Populism and the Future of Transatlantic Relations: Challenges and Policy Options

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Introduction

Several years ago, John Peterson (2018, 647) wrote that

> the future of US–European relations and the liberal international order depend less than we might expect on what the US or Europe do to invest in their alliance or in foreign policy more generally. What really matters is domestic democratic politics in Europe and America.

Donald Trump's return to the presidency in January 2025, together with the consequential shifts in United States (US) foreign policy, makes Peterson's claim appear well-founded. We are now witnessing nothing short of a deep and potentially durable rift between the European Union (EU) and the US.

With weakening transatlantic relations, broader geopolitical uncertainties and war on the European continent, the EU must navigate simultaneous internal strains and external pressure. The increasing support for radical right parties across Europe and their influence on EU institutions and domestic agendas make it more challenging for the EU to unify and present a cohesive front in response to Trump's attempt to destabilize the transatlantic alliance. The EU faces new challenges that

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are the consequence of Trump's policies in defence, trade and his undermining of international institutions, democratic norms and the rule of law. At the international level, the EU's goal to be a global leader in promoting democracy, human rights and international law both in its immediate vicinity and globally requires proactive and strategic actions to defend and enhance the current liberal order. With Trump's return to the presidency, EU leaders must reevaluate transatlantic relations and recalibrate EU policy to mitigate risks from shifts in US foreign policy.

This report assesses how changes in US foreign policy under a right-wing populist president affect the EU–US relationship and offers concrete policy recommendations on pressing issues. Focusing on the links between foreign-policy shifts, domestic polarization and antiliberal democratic trends, the report examines how domestic dynamics may constitute the most severe long-term challenge to transatlantic cooperation. It also evaluates specific policy challenges and opportunities for strengthening that cooperation in the years ahead.

'Transatlantic relations' is a broad concept that refers to the historic, economic, strategic, cultural, political and social relations that exist between countries in North America and Europe. A key feature of international relations since the end of the Second World War, we here define it as the overall set of relations between the EU and the United States, 'within the broader framework of the institutional and other connections maintained via NATO and other institutions' (Smith 2018, 539). After several decades of close cooperation, no other regions in the world have such strong ties as North America and Europe. Transatlantic cooperation is a cornerstone of the United States-originated post-war liberal order, which originated from the liberal idea that democracy, human rights, liberalized trade and active participation in international institutions produce economic gains and advance stability, peace and human dignity. The transatlantic relationship emerged as a security alliance under American leadership, established to protect Europe from the Soviet Union. Its continuing relevance after the Cold War has been driven primarily by the shared values, identities and strategic outlooks that have united its members (Schimmelfennig 2012). Despite differences in specific policy issues, a core set of shared liberal values was always at the heart of this relationship. Risse (2016), for instance, describes the transatlantic relationship as a security community – one grounded not only in common strategic and economic interests, but also in shared liberal ideas. Ikenberry (2008; 2018) similarly frames the transatlantic relationship as the 'Atlantic Political Order', a security community that moved beyond its defence origins to rest on liberal tenets, free trade and cooperation through

multilateral institutions within and outside the United Nations (UN) system (Riddervold and Newsome 2018, 2022; Risse 2012; Smith et al. 2024).

For West, and later most European nations, the Atlantic order provided a framework within which liberal democracies could secure greater protection and influence, and a framework within which the European integration project could evolve. Being part of this liberal hegemonic system meant integration into a comprehensive network of economic, political, and security institutions (Tocci and Alcaro 2012; Riddervold and Bolstad 2026; Smith et al. 2024). The relationship with the United States has thus been central to European states' foreign policies, just as ties with Europe have long been a core element of US international strategy.

While there have always been disagreements both over values and interests in the transatlantic relationship, we seem to have reached a point where this contestation does not just affect domestic developments, but also the very basis of the transatlantic relationship itself (Riddervold and Bolstad 2026). There is no longer a clear consensus that European and US markets and political institutions are bound together by common goals and interests. Trump is withdrawing from international cooperation in the UN. In the realm of security, he has cast doubt on American security guarantees in NATO and its commitment to come to the aid of its European allies in the event of an external attack. In trade, the administration's focus has been more on tariffs and trade restrictions than on the need to uphold global and transatlantic free trade and strong relations. And not least, as the US National Security Strategy of December 2025 clearly illustrates, the deepening transatlantic divide is fundamentally rooted in a clash of values between Trump's America and the EU. This illustrates the growing value divide between the two partners and risks undermining the liberal basis of the different pillars on which transatlantic relations have rested and thus the transatlantic relationship writ large (Riddervold and Bolstad 2026). Viewed together, these developments mean the transatlantic relationship is at a critical crossroads, where substantive shifts are more probable now than continued adherence to long-standing institutional collaboration and norms (Jones 2025).

By exploring developments in US foreign policies and how these are linked to domestic polarization and antiliberal democratic ideas, chapters in this report shed light on how this domestic factor poses a severe challenge to the transatlantic relationship. Authors focus on how the rise of right-wing populism – with an increasing portion of the population resisting globalization, international institutions, free trade and even democratic values on both sides of the Atlantic

(e.g., de Vries et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2021; Rogowski et al., 2021; Walter, 2021) – affects the transatlantic relationship. After all, 'the futures of the liberal order, transatlantic alliance and western democratic politics are inextricably bound together' (Peterson 2018, 638).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how US policies under Trump affect EU–US relations, we draw on Ikenberry (2008, 2018) to distinguish between four liberal pillars on which the transatlantic relationship has rested: *security, trade, international institutions and democratic values*. The report is organized accordingly and is composed of four main parts that each start with a chapter giving a broader historical overview of developments in the domain, followed by three case studies of how US policies now affect the transatlantic relationship. To systematize the changes we observe, we distinguish between three possible scenarios that are discussed in the different chapters: that transatlantic relations are *breaking apart* due to domestic polarization and/or structural geopolitical changes, that they will *muddle through* due to ongoing changes based on functional cooperation, networks and interdependencies; or that we in fact over time, despite current challenges, may be witnessing a change towards a *different and redefined but stronger relationship* (Tocci and Alcaro 2012); Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome 2021).

Framework: The four pillars of transatlantic relations

Drawing on Ikenberry (2008, 2018), the 'Atlantic Political Order' has been built on four foundational, interlinked pillars established under US liberal hegemony: security alliances, trade and finance, common institutions and rules, as well as shared democratic, liberal norms.

Ikenberry identifies two mutually beneficial bargains that have underpinned the transatlantic relationship. The 'realist bargain' involved the United States using its military strength to support its European (and other) allies, with Europe agreeing to subsume a US-led system. This bargain was institutionalized through NATO and numerous bilateral security agreements between the United States and its Western allies. The 'liberal bargain' involved Europe accepting US leadership in exchange for security protection, access to US markets, technology and resources within an open world economy, amongst other things, resulting in a strong trade and financial relationship.

While security and trade form the first two pillars, the transatlantic relationship has also formed the core of what is often called the multilateral system, meaning international cooperation within the UN and other international organizations built under US leadership after the Second World War. Ruggie (1982) referred to key parts of this system as 'embedded liberalism', where economic liberalism was integrated into a managed global economy, giving governments greater control over trade and economic openness. Institutions designed to support this framework aimed to reinforce cooperation, while strengthening US ties with its post-war partners and reducing concerns about domination and abandonment. Over time, this rules-based order expanded beyond monetary and trade cooperation to cover security, development, health and, more recently, global challenges such as climate change, with states increasingly relying on multilateral frameworks for coordinated action (Zürn 2018). Multilateral cooperation and institutions have also been so central to the EU that it is described as part of the 'EU's DNA' (Smith 2011).

Lastly, while focused on security and trade, the transatlantic relationship has, as discussed above, had a liberal value-based core, extending beyond economic and strategic cooperation and institutional rules and institutions to also include broader commitments to democracy and human rights. While the order's principles, like Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' and post-war multilateralism, were framed as universal, its structure was shaped by Cold War realities and centred on the United States and its democratic allies. Initially focused on Western Europe and Japan, the community of democracies expanded after the Cold War to include a larger and more diverse group of nations. While often being accused of double standards and with much variation in their foreign policies, from Wilson to Biden, US presidents before Trump have operated on the belief that democracies possess a unique ability to cooperate due to shared interests and values (Riddervold and Bolstad 2026). This belief reinforced the idea that the 'free world' was not merely a temporary alliance against the Soviet Union, but a growing political community united by a common liberal democratic vision. For Europe, the Atlantic order 'provided a 'container' within which liberal democracies could gain greater measures of security, protection and economic prosperity as well. To be inside this liberal hegemonic order was to be positioned inside a set of economic, political and security institutions. It was both a *Gesellschaft* – a 'society' defined by formal rules, institutions and governmental ties – and a *Gemeinschaft*, a 'community' defined by shared values, beliefs and expectations (Ikenberry 2018, 17).

Changes under Trump: Three possible scenarios

Across the post-war era, US presidents – despite partisan differences – have consistently prioritized and maintained the transatlantic partnership. Successive administrations from both parties regarded robust NATO alliances, international cooperation and extensive trade links with Europe and other partners as vital to American security and economic prosperity.

With the re-election of Trump in 2024, all four pillars of the relationship are now being challenged. Domestic policies directly and indirectly disturb the shared interests, interdependence, institutions and values that have served to uphold a strong transatlantic relationship (Risse 2016; Riddervold and Newsome 2022; Smith et al 2024). Regarding security interests, Trump is questioning the United States' commitments to NATO, forcing the EU to step up the game in security and defence. This change, however, also reflects longer-term structural and domestic trends. Indeed, the need to counter China's global expansionism is one of the few issues where the US political elite, across both parties, agree. American voters also consider China one of the main threats to the United States (Smeltz 2022; Bolstad and Riddervold 2023). Domestically, the view on transatlantic relations is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, Congress continues to be less polarized on foreign policy than on domestic issues, and there are different perspectives on foreign policy within the Republican Party (see Alcaro, this volume). Polls also show a continued, although declining, commitment to NATO and European allies (Smeltz 2022). On the other hand, however, studies suggest that Democrats and Republicans are increasingly divided on whether the United States should focus on domestic problems or continue to support international engagement (Smeltz 2022). The United States' changing security policies under Trump are also evident in the president's more aggressive foreign policies and his apparent willingness to use the United States' might to enforce American interests, also vis-à-vis its traditional allies.

Weak informal ties also make the transatlantic relationship vulnerable to changing US administrations. Despite close cooperation for decades, the transatlantic relationship rests on rather few formal institutional ties. There is for example no trade agreement between the EU and the United States. As Elsuwege and Szép (2023) note, many networks, in epistemic communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations are essentially informal and political rather than based on formal legal or institutional structures. Hence,

although many of these expert communities and diplomatic and other networks may persist under Trump (see Smith, this volume), and as such help stabilize the relationship somewhat, the lack of formal institutions makes the transatlantic relationship more vulnerable to changes introduced by the policy decisions of different administrations. Formal institutions are harder to break and are more consistent and stable over time compared to informal networks, which depend more on the people they consist of. Moreover, Trump and his team have extended the number of administrative positions referred to as political and thus subject to change substantially (Wendling 2024). Over time, this is likely to affect informal transatlantic diplomatic and expert networks.

At the same time, observers argue that the current challenges should not be exaggerated (Tocci and Alcaro 2012). The transatlantic relationship has withstood crises before, such as disagreements following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which at the time was described as the biggest crisis ever facing the transatlantic relationship (Abelson and Brooks 2022). Tocci and Alcaro (2012) even found that the transatlantic relationship has changed and reemerged through periods of stability and crisis, with structural changes, crises and disagreements leading to a renewed relationship between the United States and Europe, rather than to a breakdown or a weakening.

To discuss if and how transatlantic relations are changing under Trump, all our chapters engage with the following three scenarios:

- A first scenario suggests that transatlantic relations *disintegrate* in one or more policy areas, owing to diverging interests and responses to structural geopolitical changes, or to domestic political changes linked to antiglobalization, America First or isolationist sentiments.

- A second scenario suggests that the EU–US relationship will be able to *muddle through* contemporary geopolitical and domestic challenges by undergoing a *functional adjustment* where cooperation is maintained in policy areas where this is seen as mutually advantageous (Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 15). This adjustment is made possible by factors such as pre-existing interdependencies, networks and institutionalized relations or overlapping interests in issue-specific areas. If these types of agreements are found in many areas, the overall relationship will be stronger than if they are only found in some domains.

- A third scenario posits that the transatlantic relationship might even *move*

forward in the face of global uncertainty and common challenges. This scenario could, for example, arise in the face of external shocks, as part of a broader balancing game, and/or because changing global structures and shared challenges reinforce and strengthen existing networks and interdependencies. These new forms of cooperation will be more resilient if they are formally institutionalized. However, it is also possible that convergence in a new and redefined relationship follows populist or right-wing trends, for example, securitization of borders or a shared set of policy approaches intended to weaken liberal values like pluralism, civic freedoms and human rights.

Structure of the report

Within each section of the report, a background chapter introduces the overarching debate, followed by three case studies focusing on observed changes, policy implications and recommendations for EU responses.

Section 1: Security (Alcaro, Pomorska and Morgenstern-Pomorski, Sus, Wong)
In security, NATO has traditionally served as the alliance's institutional backbone, but the EU has also increasingly taken on a bigger role, especially after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Fiott 2023; Grand 2024; Rieker and Giske 2023). Originally established to deter and, if necessary, defend against Soviet expansionism, NATO's survival beyond the Cold War was largely due to the common values, identities, and worldviews on which it was founded (Schimmelfennig, 2012). NATO is a trust-based pact whose deterrent power rests on the expectation that Article 5 will be honoured rather than on legal enforcement. Recent US conduct, however, has strained that normative foundation: proposals for a transactional, 'two-tier' NATO tied to defence spending and rhetoric about Greenland contribute to undermining the alliance's values-based solidarity and the liberal principles of sovereignty and self-determination (Riddervold and Bolstad 2026). The clearest manifestation of an eroding liberal consensus and increasing strategic divide is visible in responses to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine: under Biden, the United States acted with Europe to condemn a breach of core international norms and lead a coordinated response grounded in multilateral and human rights arguments (Bosse 2022; Riddervold and Newsome 2022). Three years later, the Trump administration's posture – advocating neutrality and even entertaining recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and other territorial areas – diverges sharply from the liberal principles that have sustained the transatlantic order since the Second World War.

Section 2: Trade (E. Jones, K. Jones, Poletti, Young)

A second foundational pillar of the transatlantic relationship has been a shared commitment to liberal trade principles, which holds that regulated free trade through rules-based institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), produces mutual economic gains and stabilizing interdependence (Ikenberry 2018; Keohane and Nye 2012). Both the United States and the EU have at times fallen short of these ideals: the EU has long sheltered its agricultural sector, and no comprehensive EU–US trade agreement has materialized despite deep commercial ties (Risse 2016), while public concerns about consumer protection and other values helped derail the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership or TTIP (de Ville and Siles-Brügge 2016). Rising populism has amplified scepticism toward multilateral bodies such as the WTO and weakened domestic support for trade liberalization (Kerremans 2022). Under Trump's second administration, protectionist policies, tariff measures and abrupt renegotiations have strained transatlantic trade and regulatory cooperation, undermined trust, and contravened core WTO principles such as the most favoured nation (MFN) principle, whereas the EU continues to champion the WTO and rules-based trade – summed up in the claim that 'with Europe, what you see is what you get' (von der Leyen 2025) – producing a widening divergence over economic liberalism and deepening the transatlantic divide.

Section 3: International institutions (Drieskens, Fiorino, Smith, Veggeland)

Right-wing populist, antiglobalization currents on both sides of the Atlantic have increasingly challenged multilateral cooperation and liberal institutions, with the Trump administration providing the clearest political expression of this transatlantic divergence. Under his second term, Trump has initiated a rolling back of American engagement with international bodies – reaffirming withdrawals from the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) and the Paris Agreement, slashing foreign aid as 'wasteful spending', and framing multilateral institutions as inefficient, elite-driven constraints on national sovereignty. These moves reflect a broader ideological shift from liberal internationalism toward a sovereignty-first, 'America First' posture that casts multilateral commitments as threats to identity and autonomy. At the same time, the EU has become a focal point of populist ire in the US narrative – portrayed as an external extension of domestic liberal opponents (Belin 2024) – so that withdrawals and unilateralism both signal and deepen a growing rupture between US populist politics and the EU's commitment to global governance.

Section 4: Democratic values (Andersson, Azmanova, Benson, Holmes, Newman)
At the heart of the widening transatlantic divide is a core value conflict between the Trump administration and the EU, where rising illiberal social trends erode the liberal democratic norms that long anchored transatlantic ties. Far-right populists on both sides of the Atlantic are actively critical of democratic and rule of law institutions that were so central to deepening US–European cooperation following the end of the Cold War (Carothers 2007). The US administration's support has likewise emboldened self-proclaimed 'illiberal' leaders in Europe. This approach was starkly visible at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, where Vice President JD Vance echoed populist rhetoric and signalled support for Germany's ostracized far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), while figures within the administration (and allied private actors) openly backed illiberal parties and attacked democratic institutions and higher education. The administration's challenges to election legitimacy (e.g., claims about Romania's 2025 vote), its cuts to federally funded research, its elimination of long-standing programs to support democracy, rule of law and humanitarian assistance, both in and in collaboration with European partners, and its differing approach to regulating misinformation further widened the values gap with Europe. Attacks on US higher education, and cuts to funding for programs that enhance European–US scholarly exchange, undermine scientific collaboration, threaten transatlantic opportunities for innovation and undercut long-standing commitments to citizen diplomacy. Although far-right movements in the United States and Europe vary in context, they share a populist, nativist orientation – what Mudde (2007, 19) describes as an exclusionary ideology hostile to nonnative elements – that reframes democracy as majoritarian rule and rejects liberal protections for minority rights and the rule of law.

Our conclusion sums up key findings and provides recommendations for how the EU should respond to changing transatlantic relations.

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