

Conclusion: How Should the EU Deal with Changing Transatlantic Relations?

Marianne Riddervold¹, Guri Rosén² and Jessica R. Greenberg³

The transatlantic relationship has always shifted between cooperation and crisis, with tensions rooted in how United States (US) leadership is exercised, the evolution of European integration, and recurring disputes over institutions and burden-sharing. Those strains have usually been contained by shared threat perceptions and a baseline commitment to liberal democracy (Tocci and Alcaro 2012; Smith, this volume).

Under a populist right-wing policy under ‘Trump 2.0’, the authors in this volume depict a sharper, more systematic challenge to transatlantic relations across all four pillars of the transatlantic relationship. In terms of security, strategic interests, and threat perceptions no longer align, and the United States is a less reliable ally. Trump’s ‘America First’ agenda combines a broader rollback of international cooperation (including cuts and withdrawals affecting major bodies and funding streams) with punitive trade tools and more coercive alliance diplomacy, all weakening the relationship. In trade, changing policies under Trump is visible, not least in the use of comprehensive tariffs as well as an increasingly more antagonistic approach to the World Trade Organization (WTO). On the international arena, beyond targeting specific organizations, the shift is one of both practice and principle: international law becomes more openly instrumental, diplomacy more performative and multilateral institutions more readily treated as dispensable. As argued by Smith (this volume), for the European Union (EU), this is not only a difficult partner relationship but an assault on the institutional environment from which the Union derives legitimacy and leverage, while also

1. mariarid@arena.uio.no
2. guri.rosen@stv.uio.no
3. jrgreenb@illinois.edu

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accelerating a global ‘flux’ in multilateralism as other powers fill spaces left by US retrenchment. And not least, the value basis of the relationship is facing severe challenges, with right-wing populist forces challenging many of the core values on which the EU and the transatlantic relationship have been built.

All chapters in the report conclude that the transatlantic relationship has reached a turning point and is undergoing a significant shift. It is a clear possibility that transatlantic relations might weaken even further now, following a near decade of increased uncertainty. At the same time, several authors also emphasize the many adjustments made to accommodate the challenges to the EU–US relationship. One example is the framework agreement on trade (see Young, this volume). Another is defence and security, where increased European defence spending, the changing role of the EU, and the use of informal networks to bypass collaborative deadlocks indicate functional adaptation to the current impasse (Sus, this volume). ‘Muddling through’ implies that cooperation is issue-contingent. Arrangements are made based on the specific interests of either side rather than a shared ideological platform (Alcaro, this volume). While the relationship clearly is weaker than in previous decades, these various instances of ‘muddling through’ could lead to a redefined and different relationship in areas where interests align. Despite the deterioration of collaboration in international organizations, many of the existing networks of transatlantic relations, both public and private, remain strong and likely to withstand the strain, at least in the short to medium term (Smith, this volume). This form of ‘muddling through’ within a different and less strong relationship is identified as a plausible and likely future path for transatlantic relations, distinguishing it from full renewal or outright rupture.

While this is undoubtedly challenging, the European Union is in a strong position to build on and continue to lead in the areas that made the transatlantic relationship successful for so long, if the political will is there. These include active trade policies and more integrated economic and financial policies, a stronger and more independent European defence, robust commitments to core values, and sustained investment in international cooperation, institutions and coordination mechanisms. Across the chapters, the authors offer recommendations that aim to strengthen the alliance where possible, manage the pressures created by rising isolationism, trade conflict, and the current US political climate, and respond to the causes and effects of populist movements. They also emphasize the need for EU unity, a strengthening of European security and defence through investment in key strategic sectors, reaffirmed commitments to democracy, pluralism, and the rule of



law, and a reinforcement of European leadership on global challenges. A further priority is to promote effective multilateralism through new strategic partnerships while also strengthening existing international institutions.

This chapter sums up the report's main recommendations across the four pillars of the transatlantic relationship – security, trade, international institutions and values. At the end, we also provide a table that summarizes the recommendations of each chapter. Overall, the report argues that a broad coalition of actors is needed to address both the causes and the symptoms of strain in the transatlantic relationship and the impact of populism. Such broad action must include coordination among diplomatic services and international institutions, as well as engagement from citizen groups, civil society and rights advocates, state agencies, legal professionals and judges, teachers, social and health care workers, media literacy experts, academics and EU policymakers and elected officials. Both the EU's executive institutions and the European Parliament (EP) have important roles to play, not only to create efficient but also legitimate solutions to common challenges. The report also notes that while there are clear areas for action in the state, civil society and the economy, many challenges cut across sectors and require combined approaches. For example, industrial policy can be linked with economic development programmes, environmental regulation and research and development that support new security strategies.

So, what should the EU do in response?

While all the chapters have discussed the changes in transatlantic relations across different policy domains and the direction in which the relationship is moving, they also provide policy advice to the EU on how to respond to these changes. Overall, all the chapters argue for a coordinated and coherent EU response. Several argue that the EU should develop a more unified and firm political line towards Washington, moving away from appeasement and signalling that EU support cannot be taken for granted when US policies damage European security, trade or technology interests. While this is challenging when facing a US administration that links trade and other issues to security guarantees and US support for Ukraine, a coherent and strong EU will put the Union in a better position vis-à-vis its traditional partner and, not least, in a better position to adjust its policies in the face of common challenges. EU strategic autonomy should be strengthened further, and the EU must focus on developing its own security policies, although aligning

with the US and cooperating where possible, when interests align.

The EU should also continue to promote international cooperation and trade, in multilateral settings where possible, and with like-minded countries where needed. Several chapters focus on the latter point, highlighting how the EU, in order to reduce its vulnerability, should seek to strengthen its strategic autonomy while deepening bilateral and plurilateral partnerships, both in trade and in other areas of common interests. And not least, the EU should continue to uphold the values that have underpinned the integration project since the beginning. In a changing global and domestic environment, with increased right-wing populism taking place in parallel with war on the European continent, increased geo-economic and geopolitical conflict and changing transatlantic bond, this will perhaps prove to be the EU's biggest challenge.

Security: Key recommendations for the EU

The contributions on security (Alcaro, Pomorska and Morgenstern-Pomorski, Sus, Wong) all point to the same conclusion: the post-war transatlantic relationship is entering a 'post-American' phase, in which the EU can no longer rely on stable US leadership and must take much greater responsibility for its own security. Transatlantic ties are weakening, even if they are not collapsing, and US politics has become more volatile and less responsive to European concerns. At best, the relationship is muddling through, but due to developments in the EU, we also see a development towards a different, but redefined relationship where the EU takes a stronger role, and the two traditional partners cooperate in areas where interests overlap.

In this context, Europe has begun to improve coordination of resources and defence capabilities – both inside the EU and through flexible coalitions – but progress is uneven and too slow given the scale of the challenge. The EU needs to reduce its dependence on US military enablers, prepare for a possible weaker US commitment to NATO, and use its potential to strengthen member states' military, industrial, energy and technological assets. To do so will require a firmer, more unified stance towards Washington, greater solidarity inside the EU, and a coherent long-term strategy: building a stronger European defence industrial base, providing predictable support and security guarantees for Ukraine, and investing in genuine interoperability and European capabilities. At the same time, the EU must manage relations with China and other partners in a way that reinforces – rather than undermines – its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with the United States when interests align.



Trade: Key recommendations for the EU

The authors in the trade section (E. Jones, K. Jones, Poletti, Young) recommend a strategy where the EU builds its own economic strength and resilience while staying anchored in rules-based trade. The EU should keep prioritizing domestic policy goals, using its market power and regulatory tools to support growth, jobs and security at home. Doing so will form the core of a more competitive strategic autonomy. At the same time, member states need to coordinate enough to avoid pushing the costs of globalization onto one another and to prevent a patchwork of conflicting national measures. The EU should deepen trade and investment ties with partners on all continents, so it is less exposed to pressure from either the United States or China and better positioned as a key player in the multilateral trading system. Strengthening supply chains, technology capacity and the defence-related industrial base are central to this effort. In parallel, the EU should help keep the WTO functioning, work with others to update its rules and use WTO-compatible tools where possible. In the short term, it will often have to muddle through the Trump period with sector-by-sector bargaining, but the long-term goal should be a more autonomous and resilient EU economy that can both defend its interests and uphold an open, rules-based trading order.

International institutions: Key recommendations for the EU

The authors in the Institutions section (Drieskens, Fiorino, Smith, Veggeland) are also clear on their advice: under weaker transatlantic relations and more volatile US policies, the EU should approach international institutions as core instruments of European power and legitimacy, not as stable extensions of US–EU partnership. Doing so will require moving beyond a ‘wait and see’ posture and protecting the EU’s agency when US support is uncertain. The EU should be able to sustain institutional functions if the US withdraws, reduce the risks created by retaliation, and work to keep multilateral forums credible as places for rule-setting rather than coercive bargaining. Because internal division is a key constraint, the EU’s influence in the United Nations (UN) system and other bodies depends on stronger member state alignment and more predictable European financial and diplomatic capacity.

More generally, the EU should combine adaptation, selective pushback and long-term institutional strengthening. It should adapt where needed to manage short-

term risk, while avoiding dependency or appeasement. It should resist in targeted, coalition-backed ways when core norms and interests are at stake. Over time, it should prioritize ‘reconfiguration’ by strengthening international rules, funding models and coalitions with like-minded states so institutions are more resilient to funding shocks, obstruction and shifting power balances. It should also stay the course on long-horizon agendas, especially climate and health and keep building durable EU leadership that is less exposed to temporary US political swings.

Democratic values: Key recommendations for the EU

Authors in the democratic values section (Andersson, , Benson, Holmes, Newman) find that there is a clear crisis in the underlying consensus that has structured strong transatlantic relationships for the past 70+ years. The commitment to democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and minority rights is weakening on both sides of the Atlantic. This commitment arguably reached its height in the immediate post-Cold War period. Yet, a series of global shocks, including 9/11 and its aftermath, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015–2016 migration crisis, anti-internationalist and anti-EU sentiments and finally the COVID-19 pandemic, have shaken those earlier commitments to the core. These factors have shaped the rise of right-wing, populist, xenophobic politics on both sides of the Atlantic. More recently, the second Trump administration has directly undermined the shared values and commitment to the transatlantic alliance. The relationship has gone from one of strong alliance, to growing scepticism, towards what now can be seen as outright antagonism.

At the same time, parts of the population and political elites across the Atlantic converge in the rejection of core liberal principles. This convergence has produced an overall picture in which liberal institutions are muddling through, at best and are being actively dismantled, sometimes from the inside out, by populist forces. Within this context, the EU is called on to be a leader in reestablishing the core values that helped achieve the peace and prosperity of the long twentieth century. Its strength lies in EU institutions as a site for multilateral coordination and a ‘bully pulpit’ for the centrality of democratic and rule of law values. The EU must recommit to robust policy and programmatic ways of modelling inclusive approaches to social solidarity and support for precarious and vulnerable populations; returning to models of social integration and human rights guarantees for people on the move; strengthening institutional responses to populist attempts



to destabilize, undermine or co-opt democratic procedures, and rule of law principles. There is also a need to balance the need for investment in European security strategies and economic growth with social cohesion, commitments to environmental stewardship and increased civic and democratic participation.

Policy Recommendations on EU-US Relations

Security

Author	Chapter title	Key policy recommendations
Riccardo Alcaro	Overview and Background: Right-wing Nationalism, Trump and the Future of US-European Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce EU dependence on US defence and prepare for a weaker US commitment to NATO. Strengthen EU military, energy, technological and industrial capacities. Avoid fragmented national approaches and rely on pragmatic, issue-by-issue cooperation.
Monika Sus	Functional Adaptation Without Much Love: NATO and the Strains of EU-US Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase European defence spending and shared capabilities to manage US unpredictability. Use strong public support for EU defence to justify deeper cooperation. Accept uneven progress while gradually reducing reliance on US military assets.
Reuben Wong	EU-US-China Security Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in European defence capabilities and the defence industrial base. Reinforce coordination through NATO, the Strategic Compass and the Trade and Technology Council. Pursue a pragmatic China policy while diversifying partnerships to reduce vulnerability.
Jost-Henrik Morgenstern-Pomorski and Karolina Pomorska	The Russia-Ukraine War and Transatlantic Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand European production and supply chains for weapons, emergency supplies and reconstruction. Improve military interoperability and develop genuinely European capabilities. Provide Ukraine with credible, long-term security guarantees if US support weakens.

Trade

Author	Chapter	Key policy recommendations
Erik Jones	Overview and Background: Transatlantic Trade from Embedded Liberalism to Competitive Strategic Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep domestic policy goals at the centre of EU economic strategy. Coordinate national responses to globalization to avoid burden-shifting. Use EU regulatory and economic power to shape global trade norms while protecting domestic interests.
Arlo Poletti	EU-US-China Trade Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare to impose credible retaliatory trade measures when EU interests are harmed. Strengthen trade ties with partners across regions. Make full use of the EU's geo-economic policy toolkit.
Alasdair R. Young	From Trade Skirmishes to Trade War? Transatlantic Trade Relations during the Second Trump Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversify trade and reduce vulnerability to US pressure while supporting the WTO. Pursue internal reforms to boost competitiveness and defence-related capabilities. Strengthen supply-chain resilience in strategic sectors.
Kent Jones	Transatlantic Trade, the Trump Disruption and the World Trade Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand rules-based trade with non-US partners using the WTO framework. Muddle through with sector-by-sector bargaining during the Trump period. Strengthen WTO rules, including through plurilateral agreements.

International institutions

Author	Chapter	Key policy recommendations
Michael Smith	Overview and Background International Institutions, Populism and Transatlantic Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare for further weakening of transatlantic cooperation. Use resistance, adaptation and reconfiguration to sustain institutions. Focus on institutional resilience rather than restoring past cooperation.
Edith Drieskens	The United Nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge that EU-US relations at the UN are unequal. Increase European capacity to fill gaps left by US retrenchment where possible. Build stronger consensus among EU member states for coherent UN action.
Daniel Fiorino	The Trump Administration and Climate Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain EU climate leadership despite US obstruction. Continue Green Deal policies such as ETS expansion, CBAM and climate finance. Frame climate action as supporting jobs, security and democratic resilience.
Frode Veggeland	Turbulence in the World Health Organization: Implications for EU-US Cooperation in a Changing International Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen EU support for the WHO and global health governance. Build coalitions of willing partners within and beyond the WHO. Increase EU strategic autonomy in health while deepening cooperation with like-minded states.



Democratic values

Author	Chapter	Key policy recommendations
Douglas R. Holmes	Overview and Background Democracy and Populism: The European Case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat populism as a structural political challenge. • Develop anticipatory tools to identify emerging political pressures. • Reinforce democratic engagement, especially through the European Parliament.
Saul Newman	Illiberalism and Democracy: The Populist Challenge to Transatlantic Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen liberal democratic institutions. • Counter exclusionary populist narratives and protect minority rights. • Improve regulation of digital platforms to limit misinformation.
Ruben Andersson	The Illiberal Bargain on Migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect civil liberties and limit surveillance overreach. • Rework partnerships with migration host states through broader cooperation. • Frame migration as a social and economic issue rather than a security threat.
Robert Benson	Illiberal International: The Transatlantic Right's Challenge to Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandate full disclosure of foreign and EU funding for political organizations and media. • Build transatlantic civic-resilience networks linking universities, local governments, and NGOs. • Align US-EU regulation of digital platforms that amplify extremist and disinformation content.
Albena Azmanova	Vulnerable Groups, Protections and Precarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address economic precarity as a driver of populism. • Shift industrial policy toward stable jobs and public services. • Govern global markets through labour and environmental standards.

References

Tocci, Nathalie, and Riccardo Alcaro. 2012. "Three Scenarios for the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship." *Transworld Working Paper 4*. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/three-scenarios-future-transatlantic-relationship>

