

A Post-Liberal West?

by **Emiliano Alessandri**

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With US President Donald Trump swinging a wrecking ball at the world and treating European allies possibly even worse than America's adversaries, it is hard to be optimistic about either the global order or transatlantic relations. Everybody seems to agree that the transatlantic relationship as we know it has run its course and will not be restored even after Trump. May this portend the "end of the West?"

A dispassionate interpretation of recent developments suggests less hyperbole. What Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney calls a "rupture" may turn out to be a watershed at which the West – a construct that has meant different things at different points in time – will be redefined instead of jettisoned altogether. Between no West and an illiberal West, perhaps a "post-liberal" West will emerge from the ongoing turmoil.

This new West may no longer be bound together under American leadership, yet it will continue to share an interest in managing strategic competition with non-Western actors. Ideologically, it will depart from a number of orthodoxies that defined the "liberal order" during the height of Western predominance, many of which were long regarded by critics as having been carried to excess, especially in the economic and social domains. Yet, it will likely remain rooted in principles that the West has been instrumental in advancing, including democracy, individual dignity, and fundamental rights.

Infatuations with Western Hemispherism and European Strategic Autonomy

From a strategic standpoint, China's rise and the structural shift in global power towards the emerging

economies should make the logic of transatlantic cooperation more compelling – not less. The specter of relative decline is currently fueling recrimination and division across the Atlantic. As the stakes become more apparent, however, the same dynamic could lead to renewed transatlantic alignment.

In this light, the Trump administration's fixation with the Western Hemisphere – exemplified by gunboat diplomacy in Venezuela and efforts to acquire Greenland (which caused a serious spat with Denmark and America's transatlantic allies) – is not to be interpreted necessarily as the US turning its back on Europe and the world.

Rather, it may signify that Washington has determined, in a rejection of "globalism" rather than a sign of retrenchment, that the reassertion of

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the American national interest starts with confronting America's adversaries in its immediate neighborhood, which has long been considered an extension of US national security. That this approach is currently being operationalized in an imperialistic way makes it contemptible, but no less strategically coherent.

In any event, the Trump administration has already discovered that Western Hemispheric dominance will not relieve Washington from managing international challenges in other parts of the world, as the recent US-Israeli war against Iran has highlighted. And precisely because regional power balances are as important as ever, the US President and his entourage may soon come to appreciate that engaging Europe – in a reformed transatlantic relationship – remains crucial even under America First.

Without Europe as its partner, America will find it far more difficult to compete with China for global primacy, as its network of alliances remains one of Washington's most obvious strategic advantages over the most formidable rival it has yet confronted. And should Europe, left to its own devices, one day falter under internal or external pressures, America's own security would be imperiled. The US learned this lesson repeatedly in the course of the 20th century – during WWI, WWII, and the Cold War. It can now disregard it only at its own expense.

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration's repeated attacks on Europe, with targets ranging from

individual leaders to the European Union as such, are no doubt very problematic. They are inflicting nearly irreparable damage to a successful Atlantic Alliance that has never ceased to deliver for America and its European allies.

It is worth noting, however, that MAGA's dislike for Europe has various themes. European “freeloading” is certainly one. But there is also a frustration with “European weakness.” Hence, the Trump administration's support for European nationalist parties, which it views as the last line of defense against what it describes as “civilizational erasure.”

European mainstream leaders can prove American conservatives wrong by showing that majorities across the continent believe that Europe's internal and external challenges, including the preservation of the “European way of life,” are best addressed through deeper European integration. In other words, the response to European weakness is not the revival of European nationalisms, but a stronger EU.

For their part, however, European advocates of a strong Europe should define “strategic autonomy” – a concept first introduced in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, before Trump's rise to the presidency – with care. If strategic autonomy means enabling Europe to defend itself without America's assistance and to play an influential role in world affairs, it is not merely a legitimate aspiration but an urgent imperative. But to equate European autonomy with anti-Americanism, or with neutrality between America and China, would be strategically unsound.

Seeking equidistance between the world's two largest centers of power may be tempting at this time of great power rivalry, but is on the whole unrealistic. Europe remains so integrated into the transatlantic economy – still the largest in the world – and, like the US would have so much to lose from a China-dominated world, that its strategic camp is effectively pre-set.

So, it is one thing for Europe to de-risk from the US and build its own strategic edge by developing military strength, enhancing the competitiveness of European industry, and accelerating European technological innovation to keep pace with American and Chinese advances. It is quite another to pursue non-alignment – or even strategic estrangement – instead of investing in a more balanced transatlantic relationship.

Which West?

While the strategic case for transatlantic cooperation is fairly straightforward, the picture becomes more complex when one turns to societal and political questions. The illiberal tendencies currently cutting across America have become cause for grave concern to all those, inside or outside the USA, who care about the future of American democracy. Europeans, moreover, are increasingly alarmed by Washington's open disregard for international norms that America played a central role in creating.

It would be misleading, however, to interpret these worrying developments as evidence of a transatlantic rupture. Rather, the whole West is going through >



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Washington, DC, US, 8 May 2025, Vice President JD Vance attends an event in the East room at the White House.

a “crisis of liberalism,” the symptoms of which are currently more acute in the USA but whose germs have long infected the European political body too, with illiberal tendencies going hand in hand with various forms of populism even on the European continent.

Looking ahead, many are therefore asking whether the liberal West can withstand the current populist-nationalist tide or if a transformation toward an “illiberal West” will eventually prove unavoidable – one that would revive many features of the pre-modern transatlantic order: ethnically and religiously defined, intensely nationalistic, largely undemocratic, and deeply divided. While certainly capturing the stakes involved, such framing overlooks a third, less extreme scenario: the emergence of a “post-liberal” West as a middle course between liberal revival and illiberal regression. In fact, an honest analysis easily unveils that Western societies have already started updating their thinking in ways that recalibrate, rather than repudiate,

the traditional “liberal creed”. This evolution is most evident in the socio-economic sphere, but it may soon extend into other domains, reshaping the identity of the West. Whether or not it culminates in a new transatlantic synthesis, it reflects an emerging reality whose significance should not be underestimated.

Post-Liberal Corrections

The mixed consequences of globalization have already led to several corrections to economic liberalism. One is the call for fair, rather than free, trade. Current transatlantic discrepancies should not obscure the underlying shift away from the free-trade euphoria of the post-Cold War era. While President Trump has weaponized trade, imposing tariffs and renegotiating various agreements, the EU has recently concluded ambitious trade deals with a number of actors, including India and Latin America. The EU’s proactive trade agenda, however, is not immune to the type of domestic pressures seen

across the Atlantic. Accordingly, new agreements are now more scrutinized than in the past for their economic, social, and security implications.

A second connected set of corrections has to do with de-risking, especially when it comes to China, and a renewed recognition of manufacturing as a critical pillar of both economic growth and economic security. While recently re-engaging with Beijing as a response to transatlantic tensions, European countries (and Canada) remain acutely aware of the downsides stemming from opening their markets to a non-reciprocating China, or overly depending on China-dominated supply chains.

While Europeans cannot afford to dispense with China, which remains a key market for European exports and an essential partner on global challenges such as climate change, the European pendulum has nonetheless been swinging towards managed competition rather than open-ended cooperation. In this respect, starting with the

first Trump presidency, Washington has played a key role in changing European views of China for good.

Another important correction has to do with migration and multiculturalism. On these complex and divisive subjects, the pendulum has clearly swung in the direction of a more cautious approach, based on the recognition that the social consequences of both have been vastly underestimated.

While most Europeans regard the Trump administration's policy of mass deportations as morally unacceptable, both sides of the Atlantic are moving toward a more selective approach to openness – one that welcomes migration only insofar as it preserves social cohesion and safeguards national security. And as Western societies anticipate demographic decline, citizens on both sides of the Atlantic fret about the fate of Western values in a multicultural and multiethnic environment for the same reason.

On issues such as the energy transition and the environment, where transatlantic disconnect is on display, there is more than meets the eye. The Trump administration has scandalously rejected climate science and encouraged an unconstrained use of fossil fuels. Europe, for its part, continues to see itself as a global environmental leader, pursuing climate neutrality by 2050.

Yet, around sustainability and the green transition, there is a detectable transatlantic shift towards limiting foreign dependencies and avoiding self-imposed economic costs. European countries are seriously discussing civilian nuclear energy – which was anathema until recently in many national contexts. The EU is already recalibrating its 2019 signature “Green Deal” by allowing more flexible standards and extended deadlines in an effort to ease the burden on

key industries, foremost among them the struggling automotive sector.

The Uncertain Future of the Reactionary International

Moving from economics to politics, the West remains very much in transition. Transatlantic societies continue to exhibit deep polarization, including over fundamental principles, and democratic backsliding is evident in a range of contexts, not only in Trump's America. Yet one factor that may favor the emergence of a post-liberal rather than an illiberal West is the uncertain political prospects of anti-liberal leaders, particularly the most uncompromising among them, from the US to Hungary.

Less than two years into his second term, President Trump has already become deeply unpopular. While sowing discord among the American people, recently his support has even eroded within his own base, largely as a result of his increasingly controversial and extreme positions.

While it is rightly noted that MAGA may outlast Trump, America First may in the future disavow the morally unscrupulous and increasingly despotic methods of the current US administration. In this respect, the November midterm elections are rightly seen as a critical test not just for the Democrats, who are hoping to gain back control of the US Congress, but for the future of American conservatism and the course of American democracy.

President Trump's brand of illiberal and confrontational populism has also become increasingly toxic around the world, including in countries where nationalist conservative sentiments run strong, including the UK and several states in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, European populist-nationalist leaders have demonstrated a capacity for adaptation, distancing

themselves from MAGA conservatism and moderating their positions when politically expedient, as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has exemplified in Italy. Virtually none now campaign on leaving the EU, despite President Trump's evident hostility toward it, as many did in the years preceding Brexit.

In this respect, the recent Hungarian elections are hopefully the signal of a broader trend. While the precise agenda of the new leadership will become clearer in the months ahead, there is already a re-engagement with the EU and a commitment to restore democratic standards that had been significantly eroded during the long rule of Viktor Orbán. Orbán was more than a Hungarian populist. He was an early champion of “illiberal democracy” and a leading figure of the “reactionary international,” transforming Hungary into a global hub for sovereigntist movements of various stripes. The significance of his defeat can scarcely be overstated.

While polarization and ideological conflict will likely continue to accompany America and Europe for quite some time, below the surface of transatlantic discord the crisis of liberalism may already be giving way to a reconfigured but enduring West. A plausible long-term outcome may be a post-liberal – but not illiberal – West.

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