



French President Emmanuel Macron welcomes UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer to the Élysée Palace for a summit on Ukraine and security in Europe in Paris on February 17, 2025.

A Crisis Like No Other:

America First and the Future of European Security

by Emiliano Alessandri

Transatlantic relations are at an inflection point. President Trump seems to see little value in the preservation of a transatlantic community of free market democracies as a core constitutive element of the US-led international order. In fact, the current US administration appears altogether unbothered by the order-sustaining responsibilities Washington has shouldered since WWII. Instead, the President has elected disruption as an operating principle as he doubles down on an America First agenda that intently resorts to power politics and mercantilist tactics to achieve supposedly “better deals” for America. In this zero-sum world that hardly distinguishes between

partners and rivals, the shape and content of a renegotiated transatlantic bargain, remains anyone's guess.

Faced with a US administration that appears largely unconcerned about Europe's fate, Europeans must take their future into their own hands lest they end up on the menu of geopolitical competition. Yet, if transatlantic divorce were to become unavoidable over the coming years, Europeans should strive to keep it as orderly a process as possible. The quest for European strategic autonomy requires working pragmatically from within the Atlantic Alliance for the time being while proactively leveraging old and new formats to Europeanize common defence in due course. There is nothing to cheer about the crisis of Atlanticism and the potential decline of NATO at a time of global authoritarian revival and great power rivalry, but Europe must prepare now for any scenario.

Transatlantic crisis in perspective

It is often forgotten that the modern history of transatlantic relations has been punctuated by recurrent crises and an ever present risk of disengagement. America entered WWII only after the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when Nazi Germany had already occupied much of Europe. The US post-war effort to buttress European democracies with the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO took transatlantic cooperation to unprecedented levels. But Soviet containment did not ensure complete alignment.

The 1950s saw different transatlantic sensitivities about the German question and Europeans failed to create their own defence union. Against this backdrop, President Eisenhower started raising the issue of transatlantic burden-sharing. In 1956, the Suez Canal crisis saw a first major clash with

Great Britain and France over colonial privileges Washington did not support. Paris and London yielded to American power and France remained wary of transatlantic dependency ever since. French President De Gaulle later went so far as to withdraw France from the Atlantic Alliance's military structure.

In fact, Atlanticism and Europeanism became increasingly at odds from the 1960s. European governments avoided choosing between European integration and Atlantic Alliance – preferring to see the latter as the security guarantor of the former. But there were repeated calls to renegotiate the transatlantic bargain. Tensions periodically resurfaced as the European project took shape, typically but not exclusively under Republican US Presidents less inclined than their Democratic counterparts to coordinate with European capitals.

President Nixon took Europe and the world by surprise with the decision to end the convertibility of the US dollar into gold in 1971, an early sign of Washington's uneasiness with the order-sustaining role it had assumed after WWII. Secretary of State Kissinger's 1973 "Year of Europe" rang the alarm bell about the European community's rise as a trade competitor. In the 1980s, President Reagan's muscular foreign policy first led to concerns that an escalation between the two superpowers would leave Europe exposed in the middle. Later, fear arose that the US-USSR strategic dialogue would take place over Europe's head.

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred the debate about NATO's *raison d'être*. Soon afterwards, Western triumphalism was tempered by Europe's anxiety that America's "unipolar moment" would lead to an America unbound. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq without UN backing provoked the most

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severe transatlantic crisis on record. The majority of European countries condemned Washington's initiative as a major breach of international law and a blow to the multilateral system. More broadly, Europeans resented Washington's unwillingness to coordinate with Europe after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, following which Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—NATO's collective defence clause—was invoked for the first and only time in the Alliance's history. Anti-Americanism rose as President Bush's "global war on terror" was decried as a dangerous militaristic drift of an increasingly "rogue superpower". Meanwhile, the image of a weak, irrelevant, free-load-ing Europe became widespread in American conservative circles.

There has been no shortage of transatlantic tensions since the 2000s. It was during the Obama years that Washington formalized a strategic pivot to Asia that ran the risk of side-lining Europe. Before re-energizing NATO in the face of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, President Biden had disoriented Europeans with his chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Atlanticist Biden administration also confirmed the departure from free trade that had started during President Trump's first term and adopted measures that created an uneven playing field with Europe on the green agenda.

As a matter of fact, US-European relations have never been harmonious. This is due in part to political-cultural reasons as old as the American Revolution and partly to the internal diversity of the transatlantic community, a grouping of democracies broadly united by interests and values yet each going through different political cycles and pursuing specific foreign policy goals. After the Cold War, even as the rise of non-Western economies

might have led to a re-appreciation of US-European ties, divergent strategic priorities have increasingly played a role, pitting an American superpower with Asian, Atlantic and hemispheric interests against a largely self-absorbed Europe. While in recent years the US has progressively focused on the contest for primacy with an ascending China, Europe has had to deal with a string of internal crises and chronic instability in its immediate neighbourhoods.

Indeed, while the Atlantic Alliance is rightly celebrated as the "most successful in history", strategic alignment has required hard diplomatic work throughout. Far from a given, solidarity between Allies has demanded constant investment in a never-ending trust building process. Dragged repeatedly into European conflicts it would have rather avoided, America has never fully trusted that without its leadership Europeans would be able to overcome their internal differences and mutual suspicions. Hence, America's post WWII and post-Cold War roles as a European power, proactively mitigating intra-European competition while building a transatlantic front against strategic rivals such as Russia and China. For their part, Europeans have initially welcomed but become increasingly ambivalent about American hegemony. Not without contradiction, they have both resented constraints placed on European autonomy and feared the growing risk of American disengagement.

The current predicament

Ongoing international developments presage the end of the transatlantic relationship as we know it. Taking first term stances to a new level, President Trump and his entourage have sent a bundle of shockwaves Europe's way in

the first months of the administration. A non-exhaustive list includes: repeatedly disparaging the EU as an unfair trade competitor and an over-regulator which was "formed to screw the US"; disrupting the transatlantic economy – the largest in the world – with tariffs, or the threat thereof, in the context of a broader attempt to reset globalization and revive America's domestic manufacturing sector; advancing claims over Greenland, a territory of NATO founding member Denmark; endorsing the rise of xenophobic and illiberal parties, such as Alternative für Deutschland, which the European mainstream sees as a threat to democracy; rehabilitating Putin's Russia – the aggressor state in the Russia-Ukraine war – , while pressuring Kyiv towards a settlement, cost what it may.

More profoundly, this US administration has embraced a nationalist-populist ideology that is being used to justify both an ultraconservative project of domestic transformation and the dismantlement of the "liberal international order". While on the domestic front the aggressive and wide-ranging initiatives of the US administration risk provoking an unprecedented constitutional crisis, internationally America First – with its attack on multilateralism and the departure from a democracy and human-rights oriented international strategy – has already undermined America's role as the "leader of the Free World". The current transatlantic crisis is, therefore, epoch-making in that it reflects – and at the same time accelerates – a crisis of liberalism.

With Washington eagerly supporting political leaders across the transatlantic space and beyond that share similar revisionist aims, the notion of the "liberal West", as normatively and strategically understood since President Wilson's 1917 call for a "world safe for democracy",



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is challenged as never before. As a result, the future of NATO as the West's politico-military arm has also come into question. The Atlantic Alliance was never just a marriage of convenience. Rather, NATO has aspired to embody a value-based democratic security community, brought together by a sense of common destiny. President Trump's brutally transactional approach now means that, to the current US ruling elite, NATO retains its value only if it makes business sense for Washington, with the US President expecting to collect growing fees from European allies for a type of protection that has little to do with democratic solidarity.

President Trump has asserted that he would not care about defending NATO countries that do not meet the relevant financial requirements, which he

would like to significantly raise. As the US President seems to value personal loyalty more than anything else, one has to wonder whether the US military would come to the rescue of those European countries whose leaders could come in the crossfire of the White House in the months to come. Against this drastically changed backdrop, Europeans cannot escape addressing some tough questions. Can they continue relying on America for security when the US President and his entourage no longer seem bound to any normative understanding of US foreign policy and look at the European continent as a strategic sideshow at best? Can Europe realistically count on Washington in case of provocations and hostile acts by Moscow when the White House seems more attracted to the idea of a condominium of sorts between the

great leaders of the world rather than to the vision of a democratic West united against authoritarian revisionism?

The future of European security

Faced with an undiminished challenge from Russia but also unprecedented pressure from across the Atlantic, Europeans feel vulnerable as never before. European leaders are correctly coming to the conclusion that this is indeed a make-or-break moment. The prospect of a detached, even antagonistic US means that Europeans have no choice but to increasingly take their destiny into their own hands. The future of European security and the preservation of what is left of the liberal international order are both at stake. ➤

Determination in pursuing greater self-reliance, however, does not in itself justify an abrupt transatlantic break, unless it is Washington that precipitates it. Rather, Europeans should press forward with a process of Europeanization of common defence whose scope will be determined by Europe's actual ability to generate and leverage new capabilities and whose pace can be calibrated to the effective extent of the deterioration of US-European ties. However weakened, NATO is not a relic to be jettisoned, nor necessarily a straitjacket on European strategic autonomy. Defence and deterrence assets developed in the context of the Atlantic Alliance cannot be re-created overnight and strategic wisdom suggests that Europeans concentrate on building a stronger "European pillar" within NATO over any other alternative.

Europeans can and should take decisive steps towards developing a Europe-based defence and deterrence force while still counting for as long as possible on critical US assets, starting with the nuclear deterrent, that cannot be easily replaced in the short term. Working within the Alliance provides Europeans time and space to develop strategic enablers, such as intelligence and satellite communications, that are predominantly provided by Washington at present. It also allows EU countries to closely coordinate with the United Kingdom and Canada, both of which are going through their own strategic reassessments. From a military standpoint, the European Union and the UK have no choice but to forge a strong bilateral security partnership to address any future scenario in which Europe would have to take care of its own defence. To concretely strengthen the European pillar of NATO, one highly consequential step would be for Europeans to take as much

leadership as possible in operationalizing the regional plans the Alliance has recently adopted to confront the Russian threat on its Eastern flank.

Meanwhile, the European Union should focus on ensuring that the rearmament process that has already been announced leads to new tangible capabilities, especially of an operational kind, and that joint European capacities are created through joint procurement. For the time being, the EU's greatest contribution to European defence is not the creation of a European army, something that still faces resistance by individual capitals and could be hampered by Eurosceptic governments. Rather, the EU can play a crucial role in the creation of a more integrated and competitive European defence market. Only the latter may plausibly enable the production of technologically advanced military assets that can gradually bridge the long-standing transatlantic defence gap.

As a rule of thumb, resolve and tenacity in pursuing greater European security self-reliance should go hand in hand with flexibility in formats and instruments. In this light, the UK-France led "coalition of the willing" to support Ukraine is a most important pilot project as the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine conflict will shape the European security landscape for the years to come. And as the EU looks at financing tools for its "Readiness 2030" initiative, discussions about a rearmament bank open also to non-US NATO members and other stakeholders should not be dismissed as a distraction.

This is indeed the time to experiment different geometries of multilateral collaboration. Both when it comes to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and independence in the face of combined

US-Russian pressure and the end vision of common European defence, neither NATO nor the EU as such can provide all the answers at present. Rather, willing and capable countries should leverage these organizations to the maximum possible extent while also experimenting with new platforms. Only by doing this can Europeans hope that that the wide range of existing national sensitivities, individual preferences, and different budgetary capacities, do not come in the way of practical progress.

As different political cycles could result in governments with different attitudes towards European security in different countries, what EU institutions and pro-Europe national leaders should support is a "movement" towards the Europeanization of security and defence—one clear-eyed about the mission ahead but open-minded and adaptive as to the actual instruments and the specific trajectory to reach the end goal.

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