

CHAPTER 4



The Russia–Ukraine War and Transatlantic Relations

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Abstract

This chapter considers transatlantic relations from the perspective of allies' cooperation in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. After providing a contextual background, we consider three scenarios for cooperation: transatlantic disintegration, muddling through and moving forward. Regardless of which of them comes true, however, policy implications point to very similar steps that the European Union (EU) needs to undertake.

Keywords: *transatlantic relations; Russia; Ukraine; war; European Union (EU); European security*

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Introduction

As early as autumn 2021, in the year before the actual event, the Biden administration started publicly warning Europeans about the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, when US intelligence reports about extensive Russian military exercises became known. The transatlantic relationship was put to the test: to what extent were the Europeans ready to heed the American warnings? And how much unity would there be between the allies after the change of administration and the return of Trump to power as an example of a populist leader aiming to realign foreign and security policy?

Scholarship on populist foreign policy tells us that a standout feature of this type of politics is a shift in the practice of foreign policymaking rather than necessarily the policy content itself. Scholars have been writing about a phenomenon of ‘unpolitics’ and the destructive elements of populist foreign policy (Taggart 2018; Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2023; Juncos and Pomorska 2025). Destradi et al. (2021, 668) also showed that populists in power would often resort to foreign policy behaviours such as ‘the public use of undiplomatic language, the employment of social media for foreign policy communications, or the emphasis on personal bonds between world leaders’. Yet, there are some common threads, such as perceiving globalization as a threat and wanting to counter it with national preferences (Liang 2016, 8), which can be observed in MAGA’s ‘America First’ policies.

In this chapter we first look at the context of the transatlantic relations when it comes to policy towards Russia and the full-scale invasion of mainland Ukraine in 2022. We then specifically discuss what changed with the arrival of the second Trump administration. Consequently, we consider three scenarios for the future of transatlantic relations: transatlantic disintegration, muddling through and moving forward. Regardless of which of them comes true, however, policy implications point to very similar steps that the European Union (EU) needs to undertake.

From build-up to U-turn? US presidents and their response to the war

US policy towards Russia has undergone substantial shifts over the course of recent administrations’ terms in office. Obama’s reset towards Russia since 2009 aimed at increased cooperation with Putin, but suffered a fatal blow after the 2014

annexation of Crimea. In the aftermath, the transatlantic allies coordinated sanctions policies and increased overall military assistance to Ukraine. However, the Obama administration still refused to deliver lethal weapons to Ukraine. The reason cited at the time was to avoid a potential escalation of the war that might provoke Russia into a greater confrontation with Ukraine and potentially NATO. This cautious approach was not to be rewarded in the years to come. Meanwhile, the EU remained divided, largely unable to present a unified front against Putin due to differences in threat perception and economic interests. This hesitancy changed somewhat in 2014 and more noticeably, after the aggression in 2022.

The Biden administration's handling of Russia's full-scale invasion

From October 2021, the Biden administration held monthly intelligence briefings related to Russia's possible attack on Ukraine and in February 2022, the U.S. State Department warned American citizens to leave the country urgently. The same month, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken held a widely-reported phone call with European leaders, warning about Russian troops amassing close to the Ukrainian border, which created a real and imminent threat of invasion (BBC 2022a). However, still not all European allies were ready to heed Washington's warnings. The EU's high representative for foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, later stated that some things that happened were a surprise: 'We did not believe that the war was coming. I have to recognise that here, in Brussels. The Americans were telling us "They will attack, they will attack" and we were quite reluctant to believe it' (Borrell 2022). But even within the EU member states, there were divisions, with Eastern European states also issuing strong warnings ahead of the Americans.

Biden's response to the war was rooted in strong support for Ukraine while imposing extensive sanctions on Russia. The United States cooperated closely with the European Commission and, later, with member states to harmonize sanctions. Biden also secured both financial aid for the military and weapons for Ukraine to help it defend against Russian incursions into its territory. From the start of the war, Biden and his officials also worked to unify NATO and build a global alliance in support of Ukraine. They publicly condemned Putin and labelled him a war criminal (BBC 2022b) and openly expressed support for Ukraine 'for as long as it takes' (Lopez 2024).



Trump's return to the White House

The election of Donald Trump as the 47th US president in late 2024 triggered much anxiety and hand-wringing on the other side of the Atlantic. Several European leaders, such as French President Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, publicly expressed concerns about the continuity of American policy towards the war in light of the change in administration. These concerns were most closely linked to the perceived unpredictability of President Trump and his ambiguous commitment to NATO. Indeed, shortly after taking office, Trump called for an immediate ceasefire that would likely have entailed significant territorial concessions by Ukraine. He has also taken a much more critical, if not outright hostile, stance towards President Zelenskyy and even briefly suspended US intelligence and military aid in March, blaming the Ukrainian president for not being sufficiently committed to peace negotiations. This approach to Ukraine has highlighted a more transactionalist approach by the new administration, culminating in an orchestrated public attempt to humiliate President Zelenskyy at a meeting in the Oval Office on 18 August 2025 by Trump and his vice president, JD Vance. At the same time, Trump broke with the (Western) international isolation of Putin by inviting him to attend a summit in Alaska in August 2025. Another change in US discourse was the repeated assigning of blame for the war to the Ukrainian side. The Alaska summit, however, proved to be ineffective in jumpstarting a resolution to the war and was effectively cut short due to Putin's intransigence and maximalist demands. The European allies, including the United Kingdom, responded with increased support for Zelenskyy and intensified consultations about the need for strategic autonomy for the EU (Ossa 2025; Desmaele 2025)

US policy took another turn towards the end of 2025 when Trump suddenly came out in support of greater military aid to Ukraine, including potential offers of Patriot missiles. He also introduced new sanctions against Russia. American policy also included a transatlantic dimension of populism, manifested in the increased salience of the relationship between Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, whom the American president called a 'great leader' and who is liked and respected (Hutzler 2025). This relationship is significant considering that Hungary is often judged a 'troublemaker' in the EU when it comes to the relations with Ukraine and delivering aid. A significant challenge for Europeans is also Trump's and his associates' backing for radical-right parties that seek to weaken the EU (Lehne 2025).

Three scenarios for transatlantic relations and the Russia-Ukraine War

In line with the framework of the report, we now move to discuss the different scenarios for the future of transatlantic relations in the context of the war. While we develop these three scenarios on an equal footing, this does not imply that all scenarios are equally likely to occur in our estimation. As part of our final discussion, we specifically address the perceived likelihood and discuss reasons for this assessment.

First scenario: Transatlantic disintegration

The first scenario is a breakdown of the transatlantic relationship. It is a realistic, but worst-case, scenario for transatlantic relations regarding the Russia–Ukraine war, one that is more likely to unfold than many Europeans would care to imagine. It is clear from domestic US politics that the majority of Republican officeholders and the public support Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression (Pew Research 2025). Nevertheless, key actors in the Trump administration and various strands of his domestic base of support disagree on whether to maintain or expand military aid to Ukraine, even as public opinion is shifting in favour of Ukraine. The most radical factions in the MAGA movement have frequently echoed Russian misinformation, turned responsibility for the war on its head (accusing Ukraine's President Zelenskyy of being a warmonger), and demanded that US budgetary commitments be spent domestically. These signs were visible even before the administration took office, leading an influential European think-tank to issue a warning to 'prepare for the worst' (Tagarev 2024). Trump himself has become more contradictory, and in autumn 2025 even appeared willing to support Ukraine more forcefully, for example by expanding supplies of antimissile materiel, but not long-range missile exports. His administration has recently imposed sanctions on the main Russian oil businesses, suggesting a sudden shift that prompted some analysts to speak of 'whiplash' (Whitman and Wolff 2025).

Nevertheless, a scenario in which the radical faction pushing for peace on Russian terms gains domestic momentum could lead Trump to abandon Ukraine. If US military supplies to Ukraine were to cease, European supply chains would not be able to make up for the shortfall, at least in the short term. This shortfall would persist even if the limited willingness to provide additional capabilities of European



partners were to suddenly be overcome (Helwig 2023). A complete withdrawal of US troops and support to Europe would, according to Cladi, be the strongest incentive for European ‘strategic autonomy’ (2025, 6), even if it would not immediately change the EU’s capability to exert hard power (Smith et al. 2025). It would likely require institutional changes that would push the EU further down the path towards acquiring state-like characteristics (Morgenstern-Pomorski 2024). The cessation of American assistance to Ukraine would result in a peace that would favour Putin’s Russia by solidifying Russian control of Ukrainian territory, allowing Russia to rebuild its military and continue its aggression in Ukraine or elsewhere with an even more strongly embedded authoritarian regime. Europe would have to engage considerable resources into containing Russia’s incursions into and sabotage in its airspace and territorial waters, and even in the mainland of the EU’s member states (Walker and Krupa 2025), Russian political manipulation on the domestic European level, as well as balancing international efforts at alliance building by the Russian Federation in other parts of the world. Future threats to the EU’s security were already raised by several politicians, including Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen (Parker and Kirby 2025) and European Commissioner for Defence Andrius Kubilius.

Second scenario: Muddling through

In this scenario, the United States muddles through, preserving an ambivalent posture toward the alliance. Its support for Europe and Ukraine is increasingly shaped by the rapid swings of the domestic political cycle: one week, the president appears to signal sympathy for Putin by meeting him in Alaska (Dunn 2025) or by publicly attacking Zelenskyy, and the next, he recommits to Ukraine by approving further military assistance or imposing new sanctions on Russia (Debusmann, Matza, and Aikman 2025). This pattern extends to halting arms shipments only to release them later, or floating the possibility of supplying long-range missiles to Ukraine without ultimately following through (Debusmann and Sudworth 2025). In such a volatile environment—marked by fluctuating political views and eroding institutional norms—muddling through requires European partners to adapt quickly to shifting US positions while pursuing long-term objectives with a constantly changing coalition of willing states. Divergent US views on European strategic autonomy (Ossa 2025) also create openings for European governments to manoeuvre.

Muddling through is, in some ways, the EU's modus operandi (Missiroli and Rhinard 2007, Amato et al. 2013, Moravcsik 2016, Schumacher 2020), but quick and effective policy change is not a given. This is particularly true, given that the EU's member states themselves alternate between liberal democratic and populist governance. This scenario will leave many pressing policy issues unresolved, contributing to future crisis points. Besch and Varma (2025) point out that transatlantic collaboration could also take the form of revisionist cooperation, even if that would, at this moment, require overcoming a dominant majority of pragmatic governments on the European side. In security policy, this scenario is characterized by mainly national responses to regional and global challenges that are coordinated at the margins, but do not fundamentally alter the dynamics of European security policy. Recent developments in European-level defence policy show that there is potential for integration, but that member states remain resistant to centralization, even in a crisis (Genschel 2022, Fiott 2024). This reluctance also means European security policy maintains and potentially strengthens the dependence of European governments on the United States, for example, through arms purchases despite their espoused objective of increased strategic autonomy. Lovato and Simón (2025) have shown the importance of coalition size and a degree of centralization for Europeans to resist external reproaches, highlighting the need to strengthen joint efforts, particularly in a muddling-through scenario. Any move towards centralization in European defence is likely going to be contested by European populist governments as well, as the cases of Hungary and Slovakia have illustrated.

Third scenario: Moving forward

The last scenario is the most optimistic of all and means a new chapter for a closer transatlantic relationship. The reluctant move by the Trump administration in autumn 2025 to impose additional sanctions on Russia has opened the way for the development of a new transatlantic bargain. The starting point for this latest bargain would be the fulfilment of the longstanding demand on the Europeans to be fully responsible for European security in the first instance, including shouldering the costs associated with this. At the same time, it would require the United States not to interfere with European efforts toward strategic autonomy and to provide, as a starting point, a closer and privileged collaboration on defence technology. Ossa's study of American policymakers' views showed that there is diversity of views that could allow for a bargain that increases European capabilities, even though this



assumes that more minority views become mainstream in US discourse (2025, 503–7). Recent surveys do show a direction of travel of popular opinion, even among Republican supporters, towards support for Ukraine (Pew Research 2025).

However, it is noteworthy that the conservative position has so far been one of expressed opposition to European autonomous decision-making in security and defence, as it is seen as undermining NATO (Kochis 2020). From an academic balance of power perspective, Cladi argued that both sides still benefit from the transatlantic security arrangement (2025, 5). Allin and Chivvis (2025) similarly argue that there is significant scope for transatlantic cooperation, even if possibly only under future administrations. Smith et al. (2025) highlight the density of transatlantic relationships, both bilateral and involving the European Union's various actors, as a cushion against abrupt changes. The Trump administration's willingness to break with established practice, however, leaves it more vulnerable to disruption.

If this realization can be translated into a new type of transatlantic bargain, a third scenario emerges. This new, special relationship could encompass intelligence and technological cooperation with collective European entities and defence corporations, for example and reciprocal access to technological advancement, a kind of innovation sharing. It could mean stronger collaboration between the European Commission and its US counterparts to facilitate cooperation. This scenario would, of course, be more costly to the United States at the outset, but the new level of investment in Europe should yield some gains for the United States in the medium term as well. At the same time, it would require a turn away from politicizing international cooperation and a willingness to go beyond NATO's established roles (Ewers-Peters 2025).

Policy implications

The policy implications for transatlantic relations in the security domain are driven by uncertainty of US policy direction, as well as European Union political unity and willingness to cooperate in core areas of state powers, which remain largely outside of the EU's competences. Member states' cooperation is complicated by new divisions between populist governments that tend to view EU support for Ukraine more critically or oppose it, and the EU majority, which seeks to support Ukraine without taking major steps to escalate the war. But even when governments are not split along a populist– pragmatist divide, joining forces in security policy is

not guaranteed (Anderson and Steinberg 2025). At the same time, when core member states are in agreement and there is a level of supranational support, the EU can act jointly to improve its security policy (Lovato and Simón 2025). Recent developments in defence show that Europeans know what needs to be done, but find it hard to get it done quickly (Brøgger 2024; Fiott 2024).

Another policy implication is the urgent need for greater solidarity among EU member states. If moves such as using Russian frozen assets to finance loans to Ukraine are to be successfully implemented, they will likely require assurances for those who are more affected by possible Russian retaliation, in this case, Belgium.

These implications make the scenarios interesting to entertain: the consequences for the EU are similar, independent of the scenario. What changes are, first, the time horizon and, second, the environment in which these decisions will need to be taken. The muddling-through scenario, which we deem most likely, in essence, only buys time and avoids the immediate need for collective action. The disintegration scenario would add immediacy to the issue at a level that the EU is not equipped to respond to. The moving forward scenario, which we would deem the least likely in the current situation, would require significant gains in capabilities at the EU level to facilitate a new grand bargain establishing a new kind of equilibrium of responsibilities in Europe.

Conclusions: The way forward for the EU

The policy implications of these three scenarios point in the same direction, but with different levels of urgency. The EU must expand its production and supply chains for weapons, emergency supplies and civilian reconstruction. As member states will be unlikely to hand over these matters to an EU-wide authority, this will mean investment in cooperation, joint in the sense of bilateral or multilateral projects and procurement. The initiatives related to strategic autonomy have already accelerated, partly due to Trump's second term in office. These include increased military spending and initiatives such as the ReArm Europe Plan – Readiness 2030, but there will need to be greater efforts to build European military interoperability and genuinely European capabilities.

Specifically, regarding the war, if the United States does not rise to the challenge, Europeans will need to provide Ukraine with security guarantees (see also Biscop 2025). The EU needs to develop a strategic support to Ukraine beyond piecemeal



decisions on what each member state is comfortable supplying. The expansion of European financing of joint development and R&D in defence projects can only be the beginning of what needs to become a more united effort at a European scale, including the UK and other partners, without prejudice to the EU's internal requirements. Early signs of collaboration with Ukraine's defence-industrial capabilities are encouraging and could be supported at the European level. Since we know integration in these sensitive government areas will not be achieved top down, it is equally important for the EU to facilitate, at a larger scale, the cooperation of European military staff through an expansion of the European Defence and Security College to other training and planning tools where European defence and security experts can better develop mutual understanding and esprit de corps.

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