



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Changing transatlantic relations – and what it means for Europe

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Summary

In a more uncertain world and with war in Europe, securing a strong relationship with their traditional partner and ally, the United States (US), is more important than ever for Europeans. Yet, Europe is facing a reality where there is a real possibility that transatlantic relations may be severely weakening. This European policy analysis explores ongoing changes in the transatlantic relationship, what this tells us about its future direction, and what this implies for Europe. It discusses what a second Trump, or a Harris, presidency might imply, the challenges facing European security and defence, and what must be done to address them.

The analysis finds that extensive networks, trade relations, and interdependencies continue to make the transatlantic relationship the strongest interregional relationship in the world. However, domestic changes in the US and a changing geopolitical reality with the US prioritizing China over Europe mean that the transatlantic relationship is weaker than before. The future of European security and defence depends on its ability to increase its support for Ukraine, to strengthen its own security in NATO – in the EU and in closer cooperation between them – and to keep the US as close as possible.

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This analysis is largely based on the following previous publications: Bolstad and Riddervold (2023); Riddervold and Newsome (2018, 2021, 2022), Riddervold and Rieker (2024).

The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

1. Introduction

‘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. Defined here as the overall set of relations between Europe and the United States, ‘within the broader framework of the institutional and other connections maintained via NATO and other institutions’ (Smith, 2018, p. 539), transatlantic relations have been a key feature of international relations since the end of World War II. It constitutes the foundation of what is often called the ‘liberal’ or ‘Western international order’, developed by the US after the Second World War, with the UN, the Bretton Woods system, and various security alliances at its centre (Ikenberry, 2018).

The significance of transatlantic cooperation for Europe was underscored by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The conflict has re-elevated the issue of territorial security to the forefront of Europe’s agenda, dispelling the post-Cold War notion that such threats were a thing of the past. It has also exposed Europe’s vulnerabilities to various broader security threats and the dangers posed by economic and technological dependencies. And not least, it shows how deep and wide the resources of the US in terms of defence and security are compared to those of Europe; the ways in which these resources continue to shape the development of Europe’s foreign and security policies; and how dependent the other NATO members are on US support both in the face of territorial threats and in terms of providing the necessary support to Ukraine.

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Today, the transatlantic relationship is at a crossroads, with its weakening or even dismantling being at the top of the European agenda. In a more uncertain world, with a rising China, war in Europe, and conflict in the Middle East, securing a strong relationship with their traditional partner

and ally, the United States (US), is more important than ever for Europeans. Yet, Europe is facing a reality where there is a real possibility that a strong transatlantic relationship may be weaker than it used to be, that it is far from automatic, and even that it might not be there at all.

This European policy analysis sets out to explore ongoing changes in the transatlantic relationship, what this tells us about the future direction in which the relationship is going, and what this implies for Europe. With the US’s ‘pivot to Asia’ and increasing polarization of US foreign policies, are transatlantic relations changing or even weakening, and if so, what are the implications of weaker transatlantic ties for European security and defence?

To address these questions, the analysis explores change and stability in transatlantic relations since 2011 (when the US pivoted to Asia), focusing in particular on developments since 2016 (the election of Donald Trump). To provide a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted transatlantic relationship, Section 2 first describes the many factors that, despite much attention to transatlantic challenges, still serve to stabilize the relationship, such as existing networks, elite cooperation, shared norms, economic and financial interdependencies, and existing feelings of commonality across the Atlantic. Section 3 then moves on to consider how domestic and structural changes in the US nonetheless have led to a weakening of the transatlantic relationship, compared to the previous decades. This section also discusses what a second Trump, or a Harris, presidency may imply for NATO and European defence. Section 4 discusses what these changes imply for European security, and some of the challenges facing a Europe having to take more responsibility for its own security and defence. Finally, the conclusion (Section 5) explores three scenarios of how transatlantic relations might develop in the medium to longer term.

2. Crises and change in the transatlantic relationship

Relations between Europe and the US rival those of any other regions of the world. Due to decades and even centuries of cooperation and interaction, no other regions are as closely connected in terms of security, economy, values, and institutions

as Europe (increasingly as the EU) and the US (Abelson and Brooks, 2022; Alcaro, Greco and Peterson 2016; Fahey, 2023; Riddervold and Newsome, 2018, 2022; Smith et al., 2024). The election of Trump as president of the US in 2016 therefore came as a shock and can only be described as a crisis to the Europeans (Anderson, 2018). Trump's presidency not only threatened European defence prospects but also challenged the very core of the EU's identity as a promoter of a liberal multilateral order (Smith, 2018). Not believing in international institutions, and in complete contrast to the EU's preferred policies, Trump withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement and the Iran accord, ended negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), imposed tariffs on EU products, expressed a clear dislike for the EU, and questioned the US's commitment to NATO allies in the event of an attack.

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Against this background, scholars and observers started questioning the viability of the transatlantic relationship. Indeed, as underlined by Smith et al. (2024), the transatlantic partnership has always been characterized both by cooperation and conflict, with historical moments potentially also causing longer-term frictions between the traditional partners, such as the Suez crisis (1956), De Gaulle's attempts to distance the European communities from US influence (1960s), the end of the Cold War, the EU's failure to respond to the Yugoslav Wars (1990s), and not least the Iraq War (2003), which at the time was described as the worst crisis ever facing the transatlantic relationship (Alcaro, Greco and Peterson 2016; Riddervold and Bolstad, 2023). However, in light of the foreign policy U-turn under Trump, scholars like Drezner (2019, p. 10) argued that 'this time is different'. Walt (2017) argued for a 'transatlantic divorce', claiming that it was time for the US to gradually disengage from NATO and allow Europe to handle its own security. Kagan (2019) was concerned about what was referred to as a US 'decoupling'

from Europe, while yet others argued that Trump's actions risked undermining the viability of the very multilateral order the US had created (Zakaria, 2017) and that contemporary geopolitical changes, including the rise of China and a more aggressive Russia, would strongly exacerbate this decline (Rose, 2018; Smith, 2018).

3. A weaker transatlantic relationship?

What, then, do we know so far? Is the transatlantic relationship withering in the face of geopolitical changes and domestic polarization in the US? Or have the extensive networks, interdependencies, ideas, and institutions that have underpinned the transatlantic relationship in the past (Smith et al., 2024) served to uphold a stable relationship in the face of existing challenges?

3.1 Many stabilizing factors ...

On the one hand, strong networks, trade relations, shared interests, and interdependencies continue to make the transatlantic relationship the strongest interregional relationship in the world. A continued strong and shared economic interest in the transatlantic relationship is, for example, why Ikenberry (2018) expects it to remain strong in the future, even under a more isolationist president. Following Ikenberry, the high level of globalization, interdependence, and a common interest in open, well-functioning markets will continue to create a push for cooperation in search of efficient solutions to common challenges. The US is undoubtedly more interested in its own level of competitiveness vis à-vis an economically stronger China than in coordinating this with its European partners, and the US and the EU did not, for example, coordinate a common approach when introducing tariffs on Chinese electric cars in 2024. At the same time, under Biden, there has been cooperation with the Commission on how to derisk from China by strengthening supply lines, reducing dependencies, and securing access to critical technological components and raw materials. We have also seen negotiations on access to US markets for EU firms following Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, the regulation of tech, and questions of data protection, to mention just a few examples (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). And although tensions persist in the WTO, as further discussed below, the EU and the US continue to have a highly integrated economic relationship and are

each other's largest trade and investment partners (US Congressional Research Service, 2023). Indeed, since the onset of the European integration process, private investors, producers, and other commercial actors have played a significant role in shaping Euro-American systems, resulting in a vast network of commercial connections spanning the Atlantic (Smith et al., 2024). Scholars have also emphasized that the dominant role of the dollar fosters dependencies that help maintain a strong transatlantic relationship. For instance, the US central bank played a crucial role in rescuing the euro during the financial crises of 2008 and again during the COVID-19 pandemic a decade later (Hjertaker and Tranøy, 2022).

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Other scholars have highlighted how shared values and extensive formal and informal networks and institutions continue to bind the US and Europe together at various levels, not least at the elite level. After all, as underlined by Smith et al. (2024), the transatlantic relationship operates both as a state system and as a network relationship, involving a blend of intergovernmental and supranational participation at both political and expert levels. Studies have found that networks of experts (sometimes referred to as 'epistemic communities'), different types of expert and diplomatic interactions, international organizations, transnational NGOs, student exchanges, and parliamentary cooperation between the European and national parliaments and the US Congress all serve to uphold an interest in a functioning transatlantic relationship in the elite and the broader public on both sides of the Atlantic.

Of particular relevance for European security, we know that these bonds are key also to the US's continued interest in European affairs (Abelson and Brooks, 2022; Cross, 2022; Smith et al., 2024). There are also strong legal ties between the EU and the US, to the extent that Fahey and Curtin

(2014) refer to this as a 'transatlantic community of law' (also see Smith et al., 2024). There are, for example, regular meetings between the EU and the US courts, and legal arguments from both sides play into the other side's regulations (ibid.). Some of these networks are directly linked to security and even cooperation over Ukraine – for example, experts working on sanctions, diplomats meeting in NATO, the G7, and the G20, or in EU-US meetings, or parliamentarians discussing how to best support Ukraine or uphold a strong transatlantic relationship in other areas. Others, such as student exchanges or expert and diplomatic meetings over global issues such as climate or health, may not be directly linked to Ukraine or European security as such. In sum, they are still key for creating a solid foundation for the transatlantic relationship at large.

Similarly, in terms of values, while both US and European societies are polarizing with the rise of the far right, there is, according to Abelson and Brooks (2022), little evidence to suggest that there is a particular value gap that cuts across the Atlantic. Instead, what we see is the emergence of new transatlantic networks and value patterns, with an increasing gap between, for example, pro- and anti-globalization trends and between liberal and conservative values on both sides of the Atlantic and with much cooperation emerging between them. And as Poli (2023) notes, only the Western states have human rights sanctions regimes integrated into their foreign policies, even under Trump. The US and the EU, albeit to varying degrees and with many accusations of double standards, continue to be the world's main promoters of such values externally. Yet other studies have found continued strong feelings of communality and empathy between Europe and the US (Dunne, 2023; Fahey and Terpan, 2023).

There are also many institutionalized, although largely informal, forms of bilateral EU-US relations, such as the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), the bilateral dialogue and annual meetings, the many dialogues that exist on different policy issues, and the high level of EU-US coordination in international organizations (Riddervold and Newsome, 2022; Smith et al., 2024). And, not least, the very existence of already established institutions and networks enables the traditional partners to come together in a crisis

when the will is there, as we saw after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022: in bilateral formal and informal cooperation between the EU and the US, in NATO, in the G7 and G20, in the UN, including the Security Council, and in many other arenas (Riddervold and Newsome, 2022; Smith et al., 2024). While always focused mainly on the US's own national interests, when it comes to Ukraine, the Biden administration has engaged with the EU as a key partner on sanctions and other punitive measures, acknowledging the EU's competence in areas like trade and technology. After all, the EU was Russia's biggest trading partner before the war, and any meaningful sanctions depend on the EU (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). The EU, EU member states, the US, Canada, the UK, and Japan have coordinated the utilization of frozen Russian central banks' funds to finance support for Ukraine in the G7.

Transatlantic cooperation in NATO on Ukraine has also been strong, and we have seen a clearer division of labour developing between the EU and NATO in response to the war (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024; Rieker and Giske, 2023). NATO has, under US lead, returned to its core task of deterrence and defence vis-à-vis Russia – amongst other things adopting a new NATO Force Model, which aims to provide a greater number of troops at higher readiness (Deni, 2024). It has finalized new operational plans for allies, aligning defence planning, exercises, and force sizing more closely with real-world threats. Multinational battle groups have been established in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. NATO is also in the process of modifying its command structure, and it has agreed to expand its small battle groups to brigade size when necessary (ibid.). The US has also led the coordination of arms and support in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, also known as the 'Ramstein format'. To make this coordination more stable in case of a second Trump presidency, this coordination will be taken over by NATO, albeit still under the political leadership of the US. Initially, the Ramstein format was meant to avoid NATO directly providing arms to Ukraine. The fact that NATO will coordinate military support for a country in war is thus also indicative of how allied countries are gradually changing the limits for NATO's engagement as the war continues, as we have also seen with weapons deliveries and the use of weapons within Russia, etc. more broadly.

Since 2014, NATO member states have also trained Ukrainian forces, and Sweden and Finland have been integrated in record time (Deni, 2024; Fiott, 2023). At the same time, the EU is taking on many more of the broader aspects of security, such as cyber security, critical infrastructure, increased defence production, and the securing of trade and supply lines (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). With the war in Ukraine, the overlap of EU and NATO members has increased, leaving only four EU countries outside NATO. Denmark also joined the EU's security and defence cooperation, the CSDP, after a referendum. This closer alignment thus strengthens EU-NATO cooperation, with NATO increasingly acknowledging the EU's role in developing tools and structures for Europe's defence – for example, in increasing military mobility (Deni, 2024; Fiott, 2023; Håkansson, 2023).

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3.2 ... but a longer-term weakening of the relationship

If anything, the last decade's many crises have taught us not to try to predict the future. However, despite the high number of stabilizing factors discussed above, an increasing number of scholars argue that the overall trend points to a weakening of the transatlantic relationship if compared to what we have become used to since the US established the liberal order. This is also a trend that will further escalate if Trump, or, at a later stage, another more isolationist candidate is elected US president. After all, despite coming together in response to Russia's full-scale invasion, it wasn't long ago that Europe and the US faced the global COVID-19 crisis without coordinating a common response. In fact, the pandemic marked the first instance where the US did not take the lead in addressing a global crisis alongside its European

partners. Whether the COVID crisis or the Ukraine war is indicative of future relations thus remains to be seen (Riddervold and Newsome, 2022).

The first key factor in understanding the weakening of transatlantic relations is structural, linked to how the rise of China has altered global power dynamics. Because of a growing concern with China's rise and its economic and security impacts, under Foreign Minister Hillary Clinton, the Obama-Biden administration had already escalated what was announced as the US 'strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific' ('the pivot to Asia'), inevitably thus also turning the US's attention away from Europe (Anderson, 2018; Smith et al., 2024).

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As a consequence of China's rise, the US and Europe no longer necessarily share the same strategic interests, and Europe has become less critical to the US (Bolstad and Riddervold, 2023). The strategic partnership between Western Europe and the US was developed during the Cold War to counter the Soviet Union. While Europe's strategic interests remain focused on Russia to the east and terrorist threats (and migration) from the south, US security concerns are now primarily linked to China. China's growth, territorial ambitions in the South China Sea, increased interest in the Arctic, and advancements in space are all viewed by the US as threats to its global hegemony, including its important dominance in the global commons (Posen, 2003).

Thus, across the political spectrum, the US perceives the threat from Russia as secondary only to that of China. The US security strategy from 2022 is a clear indication of this priority. A press release following Biden's US National Security Strategy in October 2022 – ten months into the Ukraine war – stated that US defence priorities were defending the US and 'detering aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when

necessary, prioritizing the PRC (People's Republic of China) challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe' (US Department of Defense, 2022, author's emphasis).

The US urges its European partners to join this effort, placing pressure on Europe to act as a junior partner in this global balancing act. However, Europe's strong economic interests in China complicate this choice. What Smith (2018) refers to as the 'crisis of multilateralism', with China, Russia, and others challenging the liberal world order, and a more interest-based US approach, also creates challenges for the EU's traditional multilateralist approach to international relations. While the EU's economic security policies are increasingly aligning with the US's derisking approach from China, EU member states continue to disagree on how to reach a balance between economic security and derisking from China and following the US lead on the one hand, and supporting their own industries through continued global free trade and investment with China on the other. Inevitably, the pendulum seems to be swinging towards the EU prioritizing economic security and US support. And from a strategic standpoint, a closer alignment with the US might be the EU's best option, as further discussed below.

Also under Biden, Europe has seen the US prioritize its own interests, sometimes without involving or even informing its European allies. While there are many differences between Trump's 'America First' policy and Biden's foreign policies, Biden's 'foreign policy for the middle class' explicitly also puts US interests first (Bolstad and Riddervold, 2023; Olsen, 2022). Biden returned to the Paris Accord but did not rejoin the Iran deal or renew talks on an EU-US trade agreement. The US's unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan without informing its allies and the AUKUS deal – where the US signed a submarine contract with the UK and Australia at the expense of an already negotiated French contract – are notable examples of the US pursuing its own strategic interests without involving its European allies (Olsen, 2022). Diverging interests are also evident in transatlantic trade relations, with the EU and the US having different views on the dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization (Kerremans, 2022). The US under Biden has shown little interest in solving disagreements

in the WTO (Eliasson, 2023) and has instead implemented industrial policies that support a green transition led by the US domestic industry. The US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) was also seen by the EU as an attempt to hinder global trade competition by subsidizing US firms over European ones. In sum, when strong US interests are at stake, maintaining transatlantic coherence is less of a priority for the US, unless a unified approach clearly benefits its interests (Newsome and Riddervold, 2022).

The second and interacting main factor that serves to weaken transatlantic relations is linked to US domestic changes and in particular the increased polarization of US politics. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, it has become painfully clear to the Europeans how strongly connected US foreign policies are to US domestic policies and trends. Europe now knows that US foreign policies may significantly change from one election to the next: a strong US support can no longer be taken for granted.

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As argued by Bolstad and Riddervold (2023), domestic policies play directly and indirectly into the interests, interdependence, institutions, and identities that traditionally have served to uphold a strong relationship (Risse, 2016; Smith et al., 2024), with anti-establishment sentiments affecting both domestic and foreign politics. As regards interests, the need to counter China’s global expansionism is one of the few issues where the political elite, across both parties, agree. American voters also consider China one of the main threats to the US (Smeltz, 2022, in Bolstad and Riddervold, 2023). Domestic polarization, however, increasingly extends into US foreign policy. On the one hand, Congress continues to be less polarized on foreign policy than on domestic issues. While most Republicans prefer a more isolationist, or at least more selective, approach (i.e. focusing on China first), many still recognize the

benefits of international cooperation for economic growth and national security (Smeltz et al., 2020, in Bolstad and Riddervold, 2023). In terms of transatlantic relations, polls also show a continued commitment to NATO and European allies (ibid.).

At the same time, studies suggest that Democrats and Republicans are increasingly divided on whether the US should focus on domestic problems or continue to support international engagement (ibid.). Parts of the US Republican political elites, for example, present the WTO as a symbol of eroding national sovereignty and what they see as harmful globalization (Kerremans, 2022). Increased polarization over the US’s global role, interests, and threat perceptions have also made it more difficult to reach bipartisan ratification in Congress on foreign policy, creating political gridlocks and hindering Congress’s ability to ratify laws and international treaties (Bolstad and Riddervold, 2023). This is very evident in the politicization of continued support for Ukraine, where a minority of the Republican party in 2023/2024 was able to stop a 60 billion support package for many months, with big consequences for the Ukrainian forces on the ground.

Adding to this, it is important to underline that the transatlantic relationship rests, in fact, on rather few formal institutional ties. There is, for example, no trade agreement between the EU and the US. As Van Elsuwege and Szép (2023) note, many networks, for example in epistemic communities, NGOs, and international organizations, are also 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 even under Trump, and as such help stabilize the relationship somewhat, this lack of formal institutions nonetheless makes the transatlantic relationship much more vulnerable to changes in the policy decisions of different administrations. After all, formal institutions are harder to break and are more consistent and stable over time than informal networks, which depend more on the people they comprise. Adding to this, US presidents tend to replace more civil servants than is the case in most European administrations. But observers expect Trump and his team to extend the number of administrative positions referred to as political and thus subject to much change

(Wendling, 2024). This will thus also likely affect the more informal transatlantic diplomatic and expert networks that exist and, as previously argued, have served to stabilize the relationship during previous crises and challenges. Also, the bilateral dialogue between the EU and the US is rather informal, and the Trade and Technology Council may quickly erode under a second Trump presidency (Gijs, Zimmerman and Haeck 2024).

**3.3 The elephant in the room:
Will Trump withdraw from NATO?
And what happens if Harris wins?**

Perhaps the biggest fear in Europe is that a second Trump presidency, or another isolationist president, will reduce the US's security commitments in Europe and perhaps even undermine the NATO alliance at a time of war on the European continent. In spite of calls too from previous US presidents for Europe to take on more of the collective burden after the Cold War, most European states drastically cut their defence budgets (Grand, 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

Trump will undoubtedly continue his isolationist agenda and expect Europe to take more responsibility for its own security. What remains to be seen, however, is what this will mean for NATO and Europe. Several authors, including Applebaum (2024), have argued that it's not just possible but quite likely that Trump will try to pull the US out of NATO. If he does, other American politicians will try to stop him. In December 2023, Congress passed a law proposed by Democratic Senator Tim Kaine and Republican Senator Marco Rubio making it practically impossible for the president (read: Trump) to pull the US out of NATO. However, as Applebaum also points out, real damage would still be done. NATO is a trust-based defence alliance, relying on the belief that Article 5 will be respected and that allies will come to each other's aid if attacked. A Trumpian desire to withdraw could trigger a lengthy legal battle in the US, but trust in America's willingness to help and defend Europe would be severely weakened. This is important because it also affects NATO's deterrent effect. After all, with much of Europe's defence reliant on the US, how much of a deterrent is NATO with an American president who wants out of the alliance? Additionally, Trump could weaken NATO significantly by pulling US troops out of Europe, or he could decide not to

attend the meetings. According to Applebaum (2024), this would also strongly affect other US alliances, including in Asia, as it would cast strong doubt on the credibility of US alliances and security guarantees more broadly. As such, it would thus deteriorate not only Western allies but also various adversaries' trust in the US-led Western international security community.

Other observers suggest that Trump and his team might not withdraw from NATO but instead that the US engagement might be significantly reduced, that he will try to cut a deal with Putin over Ukraine, and that, in order to maintain a presence (albeit reduced) in Europe, he will demand a 'radical reorientation of NATO' and that the European NATO states significantly increase their defence spending (Hirsh, 2024). Rather than being the main combat provider and provider of security in Europe, the plan for a second Trump presidency, according to Politico (ibid.), is to substantially reduce and downscale the US's role to that of providing support in cases of crises. In practice, this means that the US will 'keep its nuclear umbrella over Europe during a second Trump term by maintaining its airpower and bases in Germany, England and Turkey, and its naval forces as well. Meanwhile, the bulk of infantry, armor, logistics and artillery would ultimately pass from American to European hands' (ibid.). If indeed implemented, these radical changes also imply what has been referred to as 'two-tier NATO', where NATO member states who haven't met the 2% target 'wouldn't enjoy the defense largess and security guarantee of the United States', thus clearly challenging NATO's Article 5 commitments towards all members (ibid.).

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Hence, although what Trump actually will do remains to be seen, at the very minimum, it will be less certain and more conditional than before (Grand, 2024; Hirsh, 2024)). And not least, it doesn't change the fact that a democratic president, with an increased focus on, and prioritization of,

China and facing increased domestic polarization will also require more from the Europeans.

In fact, with a Harris presidency too, Europe will face a US less focused on Europe than what has traditionally been the case.

Foreign policy has not been a focus for Harris so far in her career. But based on her speeches, her time as vice president, and her choice of advisors, we can develop some expectations of what it might imply for transatlantic relations and European security. Harris's policy will likely resemble Biden's in many ways. In some areas, this means Harris will not differ as much from Trump as one might think. Regardless of who wins the election, China will be considered the biggest threat and challenger to the US. Part of the reason for this, as discussed above, is that China is growing both militarily and economically, and the US does not want Chinese dominance in any sphere – whether on the open seas, in space, or in cyberspace. But it is also because the US can no longer easily fight a war on two fronts as it could when the Cold War ended.

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In contrast to Trump, both Biden and Harris emphasize the importance of international cooperation and alliances. But for all three of them, foreign policy is about securing the interests of American citizens. Trump calls it 'America first'; Biden calls it 'a foreign policy for the middle class'. While Democrats have traditionally talked about democracy, distribution, and equal opportunities, Harris spoke just as much about freedom, loyalty, and patriotism at the 2024 Democratic convention – concepts more commonly found in Republican circles (Hutzler, Deliso and Pereira 2024). If anything, perhaps Harris's foreign policy will be more pragmatic than Biden's. While Biden's views go back to the Cold War, Harris has so far not continued Biden's rhetoric about the divide between democracies and authoritarian states. In

areas where cooperation is needed to solve global challenges such as health and the environment, she will thus probably also reach out to China. In other areas, such as technology and raw materials, she will continue to erect barriers against China. If and when it serves American interests, Harris will continue to seek good trade relations with the US's traditional European partners. And like Biden, Harris sees the value of strong European partners in a world of intensified competition between the US and China. In sharp contrast to this, Trump says he will introduce increased tariffs and duties not only on goods from countries like China but also from the US's European trading partners, with significant consequences for European businesses and industries.

Harris shares Europe's view not only that Russia is a territorial threat but that the invasion of a neighbouring country threatens fundamental international rules and that Ukraine needs continued support. This is very different from Trump, who claims that he would end the war in Ukraine even before taking office. What that implies in practice is difficult to say with such an unpredictable president as Trump. He could go to Putin and say he will increase support for Ukraine if Putin doesn't come to the negotiating table, and similarly threaten Zelensky with cuts to all support unless Ukraine is willing to negotiate. Perhaps a Trump victory will even lead to a short-term strengthening of Ukraine if Trump sees this as useful in a broader negotiating game. What happens remains to be seen. From the West Coast and from the post-Cold War generation of US politicians, Harris will probably be less focused on Europe than has traditionally been the case for US post-1945 presidents (except Trump). But in contrast to Trump, Harris has emphasized that she wants a strong NATO, close cooperation with Europe, and US support for Ukraine to continue. The fact that Harris's longtime security policy advisor Phil Gordon, who would likely play a significant role in a Harris administration, has a strong interest in Europe also gives cause for optimism in terms of Europe's place in US foreign policies.

In sum, the possibility of a Harris victory does not mean that Europe can sit back and relax. Harris is more willing to spend on Europe than Trump, but the US neither wants, nor is able, to focus

equally strongly on both Asia and Europe. And the polarization of American support for Ukraine will not disappear with a Harris victory. So even under Harris, Europe will have to continue strengthening its own defence, both within NATO and the EU. And the money for Ukraine, on which Europe's future security also depends, will have to keep flowing. Under Harris, Europe will thus likely also have to make difficult choices in some areas, between maintaining strong trade relations with China and following the US as a (junior) partner in an effort to balance China.

In other words, the need for a stronger European security and defence is not going away soon.

4. Europe's response and remaining challenges

So, what happens to Europe if Trump (or another isolationist president) seeks to undermine NATO or significantly reduce the US's security commitments in Europe? And if he does, will Europe be able to compensate for this loss?

Some analysts, including Applebaum (2024), assert that support for Ukraine would cease as the Europeans struggle to agree on how to compensate for US support, and that the NATO countries would focus on strengthening their own national defence and bilateral ties with the US to the detriment of common defence cooperation. Most observers contend, however, that a common European defence would be challenging but not impossible.

While EU security and defence cooperation and a stronger European pillar in NATO are still far away from replacing the US in European defence, steps in the right direction have been taken since February 2022. The willingness of European states to spend on defence has increased significantly, and as of July 2024, 23 out of 32 NATO members spend more than 2% of their GDP on defence. NATO has increased its forces and capacities, as discussed above, and big changes are taking place in the EU, particularly in areas linked to security in the broader sense. In response to the war, the EU has increased its decision-making capacity, its willingness to provide resources, and its ability to combine various instruments in ways that would have been difficult before the war. In

addition to numerous sanctions packages, the EU has, for example, coordinated weapon deliveries to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF), coordinated and funded a CSDP mission for training Ukrainian troops, implemented the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), and increased ammunition production through the EU budget. It also draws on the European Defence Fund (EDF) to promote defence industrial cooperation through financial incentives. Mechanisms like civil emergency preparedness (RescEU) have been activated, delivering the largest and most complex EU civil protection operation since 2013. The EU also activated the Temporary Protection Directive, opening borders to Ukrainian refugees, and has started accession negotiations with Ukraine (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024).

'A more uncertain international environment and the Ukraine war have led to an increased focus on resilience and to the securitization of various other policy areas where the EU has competences.'

The war has also resulted in a much stronger link between security policies and other policy areas where the EU has more competences than in the CFSP. A more uncertain international environment and the Ukraine war have led to an increased focus on resilience and to the securitization of various other policy areas where the EU has competences. These areas include enlargement, energy, development, industry, and common market and trade policies, which are all increasingly used for, or linked to, foreign and security policy purposes. The second von der Leyen Commission is indeed indicative of the extent to which security, defence, technology, and competition are at the top of the EU's agenda and will probably dominate discussions, policies, and initiatives in the 2024–2029 period. So are the strong defence and economic security aspects of the 2024 Draghi report on EU competitiveness (Draghi report, 2024; Maillard, 2024). Member states are also increasingly delegating authority to the Commission to effectively implement various preparedness and crisis-management tasks. The EU is building a greater role in cybersecurity, the

protection of critical infrastructure, the securing of supply lines, space security, and economic security, including foreign direct investment screening and anti-coercion mechanisms. All these examples are indicative of the increased mainstreaming of security across different policy fields, of the EU's increased role in security in the broader sense, and of the member states' willingness to coordinate more closely within the EU (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024).

The need to increase European defence industrial output and enable a better coordination of capabilities has also reached the top of the EU agenda. Even if the EU treaties do not allow military expenditures through the EU budget, regulating the defence industry falls under EU competences. Member states' sovereignty concerns about defence issues, their competing interests in national producers, and worries about duplications with NATO have, however, continued to limit the EU's role in defence production and procurement. But the Ukraine war has now led to a shift in member states' willingness to coordinate and regulate at the EU level. While big issues of financing remain (see below), in the EU 2024 Defence Industrial Strategy, the aim is to improve 'European defense industrial readiness through collaborative EU-based investment, research, development, production, procurement, and ownership' (Besch 2024).

Due to its legal, budgetary, and financial resources, the EU is thus already becoming increasingly important in defence and security (Fiott, 2023; Grand, 2024; Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). While NATO remains Europe's most important defence alliance, the EU – due to developments over time and the big steps taken in response to the Ukraine war – is becoming its most important security actor. This is particularly evident regarding security in the broader sense, linked to resilience and strategic autonomy in areas such as cyber, disinformation, economic security, secure tradelines, critical infrastructure, and much more. And it is using its legal, budgetary, and institutional competences both for these purposes and to help build a stronger European defence industry, increased military mobility in Europe, and much more. Although the European states will have to take on more responsibility for their own defence, both in the EU and in a stronger European pillar in

NATO, the EU's role in European security is thus clearly here to stay. But its future role in European security is still in the making. How the European security structure will develop, what will be done in the EU, and what a reformed NATO will look like are at the top of European states' agenda today. And indeed, many challenges remain.

4.1 What's next for Europe?

As is clear from the above discussion, Europe must become less dependent on the US in a reality where it will continue to have confrontational relations with Russia. This is necessary regardless of what happens in Ukraine and who the US president is at any one time. Taking on more of the burden may in fact also help secure more stable relations with the US, including if led by Trump. In a policy brief produced by the ECFR, Grand (2024) sums up some of what is required for a reduced dependency on the US.

'Taking on more of the burden may in fact also help secure more stable relations with the US, including if led by Trump.'

First, Europe must increase its support for Ukraine. So far, Europe has faced production challenges, political discussions on where to buy equipment (with France eventually giving in on buying outside of Europe), and disagreement over how much to provide without provoking Russia (Grand, 2024).

Second, economic resources continue to remain a key challenge. Even if many NATO allies have increased defence spending substantially, 'this increase has not been nearly enough to compensate for years of underspending' (Grand, 2024, p. 8), and big increases – both in the member states and in the EU – are needed both to build the necessary European defence capabilities and to provide more support for Ukraine (Grand, 2024).

In line with this reasoning, the Draghi report sets out ambitious goals and means regarding how to increase not only European competitiveness but also European defence, but member states disagree on whether and how Europe's defence, growth, and green transition goals can all be financed in the EU. Discussions on priorities and the willingness to find ways of common funding, both within the next

seven-year EU Multiannual Financial Framework and beyond, will say much about the EU's actual ability to deliver on its ambitions.

Third, in terms of capabilities, Grand argues that Europe might not need a massive expansion of its armed forces, but that it must increase its combat readiness and the ability to better sustain a high-intensity conflict in areas where Europe now depends on the US. A particular challenge is again to produce the necessary military equipment and focus on addressing shortfalls where the dependence on US is high, not least as regards strategic enablers. There are several areas where Europe depends on the US (such as surveillance and intelligence, unmanned systems and space capabilities, and strategic airlifting and refuelling) but where work has at least started on some of them – for example, in the EU's 2023 capability development priorities under the European Defence Agency (EDA) (Grand, 2024).

More European-wide cooperation and joint expenditures will undoubtedly be necessary for Europe to fill these gaps. And challenges lie in coordinating much better, and in prioritizing and filling important gaps. As argued by Grand, Europe's GDP is ten times larger than Russia's, the European states in the EU and NATO spent four times more on defence than Russia in 2023, their combined forces are bigger, and the European defence industry is advanced (*ibid.*). However, as of now, in addition to capability gaps, stronger cooperation and coordination continue to face political and institutional challenges (*ibid.*).

'An EU commissioner for the defence industry and space and the extension of qualified majority voting to the CFSP may help further increase the role of the EU in European defence.'

While cooperation between NATO and the EU may seem stronger than ever, there is still a long way to go before leaders agree on how to strengthen both of them in a compatible way and avoid duplication. Developments will in any case also require increased spending within the EU budget,

more coordination, and a clearer focus on security and defence. An EU commissioner for the defence industry and space and the extension of qualified majority voting to the CFSP may help further increase the role of the EU in European defence.

Lastly, on the question of nuclear deterrence, Grand notes a new grand debate, with European states' perspectives ranging from a 'euro bomb' to increased US presence and the status quo (Grand, 2024).

The very fact that this debate has emerged is, however, a clear indication of the big changes we are witnessing in European security and defence in a changing global setting and more uncertain transatlantic relations.

5. Concluding remarks

So, where do we go from here? Drawing on Tocci and Alcaro (2012) and Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome (2021), we can distinguish three potential scenarios for the transatlantic relationship:

1. It breaks apart – that is, a worst-case scenario under an isolationist US president and/or diverging strategic interests.
2. It muddles through, in spite of changing scope conditions, based on functional agreements where the two parties' interests align, supported by the many other stabilizing factors that have upheld it so far.
3. It moves towards a renewed but different relationship between the US and Europe, pushed by common structural challenges and common crises.

The above analysis suggests that domestic changes in the US and a changing geopolitical reality, with the US clearly prioritizing China over Europe, mean that the transatlantic relationship is weaker today than what the Europeans have become used to, and that 'it is likely that the cracks in the foundation of transatlantic relations will continue into the present and foreseeable future' (Riddervold and Newsome, 2018, p. 518). So far, albeit weaker, the relationship, however, continues to muddle through based on the many networks, security relationships, trade relations, shared interests, feelings of communality, and (largely informal) institutions that underpin

it. As others have underlined (Abelson and Brooks, 2022; Fahey, 2023; Smith et al., 2024), the relationship is so multifaceted that it is hard to break.

‘Europe also needs to continue its attempts at institutionalizing EU-US relations as much as possible within existing structures, such as the G7, G20, the OECD, NATO, the EU Trade and Technology Council, and more.’

With a Harris presidency, more interests will align and many networks and institutions will persist, which makes it likely that transatlantic relations will continue to muddle through, particularly if Europe and the US are able to come to functional agreements in areas where their interests overlap and the US sees an interest in such cooperation – something the Europeans should stand ready to push. Europe also needs to continue its attempts at institutionalizing EU-US relations as much as possible within existing structures, such as the G7, G20, the OECD, NATO, the EU Trade and Technology Council, and more. A situation where Europe takes on more responsibility for its own defence and also decides to follow the US more closely as a junior partner vis-à-vis China, both strategically and economically, could help refine and strengthen the relationship. Policy areas where such balancing may play out and the US would want support from its European allies include the Indo-Pacific high seas areas, space, and issues of economic security. Hence, these are all areas to follow closely when wanting to understand the future development not only of US-China competition and rivalry but also transatlantic relations more broadly. Although clearly something to be avoided, a common crisis, like a direct conflict with China, where Europe decides to join forces with its US ally, might trigger a change towards a new and redefined relationship. On the other hand, a continued or stronger polarization of US domestic and foreign policies, a more protectionist trade policy, or a partial withdrawal from NATO and other international organizations under Trump or another isolationist president would further weaken the relationship, as this would further undermine the common interests,

interdependencies, and values and ideas on which the relationship so far has been built.

Trump’s victory in 2016 led many European states to seek stronger bilateral contacts and agreements with the US (Smith, 2018). To succeed with less US support and increase the likelihood that the US will stay in Europe, the Europeans will however have to cooperate within the EU and in a stronger European pillar in NATO, and find structures that allow the two organizations to work together. Supporting their own national defence industries cannot be a priority. Instead, comparative advantages, joint procurement, the filling of key defence gaps, and other defence needs must be sought in tandem. Given the EU’s unique financial, legal, and institutional capacities, it is only natural that it plays a big role, not least regarding hybrid threats, issues linked to the defence industry, and the financing of enhanced security and defence. While economic resources are scarce in a Europe where other issues such as the green transition and increased European competitiveness need financing, finding means, for example through Eurobonds or new fiscal tools, is of the essence. Broader security issues such as the securing of trade lines and economic security are also part of this picture, and the member states should (continue to) coordinate this within the EU, and in bilateral EU-US relations where possible. As part of this, stronger ties between the EU and the UK in the security and defence domain will be necessary for a stronger European defence to emerge, and the new UK government is already taking steps in this direction. After all, a less US-dependent European deterrence and defence will not be credible without the UK. Broader security issues such as energy security, economic security, and the protection of critical infrastructure are also natural areas for closer cooperation, and where cooperation between the EU and the UK is already emerging. At the same time, NATO’s core tasks are, after all, the defence against, and deterrence of Russia; it has a command structure that should be utilized, and a stronger European defence pillar, with better enablers, more interoperability, more spending, etc., needs to be developed within these two already existing structures, and with better cooperation and coordination between them. The ways in which the two organizations can cooperate and together strengthen European defence should be at the top of the agenda, and political differences

should be set aside. Whether the EU and a stronger European pillar in NATO will be able to take responsibility for Ukraine if the US gradually, or more rapidly, withdraws will perhaps be the biggest test of Europe's willingness and readiness to take on the responsibility for its own defence. After all, Europe's security rests not only on its own – and its allies' – defence capacities but also on Ukraine's ability to withstand Russian aggression.

To secure a stable relationship with the US, the Europeans must also focus on upholding and, if possible, strengthening societal, non-governmental, expert, and political lower-level networks and economic bonds.'

To secure a stable relationship with the US, the Europeans must also focus on upholding and, if possible, strengthening societal, non-governmental, expert, and political lower-level networks and economic bonds. In a changing and more uncertain

setting, bigger and vital political issues tend to take centre stage. But financial and economic interdependencies, trade relations, student exchanges, and networks and meeting places for experts, politicians, and market actors have all been part of the glue that keeps the relationship together, as we have seen. The EU and the European states should thus try to bind the US closer to Europe by encouraging networks and institutionalizing the relationship through various agreements and stronger institutional settings. The more formal agreements and institutions there are, the less vulnerable the relationship may be in the face of geopolitical and domestic challenges. An EU-US trade agreement, although less likely in the current domestic US landscape, would be a strong institutionalization of relations (Risse, 2016), but also, a network of more narrow agreements and institutionalized meeting places and arenas will have a stabilizing effect.

The future of European security and defence in the face of changing transatlantic relations depends on its ability to increase its support for Ukraine, strengthen its own security, and keep the US as close as possible.

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