

A NEW ATLANTIC CONSENSUS AND ITS FOES

Atlanticist–Europeanist Convergence
and the Nationalist Challenge

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IEP Bocconi Policy Insights

October 2026

IEP

INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN
POLICYMAKING
@BOCCONI UNIVERSITY



Executive Summary

Donald Trump's second term has narrowed the divide between Atlanticists and Europeanists. Europe has responded through appeasement, ad hoc coalitions and EU initiatives in defence, trade and technology.

These approaches remain fragmented but point towards a stronger European role within the Atlantic alliance.

The paper recommends combining NATO coordination with EU joint funding, procurement and defence production, while expanding European military capabilities and preserving cooperation with US firms.

Washington should stop exploiting European dependencies and recognise Europe's need to preserve its industrial capacity. Europeans should pursue the three approaches in parallel to limit damage under Trump and prepare a more balanced partnership after his presidency.

The most urgent threat comes from nationalist forces within Europe: weakening EU integration would deepen dependence on the United States and undermine a renewed transatlantic consensus.



Donald Trump's return to the White House in early 2025 reopened a debate in Europe that had long been more theoretical than real: how much should European security depend on the United States?

The transatlantic relationship has traditionally enjoyed widespread support among Europe's mainstream political forces. Sure, there have always been disagreements over whether Europe should carve out a greater international role through a more integrated EU. But the Atlanticist-Europeanist debate unfolded more often in political rhetoric and academic or expert commentary than in actual foreign and defence policy.

Trump's second term has changed the picture. Tariffs, the termination of direct military transfers to Ukraine, territorial claims to Greenland and uncertainty about the US commitment to NATO have brought the Atlanticist-Europeanist cleavage back into focus, but in unexpected ways. Perhaps counterintuitively, the gap has narrowed rather than widened. Proponents of either school of thought have come to better appreciate the merit of the other's arguments.

Europe's Three Responses to Trump

A first European response to the Trump challenge has been appeasement. European leaders have sought to avoid confrontation with Trump through flattery, cost absorption and concessions. They largely refrained from openly criticising him, accepted an imbalanced tariff deal and agreed to military spending commitments that will impose significant fiscal and political costs in financially strained EU member states.

This strategy reflects the extent of European dependence on the United States. Europe continues to rely heavily on Washington for its defence, while US leverage also extends into finance, technology and energy. The Trump Administration has attempted to turn these dependencies into political and economic concessions, pressing Europeans to spend more on defence, purchase more American weapons and LNG, and water down or abolish altogether digital and environmental regulations.

The second response has been greater cooperation outside formal EU structures. Ad hoc coalitions have sought to prevent abrupt ruptures with Washington while increasing Europe's capacity to act. Leaders from France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and others still have coordinated with Ukraine in the attempt to restore trust between Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky and steer US-Russian talks away from Russia's maximalist demands. France and Britain have promoted a coalition of willing states potentially able to deploy a reassurance force in Ukraine. Nordic and Baltic countries have intensified cooperation on defence, civilian preparedness and economic resilience, demonstrating to Washington that Europeans can assume greater responsibility for their own security.

Such formats allow Europeans to become more proactive without forcing them to choose



between Europe and the United States. They can strengthen European capabilities while keeping those capabilities embedded in NATO and continuing to involve Washington in European security.

The third response has been more explicitly Europeanist. Unlike the first two, which focus primarily on managing relations with Washington, this approach seeks to reduce Europe's structural vulnerabilities through EU-level initiatives in defence, trade and technology. The 150-billion-euro SAFE funding instrument is part of the effort to mobilise resources for defence. New trade agreements with Mercosur, Australia, India and the Philippines open new markets for EU exporters and bolster rules-based international economic interactions. Efforts to strengthen European technological sovereignty similarly aim to reduce dependencies that foreign powers can exploit.

These responses combine crisis management with longer-term efforts to build resilience and cannot be seen as a coherent strategy. Taken together, however, they support the argument that the divide between Atlanticists and Europeanists is narrowing.

Trump's challenge has demonstrated in no uncertain terms the risks of excessive dependence on Washington. But it has also demonstrated how difficult it would be for Europe simply to substitute the United States. Building genuinely autonomous military, technological and financial capabilities requires levels of political consensus and resource mobilisation that the EU has historically struggled to generate. The emerging answer is neither traditional Atlanticism nor full European strategic autonomy.

Stronger European capabilities can be conceived – and are generally seen by European policymakers – as a means of preserving transatlantic cooperation on sustainable terms. NATO and flexible intra-European coalitions can provide strategic coordination and operational cooperation, while pooling resources at EU level can supply the financial and institutional depth that national governments alone cannot muster.

Rebalancing the Atlantic Partnership

A more balanced transatlantic relationship would require both coordination and compromise.

In the short to medium term, Europe's defence can only be organised within NATO, with the United States continuing to provide strategic guidance and military assets that Europeans cannot readily replace, including nuclear weapons, fifth-generation aircraft and satellite-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems. Europeans should be encouraged – indeed, expected – to develop capabilities at scale in manpower, ammunition, air and missile defence, long-range strike, logistics and military mobility.

The EU can support this effort through common procurement, joint funding and incentives to expand European defence production, while remaining open to cooperation with US companies. The aim should be to strengthen Europe's industrial capacity without making



transatlantic cooperation a casualty of industrial protectionism.

Similarly, Washington would need to stop exploiting European dependencies on LNG imports, digital and AI services, and financial systems to compel compliance or, worse, divide Europeans.

The United States could work with European leaders to ensure that EU regulations do not discriminate against US companies, while recognising Europe's need to preserve industrial capacity, jobs and investment in key sectors, from energy and semiconductors to pharmaceuticals.

All this would increase Europe's weight within the Alliance and give European states greater autonomy without diminishing their partnership with the United States.

A stronger Europe and a more integrated EU would be better able to manage relations within Europe, reducing the need for Washington to commit extensive resources to the continent's political and military stability. Greater European integration could thus strengthen transatlantic trust while giving the United States more leeway in other strategic theatres.

This scenario is plausible because it reflects underlying geopolitical realities. Europeans need sustained US support to contain Russia's revanchism. The United States, meanwhile, has a structural interest in ensuring that Europe – still its main economic partner and, outside the Trump years, a political ally – remains secure, stable and capable of helping it sustain its geoeconomic rivalry with China.

Looking Beyond Trump

Geopolitical imperatives, however, translate into state action only when underpinned by strategic and political alignment. Admittedly, this has become next to impossible under Trump. Yet the US president's hostility towards Europe has relatively few acolytes beyond his inner circle and the most committed MAGA constituencies.

Support for the alliance with Europe remains widespread among political elites (as attested by Congress-imposed limits on the president's authority to withdraw from NATO and reduce assets in Europe) and the public, if somewhat tepid. As Trump enters the final years of his term with low approval ratings – and with a Democratic-led Congress a real possibility after the November 2026 midterms – the chances that geopolitical pragmatism would shape post-Trump US policy towards Europe increase.

A politically weakened Trump could still inflict considerable damage on the relationship. His recent decision to waive sanctions on Russian diesel exports to offset the supply crunch caused by the Iran war has strained the transatlantic sanctions front and emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin ahead of a crucial winter in his war against Ukraine.



Undersecretary of Defence Elbridge Colby's decision to establish an ad hoc group of NATO countries – the Bergen group – excluding France, the United Kingdom, Italy and the Baltic states risks sowing deep divisions within NATO Europe. The US Administration could pursue similar initiatives during the remainder of Trump's term.

Europeans have no effective response other than to double down on the three approaches outlined above. These could limit the damage if pursued in parallel and without directly undermining one another.

This is a tall order, but not an impossible one if European leaders maintain a common purpose and pursue a more balanced transatlantic relationship as a way to reverse the US drive against Europe after Trump leaves office. The picture would change, however, if nationalist, anti-EU forces came to power or gained influence over government policy in key countries such as France or Germany.

The Nationalist Threat Within Europe

Like their counterparts in the US new right, European far-right forces champion opposition to immigration, cultural and ethnic homogeneity, national sovereignty and resistance to the technocratic governance they associate with the EU within a broader civilisational understanding of Western nations. Their ideological affinity, reinforced by growing European and transatlantic networks of leaders, party members and think tanks, facilitates mutual legitimisation and the exchange of political practices.

Yet the nationalists' goal is political – to win and retain power in order to advance a radically nativist agenda – rather than strategic. Their ideological affinity does not necessarily translate into strategic convergence. Nationalist forces in Poland and the Baltic states view Russia differently from the far right in Western Europe, while efforts to protect national industries can also generate conflicts.

The United States has greater scope to absorb the contradictions of economic and political nationalism, thanks to its sheer power; individual European countries have far less room for manoeuvre. Weakening European integration in the name of national sovereignty would leave them more, not less, exposed to external pressure, including from the United States.

The greatest – or at least most urgent – danger to the emerging Atlanticist-Europeanist consensus comes from Europe itself.

If Europe, and the EU in particular, were to fracture under pressure from nationalist forces, the prospects for a more balanced transatlantic relationship would all but disappear. In its place would emerge a patchwork of relationships between the United States and individual European countries or groups of countries, shaped by shifting combinations of geopolitical needs and political expediency. With Europeanism fading, Atlanticism would survive as a label for European countries' growing vulnerability and dependence on the United States.

