

Loyalty to US vs pursuit of strategic autonomy: Where will Europe head?

Klaus F. Zimmermann, a professor at the Free University of Berlin and the president of Global Labor Organization

The transatlantic relationship between the US and Europe is facing significant strain due to shifts in US geopolitical priorities, global positioning and policymaking style. The new US administration's approach, which emphasizes "America First," is perceived as both isolationist and assertively expansionist. Some of the early actions from the new administration have caused international concern. Additionally, US demands for exclusive access to Ukraine's natural resources and undiplomatic comments about European political developments, particularly regarding Germany, have exacerbated tensions.

This shift has led to major disagreements between the US and Europe over economic policy, climate change, democratic values and how to deal with the Ukraine conflict. Europe's internal divisions and the unpredictability of American actions are making it difficult to reach a new balance in transatlantic relations. One particularly contentious issue is the tariffs on European goods imposed by the US administration. The president views tariffs as essential to national prosperity and a tool for international influence. While this economic strategy is widely criticized, it poses a direct threat to Europe's trade-dependent economies and also affects China. In response, Europe is expected to take countermeasures. The debate largely overlooks the fact that while the US has a trade deficit with Europe in goods, Europe has a trade deficit with the US in services.

With the US and Russia moving closer, doubts are growing about the US commitment to NATO and there are fears that an unstable cease-fire could be imposed on Ukraine. Europe will therefore soon be massively building up its military in order to take the necessary independent position.

As a result, Europe is likely to pursue greater independence in economic, military and foreign policy matters. The continent is still the largest internal market in the world after China. Strengthening China-Europe ties may again become a strategic priority as Europe seeks to hedge long-term risks. Discussions about decoupling from China are expected to dissipate, presenting China with an opportunity to enhance its standing and influence within Europe.

Pierre Picquart, an expert in geopolitics and human geography from the University of Paris-VIII

With Donald Trump's return to the White House, the international system is entering a new cycle of strategic realignments. Far from continuing its

Editor's Note:

It is evident that Europe's relationship with the US is undergoing a significant transformation. The continent now faces the challenge of navigating its alliance with a US that is once again prioritizing an "America First" approach while exploring possibilities and ways to strengthen "strategic autonomy." How will the transatlantic relationship evolve and what are Europe's choices in seeking "strategic autonomy"?

The Global Times consulted four European scholars to gather their perspectives.

predecessor's interventionist doctrine, the current US administration is steering American foreign policy in a radically different direction.

This redefinition of American priorities is disrupting the fragile balance of transatlantic relations. Convinced that Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security, the Trump administration is questioning Washington's unwavering commitment to NATO. This repositioning represents a strategic shock for Europeans, who have relied on US military protection since the Cold War.

The European Union, already struggling with internal divisions over its stance toward Moscow, finds its fractures deepening. While some countries, such as France, advocate for greater strategic autonomy, others, particularly in Eastern Europe, continue to view Washington as their primary security guarantor. This new American approach, more pragmatic and less ideological, is forcing Europe to reconsider its strategic foundations and reduce its dependence on US decisions.

On the diplomatic front, the resumption of talks between the US and Russia is reshaping the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Unlike the previous administration, which maintained unwavering military and financial support for Kiev, the Trump administration is prioritizing a negotiated settlement. From this perspective, the White House sees a compromise with Moscow as inevitable, even if it means imposing difficult concessions on Ukrainian leaders. This prospect deeply worries several European capitals, which fear that a settlement dictated by Washington and Moscow could come at Ukraine's expense and, by extension,

threaten the continent's stability.

In any case, the weakening of transatlantic ties and the uncertainty surrounding NATO's future raise critical questions about Europe's role in this emerging world order. Caught between loyalty to Washington and the pursuit of strategic autonomy, the divided Old Continent faces a decisive choice. Its ability to assert itself as an independent actor, redefine its alliances, and secure its diplomatic and military future will shape its role in the ongoing geopolitical reconfiguration.

Jan Oberg, director of Sweden-based think tank Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research

NATO and the EU chose the wrong path after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Instead of dissolving NATO and building a new European common security structure and conflict-resolution mechanism akin to the UN in Europe, they broke all promises made by Western leaders to Gorbachev about not expanding NATO "one inch." Deaf and blind to all warnings, Europe – failing to become more independent of the US – finally fell into a hubris trap.

The recent NATO defense ministers' meeting, followed by the Munich Security Conference (MSC), changed everything. The Trump 2.0 administration bluntly disregarded its European allies to build an autarchic Greater America, grabbing resources from Panama to Canada, Greenland, the Arctic, Scandinavia and beyond, what I call the Trump administration's "Las VeGaza."

This vision of Greater America is, of course, a fantasy that will not come about peacefully.

The cynicism vis-a-vis Europe is indeed tangible. The root cause of the tragic war in Ukraine was the Barack Obama administration's 2014 regime change in Kiev, the selection of a pro-West/NATO leader-

ship and arming Ukraine to conduct a devastating politico-military war on everything Russian in that country.

European leaders, despite their manifest havoc and Ukraine's devastation, insist on "winning the war against Russia" (now without the US) through continued cynical bleeding of Ukraine, arguing that Ukraine must be further re-armed to be strong at the negotiation table later.

Europe will now live with a double "cold war" – Russia to the East, the US to the West. Tragic beyond words, it is all of its own making.

Laurent Michelon, French entrepreneur and author of the book *Understanding the relation between China and the West*

During the recent 61st MSC, US Vice President JD Vance declared that the greatest threat that Europe is facing is not China or Russia, but "from within." Vance's speech, which left the European elites shell-shocked, reveals US objective of getting rid of the globalist European elites.

The Trump administration has made ending the war in Ukraine a priority and will not allow European leaders to derail its strategy. This is a tough sell to the European population, unless it is framed as "achieving strategic autonomy" from the US, and fighting for "renewed sovereignty."

In that regard, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's speech given at the MSC was the giveaway. According to him, as the US turns its attention to "threats" in the Indo-Pacific region, "European allies must lead from the front." Together, we can establish a division of labor that maximizes our comparative advantages in Europe and the Pacific respectively, he said.

A "division of labor" does not indicate a spat, a split or a dispute, but rather enhanced and streamlined cooperation. Therefore, speeches from the above-mentioned US officials must be watched in the light of a stronger US grip on the EU, not a split. Those speeches were designed to give the impression of scolding the current European elites and flatter the European populations by giving them some cosmetic sovereignty, but within a reinforced Atlanticist framework.

However, is Europe buying it? What we see now is instead of listening to the voice of the new US administration, EU leaders and their Siamese twin NATO are going through with their original plan of supporting Ukraine full steam ahead. It is worth keeping an eye on how the differences between Europe and the US regarding the Ukraine crisis will develop in the future.



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