the ocean will determine its quality and direction (Laderman 2024–25). For Europeans, the stakes are high indeed, given the United States' role in the defence of Europe and the amplification of European clout in an international system built over decades around the Euro–Atlantic order.

Were political elites in the United States and Europe to forge a new alliance infused with ideational commonalities and grounded in strategic convergence, the relationship could be revived in a different form. Alternatively, ideological affinities may enhance a sense of common belonging across like-minded parties but may be insufficient to provide a platform for structured foreign policy coordination. The transatlantic relationship would thus become a series of arrangements based on the contingent interests of either side. Finally, absent any form of strong transnational ties, the relationship may drift apart, potentially giving way to systemic competition. Intermediate forms of these scenarios of partnership, functional relationship (a way of muddling through where cooperation is issue-contingent) and breaking apart are equally plausible (Alcaro and Tocci 2014). One such form that does not neatly fit into any of these three scenarios is a relationship in which the United States' hierarchical centrality is reasserted through the weakening and fragmentation of the European side.

The manner in which the relationship adapts to systemic changes is thus being forged in domestic political struggles about the value and relevance of the transatlantic bond, especially in the United States. The main – although not the only – drivers of such political fights are forces that in the 2010s were grouped under the heading of right-wing populism, but which today should be described as distinct instances of national (or nationalist) conservatism. On the rise in a number of European Union (EU) member states, national conservatism has scored massive

political victories in the United States, where President Donald Trump has served as its standard-bearer (*The Economist* 2024).

This introductory chapter briefly explains Trump's Europe policy in light of the different strands of thought within his administration and his personalistic understanding of power. Next, it recaps how European countries have adjusted. Finally, it draws preliminary conclusions about how national conservatism and Trump's personalistic hold on power can affect Europe's domestic debate and choices regarding the transatlantic relationship.

Multifaceted American conservatism and Europe

In the Trump administration, the Republican Party and the US conservative world at large coexist with different visions of America's role in the world and the corresponding foreign policy priorities – including with regard to Europe (Dueck 2019). At the risk of oversimplifying, the conservative foreign policy debate breaks down into three broad categories – primacists, conservative realists and civilizational warriors – that define schools of thought conceptually distinct from one another, even if they are not always mutually exclusive in terms of policy options.

The *primacists* comprise what is left of traditional Republican internationalism (Ruge and Shapiro 2022). The liberal and universalist impetus that once positioned the United States as the leader of the free world and guarantor of the international system – a proposition extended to economic relations through the promotion of unrestrained movement of goods and capital and the globalization of efficiency-based supply chains – has faded. Yet the conviction endures that America's hegemonic position should be preserved through deep involvement in global affairs (Schake 2024).

From this perspective, alliances and partnerships are essential to augment the United States' capacity to push back against a coalition of adversaries whose strategic alignment is assumed to be strong and long-term due to their authoritarian regimes and anti-Western orientation: the 'axis of four' of China, Russia, North Korea and Iran (as well as their minions like Venezuela) (Kendall-Taylor and Fontaine 2024). Although of lesser importance, international organizations and treaties retain utility insofar as they can be used to promote narratives and policy recipes in line with US interests and thus isolate rivals.



Europe occupies a significant position in this vision because NATO guarantees the continental hegemony of the United States, and the European countries act as a first line of defence against Russia and as a check on Moscow's ambitions. While important, Europe's capacity to strengthen its military is not an absolute priority for primacists, as it may, after all, affect the United States' ability to influence European countries' foreign policy. It follows that continuous investment of political and military resources in NATO and the defence of Ukraine remains critical to weakening Russia and ensuring European followership (Michta 2024).

Although it no longer enjoys the same degree of public support as it once did, this school of thought retains significant influence within the US foreign policy establishment — particularly among Washington think tanks, conservative media outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, senior members of Congress (with Senator Lindsey Graham leading the group of Republican foreign policy hawks), and within the administration itself, where it is represented primarily by Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Conservative realists encompass a range of diverse voices united by a common desire to see the United States act upon narrowly defined national interests (Borg 2024). A segment of the public opinion sees US exceptionalism as a national peculiarity that does not need to be exported abroad and favours a limited international role for the United States, largely free of any binding commitments arising from alliances or membership in international institutions. Among foreign policy experts, this strand of thought has its roots in the realist school of International Relations, which appreciates alliances and multilateral regimes insofar as they can help limit the United States' military exposure.

Those grouped under the conservative realism label tend to agree on certain foreign policy priorities, most notably the need to prevent or contain the emergence of China as a threat to geopolitical balances in East Asia and, potentially, globally too. Still, conservative realism is open to the construction of a multipolar system in which US military might (which remains of paramount importance) works primarily for deterrence and offshore balancing, and the defence of US interests is made more sustainable through the pursuit of stability-oriented arrangements with rival powers (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016).

From this perspective, the notion that allies and partners of the United States may acquire greater autonomy is acceptable inasmuch as they can better guarantee

the stability of the geopolitical theatres that have absorbed a disproportionate share of US political and military resources – namely the Middle East and Europe – so that Washington can concentrate more extensively on the Asian front. A more integrated and potentially autonomous EU is less a threat to America's primacy (to which conservative realists do not have an obsessive attachment) than it is an opportunity to share the burden for continental stability and the containment of Russia (Williams 2025). It is also the best option to reduce the security risks that a downgrading of the United States' strategic commitment to Europe and its military presence across NATO countries would carry with it (Chivvis 2025).

While still in the minority, this strand of thought has moved beyond academia. It resonates with the inward-looking instincts of the MAGA crowd, but also with the section of the left-wing electorate that has grown weary of what it perceives as American militarism abroad. It has also entered the foreign policy debates inside the Beltway as a regular voice in favour of restraint. However, conservative realism has made little inroads into the administration, even if 'China prioritizers' like Undersecretary of Defence Elbridge Colby may be loosely associated with it.

The third category, the *civilizational warriors*, has its ideological roots in the national conservatism espoused by much of the US new right (Hazony 2022). This strand of thought holds together the forceful reassertion of American absolute sovereignty against any form of long-term international commitment with the conviction that America is the core, engine and apex of Western civilization. Civilizational warriors do not construct the West as an alliance of states bound by shared strategic interests and a common commitment to universalistic values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Rather, they conceive of it as a community of nations from Europe and of European descent linked to one another by history, Christianity (or the Judeo-Christian tradition) and, to some at least, race.

Civilizational warriors see this community as threatened not so much by the authoritarianism and militaristic expansionism of rival powers like Russia. Instead, it is migrants with an alien ethnic, linguistic and religious background and globalist elites promoting open trade, globalized supply chains and the supposedly intolerant and degenerate 'woke' ideology that risk subverting Western freedoms, welfare and cultural traditions. This vision is shared, in whole or in part, by sections of the MAGA movement, as well as by tech billionaires like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, and has its most prominent reference point in Vice President JD Vance (Lopez 2025).



Europe is both the object of nostalgia and the source of hatred for those holding this view. On the one hand, the EU is deeply resented not just because of its potential to empower its member states, but also because it embodies the set of values that this movement despises most: supranationalism, inclusivity, diversity, and cosmopolitanism (Franke 2025). On the other hand, the European nations are the natural candidates to join the United States in a ‘civilizational alliance’ against migrants and the enemies from within (Samson 2025).

US foreign policy under the second Trump administration comprises elements of these various strands of conservatism, which explains the at times wild oscillations in rhetoric and policy actions on display regarding the Ukraine war and the approach to NATO and Europe’s security in general. While this multiple origin makes US foreign policy look incoherent, another element gives it greater intelligibility – namely, Trump’s understanding of power (Moynihan 2025). The US president sees power as a never-ending exercise in renegotiating relations, in which the stronger side, the United States, uses its vast array of assets – from tariffs to military assistance to investment – to extract ever more concessions (Bertoldi and Buti 2025). He views US alliances and partnerships as a client system in which the US’s burden is diminished, and its advantage is aggressively pursued. Similarly, rival powers are less systemic enemies to be defeated than potential interlocutors for deals in which influence is shared according to each party’s relative power and interests (Feaver 2024).

What makes this combination of extreme transactionalism and penchant for unrestrained sovereignty unique is the construction of the US national interest as inexorably linked to Trump’s personal power, and the ensuing blurring of the line between public and private interests. The elevation of personal ties with Trump, his family and his closest entourage, above formal relations between state institutions, creates incentives for allies, partners and rivals alike to contribute to his political and private fortunes. Governments that do not have to worry excessively about domestic opposition, such as the Arab Gulf dynasties, which have struck multi-billion-dollar deals with the Trump administration (and generously contributed to the financial and crypto ventures of the president’s family), have adapted with relative ease. For European governments, which are often supported by multi-party parliamentary coalitions and are subject to greater scrutiny from the press and public opinion, the process is more complicated.

Europe's adjustments: The benefits and costs of appeasement

European adjustment to US foreign policy under Trump has taken on different forms. There has been an extensive use of flattery to win the US president's favour, with European leaders echoing his rhetoric or developing new language consistent with it (Shapiro 2025; Brands 2025). More significantly, European governments have made efforts to meet US expectations beforehand. They have raised military and security-related spending to address the US's longstanding concern about NATO's uneven burden-sharing, agreed to buy US weapons on behalf of Ukraine, maintained economic pressure on Russia, and shown readiness to support a post-war settlement through deployed military assets (Scazzieri 2025; Ondrych 2025). Some have signalled their value to the pursuit of strategic goals that the Trump administration deems priorities, as when Finland agreed to build icebreakers to strengthen the United States' hold on the Arctic (Foroohar 2025).

In return, the Europeans have often resorted to damage limitation. The latter has involved absorbing the effects of Trump's most disruptive policies – such as tariffs, the phasing out of military transfers to Ukraine, and threats to take Greenland from Denmark – through coordinated diplomatic engagement, notably at the level of leaders. The objective of these efforts has been to prevent unwelcome outcomes such as a deal with Russia to the detriment of Ukraine and Europe's security, further tariff escalation or the opening of new disputes (for instance over climate or digital regulations) (Momtaz et al. 2025).

These tactics have yielded some results. Trump's recurrent outbursts against NATO have ceased, and the administration's rhetoric on Europe has improved. Most importantly, support for Ukraine has not been interrupted, and sanctions on Russia have been maintained, even if Moscow's stubborn rejection of any US opening and Kyiv's deft management of Trump's expectations have arguably been more consequential than European entreaties (Mikhelidze 2025). Even so, Europe's reactive approach has limits and carries risks and costs. As mentioned above, support for maintaining a significant military presence in Europe is fading in the US public and even among elites. Thus, the most the European governments can hope for is to coordinate the downgrading of US assets within NATO with Washington so that it does not leave them overly exposed, and cultivate bilateral military relations to keep as many of those assets as possible on their national soil.



In addition, Trump's volatile nature and transactional approach force European governments into continuous efforts to appease him, which in turn feeds his tendency to renegotiate the terms of their arrangements and add new demands. An example is Trump's initial insistence that US sanctions on Russia could happen if the EU first adopted impossibly high tariffs on China and India as retribution for purchasing Russian oil (he later cast aside this condition, but not because of European opposition) (Hoskins 2025). Even when no demand is explicitly uttered, the Europeans may opt for alignment to avoid injecting an irritant into the transatlantic relationship, as their endorsement of the US bombing of Iran (an eventuality they had long opposed) attests (Azizi and Van Veen 2025).

This highly reactive and largely accommodating attitude means EU and national policymakers end up sharpening the tension between the urgent need to keep the United States engaged, on the one hand, and the long-term goal of reducing European vulnerability to external pressure through more integrated EU institutions and capacities, on the other. The domestic incentives to invest diplomatic resources and political capital in greater EU integration, by nature a slow and cumbersome process, diminish if bilateral action can more easily secure gains from a US administration that is short on sympathy for the supranational EU.

The commitment to investing in a systematic and extensive upgrade of EU governance and capabilities is also affected by the fact that Trump's power-based, sovereignty-driven foreign policy approach, which has been given an aura of legitimacy by European appeasement, has emboldened Eurosceptic forces that share ideological affinities with US national conservatism.

Trump and Europe's right: So far, so close?

There is much in common within the transatlantic right-wing galaxy, spanning a nationalist attachment to sovereignty, visceral opposition to immigration, revulsion at the 'degenerate' woke values of liberal progressivism, resentment against regulations in the digital and climate sectors, as well as impatience with political and constitutional checks and balances. Ideological affinities underpin growing ties between US and European right-wing movements, with institutions from Poland and Hungary (a central reference point for the US new right) quite active in promoting a transatlantic community of right-wing intellectuals and activists.

However, replicating the American right's success in Europe is not as

straightforward. The European right remains fractious and its relationship with its US counterpart anything but linear (Balfour et al. 2025). On a number of issues, European right-wing parties follow national preferences that are not easily reconcilable – the Hungarians and Poles, for instance, oppose greater burden-sharing in migration management and stronger fiscal capacity in Brussels, both of which the Italians would support. Marked divisions also exist regarding Russia. Some, notably the Polish and Scandinavian right as well as parts of the Italian right, view Russia as a threat and favour support for Ukraine. The bulk of the European right continues to nurture some sympathy towards Moscow, although this has become much more muted in the wake of the Ukraine war. They see Russian nationalist and authoritarian conservatism as a natural interlocutor for the preservation of Europe’s cultural and religious heritage as well as its stability and energy security. Adding to these policy divergences are party and leadership rivalries, with three distinct right-wing groups in the European Parliament.

In short, the electoral strength of right-wing parties does not translate into an equally strong capacity to shape policies at the EU level, let alone create a coherent foreign policy platform on which to engage the United States. Right-wing parties, like anyone else, must also contend with the harm inflicted by US tariffs on EU exports and wavering security commitments, as well as with Trump’s scarce popularity in most of Europe (O’Brien 2025). Even internally, the US president’s average approval rating has been stuck in the mid-to-low 40s (RealClearPolitics 2025).

The reality is that the deliberately confrontational approach to politics of right-wing nationalism and Trump’s personality tends to generate counterbalancing dynamics of aggregation. Moreover, Trump’s power-based foreign policy, even when one shares its nationalist premises, fuels a demand in Europe for security and welfare that cannot be met in full through a critically unbalanced relationship with the United States, which is constantly open to review. Russia’s war of conquest in Ukraine and Trump’s nationalistic and unilateralist re-orientation of US foreign policy are tangible manifestations of a geopolitical reality that is not just debated in foreign policy circles but felt across populations in Europe. It follows that the pragmatic logic underlying European appeasement of Trump can also be applied to the EU. Whether regarded as an alternative, a complement or merely an accessory to the relationship with the United States, the EU’s potential to improve member states’ military, energy, technological and industrial assets, as well as protect their regulatory sovereignty and trade – including to contain the costs of renewed US–



China tensions – is easier to appreciate for elites and general public alike. The weakness of pro-EU political forces, which may be more a problem of leadership than policy, obscures but cannot erase these structural realities.

Political forces that remain committed to the transatlantic bond, or that regard the relationship with Washington primarily through a pragmatic lens, should recognize that the advantages of accommodation diminish over time. The current US administration, in all its iterations of conservative views of US foreign policy and with Trump's power-infused understanding of foreign relations, is largely insensitive to European objections, not least because it perceives little or no cost in adopting positions that openly contradict European preferences. Persisting in appeasement not only reinforces this dynamic but also undermines collective efforts to enhance the EU's capacity to withstand external pressure and adapt to a gradual recalibration of American commitments to the continent. By the same token, European nationalist movements that oppose deeper integration should reflect on the tangible costs of failing to forge a common stance in response to US measures (be they on trade, technology or other strategic issues) that harm the very constituencies these movements claim to defend.

An uncertain future

There can be little doubt that the political struggles on the future of the transatlantic relationship across Europe are being fought on a favourable terrain for the right-wing forces and President Trump himself. Nevertheless, those struggles are not settled yet, and the future is open to different scenarios.

In one possible scenario – consistent with the worldview of US primacists – the United States would maintain its commitment to Europe's defence in exchange for a greater European contribution to continental security and, more broadly, Washington's pursuit of global hegemony. This approach would not only entail participation in the containment of Russia but also complete alignment in pushing back against China's influence and isolating other adversarial powers, such as Iran. Such an arrangement would loosely represent a continuation of the post-war transatlantic relationship, albeit one in which normative and institutional dimensions are downgraded since the development of European military capabilities becomes instrumental to the consolidation of a rigidly hierarchical Euro-Atlantic structure. The relationship would thereby assume the form of a hub-and-spoke system, characterized by a stronger bilateralization of US security and defence ties

with individual European states, the relative marginalization of NATO as a locus of transatlantic consensus-building, and indifference or mild hostility towards the EU. Although not entirely compatible with President Trump's aversion to long-term commitments, this configuration of US–European relations would nonetheless chime with his conception of America's alliances and partnerships as a clientelist network reaffirming US centrality.

In another scenario, the development of integrated European capacities for resource generation and defence and security provision would endow EU member states with greater bargaining power in dealings with Washington across domains ranging from trade and relations with China to the security governance of Europe itself. This dynamic would clash with Trump's anti-EU instincts and his ambition to reassert American primacy. Yet, it would resonate with his transactional understanding of international relations and with his preference, shared by conservative realists, for a substantial US retrenchment from Europe.

Both scenarios rest on the assumption that transatlantic political elites would frame their domestic political interests in terms of the strategic advantages of preserving a strong Euro–Atlantic coalition, although in the second case, the relationship would be more prone to engendering largely contingent, functional forms of cooperation. However, another scenario envisions the inverse dynamic, whereby strategic security concerns are subordinated to short-term political expediency, particularly on the European side.

In such a context, the containment of Russia, the management of tensions with China or the pursuit of stability in the Middle East would rank lower on the hierarchy of priorities than the quest for control over domestic centres of power through the continuous mobilization against internal political adversaries and, increasingly, against the supranational governance system of the EU. In this scenario, which reflects the ideological convictions of the civilization warriors, the transatlantic relationship would become 'de-strategized'. It would in effect assume a partisan function, operating as a shared ideological framework through which right-wing parties mutually legitimize their respective domestic political struggles, with strategic coordination being relegated to either contingent arrangements or, again, European followership.

As mentioned at the start of this introduction, the evolution of the transatlantic relationship will be shaped as much by the capacity of political elites to reconcile



strategic imperatives with domestic political pressures as by shifts in material power or institutional design. Whether this reconciliation yields a renewed yet asymmetrical alliance, a more equal but functional partnership or devolves into a fragmented, ideologically charged alignment will determine the degree to which the Euro–Atlantic area continues to constitute a coherent pole of order in a contested international system.

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