

SWP Research Paper

Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair (eds.)

With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relations With the United States



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
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- The Pax Americana, which guaranteed the security of Germany and Europe after the Second World War, is coming to an end. Europe can no longer rely on its alliance and partnership with the United States.
- Even before Donald Trump's second presidency, Europe was seeking to reduce its dependency on Washington for peace, democracy and prosperity.
- This cannot be achieved overnight, and will require a significant increase in material resources and strategic thinking over the next five to ten years.
- The fourteen contributions to this SWP Research Paper show how different the starting conditions for developing transition strategies are, depending on the policy area and challenges. Europe needs to consider all the options: with, without or even against Washington.
- The analyses of Europe's agency and the scope for European policy towards Russia, the Middle East and China are very wide-ranging. Trump's logic of quick deal-making and unilateralism under the banner of "MAGA" often collides fundamentally with the EU's multilateral foreign and security policy, which is bound by international law, and its commitment to sustainable peace.
- The keywords for the urgent reorganisation of security in Europe are: Europeanisation of NATO, strengthening Europe's own military capabilities, new leadership constellations for security policy in Europe, and resilient governance in technology and cybersecurity.
- Even at this geopolitical turning-point ("Zeitenwende"), the EU should continue to develop its soft power. When it comes to the crucial questions of global governance – from UN and international law to trade, climate and energy policy – Europe must find new partnerships and, if necessary, new institutional solutions without and against the United States.

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute
for International
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Germany
Phone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-200
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair

With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relationship with the US

Developments in the United States and its foreign policy under President Trump are so radical and fast-moving that many European capitals, including Berlin, are having to contemplate operating without or even against the United States in key areas of international politics. There is also discussion about what can only be achieved with the United States for the time being. A new era of transatlantic relations has dawned for Europe and Germany:

- Europe can no longer rely on its alliance and partnership with the United States. Whoever succeeds Trump II, there will be no going back to a transatlantic partnership led by a benevolent US hegemon. Even if the next US presidential elections might create breathing space, the pendulum could still swing back again four years later.
- Europe must therefore significantly reduce its dependence on the United States, and ideally eliminate it in key areas. This would mean fulfilling the promise of European sovereignty in terms of strategic capability, decision-making autonomy and freedom of action.
- This cannot be achieved overnight, and will require a significant increase in resources over the next five to ten years. During this transition period, Europe will find itself in a weaker negotiating position vis-à-vis the United States. This applies above all to security and will require concessions in other policy areas.
- Depending on the policy area or challenge, the United States may appear as a rival, competitor or partner – corresponding the strategy options of operating against, without or with Washington.

This study analyses fourteen areas of action relevant to German and European policy. Although the contributions were largely written before publication of the American *National Security Strategy*, the latter's core provisions align with the observations outlined

above. The study was prepared before the combined US-Israeli war against Iran began. In the first part, *Europe on its own*, we examine (1) whether the existential crisis in transatlantic relations can be overcome through adaptation or transformation, or whether a break is inevitable, (2) what a Europeanisation of NATO might look like, (3) how new leadership constellations can be formed in Europe, and (4) what Europe's options for action are in view of its technological dependencies on the United States. The second part, *War and Peace*, is devoted to Europe's options for action with, without or against the United States: in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in Middle East policy, in the reshaping of China policy and, at a more fundamental level, in peace promotion, humanitarian aid and development cooperation. The analyses in the third part deal with the relationship between Europe and the United States in key *areas of action*. They address the future of multilateralism and international law, the renewal of the EU's soft power, especially vis-à-vis the countries of the Global South, new ideas for European trade policy, and ways to advance climate and energy policy. The fourth part draws *conclusions* on how Europe can escape its dangerous dependence on the United States.

Europe on Its Own

Sascha Lohmann and Johannes Thimm

The Future of the Transatlantic Community: Adaptation, Transformation or Breakdown

In his second term, President Donald Trump has radically reoriented US national security and foreign policy under the slogan “*America First*”. This fundamentally changes the conditions under which transatlantic relations operate. Trump’s dealings with Europe are no longer merely transactional, but increasingly resemble blackmail, employing a variety of instruments to demonstrate that “might makes right”. In addition to unilateral military force, as recently employed in Venezuela and Iran, he has also imposed tariffs in pursuit of non-trade objectives, withdrawn security guarantees, and openly threatened to annex foreign territory (Greenland for example). His unpredictability poses enormous challenges for foreign policy elites in Germany and the European Union, particularly because Europe depends so heavily on the United States for its security and defence.

While these changes in US policy have torn up the rulebook of transatlantic cooperation, the shift in fact began well before Trump. Its causes lie in a general transformation of Western democracies,¹ and in the rise of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies.² The influence of nationalist-populist forces such as the MAGA (*Make America Great Again*) movement has grown in response to economic and technological challenges.³

1 Peter Rudolf, *Nicht allein Trump ist das Problem – Zum Umgang Deutschlands mit den USA*, SWP-Aktuell 57/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2018), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/zum-umgang-deutschlands-mit-den-usa> (accessed 19 November 2025).

2 Florian Böller, Sascha Lohmann and David Sirakov, “Ausmaß und Auswirkung parteipolitischer Polarisierung”, in *State of the Union: Langfristige Trends in der US-amerikanischen Innen- und Außenpolitik und ihre Konsequenzen für Europa*, ed. Marco Overhaus, SWP-Studie 6/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2021), 7–12, doi: 10.18449/2021S06.

3 Keith Prushankin and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism and Autocratisation”, in *The Routledge Handbook of*

Its acolytes define national interests narrowly and in a short-term perspective. Trump and his supporters largely reject US contributions to the provision of international public goods such as free trade and collective security, arguing that costs outweigh any benefits. This applies at the global level as well as within the transatlantic community. The latter is thus experiencing its most serious crisis to date, and its future appears uncertain.

Trump as catalyst for profound change in transatlantic relations

After the Second World War, the United States and its European allies created a partnership characterised by close defence cooperation within NATO, strong economic integration and a dense network of scientific, cultural and societal connections. Elites on both sides of the Atlantic believed that they belonged to a community of shared security, interests and values, where conflicts could be resolved by peaceful means, competition could be constructively managed through formal and informal institutions, and cooperation became the norm.⁴

At times reality fell short of the ideal. Serious disagreements arose over multilateral cooperation – for example, with respect to climate policy or membership of the International Criminal Court. The Bush administration’s so-called “global war on terror”

Autocratisation, ed. Aurel Croissant and Luca Tomini (London, 2024), 278–288 (279).

4 Transatlantic relations are analysed in the literature using the concept of a pluralistic security community. See Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organisation in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

following the attacks of 11 September 2001, and in particular the US-led military intervention in Iraq, also caused major controversy within the transatlantic community. Under President Donald Trump, however, the conflicts of interest have reached a new level.

Today, the future of the United States as a liberal democracy is in question.

Historically, cooperation between the United States and Europe has evolved into a dependable partnership because all involved shared democratic institutions and convictions. Today, the future of the United States as a liberal democracy is in question. The line between democracy and authoritarianism is not always clear-cut, and the situation in the United States is constantly evolving. There are indications that the country is sliding into a form of competitive authoritarianism.⁵ In such a hybrid regime, democratic institutions continue to exist and regular elections are held, but the government changes the rules in its favour; political competition is no longer fair and a peaceful transfer of power becomes less likely.⁶

One central precondition for liberal democracy – that it must be possible to engage peacefully against the government without fear of negative consequences – is no longer unequivocally valid for the United States.⁷ The Trump administration is employing various strategies to curtail freedom of expression. It casts political opposition as illegitimate, threatens negative consequences and mobilises the government apparatus to attack political opponents. Civil society and private-sector institutions that stand for liberal values find themselves under pressure to submit to the will of the government, media corporations, universities, law firms and NGOs. This violates civil and human rights as well as the rule of law. The

principle of separation of powers is under pressure and it is doubtful whether Congress and the courts can still properly fulfil their constitutional role as a check on the executive.⁸ When federal law enforcement, the National Guard, and active duty military units are deployed to Democrat-run cities, these ostensibly neutral institutions become instruments of a partisan agenda. Their deployment also serves as a demonstration of power, an attempt to intimidate the public and possibly a test run for interfering in future elections.

Under Trump, US national security and foreign policy is also taking an illiberal turn, breaking with the values and interests it once shared with Europe. The goal of supporting liberal democracies no longer unites the United States and Europe. In his dealings with other countries, Trump makes no distinction between democracies and non-democracies. His administration has renounced its commitment to a rules-based order, and openly questions – and violates – central tenets of international law. Under his leadership, the United States has withdrawn from more than 65 international forums, organisations and agreements, including the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO and the WHO, as well as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Trump administration is not merely rejecting individual organisations and agreements, it is turning its back on essential parts of the multilateral system itself. Both domestic and international law are increasingly irrelevant to US foreign policy.⁹

8 Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way and Daniel Ziblatt, “How Will We Know When We Have Lost Our Democracy?”, *New York Times* (online), 8 May 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/08/opinion/trump-authoritarianism-democracy.html> (accessed 19 November 2025).

9 This is evident, for example, in the US military’s strikes against Iranian targets, and deadly attacks on alleged drug smuggling boats and the violent abduction of President Nicolás Maduro. See Tess Bridgeman and Brian Finucane, “War Powers, Venezuela, Drug Boats, and Congress”, *Just Security* (online), 12 January 2026, <https://www.justsecurity.org/128517/war-powers-venezuela-drug-boats-and-congress/> (accessed 14 January 2026). Violations of international law, contested interpretations and certain double standards have always existed, and German foreign policy is no exception (for example, on the issue of Israel). But for Trump, international law plays no role whatsoever as a normative frame of reference.

5 Larry Diamond, “Taking Stock of America’s Slide to Autocracy”, *Persuasion* (online), 3 November 2025, <https://www.persuasion.community/ptaking-stock-of-americas-slide-to> (accessed 19 November 2025).

6 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Christopher Carothers, “The Surprising Instability of Competitive Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 129–35.

7 Johannes Thimm, *Systemsprenger – Donald Trump und die Erosion der Demokratie in den USA*, SWP-Studie 2/2026 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2026), doi: 10.18449/2026S02.

Europe's options

Europe must respond to these changes in US policy. In the past, Washington assumed leadership and often took the initiative in dealing with international crises. European countries responded to the US course by falling in line, trying to influence it, or distancing themselves. For all the controversies, Europeans could rely on Washington not to deliberately harm their security, or undermine their liberal democracies. That world no longer exists.

In some areas, such as European security, doubts are growing as to whether Washington retains any commitment at all. When it comes to addressing global problems such as climate change or pandemics, the Trump administration is not only disengaging, but rejecting the underlying objectives. And it is actively undermining certain previously shared causes, such as the multilateral free trade regime.

In this new situation, Europe must become more strategic about its options. In particular, it would be helpful to consider systematically: which policies can Europe only pursue *with* the US government, which can it work towards *without* Washington, and where it is necessary to take a stand *against* it? For instance, Europe may wish to continue trying to organise its own security and the defence of Ukraine together with the United States, despite all the difficulties. This is already requiring European concessions, such as taking on more responsibility through *burden-shifting*. Specifically, this means that the United States is scaling back its own military and financial assistance to Ukraine, but – at least for the time being – still supplying supply weapons, for which Europe now foots the bill. Washington continues to provide intelligence capabilities and logistical support and allows the use of NATO command structures. Spheres where action is possible without the United States include certain global governance goals, such as development cooperation and combating climate change. As things stand, however, they will have to act against the US government to defend their own sovereignty and liberal values.

In theory the question of whether to act with, without or against Washington can be considered separately for each policy area, testing different combinations and adapting them over time. Here, the EU's own problem-solving and conflict management capacities would be salient, along with its flexibility. In practice, however, it is doubtful to that the US government would allow such a differentiated approach.

The EU's decision to temporarily refrain from imposing counter-tariffs in the trade dispute with Washington can only be understood in the context of concerns that the United States could withdraw completely from efforts to assist Ukraine. In other words, issue linkage and spill-over effects must also be taken into account when deciding on courses of action. Nevertheless, thorough analysis of priorities and capacities in key policy areas is necessary for developing a more strategic approach. Europe will not decide the future of the transatlantic community on its own, but its behaviour will affect the outcome.

Possible futures for the transatlantic community

Three possible trajectories are conceivable for future transatlantic relations: adaptation, transformation or a breakdown in the relationship.¹⁰

Adaptation

Viewed unsentimentally, it is clear that Trump wants to dictate rather than negotiate the new basis for transatlantic relations. His administration acts coercively rather than transactionally, linking different policy areas with one another. This scenario sees Europe yielding to pressure in most areas and adapting to US demands – as already occurred in the summer of 2025 with the agreement to hold off counter-tariffs, currently scheduled to last until early August 2026.

Transformation

Another possibility is that the crisis will lead to a transformation of the relationship, based on a changed set of rules. If Washington ceases to assert international or transatlantic leadership, and refrains from providing global public goods to legitimise its position, Europe will have to consider alternatives. European security policy has already changed, for example, in assuming a greater share of the burden of supporting Ukraine. A division of labour or “agreement to disagree” might be possible in other areas,

¹⁰ This typology is based on G. John Ikenberry, “Explaining Crisis and Change in Transatlantic Relations”, in Jeffrey Anderson, G. John Ikenberry and Thomas Risse, *The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1–27 (11–14).

too. However, reducing the level of ambition to such an extent would place a question mark over the relationship's unique character as a pluralistic security community based on trust.

Breakdown

The third scenario is a complete breakdown of the transatlantic relationship. In this case, the exceptionally close community held together by shared norms and values ceases to exist because conflicts of interest that can no longer be resolved or ignored. One conceivable development would be intensifying US interference in the internal affairs of European states. Already, the Trump administration openly supports illiberal forces in Germany and the United Kingdom. Similar meddling – such as opposing European regulation of US technology companies, or attacking liberal institutions such as NGOs, the media, universities and courts – could ultimately escalate past breaking point. In this vein, Washington has imposed sanctions on staff of the International Criminal Court and the managing directors of the German NGO *Hate Aid*, and further threats against German courts and authorities may be imminent.

Toward a strategic America policy

Germany and Europe are still heavily dependent on the United States for their security and access to most technology; economically, the two sides are closely integrated. So quitting the special transatlantic relationship would entail high costs and risks in the short term. The more strongly Europe relies on US support and products, the greater the incentive to give in to Washington's demands, however unjustified these may be.

However, Europe can expand its options by building up its own capacities and reducing asymmetric dependencies. This requires the development of autonomous capabilities, not only in the field of defence, but also in key technologies and international financial transactions. When acting *with* the United States, this will expand Europe's influence on the goals and modes of cooperation. If it becomes necessary to act *without* the United States, there will be all the more need for independent capabilities and problem-solving capacities. And in the event of Europe having to act *against* Washington, it will need levers

to exert pressure. In short, it is all about balancing US power.

In the medium term, therefore, strategic risk mitigation would entail reducing Europe's dependency on the United States, rather than giving in to destructive demands from Washington. This should be the priority in formulating a strategy for dealing with the United States.¹¹ Such an effort will still be worthwhile, even if the worst fears about the decline of US democracy prove unfounded. And if they do transpire, it will have been all the more necessary.

11 Sascha Lohmann and Johannes Thimm, "Amerikapolitik als akute Aufgabe: Zu den Implikationen der US-Innenpolitik für Deutschland und Europa", in *Trumps Rückkehr und Europas außenpolitische Herausforderungen*, ed. Laura von Daniels and Stefan Mair, SWP-Studie 3/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2025), 9–13, doi: 10.18449/2025S03.

Pia Fuhrhop and Marco Overhaus

From Building Military Capabilities to Reforming Structures: Shaping the Europeanisation of NATO

In no other area is Europe's dependence on the United States as pronounced and one-sided as in defence. The Trump administration's policies highlight the enormous risks this involves. The latest National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the military intervention in Venezuela all underline Washington's claim to an exclusive American sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. As the NSS openly states, the Trump administration rejects European integration and sees itself in a fundamental conflict of values with most of its European partners. And the blatant threats against Greenland highlight the risk that Washington might even be willing to break with NATO in pursuit of its interests. It has also become clear that depending on the United States for security has made Europe vulnerable to blackmail, not least in trade and technology.

Despite these grave developments and given the lack of short- and medium-term alternatives, Europe will want to preserve NATO as the central institution for collective defence. So the process of Europeanisation can be expected to continue. In view of developments in US policy, it increasingly needs to be compatible with a "Plan B", in which Europe largely takes over NATO or alternatively establishes a credible European defence outside the Alliance. Either way, it is essential that Germany and its European partners shape this process on the basis of a clear understanding of their own interests. In 2026, and in the medium term, the focus will initially be on building and expanding European military capabilities. However, for Europeanisation to be successful and sustainable, capability building must be linked to structural changes in NATO. In the short term, this carries considerable potential for conflict: steps that expand Europe's military and political weight in NATO may exacerbate transatlantic conflicts.

Building conventional military capabilities

The first step towards strengthening Europe's capacity to act within NATO should be to build up military capabilities that have hitherto been lacking. In order to credibly deter Russia, Europe must significantly increase its pool of deployable forces. At present, Europe is unable even to substitute the approximately 80,000 US military personnel stationed here, not to speak of establishing sufficient reserves to compensate for the current potential to call on reinforcements from the United States. Military capabilities that are critical for independent deployments are also affected by dependencies. These include essential parts of the military "central nervous system", primarily communication, surveillance and reconnaissance. Serious deficits also exist in critical enablers such as strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling and, above all, air defence. Finally, there is a large gap in missile artillery and the ability to carry out long-range precision strikes.

Politicians and experts agree that it will realistically take ten to fifteen years to build up adequate European capabilities.¹ Despite the enormous increase in defence spending, Europe's financial resources are limited. The success of rearmament will depend on

1 Ben Barry et al., *Defending Europe without the United States: Costs and Consequences* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], May 2025), <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states-costs-and-consequences/>; Camille Grand, *Defending Europe with Less America*, ECFR Policy Brief (London: European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 3 July 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defending-europe-with-less-america/>.

the willingness of member states to pool resources, especially for the very expensive critical enablers. Many in Europe consider a more independent, efficient defence industry to be a prerequisite for success.

The defence industry aspect of Europeanisation is also a particular source of conflict in transatlantic relations. The European Commission and some member states believe that European rearmament should be accompanied by a sharp increase in domestic production on this side of the Atlantic in order to reduce dependency on the United States. In practice, European members of the Alliance have employed diverse approaches to fill the gaps. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a significant proportion of defence spending since 2022 went to European suppliers, but US-based contractors still accounted for 34 per cent of spending. European countries remain particularly dependent in the aerospace sector.²

Washington has been sending mixed signals on the desirability of greater European independence in defence procurement. Traditionally, it has been argued that European defence purchases from the United States strengthen the latter's commitment to Europe, and that close integration is necessary to close Europe's capability gaps and promote interoperability. Others argue that current US industrial capacity will be insufficient to meet the increased demand on both sides of the Atlantic.

NATO's integrated military and command structures

If Europe succeeds in sustainably strengthening its conventional capabilities, this will have to be reflected, in the medium term at least, in a Europeanisation of the Alliance's integrated military and command structures. Europeans already occupy key posts, including Chair of the NATO Military Committee. The question of whether the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) should also be a European is particularly sensitive. This position has traditionally been held by an American general or admiral, who

is also the commander of the US armed forces in Europe.

The Alliance has very recently taken some ambitious steps to further Europeanise NATO's operational commands, which have to date largely been filled by Americans.³ The United Kingdom will assume command of Joint Force Command Norfolk, while Italy will do the same for Joint Force Command Naples. Germany and Poland will alternate command of Joint Force Command Brunssum. Europeans will then be in charge of all three Joint Force Commands (four star commands), which take the lead operationally during crises and conflicts. By contrast, the United States will assume even greater responsibilities on the so-called "tactical" or component level of the command structure. It will continue to lead Allied Land Command and Allied Air Command, while taking over leadership of Allied Maritime Command from the British.⁴

The basic idea behind the recent – and potentially future – Europeanisation of NATO's command structure is that the European part of NATO will retain full access to this structure, especially when the forces involved are mainly or exclusively European. Otherwise, according to political scientist Sven Biscop, for example, the European part of NATO would be unable to assume primary operational responsibility for the conventional defence of the continent – which is precisely what the Trump administration expects from its partners.⁵

² James Hackett and Ben Schreer, *Building Defence Capacity in Europe: An Assessment*, Strategic Dossier (London: IISS, November 2024), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content-migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/pds-2024/iiss_building-defence-capacity-in-europe-an-assessment_112024.pdf.

³ Luis Simon, Daniel Fiott and Octavian Manea, *Two Fronts, One Goal: Euro-Atlantic Security in the Indo-Pacific Age* (Washington, D.C.: The Marathon Initiative, August 2023), 12f., <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Two-Fronts-One-Goal-website-publication-v.2.pdf>

(accessed 12 June 2024); Rachel Rizzo and Michael Benhamou, "Europeanise NATO to Save It", *Defence One* (online), 11 June 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/06/europeanize-nato-save-it/397299/> (accessed 1 October 2025).

⁴ "European Allies to Take on New Leadership Roles", NATO press statement, 6 February 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/02/06/european-allies-to-take-on-new-leadership-roles-in-natos-command-structure>.

⁵ Sven Biscop, *NATO: The Damage Is Done – So Think Big*, Egmont Policy Brief, no. 379 (Brussels: Egmont Institute, May 2025), 3, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/05/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_379_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf.

The Europeanisation of NATO structures could accelerate the decoupling of European and US security policy.

However, the Europeanisation of NATO structures also carries risks. If managed badly, it could further accelerate the decoupling of European and US security policy. Trump might push things even further and – as in the past – insist that a European assume the post of SACEUR. The Europeanisation of NATO command structures would then be faster and more extensive than many Europeans would like.

This scenario, it should be noted, would extend well beyond institutional issues, and touch on very fundamental questions. Because the post of SACEUR stands for the linkage of conventional defence with nuclear deterrence, Europe would have no choice but to build its own alternatives to the US's extended nuclear deterrence, on the basis of existing French and British capabilities.

The question of political leadership

For decades, America provided indispensable political leadership within the Alliance, in addition to its military dominance. There are many indications that Washington no longer wants to play this role – or at least not in a manner that aligns with the interests of many European countries. This is particularly evident in Trump's vacillation over Ukraine, where Washington increasingly sees itself as a mediator between Russia and Europe rather than as part of NATO. As well as the risk of Washington pursuing a “policy of the empty chair” in the NATO Council, Europe must also make plans for the real danger that US unilateralism will divide the Alliance and even – and this is indeed a novum – genuinely threaten the security of individual NATO members.

Against this backdrop, Europe needs to position itself to fill a possible leadership vacuum. As its contribution to defence policy grows, Europe must ensure that its interests are more clearly reflected in the Alliance's goals and military orientation. For decades, Washington's leadership has included balancing the different interests and threat perceptions among the members. In the future, Europe will have to take responsibility for creating trust and consensus. If Europe is to lead, European countries will have to

assert united positions that they can credibly back up with appropriate military force.

It remains unclear who in Europe is capable of taking on these leadership roles, and how they are to be filled. No single country will be able to replace the United States. Collective leadership by the European NATO members demands the political will to ensure effective European defence and to actually provide the required capabilities. Any European leadership team should represent the different threat perceptions within the alliance and be guided by the will to bring these positions closer together.

Efforts to establish collective leadership could build on recent experience with the E5 format, the group of five defence ministers. The two European nuclear powers, France and the United Kingdom, must be part of any European leadership in NATO. However, this would require both to adapt their respective nuclear doctrines and capabilities.⁶

Germany's economic and political weight makes it indispensable to the collective leadership, especially if Chancellor Friedrich Merz makes good on his promise to make the German Bundeswehr “Europe's strongest army”.⁷ Poland's geographical location and the importance of its land forces make it another an indispensable member of any European leadership in NATO. Italy, as an important military player on NATO's southern flank, is significantly involved in shaping European ideas. The future role of Turkey is politically problematic: it possesses large land forces but under President Tayyip Erdoğan has maintained close relations with Moscow.

Another important question is how best to integrate collective European leadership into NATO's decision-making structures. The primary task would be to establish reliable informal coordination in order to develop common European positions. Leadership modelled on the E5 should set an agenda aligned with European interests and establish viable European positions in consultation with the European Union

6 Suzana Anghel and Mario G. H. Damen, *The Future European Security Architecture: Dilemmas for EU Strategic Autonomy* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], March 2025), 3f., <https://eprthinktank.eu/2025/03/17/the-future-european-security-architecture-dilemmas-for-eu-strategic-autonomy/>.

7 “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz”, *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, no. 34–3 (14 May 2025), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/992814/2347886/b4b2811323312203cd14443e92b0a88c/34-3-bk-regierungserklaerung-bt-data.pdf?download=1>.

and the other European members of NATO. However, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) would have to remain the central political decision-making body, because, particularly in matters related to collective defence (Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty), all alliance partners are affected by the decisions of individual countries.

Outlook

Ideally it will be possible to realign European-American defence relations within NATO through systematic and cooperative Europeanisation. It will be crucial for this process to be shaped on the basis of a clear understanding of the common interest, which is above all to be able to deter Russia despite significantly lower American contributions and if need be, to defend Europe effectively. True burden shifting within the alliance requires that the development of military capabilities be linked to structural changes.

With regard to military capabilities, European countries should focus on rebalancing transatlantic defence industry cooperation. Where there is no alternative to US products, some at least should be manufactured in Europe.⁸ At the same time, domestic production of genuinely European armaments must be significantly increased. Europe should take the current NATO defence planning process as its starting point. And if Washington withdraws US forces from Europe, the process must be rapidly adapted. As far as the Alliance's command structures are concerned, consistent Europeanisation must encompass the tactical (component) levels, in parallel with the development of deployable European land forces.

Ultimately, however, the political level will be decisive. In this context, Europeanisation means creating collective European leadership within the alliance, with maximum congruence between actual capabilities, threat perception and political will. The initial aim should be to establish informal leadership to influence decision-making processes in the NATO

Council in the European interest rather than replacing them. In the medium and long term, a European core group could also be supported by permanent structures within the alliance.

Such a construct would also be the most promising way to effectively represent European interests to the United States, as long as Washington still has at least some interest in maintaining the alliance. But even in the worst-case scenario of a breakdown in transatlantic relations, collective European leadership would be vital in shaping the Europeanisation of NATO without the US or building a European defence outside the alliance. Germany's great economic, political and military weight means that German leadership will be necessary. The minimum goal must be to enable Europe to act collectively despite diverging interests and reduced American commitment.

⁸ Gram Slattery, John Irish and Daphne Psaledakis, "US Officials Object to European Push to Buy Weapons Locally", *Reuters*, 2 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-officials-object-european-push-buy-weapons-locally-2025-04-02/>; Becca Wasser and Philip Sheers, *From Production Lines to Front Lines: Revitalising the US Defence Industrial Base for Future Great Power Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Centre for New American Security, April 2025), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/from-production-lines-to-front-lines>.

Ronja Kempin, Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza

Coalitions Everywhere – Leadership Nowhere? Europe’s Defence in a Proliferation of Flexible Formats

The now widely shared demand that Europe must shoulder more responsibility for its defence contains one certainty and two unknowns. There is a widespread belief in Europe that Russian imperialism will not be limited to the political and military conquest of Ukraine. According to assessments by European intelligence services, Russian President Vladimir Putin could position his country to attack European Union (EU) and NATO member states militarily within the next five years. However, whether and to what extent the United States will stand by its European allies in such a scenario is currently unknown. Since Donald Trump returned to the White House, the contours of an isolationist US policy towards Europe have become clear: Washington is breaking away from the post-war European order, blackmailing its European partners on security policy (and even territory), and negotiating with Russia behind the Europeans’ backs. But there is also a second unknown: which Europe is meant? How is it organised, who forms its core, and how could it provide effectively for its security and defence?¹

The United States is leaving behind more than just a military gap

For Europeans, it is clear that a US withdrawal – or worse, an antagonistic position towards Europe – would mean more than just the loss of military capa-

bilities. Since the end of the Second World War, American nuclear deterrence, substantial conventional forces, and associated strategic enablers and reconnaissance capabilities have formed the cornerstone of the transatlantic security partnership. This also resulted in the political leadership of a “benevolent hegemon” that was able to overcome the political mistrust between European partners – which still exists today. No European state has the political and military power to guarantee Europe’s security and organise the continent’s order.

Given the uncertainties surrounding Washington’s future commitment to Europe’s security and defence, European states are striving to further differentiate Europe’s already complex security architecture. In addition to their involvement in NATO and numerous EU activities in the field of defence financing, industrial cooperation and procurement, they are also concluding bilateral security agreements. One prominent recent example is the Kensington Treaty between Germany and the United Kingdom, signed in July 2025.²

Multilateral groups have also proliferated since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The E3 format (Germany, France and the United Kingdom) has been revived, and the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France and Poland) has expanded to include the United Kingdom and other rotating partners as “Weimar Plus”. The E5 Group, also known as the Group of Five, comprises Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Poland, while the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8; Den-

¹ See Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes, eds., *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*, SWP Research Paper 4/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019RP04; Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin, *Die Neuvermessung der amerikanisch-europäischen Sicherheitsbeziehungen: Von Zeitenwende zu Zeitenwende*, SWP-Studie 15/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024S15.

² An analysis by the Heinrich Böll Foundation lists over 160 bilateral security partnerships (in the broader sense) since 2014, with most having been concluded since 2022. See Roderick Kefferpütz and Anika Bruck, *Phalanx of Defence Pacts? Mapping Bilateral Defence Partnerships in Europe*, Böll EU Brief 05/2025 (Brussels: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2025), https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/boell_eu_brief_05_2025_defence_partnerships_europe.pdf.

mark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden) is intensifying its regional solidarity. Other coordination and dialogue formats include the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the forty-plus-member European Political Community (EPC), as well as the “Coalition of the Willing” led by France and the United Kingdom.

Flexible formats and their functions

In European security and defence policy, flexible formats are variable political cooperation structures³ between European states that emerge outside or on the fringes of NATO and the European Union, mostly through bilateral or mini-lateral agreements. Some are institutionalised, with the participating states meeting regularly, while others come together as required on an ad hoc basis.

Examination of their objectives reveals that these formats can potentially complement one another. They all aim to contribute to Ukraine’s defence and to improve Europe’s capacity to act in the field of security and defence policy.

The EPC and Weimar Plus are primarily used for diplomatic coordination. The EPC brings together a broad spectrum of European states to strengthen dialogue and solidarity, and is an inclusive umbrella format. Larger European states strive to reach consensus on positions and initiatives within the Weimar Plus framework, which acts as a political bridge between Western and Eastern Europe. The E3 format, which brings together the leaders of the three main European powers – Germany, France and the United Kingdom – is also experiencing a revival. In late 2025/early 2026 this group took the lead on talks with the Trump administration and Ukraine over revisions to the US “peace plan” and the European reaction towards the US/Israel war with Iran.

The E5, NB8 and Coalition of the Willing are particularly active in the military and operational spheres. So far, the E5 group has focused on coordination amongst defence ministers, ensuring transparency in

defence planning, and structuring capability development, while working to ensure that EU projects are both independent and compatible with NATO projects. The NB8 coordinates cooperation in the North Sea and Baltic Sea regions. As well as providing support services to Ukraine, they play a strategic role through joint exercises, intelligence sharing and joint air defence efforts. Finally, the more loosely structured Coalition of the Willing and the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (UDCG) work to provide Ukraine with direct military support. The UDCG, which is now linked to NATO logistically but not institutionally, coordinates international military aid for Kyiv. The Coalition of the Willing, meanwhile, is preparing for a possible ceasefire in Ukraine and, in particular, signalling to Washington that Europe is capable of taking operational action. Last, but not least, the E6, a format bringing together the finance ministers of the EU’s largest economies, has defined defence investment as one of their four priority areas and a core objective for innovation growth.

Because there are too many actors pursuing similar goals, the result is a patchwork of initiatives and programmes.

Despite the many tasks and functions that these formats fulfil, their activities remain subject to limitations. For instance, there are no interfaces between them, nor is there any clear link to simultaneous processes within the EU and NATO. This could lead to a situation where European security becomes “Afghanised”, with too many actors pursuing similar goals without an assertive overarching structure, resulting in a hotchpotch of initiatives and programmes. Rather than systematically improving Europe’s defences, such ad hoc initiatives often merely simulate activity and risk disorienting rather than strengthening security in Ukraine and Europe more broadly. Furthermore, this flexible approach hinders the emergence of integration impulses to close the political leadership gap at the heart of European security and defence. The formats offer little support for the EU Commission’s proposals for systematically closing the gaps in the EU’s strategic capabilities.

Furthermore, the preponderance of minilateral initiatives leads to Ukraine’s gradual integration into a potential European defence union occurring through intergovernmental and arms industry agreements rather than as a structured process in the framework

³ See also Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza, *Minilateralism in der EU. Chancen und Risiken der innereuropäischen Diplomatie*, SWP-Aktuell 7/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2018), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/minilateralismen-in-der-eu-chancen-und-risiken-der-innereuropaeischen-diplomatie> (accessed 10 November 2025).

of cooperation with the EU. Lastly, states have so far been operating reactively within flexible formats, responding to developments in the course of the war and, above all, to statements and decisions made by the US President. The more resolutely Donald Trump acts independently of Europe in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the more actively certain European states are driven to seek flexible formats for cooperation and coordination.

The guiding principle is still to gain a hearing in the United States and to ensure that Washington remains part of the transatlantic security community. This has so far prevented the flexible formats from proposing viable alternatives to the current European security architecture. To date, the whole topic of European security architecture has been excluded from the scope of the flexible formats, as has the question of which coalition of actors and/or institutions would take the lead on European security and defence in the event of the United States declining to do so.

In search of new leadership constellations

Any new European approach to security and defence policy that takes into account a scenario without US guarantees will therefore be fluid and diverse rather than consistent and stable. This also means that leadership opportunities will fluctuate and leadership will emerge in different places. At the beginning of the war, countries on the eastern flank appeared capable of assuming a leading role, or at least setting the security agenda, due to their commitment, expertise and proximity to the United States. After the advent of the second Trump administration, however, it seemed that Western European countries were playing the more active role: initially the nuclear powers France and the United Kingdom, and then the E3. On specific issues, such as initiating cooperation on drone defence, countries on NATO’s and the EU’s eastern flank again played a dominant role, although they lacked the influence within the EU to push their initiatives through.

Such shifts will continue, and it is unclear which flexible formats will endure. However, it is evident that Europe cannot take charge of its own security without robust leadership from a proactive cluster of European states. While it is clear that such leadership requires acceptance, authority, credibility and responsiveness, it also brings new challenges, particularly

for Germany as a crucial factor in the new security governance of Europe.

Is there a need for a robust “centre of leadership” in European security to clarify and aggregate information and act as a point of contact with the outside world – primarily for Washington, but in future also for other partners, rivals or adversaries?

From today’s perspective, a division of labour would be appropriate. The European “heavyweights” – Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Poland and Italy – who already form the E5 and Weimar Plus, could establish a security centre with significant external impact. Other smaller partners could join as required. Other formats could focus on enhancing European capabilities, addressing vulnerabilities or bolstering support for Ukraine. The important thing here is to take a comprehensive view of European security. For instance, the debate around the EU’s drone defence initiative has revealed that concentrating solely on the eastern border and the threat from Russia poses risks, including the potential for European division or overlooking threats on the southern periphery.

What should the style of leadership look like?

A security policy centre should adopt a leadership style that is both transformative and service-oriented. Given the current geopolitical situation, the objective is to enhance the security and defence capabilities of partners or of “Europe” as a whole. This can be achieved by offering guidance and motivation, and by demonstrating a commitment to action while considering the interests of alliance partners. For now, it would be unwise to seek to formalise leadership in the form of a “European Security Council”.⁴ That would only lead to lengthy debates about membership, decision-making powers, and institutional links, while limiting the flexibility of the E3/Weimar Plus constellation.

How does leadership in multilateral formats relate to NATO and the EU?

European leadership should facilitate cooperation and promote compatibility between NATO and the EU. It should support NATO’s consolidation and capa-

⁴ See Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin, *A European Security Council. Added Value for EU Foreign and Security Policy?*, SWP Comment 2/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019C02.

bility goals, as well as the “hardening” of the EU’s security and defence policy. To avoid putting European states with their differing interests — “European sovereignty” versus the primacy of ties with the United States — in an either/or situation, the approach adopted should be compatible with both a European NATO and with the European Union. Although Europe’s efforts should continue to be presented as a contribution to strengthening transatlantic relations, they should also be considered a backup plan in case Washington reduces its commitment to Europe or withdraws entirely.

The flexible formats should be seen as a reinforcement of cooperation within the EU and NATO, rather than as a substitute.

The flexible formats should be seen as a means of reinforcing cooperation within the EU and NATO, rather than a substitute. In the longer term an overarching coordinating authority in the form of an open security and defence policy leadership centre will be needed to establish its reliability and avoid “Afghanisation” (see above). For the foreseeable future at least, this should entail a division of labour: NATO (with a European focus)⁵ would remain responsible for operational defence, while the EU would focus on defence industrial cooperation, financing, and military integration. However, collaborative efforts are essential in areas such as strengthening resilience (infrastructure protection, defence against hybrid attacks, etc.). Thematic and regional priorities and cross-cutting planning should be pursued in these areas. The Baltic Sea region is one example of this, with initiatives by neighbouring countries, NATO and the EU already intertwined. If Washington were to step up its aggression towards Denmark over Greenland intensify, or other conflicts arise between the United States and EU states or European NATO members, then flexible formats such as the E3/Weimar Plus constellation will be needed to generate short-term capacity accomplish a radical reorganisation of European security. In that case, defence readiness would have to be established quickly, potentially outside of NATO, with flexible, innovative solutions based on the strongest European allies and closely aligned with the EU.

⁵ See the contribution by Pia Fuhrhop and Marco Overhaus, pp. 12ff.

What do security-motivated groups mean for Germany?

Germany should observe and foster group formation processes, providing political and diplomatic support where appropriate, or becoming actively involved. The level of participation will depend on how Germany wishes to organise security and defence in Europe in the long term, and how it intends to exercise co-leadership. If Germany wants to slow down the centralisation and “EUisation” of security, defence and armaments, groups provide an opportunity to promote nation-state-led initiatives.

However, to achieve a greater capacity for action across Europe, it would be advisable to use flexible formats to strengthen the EU and NATO. Germany should then work towards making the European defence core as inclusive as possible. Two things should be borne in mind here. Firstly, even if it has no nuclear capabilities, Germany should claim security policy parity with the United Kingdom and France. In this context, its main assets are its ongoing and increasingly Europeanised expansion of its own armed forces, which could become the largest conventional army in Western Europe (the *Zeitenwende*), and its prominent role on the eastern flank. Germany would have to treat the responsibility to lead as a collaborative task. Among other things, a potential Weimar Plus leadership constellation should define its own strategic fields of action and projects, including embedding Ukraine in the future European security order and improved “European” security for the eastern flank.

However, if Germany is placing itself at the centre of the alliance of the great powers (Weimar Plus), it must ensure that the medium-sized, smaller, and peripheral European states remain connected and that their interests are guaranteed, especially diplomatically and politically. Formats such as the 1+3 exchange between Germany and the Baltic states could be important here, as well as new bilateral security consultations and putative security dialogues with partners from south-eastern and southern Europe (for example Germany plus Romania and Bulgaria, or Germany plus Mediterranean partners). Flexible formats for co-leadership and shared responsibility could thus be used to strengthen European and German security in the long term.

Alexandra Paulus and Daniel Voelsen

What If Washington Weaponises Europe's Dependence on US Technology? How Should Berlin and Brussels Prepare?

Germany and Europe rely heavily on the United States for key technologies. Donald Trump's return to the White House turns this dependency into a strategic vulnerability. The possibility of Washington weaponising that dependency to exert political pressure on Germany and Europe can no longer be ruled out. To mitigate this risk, Germany needs to pursue a two-track approach, ensuring its ability to act in the short term while building long-term technological autonomy. Such short-term measures should shield critical sectors from US intervention and enable Europe to put pressure on Washington in matters of technology policy.¹

Europe's technological dependence on the United States

The United States is a global leader in many key technologies. This is particularly true for the internet and other connectivity technologies, such as satellite-based communication, data centres, and cloud services. It also extends to software, including operating systems for mobile devices, and social media platforms. US companies also currently dominate developments in the field of artificial intelligence.

Europe's prosperity, security, and democracy strongly depend on US technology.

While the United States has long considered technology a fundamental source of power, many other countries have prioritised the economic gains from a

¹ This analysis builds on insights from two workshops held at SWP over the course of 2025. The authors gratefully acknowledge the participants' contributions.

global division of labour over security considerations.² Other economies have preferred to buy key technologies rather than developing their own. As a result, Europe's prosperity, security and democracy now strongly depend on US technology.

Trump's second term has exposed the substantial risks that these dependencies carry for Germany and Europe, as he is aware of the power of technology. President Biden – and also the first Trump administration – sought to reduce concentration in many technology markets by pursuing various antitrust cases. The current administration, on the contrary, seems determined to further expand the power of big tech. In fact, Trump's relationship with the major tech companies can best be understood as an implicit pact: as long as they express their loyalty to him and his policies, he rewards them with a domestic agenda focused on deregulation and a foreign policy closely aligned with their global ambitions.³

Washington and the weaponisation of technology dependencies

In light of this, the United States is unlikely to be a reliable technology partner for Europe for the foreseeable future. This poses considerable challenges for Germany. The current German government's coalition agreement walks a fine line between stressing

² See Hanns Günther Hilpert and Sascha Lohmann, eds., *Mehr Macht, weniger Markt – Denken und Handeln in der geökonomischen Zeitenwende*, SWP-Studie 16/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025S16.

³ Daniel Voelsen, *Technologiepolitik unter Trump II: Der einstige Partner wird zur Gefahr für Europas Wirtschaft und Demokratie*, SWP-Aktuell 14/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025A14.

the importance of the transatlantic partnership and committing to digital sovereignty.⁴

Washington is already applying pressure on Europe to make concessions on technology policy.

Washington is already applying pressure on Europe to make concessions on technology policy,⁵ for instance seeking to pressure Brussels into abandoning the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the AI Act, all of which the Trump administration considers to be non-tariff trade barriers.⁶

A conflict is brewing over the manner in which social media platforms address disinformation. While Europe has to date relied on close cooperation with the platforms, the Trump administration categorically rejects action to combat disinformation, likening it to censorship. With a number of German state elections upcoming in 2026, along with national elections in other European countries, this disagreement will soon turn into a fundamental conflict over the integrity of Europe's democratic processes.

Scenario 1: Technology as a pressure point to extract concessions

Going a step further, the Trump administration could even weaponise Europe's technological dependencies to extract concessions in other policy areas, such as trade or security policy.⁷ Washington could begin by

4 *Verantwortung für Deutschland: Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD: 21. Legislaturperiode* (Berlin, 2025), section 2.3, https://www.koalitionsvertrag2025.de/sites/www.koalitionsvertrag2025.de/files/koav_2025.pdf. All internet sources cited in this article were accessed on 23 October 2025.

5 Humeyra Pamuk, "Exclusive: Trump Administration Weighs Sanctions on Officials Implementing EU Tech Law, Sources Say", *Reuters* (online), 26 August 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-weighs-sanctions-officials-implementing-eu-tech-law-sources-2025-08-26/>.

6 The White House, "Defending American Companies and Innovators from Overseas Extortion and Unfair Fines and Penalties" (Washington, D.C., 21 February 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/defending-american-companies-and-innovators-from-overseas-extortion-and-unfair-fines-and-penalties/>.

7 Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman "Weaponised Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79.

demonstrating Europe's vulnerability without engaging in open conflict — in a form of hybrid warfare.

In one conceivable scenario, Washington demands that European forces secure a "peace treaty" for Ukraine that has been negotiated solely between Trump and Putin, and that Greenland be sold to the United States for a symbolic price. The European Union rejects the demands. In the ensuing weeks, several German authorities discover that their access to cloud-based office applications has been terminated. The German automotive industry encounters difficulty in using cloud services, which disrupts operations and reduces output. Concurrently, a disinformation campaign on social media attributes the problems to missteps by the German government, further heightening public uncertainty. Similar events unfold in other European countries. The Trump administration refrains from commenting in public, but communicates through diplomatic channels that further restrictions will be imposed unless the German government puts pressure on other EU member states to comply with Washington's demands.

Scenario 2: Open confrontation

Taking the thought experiment a step further, the United States and Europe could even engage in direct and public confrontation. While the probability of such a scenario appears low, these days — unlike in previous decades — it cannot be entirely ruled out.

To sketch out a possible scenario: An economic crisis in the United States sparks a financial crisis in France that spreads economic uncertainty throughout Europe. In this already tense situation, an internal chat among high-ranking European Commission staff is leaked, in which they describe Trump as "vain, insecure and simply stupid". Trump does not hesitate to weaponise Europe's technological dependence on the United States. US companies withhold software updates — leaving security vulnerabilities unpatched — and the US Cyber Command even actively exploits existing vulnerabilities to hinder the work of European Union institutions. European companies encounter restrictions on their access to US cloud services, particularly for AI applications. The German government faces a disinformation campaign on all major social media platforms. Furthermore, the US government places the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is central to the technical operation of the global internet, back under the direct control of the US Department of Commerce.

One of the most visible consequences of this change is that Greenland's government websites are no longer accessible, as they are now administered by a US company.⁸

What Germany and Europe can do

So far, the European debate has focused on how to reduce the continent's technological dependency on the United States.⁹ This will be essential in the long term: the more successfully Europe can wean itself off US tech, the weaker the US government's leverage. In concrete terms, for example, the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) could create a European database of software vulnerabilities,¹⁰ and the EU could work with member states to invest more in infrastructure, from undersea cables to power supplies for AI data centres. Member states and/or the Commission could also provide greater support for open-source projects and start-ups and facilitate the latter's access to private capital in order to promote innovative European technology products.¹¹ Deepening the EU's existing technology partnerships with non-European countries such as Japan and, where appropriate, establishing new partnerships could also help to reduce dependencies.¹² Furthermore, the European Commission and national governments could make strategic use of public procurement.¹³

However, all these measures are very resource-intensive and will only bear fruit in the long term.

⁸ Daniel Voelsen, *Cracks in the Internet's Foundation: The Future of the Internet's Infrastructure and Global Internet Governance*, SWP Research Paper 14/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019RP14.

⁹ "Building Europe's Digital Future", *EuroStack* (online), <https://eurostack.eu/>.

¹⁰ Alexandra Paulus, *Europe's Cybersecurity Depends on the United States: Europe Can and Must Do More*, SWP Comment 44/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C44.

¹¹ European Commission, *The Future of European Competitiveness: Part A, A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe* (Luxembourg, September 2024), https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en.

¹² European Commission, *Digital Partnerships*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/partnerships>.

¹³ EuroStack Industry Initiative, *A Proposed Framework for a "Buy European" Regulation of Strategic Digital Procurement* (online), 29 September 2025, <https://eurostack.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/buy-european-a-framework-for-strategic-procurement-29-september-25.pdf>.

Accordingly, European policymakers urgently need to identify short-term options to prepare for the aforementioned scenarios.

Strengthening Europe's resilience and capacity to act

In both of the scenarios described above, the top priority would be to ensure Europe's resilience — its ability to withstand and learn from crises — and its capacity to act while the dependencies remain in place.

The following measures can strengthen Europe's resilience in the short to medium term:

- In order to prepare for a situation where certain software updates may not be available, European governments should allocate generous cybersecurity budgets to all levels of public administration. The goal here should be to ensure a form and degree of protection that will continue to function even if many systems become vulnerable. Additionally, governments and administrations should plan and rehearse analogue fallback options.
- In order to be able to respond to possible disinformation campaigns from Washington, the Commission should allocate resources to closely monitor major US platforms. This information can then be used to swiftly and effectively sanction platforms for violations or deny them market access altogether.
- To preserve the internet as a global network, European governments should work to preserve the independence of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). To this end, the German government should advocate moving ICANN's headquarters from California to a location outside US jurisdiction.

Exerting pressure on Washington

While the existing power imbalances will take time to overcome, European governments nevertheless have options for exerting pressure on Washington should a conflict arise.

- The role of foreign skilled workers in the technology sector remains controversial within the Trump administration. Building on existing efforts,¹⁴ Euro-

¹⁴ European Commission, "Choose Europe for Science: EU Comes Together to Attract Top Research Talent", European Commission research and innovation website (Brussels, 23 May 2025), <https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa>.

pean governments could proactively recruit skilled workers from third countries – including from the United States – offering a long-term perspective to work in Europe.

- European policymakers could target US companies more aggressively, in order to make their “pact” with the Trump administration less attractive. For example, US entertainment companies such as streaming providers could see their access to the European market restricted or even denied.¹⁵ European entities could terminate existing contracts with US technology companies,¹⁶ and a European digital tax could be levied on digital services (as individual member states have already done).¹⁷ To increase the pressure even further, the European Union could ban US entertainment services altogether.¹⁸ Finally, in the event of open confrontation, European governments could nationalise the European operations of US companies, for example their data centres.¹⁹
- In addition, national export control authorities such as the German Federal Office for Economic Affairs and Export Control (BAFA) or the Council of

eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/choose-europe-science-eu-comes-together-attract-top-research-talent-2025-05-23_en.

15 Francisco Javier Cabrera Blázquez, *The Implementation of EU Sanctions against RT and Sputnik*, Note (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, European Audiovisual Observatory, 2022), <https://rm.coe.int/note-rt-sputnik/1680a5dd5d>.

16 Stefan Krempel, “Goodbye, Microsoft: Schleswig-Holstein Relies on Open Source and Saves Millions”, *Heise online*, 7 December 2025, <https://www.heise.de/en/news/Goodbye-Microsoft-Schleswig-Holstein-relies-on-Open-Source-and-saves-millions-11105459.html>.

17 Samina Sultan and Henrik Förster, *Digitalsteuern als Gegenmaßnahme im US-Handelsstreit?*, IW-Kurzbericht 47/2025 (Cologne: Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft [IW], 23 May 2025), https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Studien/Kurzberichte/PDF/2025/IW-Kurzbericht_2025-Digitalsteuern.pdf.

18 European Parliament and Council, “Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, no. L277 (27 October 2022): 1 – 102, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065>.

19 Alexander Martin, “Netherlands Invokes Special Powers against Chinese-Owned Semiconductor Company Nexperia”, *The Record* (online), 13 October 2025, <https://therecord.media/netherlands-special-powers-chinese-owned-semiconductor>.

the EU could impose export controls on products that are critical to US value chains, for example equipment for the semiconductor industry.

Conclusion

The possibility of significant transatlantic conflicts around technology (policy) can no longer be ruled out. In that event, Europe’s prosperity, security and democracy will be at stake. German and European policymakers need to prepare without delay. As a first step, they should ensure greater security and resilience for government and public administration. They should also make plans for exerting pressure on the United States in the event of a conflict.

Given that the Trump administration will likely view any such action as an affront, it could certainly further inflame conflict with Washington. In light of such a possible backlash, preparing measures in advance and backing them with sufficient resources is all the more important.

But securing the ability to act in the short and medium term, while urgent and necessary, is only the first step. In the long run, policymakers across Europe must ask themselves whether relying on the “dependency dividend” – the cost savings from technological dependence on the United States – is still a good deal.

War and Peace

Sabine Fischer, Margarete Klein and Janis Kluge

Russia Policy Without, With or Against the US? What Works and What Doesn't

Russia is now the number one security threat in Europe. Its aggressive policies challenge Germany and all other European democracies on multiple levels. First, Moscow is attempting to wipe out Ukraine as an independent European state through an illegal war of aggression. Secondly, Russia is undermining and weakening democratic political systems with the aim of reshaping the European order according to the principle that “might is right”. And thirdly, it is striving for a post-Western, multipolar world order in which Europe will play at most a subordinate role.

Since 2022 Germany has responded to the aggression against Ukraine by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia together with its European partners and supporting Kyiv's defensive struggle with weapons. Close coordination with Washington was central to Berlin's approach in both areas. With Donald Trump's return to the White House, that has changed.

Sanctions

In order to increase the cost to Russia and weaken its military-industrial potential in the long term, the EU has imposed severe sanctions on Moscow, together with the other G7 countries. Until now, Washington has been the most important partner in this policy. The sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States are mutually complementary. The EU controls some of the most effective measures, including the embargo on Russian raw materials, the exclusion of Russian banks from the Belgium-based SWIFT payment system, and the freezing of Russian central bank reserves. The strength of Washington's sanctions lies primarily in their global reach, which is crucial for enforcement.

Transatlantic cooperation on sanctions against Russia has become significantly more complicated since Trump's second term began in early 2025. The

imposition of coordinated US and EU sanctions on the largest Russian oil companies, Lukoil and Rosneft, in October 2025 showed that coordinated action is possible, even with the Trump administration. Washington continues to have globally unique powers and instruments at its disposal when it comes to sanctions.

There are also figures within the administration who support transatlantic coordination of sanctions. It is now clear that Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent are prepared to increase pressure on Moscow. It is therefore still worthwhile for Germany and the EU to put significant energy into coordinating sanctions, for example within the framework of the G7, and to cultivate networks with like-minded counterparts in the United States.

However, the President's own policy remains erratic. It is certainly possible to discuss with the US authorities at the working level how the sanctions should be developed strategically, but it is impossible to say with any certainty whether and when Donald Trump will approve the relevant steps.

Washington's unpredictability is a problem, especially when it comes to enforcement. A well-coordinated mix of diplomacy, political pressure and, if necessary, secondary sanctions is needed to deal with third countries that play a decisive role in circumventing sanctions. Ideally, Western governments should communicate collectively and consistently where the red lines are and what consequences will ensue for third countries that do business with Russia. The EU has appointed a sanctions envoy for this important task, currently David O'Sullivan.

Trump now regularly frustrates attempts to pursue a clear common line. In summer 2025 he unexpectedly increased US tariffs on India, citing India's imports of Russian oil. Indian oil imports had previously been permitted under the G7 price cap and only constituted a violation of sanctions where the price cap was breached. It remained unclear whether Russian oil

was Trump's original motivation for raising tariffs or merely a welcome excuse to do so.

The EU should shield the European sanctions mechanism from possible US interference.

In the meantime, Trump had also called on the EU to cease its remaining oil imports from Russia and impose its own punitive tariffs on India and China. After sanctioning Rosneft and Lukoil, Trump went on to grant an exemption to Hungary, the EU's biggest importer of Russian oil. Washington's lack of consistency makes it difficult for the EU to harmonise its own measures and maintain at least the appearance of a coordinated approach towards third countries.

Meanwhile, the risk remains that Trump will at some point unilaterally lift US sanctions against Russia. The EU should therefore urgently prepare for a negative scenario in which the president makes another U-turn on sanctions. It should shield the European sanctions mechanism from possible US interference by optimising its own sanctions instruments. Among other things, there is no way around EU secondary sanctions to curb the circumvention of sanctions via third countries. Although such extra-territorial measures, which the EU has long rejected, may not have the impact of similar steps taken by Washington, they could make international corporations with business interests in Europe more cautious.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to torpedo the sanctions consensus in the EU, working through individual member states (Hungary, Slovakia) and pro-Russian parties in Europe, and urging Trump to place greater pressure on Europe. If Putin succeeds in portraying the EU sanctions as an obstacle to peace, Trump could call on Hungary or Slovakia, for example, to veto their extension. Where the sanctions policy depends on consensus within the EU, its continuation is therefore at risk.

In the worst case — the loss of consensus within the EU — Germany would have to form a new sanctions coalition with like-minded countries within the EU in order to maintain economic pressure on Russia. The EU can prepare for such a scenario by implementing measures via trade or energy policy that do not require unanimity among member states.

Military support and security commitments for Ukraine

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe has been faced with the challenge of massively expanding its military support for Kyiv. Until then, this support had been very limited in quantity and quality and was not coordinated among the countries involved. Although the need for a change of course after 24 February 2022 was widely accepted at the political level, it was first necessary to adapt the legal framework, create national and EU-wide financing options, and fend off repeated threats of blockades by individual member states. Above all, however, Europe's stockpiles are limited, and production cannot be expanded as quickly as needed. As a result, the United States under President Joe Biden provided the lion's share of military support to Ukraine.

After Trump's return to the White House, the delivery of American weapons systems to Ukraine was significantly restricted and made subject to conditions. Trump also used this as a means of exerting pressure in negotiations with Kyiv and Moscow. While his predecessor Biden had approved military aid worth US\$5.9 billion since the full-scale invasion, the exports approved under Trump in May and July 2025 amounted to only US\$310 million and 652 million respectively. After lengthy negotiations, NATO partners were able to convince the Trump administration to supply weapons, under the condition that these would be funded through the national budgets of the other alliance members — either directly or via the new PURL mechanism (Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List). This transforms military aid to Ukraine from a project based on shared security interests into a US business venture based on particular economic interests.

Germany and Europe must acknowledge and respond to the fact that Washington has abandoned its former role as the most important financier and supplier of military equipment to Ukraine. In the best-case scenario, such support will continue in some form, but it will be significantly reduced, highly volatile and unreliable as long as Trump is president. Appeals to alliance solidarity and common security interests are unlikely to have much effect; even the prospect of economic gains offers no guarantee that Washington will continue to contribute to Ukraine's military defence — even if it is financed by Europe.

Europe must also prepare for the worst-case scenario, namely that Trump not only ceases to provide

military support to Ukraine, but also imposes restrictions on European support and thus severely limits Ukraine's own defence capabilities. This is evident in Trump's 28-point plan, which was made public in November 2025: it includes a reduction in the size of the Ukrainian armed forces, the abandonment of important Ukrainian defence lines in the Donbas, and rejects any prospect of Ukraine joining NATO or NATO stationing troops in the country. The security guarantees offered in return remain rather vague.

Militarily, Europe faces a dual task. First, it must compensate for restrictions on US military aid to Ukraine and prevent the scenario of a total loss of vital American supplies and support. Europe can only provide selective and limited temporary assistance, for example by handing over Patriot air defence systems that are actually required for national and NATO defence planning. Here, the economic benefits for the United States of having the systems it supplies paid for directly by Europe should be highlighted. At the same time, the latter must be prepared to go through with their own arms deliveries even against the will of the American president. Although the task is financially plausible, the capacity and production problems of the European arms industry pose major challenges.

In some weapon categories, such as long-range rocket artillery and air defence, there is currently no alternative to the American systems (HIMARS, Patriot). The same applies to intelligence and surveillance. In other areas, Europe can offer alternatives and expand its cooperation with Kyiv. However, for these measures to be effective, Europe must significantly increase its production capacity, expand cooperation internally and with Ukraine, and form coalitions of the willing with countries outside Europe.

Secondly, Europe will be called upon to give Ukraine security guarantees in the event of a ceasefire — possibly in a coalition of the willing extending beyond the continent. Without substantial American participation, however, it will not be possible to generate the level of troops, armaments and political unity necessary to achieve a deterrent effect. Even the deployment of smaller European contingents far behind the front line is unlikely to be feasible unless it is flanked by US military capabilities — in airspace surveillance, reconnaissance and logistics. A believable US commitment to alliance solidarity, underpinned by American troop deployments on NATO's eastern flank, would also be necessary. If, on the other hand, a US promise of protection lacks credibility, Moscow

is likely to feel encouraged to test the resilience of a European military mission in Ukraine.

Negotiations to end the war

On the diplomatic front, Germany supported Kyiv's efforts to gain more international backing for its position during the first three years of the war. The German government actively contributed to the process, which was guided by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's formula for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace for Ukraine. Germany was one of the most important supporting states at the International Summit for Peace in Ukraine, held in June 2024 at Bürgenstock in Switzerland. German policy was primarily concerned with strengthening Ukraine's position vis-à-vis Russia. This was also considered a prerequisite for direct ceasefire negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, for which the time did not yet seem ripe. Diplomatic contacts with Russia were limited to the work of the respective embassies, multi-lateral platforms and a few inconclusive telephone calls between Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Vladimir Putin.

The Putin regime feels strengthened by Trump's course and vindicated in its view of the war against Ukraine.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, began his second presidency with the claim that he would end the war in Ukraine within days. His administration's conduct of negotiations in the first ten months has significantly weakened Ukraine. Trump repeatedly made it clear that his priority was to normalise US relations with Russia. At the same time, he sought to persuade Kyiv to accept at least some of Russia's maximum demands. His administration's approach remained overly simplistic and characterised by a lack of understanding of the underlying conflict. Under American pressure, Kyiv agreed in March 2025 to the proposal for an unconditional ceasefire along the existing front line. In doing so, Ukraine relinquished its objective of liberating its entire territory from Russian occupation for the time being. In the ensuing talks, Washington marginalised the European states, which was entirely in Russia's interest. The Europeans found themselves forced into a competition for the US president's favour if they wanted to exert any influence at all on the process. Trump's fundamental

admiration for Russia's dictator Putin continues to shape American diplomacy. This was evident at the US-Russian summit in Alaska, and in the 28-point plan of November 2025. Moves of that kind will continue, forcing Kyiv and its European partners to expend enormous effort on correcting the misguided course of American diplomacy.

The Russian regime feels strengthened by Trump's course and sees its long view of the war confirmed. Moscow assumes that it can hold out longer than Ukraine. Under Trump, the United States has become an unreliable ally when it comes to military support, and Europe is not capable of fully compensating for the loss of American backing. Consequently, Moscow is rejecting Trump's attempts to bring about a cease-fire; on the contrary, in 2025 Russia significantly intensified the war of attrition both along the front line and from the air. Moscow continues to rely on manipulating Donald Trump to its own ends and ultimately achieving Russia's maximum goals.

With, without, against – what to do?

The Trump administration acts erratically, but its pro-Russian disposition is predictable. Its policies have triggered dynamics that are in some cases diametrically opposed to German and European interests. What is more, representatives of the MAGA movement regularly launch verbal attacks against democratic governments and support far right forces in Europe. In doing so, they – like Putin – are undermining European democracies. Germany and its European partners, including Ukraine, find themselves caught in the crossfire. They have very few means at their disposal to exert pressure on Moscow and keep Washington on track.

When political goals and interests diverge so widely, the basis for strategic cooperation crumbles. For the three core areas of their policy concerning Russia's war against Ukraine – sanctions, military support and negotiations – Germany and Europe must therefore carefully weigh up what can be achieved with, without or against the United States. Responses should be embedded in an effective communication strategy.

Military support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia will influence any outcome of future ceasefire negotiations. These two factors will determine how strong Ukraine's position will be in any talks and how costly the continuation of the war will be for Russia.

In both areas, Germany and Europe are dealing with a US administration that no longer shares Europe's goals. Europe must resolutely reduce its dependence while maintaining constructive relations with pro-Ukrainian and pro-European forces in the United States. In the diplomatic process, that will entail a complicated balancing act for the foreseeable future. Europe must strengthen both Ukraine's and its own positions while at the same time providing a corrective to Washington's often one-sided, pro-Russian approach.

From a German and European perspective, a negotiated solution must preserve Ukraine's sovereignty and include reliable security guarantees to deter another Russian attack. The territorial integrity of Ukraine must remain a principle of European policy, even if it cannot currently be enforced. Germany and Europe would have to openly oppose any move by Washington to recognise occupied Ukrainian territory as Russian. After the first year of Trump diplomacy, it should be clear that Ukraine and Europe need to stand up to Russia *and* the United States from a position of strength.

Muriel Asseburg and Peter Lintl

European Middle East Policy: With, Without or Against the US?

7 October 2023 marked a watershed for the Middle East. As well as traumatising Israelis and Palestinians alike, widening the rifts between them, and making the prospect of a peaceful resolution even more remote, the Hamas-led attack and Israel's military response significantly shifted the military balance of power in the Middle East and Israel's position within it. Israel emerged militarily strengthened, while Iran and its so-called Axis of Resistance were significantly weakened. At the end of September 2025, US President Donald Trump presented a "20-point plan" to end the war and initiate a stabilisation of the Gaza Strip. A ceasefire came into effect on 10 October. In mid-November, the approach was further elaborated and internationally legitimised by UN Security Council Resolution 2803. In mid-January 2026 Washington announced the start of the second phase of the ceasefire and revealed a governance structure for Gaza and – in the guise of the so-called *Board of Peace* – a forum for addressing conflicts around the globe. At the same time, the ceasefire in Gaza remained incomplete and a peaceful settlement of the conflicts between Israel and its neighbours (the Palestinians, Lebanon and Syria), between Israel and the Yemeni Houthis, and between Israel and Iran remained elusive.

The developments since 7 October 2023 have yet again demonstrated that while the United States is not the only external actor in the region, it remains the most important. There is little prospect of progress without or against Washington. At the same time, the US approach differs significantly from Europe's. While Europe emphasises the goal of a permanent resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a negotiated two-state solution, this is not a priority for Washington. Instead, the Trump administration focuses primarily on short-term achievements. Furthermore, Trump's policy is, at least in part, incompatible with principles of international law. It is also highly erratic and disruptive,

and is largely uncoordinated with the EU or its member states.

Germany needs to clarify its own interests and priorities in the Middle East. These should include strengthening Europe's capacity to act in the region and to work towards political goals, international legal standards and formats that can enable a long-term resolution of the conflict. This will also require cooperation with other partners, especially Arab states. Cooperation with the Trump administration on the Middle East, however, has become more challenging for Germany and its partners in the EU as they have ruled out joining the Board of Peace and subordinating themselves to Trump's capriciousness in that highly problematic set-up. The challenge will now be to influence decision-making on Gaza from the outside.

A destabilised region

Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, have largely destroyed Hamas's military and civil capabilities without defeating the organisation. At the same time, according to UN figures as of early February 2026, almost 72,000 Palestinians have been killed and over 170,000 injured. Tens of thousands are still missing. Large sections of the population face existential threats as a result of bombing, displacement (around 90 per cent of the population is internally displaced) and insufficient medical and food supplies. Widespread destruction has rendered the Gaza Strip largely uninhabitable. According to UN estimates from mid-October 2025, the cost of reconstruction will be around US\$70 billion. The situation in the West Bank has also worsened over the past two years due to Israeli military operations against armed Palestinian groups, settler violence, the ongoing settlement and annexation project, and the deliberate weakening of the Palestinian Authority (PA). At the same time,

Israel has increasingly undermined the humanitarian aid system, in particular restricting the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and, most recently, prohibiting the operations of 37 international NGOs from March 2026.

Through its military operations, Israel has significantly weakened its enemies, restored its own deterrence and positioned itself as the dominant military power in the Middle East. This situation would certainly offer opportunities for long-term, sustainable stabilisation. However, the Israeli government has not translated its military successes into diplomatic progress. Instead, it has expanded its military presence in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, and also in Syria. Meanwhile, the “peace through strength” approach, the warfare in the Gaza Strip, and certain government ministers’ fantasies of expelling the Palestinians and of creating a Greater Israel have generated considerable irritation among Israel’s neighbours Jordan and Egypt, as well as the Arab Gulf monarchies. These feelings were exacerbated by the Israeli missile attack on a Hamas delegation in Qatar in September 2025. Even though Arab states have adhered to existing peace treaties and normalisation agreements, cooperated with Israel in repelling Iranian attacks, upheld bilateral military cooperation and agreed that Hamas should be entirely excluded from Palestinian political life, they increasingly see Israel as a threat rather than a partner. This has further deepened Israel’s international isolation.

Trump’s Middle East policy and the end of the Gaza war

US Middle East policy under Donald Trump is shaped by the president’s idiosyncrasies and interests and by the different priorities and interests of those around him. The positions involved range from radically pro-Israeli positions, through approaches to regional integration based on the model of the Abraham Accords, to an isolationist line espoused not least by prominent voices in the *MAGA (Make America Great Again)* movement. Trump himself vacillates between these poles, while emphasising his desire to be acknowledged as a peacemaker worth the Nobel Peace Prize – an attitude that combines political ambition with personal vanity. In general, principles of international law and traditional diplomacy play a subordinate role in Trump’s political style. Instead, it is character-

ised by a transactional approach, unexpected initiatives (for example direct contacts with previously ostracized actors, such as Hamas) and the pursuit of quick, PR-friendly successes. Political goals are frequently intertwined with personal business interests, especially with regard to actors in the Arab Gulf monarchies.

During his first term, Trump had already circulated a highly one-sided peace plan for the Middle East, promoted as the Deal of the Century, which he was unable to bring to fruition. However, he did achieve success in brokering the Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab states (Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Sudan). These agreements effectively undermined the idea of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative – which made the normalisation of Arab relations with Israel conditional on ending the Israeli occupation and a just and agreed upon settlement of the Palestinian refugee issue – and marginalised the Palestinians.

US Middle East policy exhibited no clear line during the first year of Trump’s second term, as was particularly evident in the handling of the situation in Gaza. Even before his inauguration in January 2025, Trump successfully pushed for a temporary ceasefire. He then contributed to its failure by talking about transforming the Gaza Strip into a luxury tourist resort (“Riviera”) and encouraging the majority of the population to “voluntarily emigrate”. When the ceasefire collapsed in March, Trump gave Israel a free hand to intensify its military operations. Against this backdrop, talks on a new ceasefire failed to achieve any progress. However, when the Israeli air force bombed a Hamas delegation in Qatar in September, Trump saw US interests directly threatened. After all, Qatar is not only one of the main mediators between Hamas and the international community, but also a “major non-NATO ally” of the United States and the location of the largest US military base in the region. Trump subsequently presented a 20-point plan for peace in the Gaza Strip and, together with Qatar, Egypt and Turkey, exerted pressure on the parties to the conflict. Israel and Hamas felt compelled to sign up to ending the war and agreed to implement the first phase of the plan, which involved a hostage/prisoner exchange, the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of the Israeli army behind an agreed line and the admission of humanitarian aid.

The first phase was only partially implemented. Violence, military operations and destruction never ceased and humanitarian assistance failed to enter

the Strip in sufficient quantities. Nevertheless, in mid-January 2026 Washington announced the start of the second phase, which is supposed to see disarmament of Hamas, withdrawal of Israel's army to a buffer zone and the start of reconstruction work. A complex set of institutions is to govern this phase, whose relationships to one another are still not entirely clear. The process is meant to be overseen by the Board of Peace, operationalised by a "Board of Peace Executive Board" and a "Gaza Executive Board" and implemented by a Palestinian "National Committee for the Administration of Gaza", with a High Representative for Gaza serving as the link between the international boards and the Palestinian committee. Security is to be provided by an International Stabilisation Force. The Palestinian committee was constituted in Cairo in January and the Board of Peace was established on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos. As it turned out, the Board of Peace is no longer a temporary body focused on Gaza (as mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2803), but seeks to address conflicts and governance failures around the globe. In Davos, Jared Kushner also presented a slide show of the new Gaza – a Dubai-inspired fantasy dominated by tourism and investment opportunities rather than the needs of the Palestinians.

Despite Trump's triumphal rhetoric of "eternal peace", the 20-point plan contains no provisions for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or other disputes in the region. Moreover, it is highly uncertain whether the plan can actually end the war and lead to lasting stabilisation. Its vagueness cuts both ways. It was the vague wording, together with the commitments made by the guarantors, that made it possible for both parties to commit to the plan, at least in principle. Yet there is no clearly formulated final status, no defined milestones or timelines, no clear responsibilities and no implementation mechanisms. At the first meeting of the Board of Peace in February 2026, some of its members, notably the Arab Gulf monarchies and the US government, pledged US\$17 billion for reconstruction. Several other countries, among them Indonesia, Morocco and Kazakhstan, volunteered to send troops. Still, major questions remain unsolved. For example, it remains unclear what the demilitarisation of Gaza actually means and how it is to be carried out, what relationship the International Stabilization Force (ISF) is to have with Palestinian security forces and the Israeli army. The roadmap for withdrawing Israeli troops from the

Gaza Strip, which Israel has reserved the right to veto, also remains open. Furthermore, the conditions and timetable for future involvement of the PA are outlined only vaguely. According to the plan, the PA must first complete the reform programme set out in the "deal of the century" of 2020 and the French-Saudi initiative of July 2025. Lastly, unless crucial issues of security, public order and disarmament of Hamas are resolved and agreement is achieved on a path toward conflict resolution, it remains doubtful that reconstruction pledges will actually materialise.

These ambiguities threaten the success of the approach and make it vulnerable to sabotage. Weaknesses in the sequencing were already apparent during the implementation of the first phase. The Israeli army withdrew to the so-called yellow line and now only directly controls around half of the Gaza Strip. Yet no alternative actor took over the law enforcement and governance functions from Hamas in the evacuated areas. Hamas was therefore able to reassert its presence and crack down on (alleged) collaborators, opposition figures and militias allied with Israel – in some cases with publicly staged violence. From the outset, representatives of both Hamas and the Israeli government raised doubts as to whether they would actually be prepared to implement their obligations under phase two.

These unresolved issues render Gaza's stabilisation and reconstruction highly uncertain. There therefore is a significant risk that arrangements intended for a two-year transition period will become permanent and that the division of the Gaza Strip will become entrenched. It is quite possible that only the part of the territory under the control of the Israeli army will receive sufficient humanitarian aid and see reconstruction, as plans for a new Rafah suggest. There is also a risk that the division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank will deepen and the situation in the West Bank deteriorate further.

A role for Germany and the EU

It is obvious that the United States cannot stabilise the Middle East on its own. Theoretically this would open up the possibility for Germany to play a more active and constructive role than it has during the past two years. Yet, Germany and its European partners find themselves in a dilemma, as the Board of Peace is the forum where the deliberations will take place. Joining the board would have contradicted

European interests in several ways: participating states are subordinate to Trump's personal will (even after his presidency, as he is its lifelong chair), embracing it would further undermine the status of the UN, European participants would be sitting alongside die-hard autocrats, and permanent membership costs US\$1 billion. Remaining outside, as Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom have decided to, will very likely heavily constrain German and European influence on future developments in Gaza.

Berlin should therefore focus on forging a concerted European line on Gaza in particular and the Middle East conflict in general, and approach the Board of Peace (or its Executive Board) from the outside. Opportunities will remain for Germany and its European partners, as they continue to be prominent humanitarian donors, and offer support through the civilian missions EUBAM Rafah and EUPOL COPPS. Where no common EU external policy can be agreed, efforts should be made in the E3 (with France and the United Kingdom) or E4 (plus Italy) frameworks. In addition, Germany and its partners in the EU should strengthen their cooperation with Arab partners to achieve shared aims that are largely sidelined in the Trump plan: long-term security arrangements, a political horizon, and reconstruction that is based on humanitarian standards and the needs of the population in Gaza, prominently involves Palestinian labour, businesses and expertise, and lays the foundation for sustainable development – thereby also strengthening alternatives to Hamas in Palestinian society. Furthermore, in cooperation with European and Arab partners, Germany and its partners should push for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip after a temporary transition period, the “reunification” of Gaza with the West Bank, and Palestinian self-determination.

Even if there is no realistic short-term prospect of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a two-state solution, all steps taken to rebuild Gaza should point in that direction and establish structural path dependencies that promote security for both populations, Palestinian self-determination, and peace. This includes an explicit commitment by donors and mediators to support the reconstruction and stabilisation of Gaza with a view to a long-term peace settlement. This also requires support for the PA in urgently needed reforms to restore it as a representative, legitimate, effective and accountable actor. At the same time, it is important to save the PA from financial collapse and protect it from the extreme right-wing forces in Israel's government, which are seeking to

destroy it and provoke an escalation of violence in the West Bank.

Europe's dilemma: no progress with, without or against the US

Trump's 20-point plan opened up a possibility to end the bloodshed in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the plan and the Board of Peace have revealed the ambiguity of Washington's role in the region. Effective influence on the Israeli government is virtually impossible without or against the United States. At the same time, Trump's policies remain erratic and unpredictable, his attention driven by personal whims and business interests. The focus is on quick wins, not on addressing the root causes of the conflict. Under Trump, the United States is not an honest broker either. Rather, the president's initiatives repeatedly legitimise blatant violations of international law, as evident in his “Riviera” fantasy. The provisions for cease-fire governance, dominated by the Board of Peace, have created a highly questionable set-up and further increased the unpredictability of US policy in this regard.

Thus, while the Trump administration's approach has opened the door to urgent conflict transformation, the nature of the Board of Peace makes it impossible for Germany and its partners in the EU to engage and cooperate with Washington in this format. Still, they should seek to contribute to sustainable conflict resolution, as outlined by the UN General Assembly in September 2025 in the New York Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, a document that was adopted by an overwhelming majority of 142 to 10 votes.

It is equally necessary for Europe to develop a concerted, long-term Middle East policy. If Europe fails to find an independent position, at least in smaller formats (E3/E4), or to actively demand US participation, the continent will play no role. Contributions to sustainable stabilisation in the other, interlinked conflict arenas of the Middle East are also needed. Europe should systematically coordinate with partners whose objectives and approaches to the Middle East conflict are closer to its own than to Washington's, i.e. with Israel's neighbours Jordan and Egypt and the Arab Gulf monarchies. Only together do they have any chance of constructively influencing the US administration and the course of the peace process.

Nadine Godehardt and Christian Wirth

Germany's China Policy: Now Mainly Without the US

German policy towards China is determined by fundamental economic, technological and increasingly also security interests, with a premium on strengthening Germany's own resilience and independence. Presenting new challenges, this policy must now be designed and implemented largely without the United States as a partner. Germany's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is therefore becoming increasingly important as a regional dimension of its China policy.

Europe facing Chinese and US great power politics

The interests Germany pursues with its China policy have not fundamentally changed under Chancellor Friedrich Merz. From an economic perspective, the focus is on improving market access in China and reducing unilateral dependencies on imports of critical raw materials and manufactured goods, such as rare earths, semiconductors, other high technology products and pharmaceuticals. In addition to diversifying away from the Chinese market, protecting domestic industries from cheap imports has recently become a central concern, affecting for example electric vehicles and photovoltaic and wind power equipment. China's dual-use deliveries to Russia, especially of drones, have become a security issue too. Enforcing international maritime law in the South China Sea and stabilising the status quo in the Taiwan Strait has come into focus since China stepped up its military exercises in 2022. The concerns here are to secure supply chains to Europe and to defend Europe against Russian threats. The uncertainties that characterise the foreign and security policy of the second Trump administration hamper and complicate coordination between Berlin and Washington on these issues.

Even in Washington there is no clarity about the direction of the Trump administration's China policy.

At present, there is no clarity – even in Washington – about the course the Trump administration is actually pursuing towards China, apart from an erratic tariff policy. Buzzwords such as “decoupling” or “strategic rivalry” have largely disappeared from official speeches. When Donald Trump met with Xi Jinping for the first time in six years at the end of October 2025, he spoke of a “great meeting” and historic agreements reached on tariffs and on raw material and semiconductor exports.¹ So the main focus of Trump's China policy seems to be trade. This example illustrates an uncomfortable truth: Germany and Europe are dependent on both great powers in multiple dimensions, and it is imperative to reduce them. In addition, Russia's war of aggression against the Ukraine and the acute threat to Europe's security place a premium on greater strategic autonomy.

China and the United States are putting pressure on partners and competitors alike, by linking security policy with economic issues. Two examples illustrate this. Firstly, Washington placed controls on exports of semiconductor technology to China. The Chinese leadership turned the tables and restricted exports of rare earths and related technologies, deliberately including Europe. These measures affect renewable energy as well as the automotive and defence industries. Secondly, as well as demanding that European defence spending be increased to 5 per cent of GDP, the Trump administration is making its support for the Ukraine and NATO conditional on US tech giants –

¹ “Trump Says He Struck Deals with China's Xi on Tariffs, Rare Earths, Fentanyl and Soybeans – as It Happened”, *Reuters*, 30 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/live-trump-xi-meet-south-korea-trade-2025-10-30/> (all sources accessed on 20 November 2025).

which are associated with the spreading of disinformation – being given free rein in their business activities. As EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen put it, “Europe is in a fight” for its freedom and independence, its values and its democracies.²

German foreign policy should therefore support the EU’s efforts to conclude new free trade agreements and strategic and defence partnerships (SDPs), deepen existing ones, and supplement them with bilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. Such partnerships can help Germany pursue its core interests more vigorously in both Europe and Asia. To this end, Berlin’s Indo-Pacific policy must also be made more independent from Washington’s.

Opportunities for a more independent German Indo-Pacific Policy

Like its policy towards China, the second Trump administration’s efforts to persuade its Indo-Pacific partners and allies to form a counterweight to China are opaque or even contradictory. As a result, the worldview underlying German Indo-Pacific policy – the imperative to stabilise the US-led (liberal) rules-based order in the face of destabilising pressures from authoritarian adversaries – has proven oversimplistic.

To begin with, the second Trump administration’s approach to the Indo-Pacific has resulted in a more distant relationship between the United States and India. This has undermined years of American efforts to court New Delhi to counter Chinese influence. Furthermore, although the Pentagon’s focus remains primarily on China and the Western Pacific, the long-standing question of the dependability and strength of US support for its Pacific allies has become much more pressing. The Trump administration’s demands on South Korea and Japan, for example, go far beyond drastic increases in defence spending, which are already extremely onerous. As well as imposing heavy tariffs on the two allies, the Trump administration is also demanding that they contribute to investment funds whose ultimate purpose remains unclear: Japan US\$550 billion and South Korea 350 billion.³ Here

² European Commission, “2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen” (Strasbourg, 10 September 2025), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_25_2053.

³ Choi Eun-Kyung, “Trump Pressures South Korea for 350 Billion Dollar Upfront Payment”, *Chosun Daily*, 29 September

Washington is exploiting the security predicament arising from the threats posed to these allies by China, North Korea and Russia.

Taiwan is even more closely linked to China economically and would be unable to defend itself against attacks from the mainland without US military assistance. Its quandary is therefore far more dramatic than Japan’s or South Korea’s. Here, again, the Trump administration’s strategy remains vague at best. Taiwan has repeatedly been urged to increase its military spending – to up to 10 per cent of GDP.⁴ Accusations of technology theft and demands to relocate up to 50 per cent of Taiwan’s world-leading semiconductor production to the United States are a particular cause of uncertainty.⁵ In addition, President Trump has publicly likened Washington’s support for Taiwan to an insurance business.⁶ Such statements further reduce the deterrent effect on China. These uncertainties are not in Germany’s interest.

The policies of the second Trump administration have also had disruptive effects in Southeast Asia, even though Washington continues to provide military support – particularly to the Philippines. In this region, where economic development is a top priority, the abrupt dissolution of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the end of its development cooperation projects have had drastic consequences. The comparatively high tariffs are also fuelling uncertainty. There is widespread concern in Southeast Asia that the region will become a bargaining chip in relations between Beijing and Washington.

Many players in the Indo-Pacific are therefore seeking to intensify their economic and security relations with regional and extra-regional partners, in order to reduce their dependencies on both China and the United States. This interest in new partnerships is in

2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/industry-en/2025/09/27/2KEVT466XNEBJIKO4KMZU6676M/>.

⁴ “Pentagon Nominee Backs Trump Call on 10% Taiwan Defence Spending”, *Reuters*, 8 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/pentagon-nominee-backs-trump-call-10-taiwan-defense-spending-2025-10-07/>.

⁵ James Palmer, “How Taipei Should Handle Washington”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/09/30/taiwan-china-trump-independence-tsmc-semiconductor/>.

⁶ Chad de Guzman, “For Taiwan, Trump’s Strategic Ambiguity Brings Anxious Uncertainty”, *Time*, 1 April 2025, <https://time.com/7262281/us-taiwan-relations-trump-china-strategic-ambiguity-anxious-uncertainty-explainer/>.

line with German and European efforts to “de-risk” their relations with China (and the United States).

However, these developments also show that the narrative that Germany’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is simply for “the rules-based order” and not directed against anyone in particular, is no longer adequate. The central question is therefore how stability can be established in a rapidly changing regional context. It is also necessary to specify what kind of deterrence, and by whom, is capable of prevent conflicts, and for how long that might succeed. And international law, especially maritime law, can only be strengthened if two conditions are met: Firstly, the norms whose enforcement Germany and others rightly insist on, must be named and cited. Secondly, because international law depends on most states adhering to it voluntarily, violations must be consistently denounced wherever they occur, even if the transgressor is a partner and ally.

Priorities for Germany’s policy on China

The following four priorities can make China policy more strategic:

Firstly, *normalise China as a great power*. This does not mean returning to the state of bilateral relations prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather, normalisation requires German and European decision-makers to understand and deal with the reality of China’s existence as a great power in a volatile international system. Whatever the differences in values and interests, China (and thus also the Communist Party) is going to play a role in shaping and influencing certain aspects of a new international order. China has power and uses it, sometimes subtly, often very directly. Normalisation is necessary in order to avoid being repeatedly surprised by Beijing’s behaviour. It is an important intellectual precondition if Germany is to develop a proactive China policy. This is especially true when goals such as reducing unilateral dependencies, investing in economic and technological autonomy, promoting political and economic diversification, and strengthening cooperation with partners have not yet been achieved. There is an urgent need to devise a well-thought-out strategy for this risky interim period. Such a strategy must be based primarily on the reality of German dependencies and regional developments in the Indo-Pacific. The basic prerequisites for this are targeted information gathering and independent analysis of the risks, opportunities and potential

chokepoints. Particularly in areas where Germany remains dependent on China, more knowledge about Chinese strategies must be generated in order to build up Germany’s own negotiating power. This also means that German decision-makers must identify the areas where strategic cooperation with China is still pertinent – at least for the interim period.

Secondly: *prioritise China*. For Germany and Europe, China is as important as the United States in many areas, and therefore merits consistent attention. If, as EU Commission President von der Leyen says, Europe finds itself in “a world of great power fantasies and imperialist wars”,⁷ China cannot be a priority only when the next German-Chinese government consultations are due or the next EU-China summit is around the corner. China’s actions must be monitored continuously across almost all policy areas. At the same time, the implications for the goals and outcomes of German policy must be continuously analysed and debated. As long as the US President’s posts on Truth Social receive more attention in German and European economic policy debates than, for example, China’s five-year plans and its efforts to strengthen its economic autonomy, we will lack understanding of the new realities in world politics.

China policy and Indo-Pacific policy must be seen in conjunction.

Thirdly: *contextualise China regionally*. China policy and Indo-Pacific policy must be seen in conjunction. One could say, Indo-Pacific policy primarily represents the regional dimension of China policy. The Indo-Pacific is also the area where China’s sometimes imperial ambitions are most evident. State actors in the Indo-Pacific, including Beijing, have understood that Germany primarily wants to counter China’s growing influence. It is therefore important to communicate the confrontational side of Indo-Pacific policy in a targeted and coherent manner to the Chinese leadership and to actors who need to find a *modus vivendi* with China as a difficult neighbour. This type of policy requires clarity about the desired and actual impact of signals. And it can only be credible if the signals are consistent with the resources available to German foreign policy, and if they take the actual regional circumstances as their starting point rather than the sensitivities of audiences in

⁷ European Commission, “2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen” (see note 2).

Washington or Berlin. Such honesty, including with oneself, is a prerequisite for strategic thinking and action. The intensifying conflict between China and the United States, in which their respective allies and partners are embroiled, can only be kept in check through greater engagement by a larger group of states, especially from Southeast and South Asia. In addition to the necessarily short-term strategy of deterring China (and North Korea), these states must agree to further develop international norms and institutions in the medium and long term. Otherwise, no public goods will be produced and no regional stability achieved.

Fourth: *Address China globally (with partners)*. China already shapes the global governance system and is a key global player economically, technologically and politically. *Global China* is not just a concept, but a reality. The adoption between 2021 and 2023 of its three global initiatives for development, security and civilisation creates, for the first time, a unified Chinese vision for the future of the international system. The Global Governance Initiative (GGI) announced in September 2025 reinforces this claim by explicitly positioning China as a force for order and a normative alternative to the existing Western-dominated system. Germany can only develop a response to the GGI in cooperation with its partners. A proactive strategy is needed to further develop existing institutions and establish new ones to provide global public goods more effectively and equitably. This applies to institutions in areas such as free trade, environmental and climate protection, arms control, and peacekeeping. Such a strategy can only be successful if partners actively and constructively strive to forge coalitions of those who are willing to reform and have their own visions and ideas. Countries in South America, Africa and South Asia are important players in this regard, with whom intensive and targeted cooperation must be pursued in the long term.

Outlook

At a time when the United States has joined Russia and China in increasingly openly pursuing imperial ambitions, Germany's China and Indo-Pacific policies must be pursued primarily without and sometimes even against the United States. Although cooperation with the Washington should be sought, it is difficult to imagine this going beyond the tactical level in the foreseeable future.

Gerrit Kurtz

A Sustainable Commitment to Peace in an Age of Transient “Deals”

Whether in the Middle East or Ukraine, Sudan or Syria, the United States plays an important, sometimes indispensable role in many conflicts. President Trump presents himself as a peace broker who deliberately disregards established norms, institutions and practices. The mediation processes led by the US administration and the “deals” it has enforced break with the pillars of a system of international conflict management, mediation and peacebuilding in which few countries have invested more than Germany. Behind Trump’s publicly staged handshakes lie often neo-imperialist ideas of great power diplomacy aimed at dividing spheres of interest and exploiting resources without adequately involving those affected. Putting public pressure on parties to a conflict, a favourite tactic of the Trump administration, often leads only to superficial, short-lived ceasefire deals that fail to address the root causes and are soon interrupted by renewed violence. At the same time, a lack of tangible success highlights the weakness of traditional multilateral peace efforts in recent times. Germany should assess US-led initiatives in terms of their contribution to the actual security of the affected populations and – at least as a complement – invest more heavily in principles-based peace efforts.

Crumbling basic assumptions

Germany’s commitment to conflict management and peacebuilding is based on well-understood foreign policy interests.¹ Germany’s interest in sustainable peace stems from the realisation that a country that depends on international cooperation, free trade and an open society cannot isolate itself from the

¹ Federal Foreign Office, ed., *Krisen verhindern, Konflikte bewältigen, Frieden fördern: Leitlinien der Bundesregierung* (Berlin, June 2017), 48f.

effects of armed conflicts.² Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl promotes such engagement more broadly: “I am convinced that crises and conflicts that we ignore, that we imagine do not affect us, will sooner or later come to us. That is why we must get involved on the ground.”³

Armed conflicts, terrorism and fragility in the Middle East and Africa affect Germany’s prosperity and security, as well as peaceful coexistence in its diverse society. In an increasingly competitive international order, Germany has an overriding interest in promoting compliance with fundamental norms of international law that also protect German citizens – such as territorial integrity, the prevention of genocide and the prohibition of inter-state violence.

Since the mid-2010s, Germany has expanded its “integrated peace engagement”, which includes a whole range of measures such as peace mediation, promotion of the rule of law and strengthening of legitimate statehood.⁴ Since 2017 Germany has been the world’s largest donor in the field of civilian peacebuilding, with a focus on Iraq, the Lake Chad basin and Ukraine.⁵ Since 2023, however, Germany has cut its funding in this area by 40 per cent.⁶

The failures in Afghanistan and Mali placed question marks over important assumptions underlying

² Gerrit Kurtz, “Plädoyer für eine progressive Außenpolitik: Prävention braucht Gestaltungswillen”, *Internationale Politik* 76, no. 3 (2021): 91 – 95.

³ German Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll 21/27* (Berlin, 24 September 2025), 2849, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/21/21027.pdf>.

⁴ Federal Foreign Office, ed. *Stabilisierung gestalten: Außen- und sicherheitspolitisches Konzept für ein integriertes Friedensengagement* (Berlin, December 2022).

⁵ Germany also supplies considerable military assistance to Ukraine.

⁶ Melissa Li, Maximilian Biller and Philipp Rotmann, *Peace & Security Aid in Crisis: Rethinking Civilian Investment and Local Leadership* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, July 2025).

the German approach.⁷ Under the Trump administration, some have had to be abandoned altogether. Germany regularly contributes to conflict management and peacebuilding in contexts where political processes are primarily shaped by other powers such as the United States. As a rule, Germany saw itself as a supporting actor, leaving the negotiation of key political parameters to the conflict parties, local elites and more influential states, often moderated by multilateral special envoys.⁸ This was due to Germany's limited capacities, its lack of access to elites, and the risk aversion of its foreign policy, but also contributed to Germany's reputation as a good multilateral member state of the United Nations, and one that is particularly diligent in supporting joint funds and activities.

The United States had long relied on elite deals geared towards short-term success.

Even before the first Trump administration, the United States frequently relied on limited elite deals that were often geared more towards visible short-term success than sustainable peacekeeping.⁹ The German government learned just how short-sighted such an approach could be with the fall of Kabul in August 2021, after the first Trump administration negotiated an agreement with the Taliban that disregarded the internationally recognised Afghan government.¹⁰ Another example was Washington's reluctance to impose sanctions on the Sudanese generals

who staged a coup in October 2021, ending a transition process into which Germany had put great political effort.¹¹ The ensuing escalation into open war in April 2023 could perhaps have been prevented with more decisive pressure.¹²

The political approach of contributing to political processes led by third parties is coming to its end, amidst developments marked by a deep crisis of multilateralism and dramatic cuts in international funding.¹³ The UN Security Council's capacity to act is limited by geopolitical tensions. The UN and the African Union (AU) lack seriousness and impartiality in dealing with the war in Sudan.¹⁴ Newer mediators such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia act transactionally. The result is agreements such as the Ankara Declaration between Ethiopia and Somalia in December 2024, reached outside multilateral institutions.

Mediation as great power diplomacy and geopolitical PR spectacle

The contradiction between Germany's basic assumptions and Washington's current initiatives is particularly striking. The Trump administration follows a state-centred, self-serving and often neo-imperialist approach to resolving armed conflicts that is also personalised and performative. It ignores complexities and disregards the established criteria for successful peace mediation – which include patience, expertise, impartiality, avoiding the spotlight, international coordination, participation by all relevant groups, and a leading role for local actors.¹⁵

⁷ Denis M. Tull, *Lessons to Be Learned: Germany's Crisis Management in Mali (2013–2023)*, Research Paper 18/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024RP18; German Bundestag, *Abschlussbericht der Enquete-Kommission Lehren aus Afghanistan für das künftige vernetzte Engagement Deutschlands*, Bundestags-Drucksache 20/14500 (Berlin, 27 January 2025), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/145/2014500.pdf>.

⁸ Exceptions were the Normandy format on Ukraine, the Berlin process on Libya and the E3+3 negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme.

⁹ Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021).

¹⁰ German Bundestag, *Beschlussempfehlung und Bericht des 1. Untersuchungsausschusses der 20. Wahlperiode gemäß Artikel 44 des Grundgesetzes*, Bundestags-Drucksache 20/14700 (Berlin, 18 February 2025), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/147/2014700.pdf>.

¹¹ See Gerrit Kurtz, *An International Partnership for Sudan's Transition: Mobilising Support, Preventing Instability*, DGAP Policy Brief no. 11 (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations [DGAP], June 2020).

¹² Gerrit Kurtz, *Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir: From Revolution to War*, SWP Research Paper 5/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024RP05.

¹³ See the contribution by Judith Vorrath, Marianne Beisheim and Christian Schaller on multilateralism and international law (pp. 49ff.) and the contribution by Nadine Biehler, Anne Koch and Pedro A. Villarreal on humanitarian aid and development cooperation (pp. 43ff.).

¹⁴ Abdul Mohammed, "Mediation Fiddles as Sudan Burns", *Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker*, 2 May 2025, <https://sudantransparency.org/mediation-fails-as-sudan-bleeds/>.

¹⁵ See United Nations, *Guidance for Effective Mediation* (New York, 2012).

The United States focuses on inter-state conflicts, or at least the inter-state aspects of armed conflicts. The agreement between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda in June 2025, for example, excluded the most important armed group in eastern Congo, the Rwandan-backed M23, as well as the key neighbouring states of Uganda and Burundi.¹⁶ In Sudan, Washington first reached an agreement with the most important external supporters of the parties to the conflict — Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in September 2025. Only then did it initiate indirect talks with the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).¹⁷

The involvement of the population affected by the conflict plays only a minor role. Trump has repeatedly talked directly with Moscow about Ukraine without Kyiv’s involvement, and urges Ukraine to cede territory.¹⁸ In Gaza, a ceasefire was only reached in October 2025 after Trump backed away from his unconditional support for Israel, including the possible expulsion of Palestinians.¹⁹ The weakening of established norms and institutions is not a side-effect, but serves the strategic interest of the current US administration to create a world order that follows Washington’s lead rather than the rules of international law.²⁰

Implementation of “deals” depends on the personal capacity of a few individuals.

Another distinctive feature of the current US approach is that the key players in many of these mediation efforts are not professional diplomats, but special envoys who have a close personal relationship with President Trump. This gives them an influence

that career diplomats lack. Trump’s envoy to Africa, Massad Boulos, is the father-in-law of his daughter Tiffany. Steve Witkoff, who conducts talks for Trump in the Middle East and with Putin, is a real estate entrepreneur and golfing friend.

At the same time, many State Department employees have been made redundant, departments responsible for conflict management have been dissolved, and leadership positions left vacant.²¹ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was abolished, and many peacebuilding projects have been cancelled, including those in the Sudanese diaspora.²² Special envoys such as Witkoff and Boulos generally make little use of the State Department’s apparatus and experts.²³ The suspension of US contributions jeopardises the UN’s ability to pay its bills and fulfil its obligations.²⁴ Without institutional safeguards, the personal attention and capacity of a few individuals decide whether and how well the implementation of deals is monitored. The envoys also are counting on their business bargaining methods to help in negotiations with Russia and Iran, and on the war in Sudan. Over time they realise that they have underestimated their counterparts’ ideological disposition and determination to resort to armed force.²⁵

Economic side agreements underscore that the United States is more concerned to advance its own particular interests than with conflict transformation. Washington has concluded raw materials agreements with both Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of Congo. While Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner championed the Abraham Accords to normalise diplomatic relations between certain Arab states and Israel and

16 Following Qatari mediation, the Congolese government and M23 signed a separate agreement in Doha in July 2025, but fighting continued.

17 US Department of State, “Joint Statement on Restoring Peace and Security in Sudan” (Washington, D.C., 12 September 2025), <https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/joint-statement-on-restoring-peace-and-security-in-sudan/>.

18 Sabine Fischer, “Everything about Ukraine without Ukraine”: *Peace Negotiations in Trump’s Brave New World*, SWP Comment 14/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C14.

19 See the contribution by Muriel Asseburg and Peter Lintl on Middle East policy (pp. 31ff.).

20 Stacie E. Goddard, “The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition”, *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (2025), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print-article/node/1132940>.

21 Nahal Toosi, “Trump Is Breaking US Diplomacy, State Department Staffers Say”, *Politico*, 21 September 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/21/trump-embassies-ambassadors-00573848>.

22 Conversations between the author and representatives of Sudanese civil society, Kampala, May 2025.

23 Jo Becker, Tariq Panja, Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, “Tiffany Trump Cruised on an Oil Mogul’s Yacht as Her Father-in-Law Talked Oil Deals”, *The New York Times*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/18/world/europe/tiffany-trump-yacht-oil.html>.

24 Ronny Patz, *Gehen die Vereinten Nationen pleite?* (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Vereinten Nationen [DGVN], 20 October 2025), <https://dgvn.de/meldung/gehen-die-vereinten-nationen-pleite>.

25 “The Education of Steve Witkoff”, *The Economist*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2025/09/18/the-education-of-steve-witkoff>.

his company received large investments from the region.²⁶ The combination of great power diplomacy, border changes without the involvement of those affected, and the mediators' own economic interests is reminiscent of the imperialism of European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For Trump himself, the prestige of personally announcing an agreement appears to be foremost. It is no coincidence that he has repeatedly said that he deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. In Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in October 2025, Trump gathered more than twenty heads of state and government to celebrate "the end of the war in Gaza", while representatives of the conflict parties were absent. While one might think that Trump would also tie his credibility to the success of the ensuing process, such consistency does not seem to be important to him.

Conclusions

The existing system of international conflict management is in deep crisis.²⁷ Even if its architecture and practice is in urgent need of reform, Germany must defend it against the Trump administration's attacks.

Four necessary courses of action can be identified. First, the German government should, on its own behalf and in consultation with key partners such as the EU, explicitly define minimum criteria that US-led mediation processes must meet in order to receive explicit (financial and political) support. The right of self-determination of Ukraine and of the Palestinians is such a condition, for example. Furthermore, each process should be assessed in terms of the extent to which it actually reduces armed violence and improves the livelihoods of the civilian population.

Secondly, where it has influence, the German government should provide diplomatic impetus offering alternatives to (possible) US initiatives. One example of this would be Germany's support for the transition

process in Syria, also in cooperation with Turkey and the Gulf states.²⁸

Thirdly, Germany should (continue to) support the kind of inclusive, multilaterally coordinated and locally led peace engagement (such as in the Lake Chad basin) that the Trump administration lacks. However, this would require the German government to reverse the cuts it has made in the area of international cooperation and to invest more politically and financially in civilian peacebuilding.²⁹

Fourthly, Germany should make greater use of the leverage it possesses in conflict contexts to maintain principles-based peacebuilding. Germany should make reconstruction aid conditional on fundamental commitments by the conflict parties, for example, that no violent actors be part of a future government in Sudan.

While many international actors, including the United States, are increasingly relying on economic or geopolitical incentives to end wars, Germany would be well advised to emphasise the central role of domestic and international legitimacy. Only that will be able to sustain peace.

26 Katie Rogers and Tyler Pager, "How Jared Kushner, a Self-Described 'Deal Guy', Helped Broker a Gaza Breakthrough", *The New York Times*, 9 October 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/09/us/politics/jared-kushner-gaza-deal.html>.

27 Roger Mac Ginty, "The Liberal Peace Is Over and It Is Not Coming Back: Hybridity and the Emerging International Peace System", *Third World Quarterly* (online), 26 September 2025, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2025.2559376.

28 Sinem Adar, Muriel Asseburg, Hamidreza Azizi, Margarete Klein and Guido Steinberg, *The Fall of the Assad Regime: Regional and International Power Shifts*, SWP Comment 9/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C09.

29 Gerrit Kurtz, *Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung: Investieren statt kürzen*, SWP Kurz gesagt (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 13 August 2024), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/zivile-konfliktbearbeitung-investieren-statt-kuerzen>.

Nadine Biehler, Anne Koch and Pedro A. Villarreal

Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation: Challenges Beyond Financial Constraints

The funds available globally for humanitarian aid and development cooperation have shrunk dramatically since 2023: in addition to the United States, other important donors like Germany have also significantly reduced their funding.¹ This has acute implications for the provision of aid to people in need and threatens to undo years of development progress in poorer regions of the world. Together with other donor countries, the German government should advocate for the overall stabilisation of international humanitarian aid and development cooperation structures and defend the principles of international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles – if necessary, even against the United States.

As by far the largest donor of official development assistance, the United States has been the backbone of humanitarian aid and development cooperation for decades. In the United States the humanitarian aid and development cooperation institutions and budgets are not strictly separated (as they are in Germany). Services in both areas are traditionally understood more openly as foreign policy instruments than is the case with European donors. National security, economic interests and humanitarian considerations have been the overarching motives for Washington's (broader) foreign assistance (which also includes military aid). In other words, the goals are explicitly broader than human rights, democracy and sustainable development, and also encompass geopolitical

interests, such as countering Russian or Chinese influence in developing countries and addressing cross-border challenges that pose a potential threat to the United States. Historically, the United States has focused primarily on social infrastructure and services, humanitarian aid and (reproductive) health programmes.

Germany, on the other hand, like other European donors, tends to base its humanitarian aid and development cooperation on relevant international agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals and has so far largely avoided prioritising its own self-interest.

Impact of the Trump II administration on humanitarian aid and development cooperation

The dissolution of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), massive cuts in funding for the United Nations, and the ideologically motivated distancing and, in some cases, formal withdrawal from various institutions dedicated to international cooperation represent a turning point with far-reaching consequences for the entire sector.

The entire spectrum of humanitarian aid and development cooperation has been reassessed from the perspective of the "America First" ideology, and all USAID programmes that go beyond narrowly defined life-saving aid have been discontinued. The redefinition of the United States' engagement with the UN is also strongly oriented towards national self-interest. Washington is demanding that important UN organisations limit themselves to their respective core mandates. This implies a blanket rejection of the nexus approaches long advocated by Germany and the EU, which are intended to strengthen the coordi-

¹ By 2022, Germany's budgets for humanitarian aid had risen to around €3.1 billion and for development cooperation to just under €13.8 billion. In 2024, they fell to €2.2 billion and €11.2 billion respectively, and in 2025 to just over €1 billion and just under €10.3 billion respectively; see *Mittelkürzungen für Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und humanitäre Hilfe in Deutschland, Großbritannien und den USA* (Berlin: German Parliament, Research Services [Wissenschaftliche Dienste], Department WD 2, 2025).

nation of humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding. At the same time, in anticipation of impending funding cuts, UN organisations have, in an eager display of deference, proactively removed references to gender equality and climate protection from their programmes. The radical nature of the cuts has systemic implications that will bring about long-term changes in humanitarian aid and development cooperation, including in the areas of health policy and international support in situations of forced displacement.

Forced displacement

Many host countries in the Global South are overwhelmed by the costs of providing for refugees. International support – in line with the international responsibility sharing enshrined in the Global Compact on Refugees – is often essential. The massive cuts in US humanitarian aid therefore have a particular impact on people fleeing their homes and on their host communities.

Both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as the guardian of the Geneva Refugee Convention, and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), whose work includes providing humanitarian aid in displacement contexts, used to receive over 50 per cent of their funding from the United States. Both had to lay off large numbers of staff, significantly reducing their operational capacity in the relevant country contexts.² In addition to protecting and providing for refugees, the UNHCR is also expected to develop durable solutions in the form of local integration, return or third country resettlement. Implementing this in practice involves politically sensitive negotiations: in the case of local integration, refugees must be included in the health and education systems. Sustainable return, especially after protracted displacement, requires comprehensive reintegration measures. The Trump II administration's demand that the UNHCR focus on its core humanitarian mandate negates the complexity of these tasks, which extend beyond the humanitarian and require longer-term (development) commitments.

² Information on the specific cuts is patchy and opaque. Experts estimate that the UNHCR will face budget cuts of 44 per cent by 2026 and the IOM of 31 per cent, while at the same time 7,000 jobs will be cut at the UNHCR and 8,000 at the IOM.

Turning away from nexus approaches to focus solely on providing emergency shelter, food and medical care is problematic. It carries the risk of creating permanent dependence on humanitarian aid, in the sense of the much-criticised warehousing of refugees, without offering them the prospect of securing their own livelihood without external support. This is inefficient and expensive, as well as morally indefensible.

The political reinterpretation of resettlement threatens to undermine the entire system.

The third durable solution is resettlement. Essentially, this involves offering particularly vulnerable refugees protection in third countries, after a thorough individual vetting process. Resettlement has traditionally been an important element of US refugee policy. For decades, the United States not only provided the most places per year, but also financed the basic structures of the international resettlement system. The German government also benefitted from this and provided hundreds, sometimes thousands of resettlement places annually, before announcing in 2025 that it would withdraw completely. The United States is going one step further: not only has President Trump announced a drastic reduction in the number of places to be offered, but he has also radically changed the objectives. Now, resettlement is to benefit primarily white South Africans, whom Trump considers victims of genocide, without any credible evidence. This politically motivated reinterpretation threatens to undermine the entire system, with no clear indication of who will fill the resulting gap.

As well as the looming decline in solution-oriented approaches, other advances in refugee policy in recent years are at risk of being lost. These include efforts to support internally displaced persons, regardless of whether they have fled violent conflicts or environmental disasters. Furthermore, the funding cuts affect not only the large UN organisations UNHCR and IOM, but also numerous smaller initiatives whose work has supported political priority-setting, humanitarian planning and the coordination of various actors. These include organisations that collect, analyse and process displacement-related data, such as the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the Joint IDP Profiling Service and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Cuts in funding lead to interruptions in the flow of information and gaps in regional coverage

that are likely to hamper the planning of displacement-related programmes and reduce their quality. If these initiatives are forced to cease their work, issues such as internal and climate change-induced displacement are likely to again drop down the political agenda.

Global health: The return of nationalism and conservatism

For decades the United States was the most important donor to global health programmes, both at the multilateral level and through bilateral partnerships. That remained the case until the end of the Biden administration. For 2026, however, the US State Department has requested a global health budget of only \$3.6 billion from Congress. This represents a reduction of around \$5.7 billion, or almost two-thirds, compared to 2025. And the smaller budget will be reallocated on the basis of new priorities that were laid out by the State Department in the “America First Global Health Strategy” of September 2025. Three fundamental changes can be identified.

Firstly, humanitarian goals are no longer sufficient grounds for promoting human health in other countries. Instead, the global health strategy puts forward even more explicitly nationalist arguments for future investment in this area. In addition to the motivation to protect the US population from health threats through initiatives such as the eradication of polio and the containment of HIV/AIDS, the strategy also emphasises the need to achieve commercial benefits for US corporations. To this end, the national health sectors of developing countries are to be opened up to products and services from the US.

The second Trump administration will enshrine asymmetric bilateralism as the cornerstone of US global health policy.

Secondly, under Trump II, this strategy establishes asymmetric bilateralism as the cornerstone of US global health policy, thus moving significantly away from the multilateral level. This can be seen, for example, in the US withdrawal from the World Health Organisation, of which it was the main source of funding until 2024. The clear priority given to bilateralism reveals an intention to maintain a small number of opportunistic alliances while retaining full con-

trol over decisions on the financing of specific bilateral programmes and their implementation. The strategy explicitly cites competition with China as a reason for concluding agreements with selected countries in the health sector.

Thirdly, the new US strategy for global health is characterised by conservative norms, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights. This was made clear by US Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy when he spoke out against a United Nations political declaration on non-communicable diseases, claiming that it promoted a “radical gender ideology”. This principle also influenced the US government’s recent decision to withdraw from other UN organisations dealing with sexual and reproductive health and rights, in particular UN Women and the UN Population Fund. The strategy also contains new elements, such as an open preference for faith-based organisations when it comes to providing health services in recipient countries. Although these organisations play an important role for the local population, they have often spoken out against certain forms of sexual and reproductive health, especially abortion.

Moving forward with, without or against the US

The examples of forced displacement and health illustrate that Washington’s cuts in bilateral and multilateral humanitarian aid and development cooperation are not merely a reduction from previous commitments. Instead, they express an ideologically motivated repudiation of the idea of international solidarity and the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, even going as far as to fundamentally reject international cooperation. This goes hand in hand with a broader trend towards increasingly transactional international cooperation, but manifests in an even more radical form: the Trump administration views international relations as a zero-sum game in which winning is based on dominance and not cooperation.

With the US

Where the United States remains willing to engage, the German government should weigh further cooperation pragmatically. It is becoming apparent that the United States still wants to finance humanitarian aid – but on the basis of a very narrow understand-

ing of life-saving measures. Where possible, other donors such as Germany should build and expand on this. Washington has also indicated that it will remain involved in global health policy. Technical cooperation on the containment of communicable diseases is an obvious step and may offer starting points for further cooperation. In all these areas, the added value of continued cooperation must be weighed against possible reputational risks: there is a danger that close cooperation with the United States could lead other partners to perceive Germany as less reliable and less committed to a rules-based order.

Without the US

Following cuts in 2025, it is now clear that the United States will drastically reduce its UN contributions again in 2026. The UN has responded with the UN80 reform, which secures cost savings through layoffs and a reduction in activities, but also includes technical efficiency gains through shared services such as IT and logistics. Germany and like-minded donors should make use of the momentum to influence the reform in line with their preferences and counteract the UN's impending loss of significance through their commitment. It seems sensible to pool resources in areas such as logistics and IT in order to achieve efficiency gains. This also applies to reforms more closely related to humanitarian aid and development cooperation, such as the establishment of *pooled funds* at country and regional level and greater powers for UN humanitarian and resident coordinators. The German government should therefore continue to engage in relevant reform processes (such as Grand Bargain 2.0) and refrain from further reducing its own humanitarian aid and development cooperation.

In health policy, both the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the German Federal Foreign Office can help to build partnerships with other governments, possibly involving the private sector. The aim should be to make investments that have been deferred by the United States and offer long-term benefits to recipient countries. This includes expanding local and regional capacities for the manufacture of medical products.

When it comes to situations of forced displacement, it is worth pursuing tried and tested successful approaches without the United States, and to this end placing greater emphasis on the economic arguments for local integration, as was recently done successfully in Thailand. The German government should step in to finance relevant UN agencies and encourage like-

minded countries to continue or increase their funding.

Against the US

Gaps have emerged particularly in areas from which the US wishes to withdraw for ideological reasons, but which are essential for the high-quality implementation and sustainability of development projects. These include climate protection, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Germany and European donors should try to compensate for the lack of US funding in these areas, at least in specific cases, and continue to promote these issues, even against Washington's wishes.

In addition, the German government, together with allies, should insist that international humanitarian law and the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are upheld. In particular, it should defend humanitarian aid and development cooperation against tendencies towards privatisation and militarisation. These are evident, for example, in Washington's preference for faith-based aid organisations, in the commissioning of private logistics companies, and in initiatives such as the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.

The stronger integration of development cooperation into foreign policy, which is also being discussed in Germany, can be useful for avoiding contradictions and inconsistencies in cooperation with third countries. Nevertheless, the German government should resist the growing instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid and development cooperation in foreign and economic policy. This would be in the interests of a more broadly defined and enlightened self-interest, which includes the preservation of a rules-based international order, resilient partnerships and effective climate protection.

Areas of Action

Judith Vorrath, Marianne Beisheim and Christian Schaller

Multilateralism and International Law: UN Policy With, Without, Against the US

The situation of Germany, other European states and the European Union at the United Nations has changed significantly with the advent of the second Trump administration. The US President's speech at the 80th UN General Assembly in September 2025 showed his disdain for the organisation in its current form and his preference for bilateral agreements between nation states. On the other hand, he has not followed demands from US Senators to turn his back on the United Nations entirely.¹ The United States would not want to cede this arena to China, and intends to continue using its veto power in the Security Council. Nevertheless, on 7 January 2026, Trump instructed his administration to withdraw from a further 66 international organisations and institutions, including the regional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the International Law Commission, the Peacebuilding Commission, units and mechanisms of the UN Secretariat, and numerous scientific and non-governmental advisory bodies; others may follow.² It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the Board of Peace initiated and chaired by President Trump, which was initially set up to implement the Gaza peace plan, will enter into direct competition with UN structures.

The second Trump administration: Not just more of the same

Although previous US administrations also criticised the United Nations and sometimes withdrew from multilateral agreements and processes, the situation changed profoundly with Trump's second inauguration in January 2025. Firstly, Washington now is more determined than ever to free itself from the constraints imposed by international law and international institutions. Secondly, it has largely ceased to act as a force for the international liberal order. Thirdly, it is cutting its financial contributions to the UN so drastically as to threaten the organisation's core functions.

Washington's approach to *international law* is increasingly causing concern. The Trump administration treats its legal obligations with contempt — while selectively invoking international norms when it suits its interests. Although that is nothing new in US foreign policy, the rejection of international law and its institutions has become glaringly obvious under Trump. The United States is now withdrawing across the board from key international agreements, organisations and forums. Institutions that are considered a threat to American interests, such as the International Criminal Court, are actively targeted. In his numerous “deals”, Trump also exerts pressure on other states to fall in line with what he defines as US interests. In some cases, the aim is to achieve outcomes that contravene international law, as when Ukraine is pressured to cede parts of its own territory. In other cases, states are openly threatened with the use of force.

When justifying military actions, Washington sometimes still tries to set out a case under international law, as with the air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025. However, its arguments are often unconvincing, for example concerning the targeted killing of suspected drug smugglers in the

¹ U.S. Senate, *Disengaging Entirely from the United Nations Debacle Act of 2025* (Washington, D.C., 20 February 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/669/text> (accessed 22 October 2025).

² The White House, *Withdrawing the United States from International Organisations, Conventions, and Treaties That Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States*, Presidential Memorandum, 7 January 2026. This is based on the review mandated by Executive Order 14199 of 4 February 2025.

Caribbean and the eastern Pacific. Compared with the extensive legal deliberations undertaken by the Obama administration in the fight against international terrorism, the current administration has so far made limited efforts to ground its policies in international law. The military action against Venezuela in January 2026, in which the country's president and his wife were forcibly abducted to the United States, illustrates yet again that the UN Charter's prohibition of the use of force and other fundamental principles of international law are no obstacle to the Trump administration. The way the administration staged the operation suggests that it not only countenanced the open breach of international law, but deliberately instrumentalised it as a message to other states.

Overall, the Trump administration's line on the UN is "back to basics": the organisation should concentrate on matters of international peace and security. The United States has basically stopped claiming to be the leading power of the global liberal order these days. Instead, its positions reflect a narrow understanding of the UN's core mission – one derived largely from Trump's "America first" policy and the use of transactional negotiations or of coercion in pursuing this agenda. It is no coincidence that in his speech to the General Assembly, President Trump referred exclusively to armed conflicts between states that he claims to have resolved.³ In the UN Security Council, the United States has repeatedly underlined that it wants to keep issues such as the effects of climate change and "Women, Peace and Security" off the agenda.⁴ The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are rejected as "globalist" and incompatible with American interests.⁵ Even instruments aimed directly at securing peace are not spared. The nine UN peacekeeping missions, which are funded by mandatory contributions from member states, will have to

cut their operations by around 25 per cent;⁶ for 2026, the White House had even planned to completely discontinue the corresponding US payments.⁷ The implementation of contingency plans to cope with financial shortfalls might seriously affect missions' ability to fulfil their mandates.⁸

Under Trump, the US is not only failing as a liberal hegemon – it is undermining international law and multilateralism.

This brings us to the third point: Washington's *budget cuts*, some of which are massive, will change the UN. The Trump administration justifies the radical cuts as a necessary pruning of an inflated and inefficient UN bureaucracy. Accordingly, the (planned) cuts affect large areas of the United Nations system: in addition to peacekeeping, they also affect many programmes in the humanitarian, development, environmental and health sectors. In July 2025, the Trump administration also withdrew UN funding that had already been approved for 2025.⁹ The initial proposal was to stop virtually all US funding for the 2026 UN budget.¹⁰ After negotiations, Washington agreed to contribute US\$2 billion to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), but only to support specific countries. The 2026 UN

3 See the contribution by Gerrit Kurtz in this volume, pp. 39ff.

4 Security Council Report, *In Hindsight: A Council in Waiting* (August 2025 Monthly Forecast), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-08/in-hindsight-a-council-in-waiting.php> (accessed 22 October 2025).

5 Edward Heartney, "Remarks at the UN Meeting Entitled 58th Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly, 4 March 2025", <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-the-un-meeting-entitled-58th-plenary-meeting-of-the-general-assembly/> (accessed 23 October 2025).

6 United Nations Peacekeeping, "Budget Gaps Threaten Global Peace Efforts", updated 16 October 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/budget-gaps-threaten-global-peace-efforts> (accessed 12 November 2025).

7 "Trump Administration Proposes Scrapping UN Peacekeeping Funding", *Reuters*, updated 15 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-administration-proposes-scrapping-un-peacekeeping-funding-2025-04-15/> (accessed 12 November 2025).

8 Security Council Report, "UN Peacekeeping Operations: Closed Consultations", *What's in Blue* post, 17 November 2025, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/11/un-peacekeeping-operations-closed-consultations.php> (accessed 30 January 2026).

9 The White House, *Proposed Rescissions of Budgetary Resources: Special Message* (Washington, D.C., 28 May 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Proposed-Rescissions-of-Budgetary-Resources.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2025); H.R. 4 – 119th Congress, *Rescissions Act of 2025* (2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/4/text> (accessed 12 November 2025).

10 *Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, 2025).

budget shows a 15 per cent reduction in financial resources and a 19 per cent cut in staffing. The UN's current austerity and reform efforts will not be enough to plug the budget gaps, while European countries will remain unwilling and unable to close the financial gap. As a result, the UN risks becoming insolvent in July 2026.¹¹ In addition, a number of important donors, including the United Kingdom and Germany, have cut their own budgets for humanitarian aid, crisis prevention and stabilisation, and development cooperation, further limiting their voluntary contributions to the UN.

The changes are profound and can be expected to have more permanent effects than those that occurred under the first Trump administration. In the past, Washington often acted as a spoiler in UN negotiations. Recently, it has tended to withdraw from negotiations but refrained from further obstructing them, as in the case of the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville. How Washington operates in the future remains to be seen. We witnessed one successful attempt to block unwanted UN negotiations in October 2025, when Washington put a temporary stop to the International Maritime Organisation's plans to set globally binding targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the shipping sector.

Opportunities for action and influence

As a consequence of the challenges mentioned above, Germany and its European partners will have to work even harder to define their own positions in the UN and win over new allies with whom they can develop strategies and act as a group to shape policy. This holds true across the three pillars of the United Nations. Whether Washington is to be a partner, a competitor or a rival in the UN will depend on several factors.

On the one hand, the positions of Germany and other European states on *norms and values* will be crucial. During Trump's first term, his administration was already moving away from international law and largely refrained from commenting on the international legal ramifications of its own policies. Never-

theless, professional exchanges with US government representatives remained possible at the diplomatic and technical levels. Now, Washington is withdrawing more broadly from international legal discourse. For example, Trump has decided that US legal experts will be barred from serving on the UN International Law Commission in the future. The vacuum created by such a broad US retreat will make it easier for authoritarian actors such as China and Russia to establish their own concepts of international law and the international system, which differ from the Western understanding. This underscores the need for Germany and other states that consider themselves advocates of international law and a rules-based international order to promote their own models more actively.

Responding appropriately to violations of international law committed by the United States is another tricky challenge. As a matter of principle, serious breaches of international law must be explicitly addressed – irrespective of the perpetrator. Where that means criticising Washington, political cost could be very high. Open confrontation with the Trump administration risks an escalation that could lead to significant reductions in US involvement in Ukraine. Moreover, Germany has a vital interest in ensuring that the United States continues to fulfil its key role within NATO. This poses a fundamental challenge for German foreign policy, which has already been accused of double standards. The criticism revolves around the contrast between Germany's clear and robust condemnation of Russia's war of aggression and active support for Ukraine, as against its hesitant and cautious responses to Israel's violations of international law during the Gaza conflict. A similar problem is now arising in relation to the United States. The attacks on Venezuela left no doubt that the Trump administration is willing to impose its political agenda by brute force, even if that means disregarding fundamental norms of international law.

Germany and the EU must provide stronger political and financial support to the UN, else others shape its future.

That brings us to the question of which German and European *interests* still coincide with those of the United States and what scope exists for rapprochement. In the UN Security Council, for example, tensions between Washington and European states have

¹¹ Farnaz Fassihi, "U.N. Says It's in Danger of Financial Collapse Because of Unpaid Dues", *New York Times* (online), 30 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/world/americas/un-finances-collapse-debts.html> (accessed 2 February 2026).

emerged since January 2025. A very striking instance occurred in February, on the anniversary of the full Russian invasion, when the United States joined China and Russia to pass Resolution 2774. The European Security Council members all abstained, as the text failed to condemn the Russian attack and made no mention of Ukraine's territorial integrity. This was preceded by a dispute in the General Assembly, when Washington introduced a draft resolution that competed with one put forward by Ukraine and its European allies.

Clear rifts within the Security Council have also appeared on other issues, particularly among the United States, France and the United Kingdom (the P3) – for example when the latter two recognised the State of Palestine during a high-level General Assembly conference in September. Such disagreements do not occur across all regional or thematic issues dealt with by the Security Council, and positions can shift over time, as seen in the case of the war in Ukraine. The United States does seek support at the Council when it suits, as with Trump's Gaza peace plan, which was approved by Resolution 2803 in November 2025. However, in this plan and other peace negotiations or agreements pushed by Washington, the UN itself plays at best a minor role. We have reached a point where European states can no longer rely on broad agreement with US positions – at a time when it already has become much more difficult for the Security Council to reach consensus.

Outlook

If Germany is elected to the UN Security Council again in mid-2026, the question of weighing options will become particularly pressing. This would raise the very blunt question of how the German government will respond to Washington's narrow understanding of security. In his report on "The Security We Need", the UN Secretary-General argues that an overly strict focus on military security and the corresponding reallocation of public funds to defence budgets contributes to global destabilisation. Empirical findings and strategic considerations continue to favour a multidimensional and integrated approach to security, as is basically also laid out in the rules of

procedure of the newly created German National Security Council.¹²

Germany is also expected to continue pursuing implementation of the UN Pact for the Future, as it did for example at the Peacekeeping Ministerial hosted in Berlin in May 2025. This high-level political forum has been meeting regularly since 2016 but last year focused explicitly on adapting missions to new challenges and realities. However, the current budget cuts threaten to render the UN Secretary-General's ongoing review largely ineffective. The political and financial frameworks for missions must not address only efficiency but also changing needs, for example, when it comes to protecting civilians in armed conflicts.

On top of appointing a new Secretary-General, the General Assembly will have other important issues on its plate in 2026. The current Secretary-General, António Guterres, presented the "UN80" initiative to member states in March 2025. Essentially, this can be seen as an attempt to mitigate impending financial cuts and proactively address necessary reforms. However, the cuts made by Washington reflect a prioritisation of national interests over multilateral cooperation, and are not primarily seeking to promote necessary reforms. Instead, they embody an ideological project whose objective is to end American support for what are seen as self-serving and politicised structures.¹³ Similar trends can be seen in the policies proposed by right-wing populist parties in other OECD countries.¹⁴

In view of the above, it is all the more important for the EU and Germany to take a constructive position on the "UN80" proposals and to set out their own priorities and recommendations on both the mandate implementation review and the structural reforms and programme realignments. Prioritisation will be

¹² German Bundestag, *Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung: Einsetzung des Kabinettausschusses Nationaler Sicherheitsrat und Geschäftsordnung des Nationalen Sicherheitsrates*, Bundestags-Drucksache 21/1460 (Berlin, 2 September 2025), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/21/014/2101460.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

¹³ See Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise, Presidential Transition Project* (Washington, D.C., 2023), 253f.

¹⁴ Lee Crawford, Ranil Dissanayake and Anita Käppeli, "Foreign Aid in a Time of Right-Wing Populism", blog post, Centre for Global Development, 24 July 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/foreign-aid-time-right-wing-populism> (accessed 11 November 2025).

necessary, but its direction will depend on how strongly those members who adhere to the principles of effective and inclusive multilateral cooperation get involved. To reinforce their position, Germany and other European states should provide reliable support to the UN through their core contributions; the EU could explore ways of allowing its voluntary contributions – which have to date been earmarked – to be used more flexibly within the UN budget.

A strategic “sequencing” approach could be helpful. First, in the spirit of transatlantic partnership, one would examine what can be achieved *with* the United States. If this proves insufficient or unsatisfactory, consideration should be given to what is possible *without* the United States. European countries could, for example, continue to develop their peacebuilding efforts independently of the United States. Here, Germany can use its engagement as a Co-Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission to pursue its stated goal of more closely linking peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Promoting multilateral engagement means including countries in the “Global South” at an early stage. The non-permanent European members of the UN Security Council have already been doing so by cooperating with other elected members, for example in the drafting of a resolution on the situation in the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, the Trump administration largely bypasses the UN when it believes important security interests to be at stake. The charter of the Board of Peace suggests that its role is by no means limited to conflict resolution in Gaza, but is intended to generally create a “more nimble and effective international peacebuilding body”.¹⁵ It will be up to European governments to ensure that this Trump initiative does not undermine international law and the work of the UN.

It may become necessary to consider what can be done *against* Washington’s positions or actions. In situations where the United States and other Security Council members such as China or Russia have strong interests, efforts must be made to ensure that the UN works towards balanced and sustainable solutions rather than concentrating on great power politics and “spheres of influence”. As the Trump administration’s threat to annex Greenland by military force has underscored, this is a vital interest of Germany and the

European NATO states. On matters concerning the Security Council, Germany’s main option right now is to work through coordination with other European members – as recently seen when Berlin, Paris and London jointly activated the snapback mechanism in the nuclear dispute with Iran. However, if Germany becomes a member of the Security Council, it will also be necessary to seek cooperation with and support from the African, Latin American and Asian elected members. To this end, communication channels must be established to enable Germany and the EU to quickly forge effective coalitions with like-minded middle powers and smaller states.

¹⁵ Jacob Magid, “Full Text: Charter of Trump’s Board of Peace”, *Times of Israel*, 18 January 2026, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-charter-of-trumps-board-of-peace/> (accessed 20 January 2026).

Kai-Olaf Lang, Barbara Lippert and Claudia Zilla

Renewing Europe's Soft Power in the Geopolitical *Zeitenwende* – Outmoded Considerations

The European Union is undergoing a major geopolitical turn as it responds to – the so-called “*Zeitenwende*”¹, a tectonic shift in an “unforgiving” world.² Two factors are driving change simultaneously: Russia continues to threaten Europe's security, while the unconditional support of the United States for Europe in terms of security is slipping away. The new US National Security Strategy and the intended acquisition of Greenland demonstrate that Washington's great power politics, which it has announced and immediately put into practice, is aggressive and rule-breaking. This makes the United States a potential adversary of EU member states, and therefore of the EU.³ Against this backdrop, the EU is realigning its foreign policy and striving for comprehensive strategic sovereignty based on a full range of civil and military instruments.⁴

The “soft” attributes that have traditionally shaped the EU's external action – dialogue and diplomacy, long-term investment in development cooperation,

human rights policy, foreign cultural and scientific policy – and their instruments are taking a back seat. These issues have virtually disappeared from the agenda of the European Council and the EU foreign ministers. The EU is not a key diplomatic player in either of the major conflicts in its neighbourhood (the Middle East and Russia – Ukraine). In its trade and financial policy, it is now also pursuing a geopolitical course in which coercive instruments make up a large part of the new economic security doctrine.

At the same time, the Trump administration is fighting against the “deep state” and “wokeness” at home, among other things by cutting the funding basis of its public diplomacy. In addition, believing in its own “inherent greatness and decency”,⁵ it is pushing ahead with a transnational “culture war”, intervening in the political processes of other states and attempting to enforce regional exclusivity claims and imperial ambitions through the use or threat of force.⁶ The EU has work to do here: On the one hand, it must understand how the consequences of its changing foreign policy role are perceived in countries outside Europe. On the other, it must reform its soft power instruments and modernise the ways they are used. This raises the question of where and when

1 Federal Government, “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022”, Berlin, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356> (accessed 28 October 2025).

2 European Commission, “2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”, Strasbourg, 10 September 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_25_2053 (accessed 28 October 2025).

3 President of the United States of America, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., November 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2026).

4 Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes, eds., *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*, SWP Research Paper 4/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019RP04.

5 President of the United States of America, *National Security Strategy* (see note 3), 4.

6 For more details, see Helmut K. Anheier and Edward L. Knudsen, *Domination without Hegemony? The Emerging Contest to Fill the US' Soft Power Vacuum*, ifa ECP [External Cultural Policy] Monitor (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen [ifa], 2025), 18–26. For the impact on humanitarian aid, peace work and cooperation in the United Nations, see the contributions by Nadine Biehler, Anne Koch and Pedro A. Villarreal (pp. 43ff.), Gerrit Kurtz (pp. 39ff.) and Judith Vorrath, Marianne Beisheim and Christian Schaller (pp. 49ff.) in this volume.

Europe should pursue its soft power activities with, without or even against the United States.

Having soft power and being soft power

“Soft power” refers, firstly, to a specific form of power and its exercise. Soft power is at work “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants”.⁷ In a broader sense, soft power refers to the underlying resources and instruments (“having soft power”). Soft power relies primarily on attractiveness and persuasiveness, both as passive qualities and active behaviours. An actor or state receives support from a counterpart – concerning an issue, decision, approach or point of view – without resorting to coercive military or economic measures, as would often be the case with hard or sharp power. Thirdly, possessing and employing soft power resources and instruments can have an identity-forming effect, shaping how a country perceives itself and is perceived by others, and thus leading to the development of a foreign policy role concept as a soft power (“being a soft power”).

The domains and instruments of soft power are diverse and are applied by democratic, non-democratic and authoritarian states. They include dialogue and diplomacy – in particular to reduce and balance global asymmetries – as well as the competition of ideas, interpretations, discourses and narratives, and operating as a norm entrepreneur.⁸

The EU's soft power has been part of its self-image for decades, and is acknowledged by other actors. However, the EU's profile and legitimacy as a soft power have been eroding in recent years. This development is attributable to two developments: a series of transformations within the EU that have gained momentum since 2022, and the changing international context – the formative and destructive power of destabilisation, manipulation and war, and broader shifts in global power rivalry.

⁷ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power between the United States and China*, China and Globalisation (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 12.

⁸ On the EU as a normative power, see Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–58. Unlike soft power, which is a pillar or dimension of foreign policy, normative power represents a holistic role concept.

The new view from within

The EU's self-image is changing rapidly. Since 2019, it has increasingly described itself as a “geopolitical” community. The security and defence policy efforts initiated in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have brought protection against military and hybrid threats, as well as resilience in general, to the forefront of European politics. Improving defence policy, defence industry and military capabilities has become a cross-cutting task in key policy areas.

However, the “hardening” of European foreign policy is not the only factor that is tarnishing the EU's soft power dimension, which was once considered its hallmark. The dwindling of normative coherence among EU member states makes it more difficult for the Union to appear united, credible and reliable. The EU may benefit if it is able to present its domestic political and socio-cultural diversity as a positive aspect of plurality and cultural compatibility. However, if internal differences become too pronounced, for example with regard to the basic orientation of European integration or the interpretation of democracy and the rule of law, or if there are too many disagreements in important policy areas, the EU will lose its political appeal and concrete capability to act. This is all the more true as the economic resources of European soft power – economic strength, innovation and competitiveness, are declining.

The securitisation and “hardening” of EU foreign policy demand more “soft” external action, not less.

However, the securitisation and “hardening” of EU foreign policy both enable and demand more “soft” external action, not less. Thus, the shift towards a “geopolitical” EU more attuned to security concerns has been accompanied by the Global Gateway initiative, which employs instruments from the classic soft power repertoire. Most member states understand the new prioritisation of military defence not in terms of “hard power” replacing “soft power”, but as the reinforcement of an underdeveloped “hard” dimension, while seeking to preserve existing strengths in the economic, scientific and cultural spheres. Most member states see soft power – both internally and externally – as a means of exerting influence and dealing with systemic rivals and adversaries.

The critical view from outside

The EU's soft power qualities have traditionally been particularly important in its relations with Latin America. The region's view of the EU is also shaped by comparisons with the United States and China. A representative survey conducted in ten Latin American countries in 2021 found that – with the exception of their own region – Europe was considered to be the preferred world region for living and for intensifying cooperation.⁹ European integration is seen as a useful example for similar processes in Latin America. From a Latin American perspective, the EU ranks far ahead of the United States and China in terms of promoting world peace, defending human rights, providing humanitarian aid, protecting the environment, and combating poverty and social inequality. Yet it ranks only third, behind the United States and China, when it comes to technology, science and education, or military and economic power. Foreign direct investment from the United States and China is considered more attractive than European investment.

The comparative advantage of Europe and the EU clearly lies in their positive image as a soft power. This is undoubtedly facilitated by Europe's cultural similarities with Latin America and the convergence of important political and foreign policy principles. Nevertheless, criticisms of the EU are heard from members of Latin American governments and the region's foreign policy community. The main issues raised are the EU's attitude of superiority (regarding its own integration model as universal), its agricultural protectionism, its hierarchical imposition of normative demands and standards, its double standards concerning values, and its affirmation of global asymmetries. Many of these aspects complicated the conclusion of the association agreement between the EU and Mercosur, whose value to Europe has increased since Washington's turn to "America first". Brexit has demonstrated that the process of European integration is neither universally accepted nor irreversible, raising hopes in Latin America for a more

⁹ Latinobarómetro, Nueva Sociedad and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "América Latina – Unión Europea: miradas, agendas y expectativas" [Latin America – European Union: perspectives, agendas and expectations], <https://data.nuso.org/es> (accessed 20 October 2025). The survey was conducted in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay and Uruguay between 10 September and 4 October 2021.

"modest" approach from the EU. However, the EU's Eurocentric vaccine policy during the Covid pandemic, the tightening of its migration and asylum policy, and its toleration of violations of international law during the Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip and US military action in Venezuela are fuelling criticisms of double standards. As it neglects its soft power resources, the EU is also overshadowed by two developments. On the one hand, under Trump Washington is pursuing an increasingly aggressive approach towards Latin America. This hard power policy began with punitive tariffs, deportations and militarisation of the fight against drug trafficking, and reached a climax with Trump's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, as laid out in the new National Security Strategy, and the military operation in Venezuela in January 2026, during which President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores were abducted. On the other hand, China, as one of the region's most important trading partners and investors, is intensifying its soft power activities, including a dynamic foreign cultural policy.

Linking the topics and instruments of cooperation to security goals jeopardises the EU's broader relations with Latin America.

In Latin America the EU stands little chance of prevailing over the United States and China in the hard power sphere. Yet, by increasingly linking the topics and instruments of cooperation to security goals, the EU is jeopardising its long-established trust-based relations with the region, as well as its renowned profile in areas such as development cooperation. With its massive rearmament and the promotion of a negative agenda (against China and Russia), the EU is also widening its differences with a region that is a nuclear-weapon-free zone, characterised by low defence spending and largely opposed to bloc formation.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the course of its open confrontation with Russia, its security emancipation from the United States and its economic "de-risking" from China, the EU is pursuing policies that increasingly rely on hard power. In the process, distancing from systemic rivals Russia and China and normative alienation from the United States are leading the EU to overestimate its reputa-

tion as a “force for good”.¹⁰ These developments are inevitably changing the EU's foreign policy role concept. They have an impact both on its (foreign) policy priorities, and on how it is seen by itself and others. This leads to two conclusions: On the one hand, the EU should be aware of the implications of this change, including trade-offs and side effects. On the other hand, it should avoid focusing so much on hard power as to squander its soft power capital. Strategic autonomy requires both hard and soft power.

At a time when the EU is facing pressure from external powers and competition, soft power can also help the EU to assert itself, provided that it reflects the EU's socio-political resilience. However, it would be short-sighted to see the benefit of soft power primarily in terms of gaining advantage over rivals. The regions of the Global South (including Latin America), with which the EU and its member states wish to develop sustainable reciprocal relations, have different ideas. They do not see themselves as an arena for transatlantic rivalries. The countries of the Global South are mainly interested in economic and social development, technology transfer, and the reduction of global asymmetries. The areas of economics, science, technology, innovation and infrastructure are therefore particularly suitable for intensifying cooperation. It is important to flank the relationships with people-to-people projects and to seek convergence, for example through dialogue on global issues.

The EU should also explain its principles and priorities to the target countries and refine its instruments in dialogue with them – rather than simply pursuing “more of the same”. Filling the gaps left by Washington's withdrawal would be neither possible nor advisable. Instead, it is crucial that the EU maintain its own profile. It should not try to present itself as a “better United States” or a “different West”, but rather reflect self-critically on Europe's dealings with new and existing partners. These forms of interaction include a preference for rules, regulation and compromise, for the joint development of priorities and projects, and for balancing of interests, as well as aspiring to act responsively, reliably and predictably. Accordingly, soft power should be cultivated and developed together with partners rather than “deployed” or “applied”.

Although the EU's soft power has sometimes arisen through differences with the United States, it has not been resulted from direct confrontation. This could change, in view of the ongoing systemic transformation in the United States. The EU and its member states must be prepared for the associated soft power rivalries to play out in Europe itself, and not only in third countries. The EU cannot ignore such competition, but should not focus primarily on it either. It would be beneficial if Europe were able to develop a positive agenda in cultural and social matters, engaging in a contest of ideas and concepts – both at home and on the global stage. In specific situations, the EU will have to “stand up and be counted” when it comes to defending its guiding principles, even if this means disagreeing with the United States. That does not preclude common interests or opportunities for cooperation on issues such as promoting social or economic resilience, which would be desirable, especially in a phase of transatlantic drift.

The German government and the Bundestag should advocate within the EU for soft power instruments not to be subordinated to economic or security policy logic. Instead, they should be upgraded to create an autonomy of “soft” external action, taking into account security, vulnerability, competition and friction as given conditions. What is needed, therefore, is a foreign policy in which the components of soft and hard power remain recognisable and well balanced – in bilateral relations and global governance alike.

10 Council of the European Union, *European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World* (Brussels, 2009), 24, <http://bit.ly/4nsXmIs> (accessed 28 October 2025).

Heribert Dieter

The European Union's Trade Policy Needs a Fresh Start

For many years the European Union pursued a two-pronged trade policy. On the one hand, it was one of the most vocal supporters of the multilateral trading system and worked to revitalise the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in a difficult environment. On the other hand, it sought to impose European political preferences, such as labour protections, through comprehensive trade agreements with non-European countries (and occasionally with the United States). It has become increasingly apparent that this approach no longer works. The World Trade Organisation has been paralysed for more than two decades, and has not been spared from the geopolitical conflict between the United States and China. Geoeconomic rivalry has made multilateral cooperation difficult, if not impossible. And today potential partners reject the second pillar — the EU's far-reaching non-trade requirements — as interference in their national sovereignty. The EU member states therefore need to develop a new trade policy, returning to the original purpose of trade agreements and concluding lean agreements. The EU should also work with other market economies to establish an alternative to the WTO. Ideally, a compromise should be found with the United States. A world trade agreement that excluded the United States would be a poor substitute for the WTO. A global trade regime that includes almost all nations remains the ideal solution for regulating trade in goods and services.

Why trade agreements?

Despite the shifts in global politics, the reasons for concluding free trade agreements remain largely unchanged. Such agreements create a larger economic area, strengthen cross-border trade and deepen the international division of labour. The fewer regulations companies engaged in cross-border trade have to comply with, the greater the positive growth

effects. For a long time, the question of regulation through free trade agreements was the domain of the European Union, and resulted in the Union seeing itself as a “regulatory superpower”. However, compliance with international trade rules incurs costs that must be borne by companies and consumers.

The regulation of the origin of goods is an important element of all EU free trade agreements. Rules on origin are required to prevent goods produced outside the free trade area from being traded duty-free within it. Such rules always represent a cost factor: companies must maintain documentation for the customs authorities. The Federation of German Industries (BDI) is committed to simplifying and standardising rules of origin in EU free trade agreements. An analysis of 33 EU free trade agreements found that in 2021 67 per cent of cross-border trade made use of the provisions of the relevant free trade agreement (the utilisation rate). The remaining 33 per cent was traded without documentation of the origin of the goods, even though it is possible to trade goods duty-free. In the case of German companies, the average utilisation rate across all 33 agreements was only 60 per cent. Although this issue may seem technical, it is of considerable economic relevance: the goal of keeping trade costs as low as possible is not being achieved due to complicated rules of origin.¹

Refounding the WTO more plausible than reform

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was founded in 1994 during a period of confidence in global regulation, and is unlikely to be reformed. On the one hand,

¹ Heribert Dieter, *Ursprungsregeln in Freihandelszonen: Protektionismus durch die Hintertür*, SWP-Studie 9/2004 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2004), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/ursprungsregeln-in-freihandels-zonen>.

geopolitical tensions now make multilateral cooperation difficult. On the other, it will be almost impossible to force a controlled, communist economy such as China's to adhere to the rules that are generally accepted in market economies. The admission of China in 2001 was probably the biggest mistake in the history of the WTO. Proponents of accession assumed that WTO membership would lead China to become a market economy. Critics, on the other hand, argued that China was a communist planned economy and would not submit to WTO rules. They were right.

There are still reasons not to write off the WTO completely. China's communist dictatorship might collapse, and the country could still become a democratic market economy. Change could occur in the United States, too, where a new president will be elected in 2028. But those are not compelling reasons to retain the WTO as the central institution for regulating cross-border trade in goods and services; they are merely expressions of hope. The working assumption should be that the WTO's members will not be prepared to conduct a new round of trade negotiations. The last round, which is widely regarded as a thorough failure, began in 2001 in Doha.

Europe's trade policy should work towards creating an alternative to the WTO.

Europe's trade policy should therefore work towards creating a replacement for the WTO, which should include mechanisms for regulating subsidies, a robust dispute settlement mechanism and liberal trade rules for all participating countries. The new regime should be open to all countries that are willing to abide by the rules – and should exclude those that violate them.

It could make sense for the countries of the European Union to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP),² as the United Kingdom did in December 2024. Unlike Mercosur, which is a customs union with a common trade policy (like the European Union), the CPTPP is a free trade area in which rules of origin play an essential and costly role. Any new agreement between the CPTPP member countries would have to develop its

own rules of origin, which would tend to increase rather than reduce trade costs. There would also be duplication where countries have already concluded bilateral agreements with the EU. Companies would have to decide whether to trade under the terms of the bilateral agreement or the plurilateral CPTPP-EU agreement. The result would therefore be more bureaucracy, not less.

Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have suggested exploring closer cooperation with the group. The precursor to the CPTPP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, was negotiated by President Barack Obama's administration, but not yet ratified. His successor Trump dropped the project at the beginning of his first term, and said he would instead focus on bilateral agreements. President Biden also made no effort to bring the United States back into the group.

The CPTPP meets three key requirements for a trade policy club: it is internally liberal, with strict rules on subsidies and a robust dispute settlement mechanism. Joining would offer significant benefits for the EU. Existing bilateral agreements, such as those with Japan or the United Kingdom, could be replaced by the larger plurilateral free trade area. Companies would no longer have to deal with different rules of origin and different administrative procedures. Joining the CPTPP (whose name would have to be changed and simplified) could encourage other players to follow the EU's example. It is conceivable, for example, that the Mercosur group could join. That would also reduce the administrative burden for businesses. And it might be easier for the European Parliament and Europe's national parliaments to ratify a single larger agreement than many smaller bilateral ones.

If the European Union's turned its back on the existing multilateral order there would certainly be criticism from those who argue that Europe should be working within the WTO to fill the gaps left by the United States and China. The counterargument is that the EU has lost importance in international economic relations and no longer has the power to keep the WTO alive on its own. On the other hand, the EU does have the opportunity to create and strengthen new forms of plurilateral regulation together with like-minded countries. Of course, it would have been better if the EU had been involved in the CPTPP negotiations from the outset. Today, it is worth considering whether accession would not be the more elegant solution. If the United Kingdom was able to join the

² This group currently includes Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United Kingdom and Vietnam.

existing CPTPP agreement, why should the European Union not follow suit?

A revival of the existing multilateral order seems unrealistic at present.

Striving for a new version of today's multilateral order seems an unrealistic prospect. Without the United States and China, which for their own different reasons have no interest in participating in a rules-based, market-based regime, the only alternative is plurilateral agreements.³

Prospects for transatlantic cooperation on trade issues

The future shape of transatlantic economic relations is a key question. President Donald Trump's blackmail seems to have worked initially, bringing about the US-EU trade agreement in the summer of 2025. In conceding to Trump's demands, the EU suffered a loss of prestige both internally and externally: it was a "summer of humiliation",⁴ as Belgian author Marc De Vos put it. America already knew that the EU was weak. Now the rest of the world knows it too.

The agreement contains a presumably unintended technical error, in limiting the abolition of import duties on industrial products to American companies.⁵ Under the most-favoured-nation clause of the WTO agreement, other WTO members could demand the same duty-free access to the EU market. The situation would be different if the United States and the EU were to conclude a free trade agreement under Article 24 of the WTO Agreement. Since this is out of the question, the European Commission may have scored a reckless own goal. If the Commission ignores the WTO rules, the multilateral system will suffer a further harm.

However, there may be opportunities to expand transatlantic cooperation in the coming months. While that might currently appear unlikely, US

3 In the WTO, only the organisation itself is considered multilateral. All other agreements are considered plurilateral.

4 Marc De Vos, "Europe's Summer of Humiliation", *Financial Times*, 31 July 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/698517e6-9955-4ae9-9a9f-b91202157571>.

5 Anne O. Krueger, "Case for a GTO Without America", *Korea Herald*, 29 October 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10603403>.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has signalled Washington's willingness to engage in dialogue and is calling for his country to play a more active role in reshaping the international economic order. In his view, complete withdrawal from the international trading system would be a disaster for American and its allies.⁶ During his first term in office, President Trump threatened to withdraw completely from the WTO.⁷ In his second term, he is continuing his predecessor Biden's policy and denying US approval of new appointments to the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism. According to Reuters, he has also suspended US financial contributions to the WTO budget.⁸

Against this backdrop, Washington's new tone is surprising many European observers. Perhaps Washington's harsh tariffs were only the overture to an American initiative to reorganise international economic relations. The America's policy of 2025 is attributable at least in part to the deafness of its trading partners. For years, successive American administrations had complained about trade imbalances, in particular criticising the EU's 10 per cent import duty on motor vehicles – to no effect.

The EU appears to have basked too long in the illusion that European businesses are infinitely resilient and can weather even the most severe storms. Today, it is clear that many German and European companies are struggling with the combination of overregulation, high energy costs and a difficult trade environment, and sometimes going under. Yet another reason to reorientate Europe's foreign trade policy.

New goals for the EU's foreign trade strategy

The turbulence in international economic relations makes it necessary to revise the EU's current trade policy. Continuing the dual preference for multilat-

6 "A Trump Adviser on How the International Economic System Should Change", *Economist*, 23 October 2024, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/10/23/the-international-economic-system-needs-a-readjustment-writes-scott-bessent>.

7 "Trump Threatens to Pull US Out of World Trade Organisation", *BBC*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45364150>.

8 Emma Farge, "Exclusive: US Pauses Financial Contributions to WTO, Trade Sources Say", *Reuters*, 28 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-suspends-financial-contributions-wto-trade-sources-say-2025-03-27/>.

eral trade policy and deeply regulatory free trade agreements is leading the countries of the European Union into difficult waters, because the WTO has been manoeuvred into a dead end by Washington's blockade and China's self-serving economic policy.

The EU's future trade policy should be based on two pillars. Firstly, the countries of the European Union should strive to establish a large trade policy club in which market-oriented countries agree on free trade. Such a club could also include countries that are not considered democracies. The decisive factors for possible membership would be minimised state intervention in the economy and willingness to recognise the outcomes of dispute settlement within the plurilateral club. While the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) currently offers the best basis for a new trade agreement, establishing a trade club with all the OECD countries would be an alternative.

Trade clubs have been under discussion for some time. The Warwick Commission on the Future of the Multilateral Trading System, chaired by former Canadian Foreign Minister Pierre Pettigrew, addressed the question of alternatives to the WTO back in 2007. Instead, it proposed open clubs which any state prepared to recognise the agreed set of rules would be welcome to join.⁹

The second pillar would be lean bilateral and minilateral free trade zones largely free of side agreements. These cannot substitute a broad plurilateral agreement, but would represent an intermediate step towards more liberal trade. Any future free trade agreements should be based on the principle of minimal regulation. Reducing the level of detail, introducing uniform and practical rules of origin, and doing without social and environmental side agreements would make classic free trade agreements more attractive to Europe's partners. The EU-India Free Trade Agreement, concluded in January 2026, is the first example of that new policy. This liberal approach would make interference in the sovereignty of other states a thing of the past. Trade policy would be reduced to its core and no longer used to enforce the political preferences of the European Commission.

This would represent a significant climbdown from the European Union's claim to be a regulatory superpower. The EU could also refrain from demanding

compliance with its own norms and standards, for example in transatlantic trade, and accept those of its partners. That approach, which does not exclude mandatory labelling, should be feasible at least with OECD countries. The EU would once again be a player, rather than watching the trade system change without taking any action itself. It is conceivable, in principle, to stick to the previous line of comprehensively regulated foreign trade. But that would make the EU less attractive as a trading partner, and enhance the pull of less demanding players such as China.

⁹ The Warwick Commission, *The Multilateral Trade Regime: Which Way Forward?* (Coventry, UK: University of Warwick, December 2007), https://warwick.ac.uk/news/press/releases/wcreport/uw_warcomm_tradereport_07.pdf.

Ole Adolphsen and Sonja Thielges

European Climate Policy Against US Headwinds: In Search of Strong Climate Partnerships

European climate policy faces considerable internal and external challenges. On the one hand, the prolonged debate over the 2040 climate target shows that support for the Commission's Green Deal is waning within Europe. On the other hand, the EU is placing industrial opportunities and European interests at the forefront of its international climate policy, with the Clean Industrial Deal and the new global climate and energy vision. The refocus on competitiveness was originally also intended as a response to the now largely defunct green industrial policy of the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

Internationally, the United States under Biden used its diplomatic weight to support the European approach of building a broad coalition of industrialised and developing countries for progressive climate policy. The EU and the United States jointly promoted measures such as the energy package at the 28th World Climate Conference in Dubai in 2023 (COP28), and plurilateral initiatives such as the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) and the Climate Club. This cooperation came to an end when the Trump administration withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement and announced that it would be pulling out of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and all other relevant climate initiatives.

The United States as an antagonist of the EU in international climate policy

After the first few months of Trump's second term, it seemed that the EU would have to push ahead with climate policy *without* the world's second-largest emitter. Now the outlook is even more pessimistic. The Trump administration has become an antagonist of European climate policy: It is increasingly and

systematically working to expand fossil fuel production and achieve "energy dominance" through foreign policy. Trump is attacking international climate measures on various fronts and attempting to gain advantages for fossil fuels.

Trump is pursuing a fossil fuel foreign policy that runs counter to EU interests.

The EU's interests are fundamentally different. On the one hand, they derive from the goals of the Paris Agreement. To achieve these goals, it is essential that the world largely transitions away from fossil fuels and establishes green industries. Without US cooperation, the Paris climate targets will be virtually impossible to achieve. This will have drastic consequences, including climate-related migration and conflicts. On the other hand, the EU's climate policy pursues the objective of economic security. The climate transformation provides an opportunity to reduce dependence on fossil fuel imports and secure market shares in nascent green technologies.

Instead of turning away from fossil fuels, Trump's trade policy is promoting them. Japan¹ and South Korea,² for example, have agreed to increase their

1 "JERA Announces Milestone Agreements with U.S. Partners to Secure Up to 5.5 Million Tonnes of New Long-term LNG Supply Annually over 20 Years", press release, 24 October 2025, https://www.jera.co.jp/en/news/information/20250612_2184 (accessed 24 October 2025).

2 Gawoon Philip Vahn, "South Korea Cements Energy Ties with US Crude, LNG Supply Deals after Landmark Summit", *S&P Global Commodity Insights* (online), 26 August 2025, <https://www.spglobal.com/energy/en/news-research/latest-news/crude-oil/082625-south-korea-cements-energy-ties-with-us-crude-lng-supply-deals-after-landmark-summit> (accessed 22 October 2025).

imports of US energy products in return for tariff reductions. The EU's promise to do so is currently awaiting parliamentary approval. Other countries are considering similar steps. Trump also used the energy agreement with the EU to demand alterations to the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the Supply Chain Directive, the Sustainability Reporting Directive and the Deforestation Regulation. The EU promised to ensure that these regulations do not unduly affect trade with the United States and committed to work on further flexibilities in the CBAM.³

Fossil fuels also feature increasingly prominently in the Trump administration's Africa policy. Instead of a "post-colonial" focus on sustainable energy systems,⁴ Energy Secretary Chris Wright now seeks to concentrate cooperation with African countries on access to fossil fuels in order to combat energy poverty. The US Export-Import Bank (EXIM) has already approved its first major loan for a liquefied natural gas project in Mozambique.

In multilateral forums, the United States under Trump has become the biggest opponent of the progressive coalition centred around the EU. It is calling on the World Bank and the International Energy Agency to return to their original core mission – which means away from climate financing and renewable energy. Washington played a decisive role in the failure of negotiations on a global plastics agreement in August 2025. Together with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Russia – countries that usually share common interests as a fossil fuel coalition in the UN context – the United States insisted on exclusively voluntary measures on plastic consumption.⁵ Washington moved up a level in Octo-

ber 2025. After years of negotiations, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) was set to adopt an international system for CO₂ pricing for shipping. Before the final vote, the United States threatened members of the organisation with a list of countermeasures such as personal sanctions on government officials, denial of access to ports, and trade measures. Washington described the IMO's proposal as "European-led, neo-colonial export of global climate regulation".⁶ The vote, which Germany and the EU had prepared in close cooperation with Brazil and the involvement of China, was postponed indefinitely. The Trump administration is currently working to take CO₂ pricing for shipping off the agenda permanently.⁷ This choice of extreme measures demonstrates that Washington views these technical negotiations as a threat to its core economic interests.

Fossil fuel foreign policy as an alternative to the global energy transition

European climate policy must therefore take US resistance into account in the medium term. Even if it is not always clear how strategically Trump will pursue his goals, the example of the IMO illustrates the potential for escalation. Washington is operating partly within existing fossil fuel coalitions and partly unilaterally. Overall, however, a clear US fossil fuel foreign policy is emerging. It is structurally reinforced by – and itself reinforces – the systemic competition with China, which experts increasingly refer to as "PetroStates" vs. "ElectroStates".⁸ China currently

3 European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, *Joint Statement on a United States-European Union Framework on an Agreement on Reciprocal, Fair and Balanced Trade* (Brussels, 21 August 2025), https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-united-states-european-union-framework-agreement-reciprocal-fair-and-balanced-trade-2025-08-21_en (accessed 22 October 2025).

4 Max Bearak, "Fossil Fuels Are the Future, Energy Secretary Tells African Leaders", *New York Times* (online), 7 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/climate/africa-chris-wright-energy-fossil-fuels-electricity.html> (accessed 22 October 2025).

5 Patrick Schröder, "The World Wanted a Plastics Pollution Treaty, But the U.S. Had Other Plans", *Foreign Policy* (online), 2 September 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/09/02/plastics-treaty-geneva-united-states/> (accessed 22 October 2025).

6 United States Department of State, "Taking Action to Defend America from the UN's First Global Carbon Tax – the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) 'Net-Zero Framework' (NZF)", press release, 10 October 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/10/taking-action-to-defend-america-from-the-uns-first-global-carbon-tax-the-international-maritime-organizations-imo-net-zero-framework-nzf> (accessed 22 October 2025).

7 Schonhardt, Sara, "Trump Delayed a Global Carbon Tax: Now He Wants to Finish the Fight", *Politico Pro* (online), 2 February 2026, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2026/02/trump-delayed-a-global-carbon-tax-now-he-wants-to-finish-the-fight-pro-00799842?site=pro&prod=alert&prodname=alertmail&linktype=article&source=email> (accessed 16 March 2026).

8 Tatiana Mitrova and Anne-Sophie Corbeau, "PetroStates and ElectroStates in a World Divided by Fossil Fuels and Clean Energy", *The National Interest* (online), 27 May 2025,

dominates many supply chains in the clean technology sector,⁹ and it is linking its global economic position to a fundamentally different energy future – despite the seemingly unambitious climate targets it announced for 2035.

Climate policy against Donald Trump: Recommendations for Germany and the EU

In practice, the options for action without or against the United States differ only marginally. The line between defending one's own climate policy interests and asserting action against US resistance is also conceptually blurred. In any individual case, the decisive factor is the extent to which Washington perceives international climate policy as an attack on its interests and reacts accordingly.

Strengthening the soft power base

The basic prerequisite would be targeted protection of the EU's soft power in the climate sector. It is crucial that the EU does not preemptively scale back its climate ambitions in order to obtain agreements with the Trump administration. Shortly after the EU announced a simplification of its CBAM, the United States demanded even more extensive exemptions and increased its pressure on EU climate regulation. This highlights the danger to the integrity of EU climate policy of giving in to Washington.

Instead, the EU should counter Trump's energy dominance strategy with a strong, communicable narrative – such as a clean power strategy. The EU's communication on a global climate and energy vision is a first step in this direction. It also recognises the loss of trust caused in the Global South by inadequate CBAM diplomacy, which must be minimised through a combination of clear communication and better support for vulnerable affected countries.

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/energy-world/petrostates-and-electrostates-in-a-world-divided-by-fossil-fuels-and-clean-energy> (accessed 24 October 2025).

⁹ See Jacopo Maria Pepe's contribution on EU energy policy, pp. 67ff.

Keeping the multilateral climate regime functional

As COP30 in Belém showed, the Paris Climate Agreement is in a transitional phase (see SWP Comment 5/2026). With the end of the negotiations on the rulebook and the international climate finance target, the agenda until the next global stocktake (GST II) in 2028 offers the EU fewer opportunities to shape global climate protection efforts. In this fragile phase, the EU should continue to use the energy package from the first GST – tripling renewable energy globally and doubling energy efficiency – as a guide for its multilateral efforts and supplement it with reliable climate financing. It is important to build on the efforts at Belém and, for the time being, form a coalition outside the UNFCCC for a roadmap to transition away from fossil fuels. The adaptation agenda offers scope to accommodate developing countries in the UNFCCC: its importance will increase in the coming years and is already a priority for many countries in the Global South.

At the political level, the EU must also consistently monitor other multilateral forums, even if they are generally more technical in nature. The failed IMO vote shows that the United States uses unilateral pressure tactics that the EU cannot and should not use in return. With political support, however, the EU can create and maintain majorities in these forums and potentially assure vulnerable countries of its assistance against possible retaliatory measures by the United States.

Strengthening climate cooperation with China and India

China is the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter and India the third largest.¹⁰ Cooperation with these two countries offers both great potential and challenges. China's dominance in almost all relevant supply chains in the clean tech sector translates into a clear strategic interest in the global expansion of renewable energy production. At the same time, China's climate relations with the EU play out against the backdrop of trade disputes over massive Chinese

¹⁰ European Parliament, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Country and Sector (infographic)" (Brussels, 7 March 2018), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20180301ST098928/greenhouse-gas-emissions-by-country-and-sector-infographic> (accessed 22 October 2025).

overcapacity in areas such as e-mobility and steel.¹¹ India's climate protection ambitions remain limited, and the country's dependence on coal is still enormous. However, in its plans to become an industrialized country, India seeks to position itself as a leader in clean tech areas such as solar power, green steel and green hydrogen. And at the same time, the country is already severely affected by climate change.

The EU therefore has fundamental common interests with China and India that it does not share with the US government. However, integrating these countries into plurilateral initiatives such as the Climate Club, the Global Methane Pledge and the JETPs has proven difficult. Nevertheless, with the EU-India trade agreement¹² and the joint press release¹³ with China on climate protection, the EU has achieved joint commitments to climate transformation. Germany and the EU should build on this and further strengthen bilateral cooperation, especially with regard to COP33 in 2028 in India, where the next GST is due. If it is possible to develop jointly communicated climate policy positions with China and India in the run-up to this COP, that would send an important signal. The commitments contained in the energy package and the mobilisation of climate finance would be key elements here.

Agenda-setting in the G20 and the G7

Washington will use its G20 presidency in 2026 and G7 presidency in 2027 to further advance its fossil fuel foreign policy. Considerable US resistance to joint declarations on energy transition and climate protec-

tion must be expected in both fora beyond 2026, too. However, summit communiqués and action plans on climate can continue to provide impetus for international climate negotiations — even if they are not shared by all members.

Energy summits should remain focused on the *energy transition* and not serve as a stage for countries with fossil fuel-based foreign policies.

Germany and the EU can use diplomacy to counteract such negative tendencies and keep climate protection and energy transformation on the agenda. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that energy ministerials still promote *the energy transition* rather than offering a stage for petrostates. Just transition, phasing-out the still immense fossil fuel subsidies,¹⁴ initiatives for research, development and demonstration in the field of carbon capture and storage (CCS) and carbon removal, and the reduction of methane emissions are all therefore important topics for the agenda.

Strengthening development cooperation in Africa

Germany and the EU should also more closely involve the African Union, the newest member of the G20. The African Climate Summit 2025 reaffirmed the goal of green industrialisation. Ethiopia will host COP32 in 2027. At the same time, individual countries are making it clear, including in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs), that they will invest in new fossil fuel infrastructure if they fail to receive sufficient international financial support. If the Trump administration expands its support for fossil fuel projects in African countries, it will be all the more important for Germany and the EU to make attractive offers promoting renewable energies, for example with the help of the Global Gateway initiative and German development cooperation instruments. The difficulty here is that much of the funding would

¹¹ Jacob Gunter et al., *Beyond Overcapacity: Chinese-style Modernisation and the Clash of Economic Models* (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies [MERICS], 1 April 2025), <https://merics.org/de/report/beyond-overcapacity-chinese-style-modernization-and-clash-economic-models> (accessed 22 October 2025).

¹² Enrico D'Ambrogio, "Joint Communication on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda", Legislative Train, 10.2025 (Brussels: European Parliament, 24 October 2025), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-europe-as-a-stronger-global-actor/file-eu-india-agenda> (accessed 24 October 2025).

¹³ European Council, "Joint EU-China Press Statement on Climate: The Way Forward after the 10th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Paris Agreement" (Brussels, 24 July 2025), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/24/joint-eu-china-press-statement-on-climate/> (accessed 24 October 2025).

¹⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development, "G20 Governments Are Spending Three Times as Much on Fossil Fuels as Renewables", press release, Winnipeg et al., 30 September 2024, <https://www.iisd.org/articles/press-release/g20-spending-three-times-fossil-fuels-renewables> (accessed 24 October 2025).

likely end up benefiting the Chinese, who currently produce clean-tech at the lowest cost.

The geopolitical significance of bilateral climate and development partnerships for the new German National Security Council stands out here. The process of evaluating partnership models – initiated by the previous German government – should be extended to the European level to enable the EU to act effectively under the “Team Europe” approach. Flagship partnerships, such as the JETPs and the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership with South Africa currently being negotiated by the EU, must also be supported politically.

Jacopo Maria Pepe

EU Energy Policy Between Security of Supply, Decarbonisation and Strategic Autonomy – With, Without or Against the US

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine triggered a strategic realignment of European energy policy. As a consequence of the drastic reduction in EU energy imports from Russia, the United States has emerged as Europe's principal short-term energy supplier, providing substantial volumes of coal, oil and, above all, liquefied natural gas (LNG), thereby contributing decisively to safeguarding the EU's energy supply. At the same time, this shift has created new dependencies that may conflict with Europe's decarbonisation objectives and ambitions for strategic autonomy.

The energy policy of the current US administration is increasingly shaped by industrial, security and geopolitical considerations, reinforcing these dependencies. The Trump administration has pursued a strategy of "energy dominance", weakening global climate governance and employing energy and technology exports as instruments of power politics. Its diplomacy centred on fossil fuels and nuclear technologies seeks to secure market shares while cultivating geopolitical loyalties. This approach is reflected in the bilateral EU – US trade agreement concluded in the summer of 2025, which envisages expanding imports of LNG, oil and nuclear technologies from the United States. Against this backdrop, the EU faces the challenge of redefining its strategic position vis-à-vis Washington in order to safeguard its energy and climate policy interests.

The EU's room for manoeuvre is further constrained by global dynamics. China is investing heavily in renewable energy technologies, while energy demand in emerging economies continues to rise. At the same time, the Middle East, Africa and parts of Eurasia are positioning themselves as suppliers of low-emission energy and green industrial products. As a result, the EU increasingly finds itself facing new competitors

that may also be potential partners in an increasingly fractured geopolitical environment.

In its energy policy, the EU seeks to balance transatlantic cooperation with the pursuit of strategic autonomy, without undermining its climate targets. In light of the threefold objective of security of supply, decarbonisation and autonomy, three broad strategic approaches can be distinguished: energy policy with, without, or against the United States.

Three options for an EU energy policy towards the United States

Since 2022, the United States has been an important – and in the case of natural gas indispensable – energy supplier to the European Union. Under the Biden administration, this role conferred both economic and political advantages on the United States, while the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) positioned it as both partner and competitor in green technologies. Following the reversal of key climate policies, the Trump administration has increasingly leveraged the United States' position as a major supplier of fossil fuels to advance its energy, industrial and geopolitical objectives, not only vis-à-vis the EU.

Option 1: Energy policy with the US

A policy with the US would deepen transatlantic energy cooperation, making the United States Europe's main energy supplier. Securing gas supplies is an urgent priority for Europe. The volume of US LNG supplies has increased massively, since 2022, now accounting for 45 per cent of Europe's LNG imports

and one quarter of its total natural gas imports.¹ A combination of flexible spot market purchases and resale options securitised in US LNG contracts permits the EU to adapt to fluctuations in demand, while working towards its decarbonisation targets. As global LNG supply is expected to remain tight until 2027, the United States will retain its position as the most important supplier in the short term, and under comparatively flexible conditions.

However, securing supply comes at a cost. European customers pay significantly more for US LNG than they previously paid for pipeline gas or Russian LNG; they are also exposed to strong price fluctuations through spot market volatility and competition from Asia: US producers can cancel deliveries if prices in Asia rise. Market shortages and the EU's climate policy preferences thus reinforce dependence on the United States in the short term.²

The purchase of additional LNG after 2027 – once the EU's planned total ban on Russian gas imports comes into force – would entail considerable medium-term risks. Excessive political dependence on US supplies could limit flexibility, amplify price risks and increase the US share of Europe's LNG imports to 80 per cent. At the same time, growing domestic electricity and gas demand in the United States could prompt export restrictions, potentially leading to supply bottlenecks.³

In the medium to long term (from 2030 onwards), structural market shifts under volatile conditions pose further risks: while an LNG oversupply between

2028 and 2030 could depress prices, it could also undermine security of supply by exerting financial pressure on US producers. If politically motivated export constraints emerges in the United States, or Asian demand rebounds sharply, Europe could again face significant supply stress.

Continued reliance on fossil fuels also risks deepening a transatlantic divergence in energy and climate policy. While Europe is focusing on decarbonisation, the United States is increasingly profiling itself as a “petrostate” in which fossil fuels play a central role. Closer energy ties with the United States could weaken the EU's diversification efforts, reduce incentives for the energy transition, and undermine Europe's credibility as a global climate policy leader – particularly if European firms resell surplus US LNG or remain dependent on natural gas longer than envisaged.

In the short term, cooperation with the United States is indispensable, but in the medium to long term it reinforces asymmetrical interdependencies.

Beyond LNG, EU-US cooperation could be expanded beyond LNG to include standard-setting for critical raw materials, key technologies and infrastructure (such as small modular reactors, carbon capture and storage, and grid technologies). At the NATO level, protection of critical energy infrastructure could be more firmly embedded as a security priority. Yet here, too, closer cooperation entails the risk of asymmetric dependencies. The doctrine of “energy dominance” underpinning US policy aims explicitly to translate control over fossil and nuclear energy supplies into geopolitical leverage. Under an administration that prioritises national industrial interests, energy relations may become increasingly securitised and instrumentalised across policy domains.

Option 2: Energy policy without the US

A policy without the United States would focus on strengthening European autonomy in a targeted manner – by diversifying energy partners, sources and carriers. In practice, this would involve a combination of fossil fuel diversification, climate-friendly transformation and active foreign climate policy.

The EU is already pursuing this approach to an extent; measures planned or already instituted in-

1 Council of the European Union, *Where Does the EU's Gas Come from?* (Brussels, 9 October 2025), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/where-does-the-eu-s-gas-come-from/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed 6 October 2025); European Commission, *Quarterly Report on European Gas Markets, Q1/2025* (Brussels: Directorate-General for Energy, 4 July 2025), 4–5, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/document/download/54588f71-70af-4663-b822-8cc26fdf790f_en?filename=New_Quarterly_Report_on_European_Gas_Markets_Q1-2025.pdf.

2 Jacopo Maria Pepe, *Energie zwischen Markt und Geopolitik: Der Fall LNG: Herausforderungen für die EU und Deutschland seit Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine*, SWP-Studie 4/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2025), 15, doi: 10.18449/2025S04.

3 Anne-Sophie Corbeau, *Bridging the US-EU Trade Gap with US LNG Is More Complex Than It Sounds* (New York: Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs [SIPA], Centre on Global Energy Policy, 20 February 2025), <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/bridging-the-us-eu-trade-gap-with-us-lng-is-more-complex-than-it-sounds/>.

clude the REPowerEU project to end imports of fossil fuels from Russia, the Net Industry Act, the European Hydrogen Backbone Initiative, efforts to complete the Energy Union, a possible raw materials fund, and new climate, trade and investment partnerships (CTIPs). This approach offers the greatest room for manoeuvre in the short term, but its full impact would materialise only in the medium to long term.

Its success will depend on a rapid expansion of green and low-emission technology production before 2030, extending beyond the power sector. Only under these conditions can Europe's energy-intensive industries be decarbonised while remaining competitive. This requires accelerated permitting procedures, substantial investment in grids, storage, and digital systems, and a coherent CO₂ pricing framework.

The scale-up of the hydrogen economy is particularly critical. Given weak industrial demand and high production costs for green hydrogen, blue hydrogen based on natural gas and CCS is likely to play a transitional role. Establishing a diversified import structure will require robust and binding energy and climate partnerships. Initially, global hydrogen supply is likely to remain concentrated among a limited number of suppliers, primarily in regions with fossil resource endowments and petrochemical expertise.

The same applies to electricity partnerships: connecting the European Union's southern and eastern neighbouring countries in particular poses risks for the electricity infrastructure, given the degree to which geopolitics and competition for influence shape the grid configurations in these countries.

At the same time, new dependencies are emerging along the green value chain. Critical raw materials needed for the production of batteries, electrolyzers and wind turbines come from a few countries (primarily China) or from geopolitically unstable regions (Africa, East Asia, Central Asia).

The resulting trade-offs are evident: the more decisively Europe seeks independence from the United States, the greater the need to remain resilient to external shocks while remaining dependent on globally integrated supply chains that Europe alone cannot secure. Moreover, completing the Energy Union and establishing a coherent external energy policy would require member states to relinquish certain national competences – an issue where political willingness remains patchy.

Option 3: Energy policy against the US

An energy policy *against* the United States would amount to a conflict scenario. This could arise if Europe were compelled to respond forcefully to US protectionism, such as punitive tariffs on European industrial or technology exports, aggressive LNG pricing strategies, or deliberate efforts to undermine the EU's climate agenda. In such a case, the EU would need to defend its energy supply, its climate objectives and its role in global climate governance. Possible responses could include industrial and trade policy instruments – such as retaliatory tariffs or WTO proceedings – as well as regulatory tools like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) or the Methane Regulation, which could be used against the United States.

A strategic reorientation towards alternative partners – above all China and India – would be of central importance. Both could emerge as key allies in climate policy – preserving the multilateral climate regime – and as energy and technology partners. The EU's primary objective would be to reduce vulnerability to US pressure while safeguarding its own industrial and energy policy capacity and consolidating its position as a global climate policy frontrunner. In an ideal scenario, this could enable the EU to exert transformative influence on US climate and energy policy through new alliances and selective confrontation.

This option would require energy supplies from alternative sources in order to cushion short-term shocks and presupposes institutional coherence within the EU. It would require Europe to be able to pool power beyond the energy domain, especially in security and defence policy, in order to contain the risk of a transactional response from Washington.

In the long term, such a strategy could bear fruit. In the short to medium term, however, its implementation is unrealistic. Dependence on American LNG and US security guarantees, as well as the heterogeneity of European interests, make it considerably more difficult for all member states to pursue a confrontational course. In the event of an intended shift towards alternative climate partners, the diverging energy, industrial, trade and technology priorities of other major emitters in the Global South – above all China – must be taken into account. Establishing new climate partnerships is therefore only conceivable if Europe is prepared to make significant compromises in its climate, industrial and technology policies.

Conclusions and recommendations

The three options should be understood less as discrete alternatives and more as points along a strategic spectrum. Their relative weight will vary depending on geopolitical developments, energy and climate priorities, and the scope for action in the scope of European energy policy autonomy.

In the short term, close cooperation with the United States remains essential to ensure a stable European energy supply. It can help to secure key transformation infrastructures – for LNG, hydrogen and critical raw materials – or to acquire alternative technologies (SMR). Such cooperation could also be viable in the longer term if Washington's priorities and modes of action change again. At the same time, given the volatility and transactional nature of US policy, it would be risky to consolidate the associated fossil fuel dependency in the long term, as the recent US-EU trade deal shows.

In parallel with transatlantic cooperation, the EU should therefore lay the foundations for an independent energy policy. The functional expansion of the European Energy Union is crucial to accelerate transformation and improve security of supply. Cross-border electricity and hydrogen networks and better coordination of storage levels, strategic reserves and joint procurement mechanisms – temporary for gas, structural for hydrogen – can bundle demand and reduce costs. These measures create economies of scale, deepen market integration and enhance resilience. In this way, Europe can strengthen its negotiating power and expand its scope for action.

Initially the Energy Union is likely to be promoted at the intergovernmental level – through closer cooperation between member states. Germany should advocate for a well-funded European sovereignty fund to finance critical energy and technology infrastructure, as well as for greater integration of energy, climate and security policy. Flexible multilateral formats – for example with the United Kingdom, Norway or Turkey, in the Baltic States, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea or the Caspian region – could serve to promote coordination and independence during a transitional phase.

In parallel with transatlantic cooperation, the EU should lay the foundations for an independent energy policy.

The EU should build on this to diversify its external energy partnerships. Cooperation with countries in the Global South – such as Morocco, South Africa, Chile and Indonesia – can support increasing production of new technologies and energy sources and secure critical raw materials. At the same time, cooperation with Japan, China and India should be deepened. Although this is unlikely to make much of an impression on the United States in the short term, it could serve as political leverage in the medium term to expand the scope for negotiation with Washington and explore areas of compromise, particularly between the EU, China and India.

At the same time, linking LNG and other gas imports to long-term cooperation on hydrogen and CCS should form a core element of graduated energy partnerships with countries such as Norway, Qatar, Oman, Brazil and Kazakhstan – although fossil path dependencies and lock-ins should be avoided. The pace of decline in gas demand after 2030 will depend on the speed and cost of the transition. The EU should therefore diversify its supplier base at an early stage and make decarbonisation technology-neutral in order to use fossil fuel bridges without jeopardising either the transition or its own industrial competitiveness.

In an environment increasingly dominated by geopolitical interests, the EU should also develop its ability to limit risks and to take transformative action against the United States if necessary. This will require Europe to establish strategic autonomy in terms of both energy and security. To achieve this, the strengthened Energy Union must be institutionally anchored, for example through treaty reforms that transfer powers to the Commission or through the institutional strengthening of subregional multilateral formats. The expansion of green hydrogen and CCS should go hand in hand with diversification in the Global South and deeper energy and climate partnerships with China and India, embedded in a global institutional framework.

The EU should strive for a global energy governance that includes China and India on an equal footing with hydrogen producers, raw material suppliers and manufacturers in the Global South – and that can if necessary forge alliances against the United

States without fundamentally excluding it. Interdependencies persist in key sectors such as electrolyzers, battery cells, solar technology and critical raw materials, especially with China. Complete decoupling from China would be just as unrealistic as a permanent shift away from the United States.

In conclusion, the three options and the conflicting goals associated with each give an indication of the global challenges facing European energy and climate policy. The EU, like Germany, must maintain and expand its capacity to act and learn to tolerate conflicting goals. Only by preparing for all three scenarios – integration, diversification and institutional reform – can Europe make its energy policy resilient, decarbonisation-oriented and strategically sovereign.

Conclusions

Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair

Europe's Options for Avoiding Dangerous Dependence on the US

The era of the Pax Americana, which ensured Europe's security for decades, is coming to an end. The forces that drive international politics are bringing new power constellations to the fore. The heart of this reconfiguration is the Indo-Pacific region with China and India. Beijing has established itself as a global political player, challenging Washington in all dimensions and threatening its military, economic and technological superiority.

In this new constellation of "great power politics" pursued by Trump, Xi and Putin, European governments¹ continue to advocate a foreign policy based on international law and democratic values. However, Europe stands on shaky ground: doubts about the US security guarantee are growing, while illiberal movements are gaining popularity across the continent. Last but not least, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Putin's neo-imperialist policies have placed Europe in acute security distress and highlighted its existential dependence on the United States. Europe's immediate responses – a massive increase in defence spending, military support for Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia and efforts to keep Washington on board – signal that the watershed moment of 2022 (the "Zeitenwende") has ushered in a period of major change.

If Germany and its European partners wish to actively shape these developments, they must also be clear about whether and how this can be achieved – with, without or even against the United States. The findings on key areas and actors presented in this Research Paper are very wide-ranging. There is time and scope for fundamental strategic action to address risks and expand independence from the United States. The need to do so is an obvious conclusion

¹ When we refer to "Europe" and "European countries", we are generally referring to the countries of the EU and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), as well as the United Kingdom.

from the US National Security Strategy of November 2025, which paints a picture of ambivalence towards Europe: Europe ranks third, after the Western Hemisphere and Asia; the EU is described as a transnational collective adversary; and European societies are portrayed as weak and degenerate in every respect. Nevertheless, Washington has an interest in stability and peace in Europe, which it wants to help return to its "former greatness".² That sounds more like a threat in view of the Trump administration's illiberal and ethno-nationalist agenda.

With the US – a stopgap for the moment

The transatlantic community of values has broken down. The United States is undergoing a rapid systemic transformation, towards what Lohmann and Thimm call "competitive authoritarianism".³ In the field of US foreign policy, this is accompanied by demonstrative discrediting of international organisations, threats of violence and coercion even against allies, and violations of the principles of international law. This was recently demonstrated by US military action against Venezuela, as well as Trump's statements about taking over Greenland and his threats of punitive tariffs for states and allies that oppose the land grab. Nevertheless, Europe cannot want an immediate rupture with Washington. Especially when it comes to existential security issues, Europe will need to continue cooperating with Washington, tackling problems collaboratively – as long as the

² President of the United States of America, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., November 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf> (accessed 18 January 2026).

³ As stated in the contribution by Sascha Lohmann and Johannes Thimm, p. 79.

Americans are willing to do so in ways that the Europeans find normatively acceptable. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has starkly highlighted Europe's predicament: "The war in Ukraine is forcing the EU to maintain its alliance with the US within the framework of NATO, which, due to the process of regime change in its most important and hitherto leading member, can no longer credibly invoke human rights to justify its military support for Ukraine."⁴

In the short and medium term, however, the most pressing and painful issues for Europe are its own security and defence. Europe feels threatened by Russia and vulnerable to blackmail by the United States. While NATO is Europe's life insurance policy, the Americans have been paying most of the premiums. Washington's security commitment now depends on whether President Trump considers European burden-sharing to be sufficient, especially for the conventional defence of NATO territory. The ideal scenario would be a structured Europeanisation of NATO in harmony with the United States, but no decoupling (or only a very well-prepared one).⁵ In the medium term, it is not just a matter of closing the military gap that would appear if Washington withdrew all its forces from Europe. Europe also lacks collective political leadership capable of representing its interests and taking responsibility at the highest levels of NATO.

In the meantime, European states are coming together in existing and new informal groups to organise military support for Ukraine and bolster their own defence capabilities (equipment, personnel and strategy). The search for effective leadership constellations is still ongoing, but the leaders of France, the United Kingdom and Germany, occasionally joined by Poland and Italy, meet ad hoc as E3" and "E5"/"Weimar plus".⁶ These states bring their military, political and economic weight to bear in NATO, the EU and the United Nations Security Council. They represent NATO's north-eastern flank and, with Italy, its southern flank, and act as a "security centre with significant external impact"⁷ on small and medium-sized partners that are geographically and politically close. EU states continue disagree as to whether defence ties

with the United States — preferably within the NATO framework, but bilateral if necessary — should remain a priority, or whether European sovereignty should be advanced as rapidly as possible towards a defence union building on EU and NATO. At present, the E3 and Weimar plus formats principally support existing EU and NATO structures and responsibilities, so impetus for transformation towards European sovereignty is most likely to occur through acute political escalations. Trump's original 28-point plan for ending the war against Ukraine would have the potential to do that, because it contradicts core NATO and EU demands and offers Ukraine no prospect of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace. It could be the moment to openly oppose the United States. But what would be the consequences?

In the Middle East, too, little can be done without Washington and nothing against it. Here — unlike with Russia — European states still have diplomatic channels of communication with the warring parties and are pursuing a political vision for stabilising the Middle East region through the two-state solution. But Trump's sloppily crafted and vaguely worded 20-point plan for Gaza, like the original 28-point plan for Russia and Ukraine, highlights Europe's dramatic loss of influence. Washington uses power, political capital and military capabilities — which Europe lack — to set diplomacy in motion. In both cases, Europe is manoeuvring to keep the United States on course⁸ in the Middle East (towards sustainable conflict management) and "on track"⁹ in Ukraine (maintaining arms deliveries, upholding sanctions, providing genuine security guarantees). Wherever possible, Europe should exert concerted and constructive influence on the United States, even if that means ad hoc cooperation rather than strategic collaboration. Given the Trump administration's short-sighted, unprofessional and ill-considered deals at the expense of third parties, Europe has little opportunity to demonstrate the strengths of its diplomacy and foreign policy: active solidarity, integrated security approaches, and long-term civil peace engagement in complex conflict arenas. Germany in particular has traditionally been very active in this area, to which it has devoted significant resources.¹⁰ Given President Trump's unpredict-

4 Jürgen Habermas, "Von hier an müssen wir alleine weitergehen", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 November 2025, 9. Translation by authors.

5 See the article by Pia Fuhrhop and Marco Overhaus, pp. 13ff.

6 See the contribution by Ronja Kempin, Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza, pp. 17ff.

7 See *ibid.*, p. 19

8 See the contribution by Muriel Asseburg and Peter Lintl, p. 34.

9 See the contribution by Sabine Fischer, Margarete Klein and Janis Kluge, p. 30.

10 See the contribution by Gerrit Kurtz, pp. 39ff.

ability, it will not be possible to engage in long-term peace processes with the United States – not for the coexistence of Israel and a Palestinian state, not for a sovereign and viable Ukraine, and not for a lasting solution to the conflicts in Africa.

In the short and medium term, Europe will also be unable to escape the US policy of energy and technology dominance. In both areas, Europe is wholly dependent on the actions of the US government and the powerful US tech companies. Initially, Europe will have to use every possibility of cooperation with the United States to secure its energy supply, while at the same time doing everything it can to lay the foundations for an independent energy policy or energy union. The only sustainable path is the transition to a decarbonised economy. That will mean diversifying and deepening relationships and partnerships, especially with China, India and Japan.¹¹ Technological dependency is particularly dangerous because it provides politically authoritarian and economically libertarian US billionaires with gateways into the institutions and regulatory frameworks of European societies, enabling them to manipulate, sabotage or destroy them. However, the development of independent alternatives in the tech sector (e.g. software) will not progress quickly enough to allow an immediate switch to a strategy without or against the United States. For the time being, resilience and protection against interference are the main priorities.¹²

Without and against the US – a policy for the future

Although European states have pursued independent foreign policies without the United States in the past, and weathered conflicts and crises in bilateral relations, as long as the transatlantic community was based on shared values and interests, cooperation remained the norm.¹³ The Trump administration is renouncing this community in word and deed. Decades of reform gridlock – around the UN Security Council, the UN budget and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) – and the meagre results of peace and stabilisation missions and political interventions

make it easy to discredit the policies of multilateral organisations organised around the idea of liberal peace. But many potential partners outside the transatlantic alliance are also no longer on board, and now criticise Europe for its passivity, for tying cooperation to unreasonable and self-serving conditions, or for staging interventions that cause more harm than good.

Europe, together with like-minded partners, seeks primarily to defend the institutional status quo and the UN principles of joint governance in policy areas that are fundamental to the future of the planet and the global community. In humanitarian aid and peace efforts, Washington is pursuing a different line under the slogan “Back to basics”.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Europe should cooperate pragmatically with the United States when it comes to concrete aid and solidarity, for example alleviating hunger and mitigating environmental disaster. But Europe should oppose Washington when it aligns aid programmes ideologically and discriminates against particular groups, as that contradicts the principles of neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian aid.¹⁵ It will probably be possible to implement multilateral development projects that integrate climate sensitivity, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive rights and health without and against the United States.

The EU should not subordinate its considerable soft power to an economic and security policy logic nor should it instrumentalise it in any rivalry with Washington.¹⁶ The inevitable hardening of European foreign policy and the resulting gain in hard power should not lead the EU to neglect its soft power appeal or underestimate the importance of cultivating it. This is particularly true if the EU wants to build partnerships with countries in the Global South. European policy towards China should also be developed independently and without too much consideration for Sino-American relations, the future of which remains largely uncertain under Trump. However, China must be taken seriously in its quest for regional dominance and global influence and perceived as a threat to stability in the Indo-Pacific. Germany is heavily dependent on access to the Chinese market

¹¹ See the contribution by Jacopo Maria Pepe, pp. 67ff.

¹² See the contribution by Alexandra Paulus and Daniel Voelsen, pp. 21ff.

¹³ According to Sascha Lohmann and Johannes Thimm in their article, pp. 9ff.

¹⁴ See the contribution by Judith Vorrath, Marianne Beisheim and Christian Schaller, pp. 51ff.

¹⁵ See the contribution by Nadine Biehler, Anne Koch and Pedro A. Villarreal, pp. 43ff.

¹⁶ See the contribution by Kai-Olaf Lang, Barbara Lippert and Claudia Zilla, pp. 54ff.

for its own exports and for imports of critical raw materials. All this should be taken into account when revising the German government's Indo-Pacific strategy, in order to bring it up to speed with the emerging geopolitical conflicts in the region.

In climate policy, too, the United States has become an active opponent of the EU, which continues to pursue a progressive climate policy agenda and is increasingly integrating the issue into its trade and development policies.¹⁷ In contrast, the United States is pursuing a fossil-fuel-based foreign policy that puts pressure on countries committed to decarbonisation. One region where the conflict between these two opposing approaches could have a particularly significant impact is Africa, but the EU should also demonstrate its climate commitment by maintaining multilateral climate regimes – in cooperation with China and India – and through agenda setting in the summit formats (G7, G20).

In hardly any other field is the Washington's abandonment of the rules-based system as obvious as in the world trade order – which has effectively been rendered obsolete through US tariff policy and economic coercion. The EU's trade policy must address the resulting devaluation of the WTO. On the one hand, the EU should strive to establish a large trade club of market-oriented countries that agree on free trade. This could offer an alternative to the WTO, at least temporarily. On the other hand, the EU could negotiate lean bilateral and minilateral free trade zones. These cannot replace a major plurilateral agreement, but they would at least be an intermediate step towards reviving liberal trade.

Outlook

The United States has morphed from a benevolent hegemon into an unpredictable ally and even an adversary of liberal democratic values and human rights. As far as transatlantic relations are concerned, the signs point to transformation through European emancipation and independence. Concepts for European sovereignty and strategic autonomy are the way out of critical, increasingly dangerous dependence on the United States. In this context, more than ever before, NATO should remain responsible for collective defence. But Europe will have to bear more of the

financial and military burden and seek greater responsibility within NATO's command structures. However, during this transitional phase the circumstances for pursuing structured cooperation with the United States are highly unfavourable. Trump's policy on Russia alone has the potential to thwart such plans. Trump aims to normalise relations with Moscow and is prepared to make everything a bargaining chip, including the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. If this difference is not bridged, it could become the breaking point for transatlantic relations, just as Trump's policy on Greenland could have blown up NATO. Breaking with the United States would have dramatic consequences for Europe: today's NATO states would lose their collective security, and the EU would be more divided than united. The optimists will be left hoping for a leap into a European defence union.

¹⁷ See the contribution by Ole Adolphsen and Sonja Thielges, pp. 62ff.

Appendix

Abbreviations

BAFA	Federal Office of Economics and Export Control (Eschborn)	Mercosur	Mercado Común del Sur (Southern Common Market)
BDI	Federation of German Industries	NAC	North Atlantic Council
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
CCS	Carbon Capture and Storage	NB8	Nordic-Baltic Eight (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden)
COP	Conference of the Parties	NDC	nationally determined contribution
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership	NSS	National Security Strategy (United States)
CTIP	Clean Trade and Investment Partnership	NZF	Net-Zero Framework
DGAP	German Council on Foreign Relations	ODA	Official Development Aid
DGVN	German Society for the United Nations	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
DMA	Digital Markets Act	PA	Palestinian Authority
DSA	Digital Services Act	PURL	Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List
DSACEUR	Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe	RSF	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
E3	Germany, France, Great Britain	SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
E3+3	Germany, France, United Kingdom + China, Russia, United States	SDP	Strategic and Defence Partnership
E4	Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy	SMR	Small Modular Reactor
E5	Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Poland	SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
ECP	External Cultural Policy	UDCG	Ukraine Defence Contact Group
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations (London)	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ENISA	European Union Agency for Cybersecurity	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
EPG	European Political Community	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service	UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
EUBAM	European Union Border Assistance Mission in Rafah	USAID	United States Agency for International Development (Washington, D.C.)
EUPOL	European Union Police Co-ordinating Office for COPPS	WHO	World Health Organisation
COPPS	Palestinian Police Support	WTO	World Trade Organisation
EXIM	Export-Import Bank		
G7	Group of Seven (the seven leading Western industrialised countries)		
G20	Group of Twenty (the most important industrialised and emerging economies)		
GG	Global Gateway		
GGI	Global Governance Initiative		
GST	Global Stocktake		
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System		
ICANN	Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers		
ifa	Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Stuttgart)		
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies		
IMO	International Maritime Organisation		
IOM	International Organisation for Migration (Geneva)		
IRA	Inflation Reduction Act (USA)		
IW	Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (Cologne)		
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force		
JETP	Just Energy Transition Partnership		
JFC	Joint Forces Command		
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas		
MAGA	Make America Great Again		

The Authors

Ole Adolphsen

Associate in the Global Issues Research Division and in the “Climate Foreign Policy and Multi-Level Governance” project

Dr Muriel Asseburg

Senior Fellow in the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Marianne Beisheim

Senior Associate in the Global Issues Research Division

Nadine Biehler

Associate in the Global Issues Research Division; member of the “Strategic Refugee and Migration Policy” project

Prof. Dr Heribert Dieter

Senior Associate in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Sabine Fischer

Senior Fellow in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division

Dr Pia Fuhrhop

Head of the International Security Research Division

Dr Nadine Godehardt

Senior Associate in the Asia Research Division

Dr Ronja Kempin

Senior Fellow in the EU/Europe Research Division

Dr Margarete Klein

Head of the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division

Dr Janis Kluge

Deputy Head of the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division

Dr Anne Koch

Associate in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Gerrit Kurtz

Associate in the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Kai-Olaf Lang

Senior Fellow in the EU/Europe Research Division

Dr Peter Lintl

Deputy Head of the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Barbara Lippert

Director of Research of SWP

Dr Sascha Lohmann

Senior Associate in the Americas Research Division

Dr Stefan Mair

Director of SWP

Dr Nicolai von Ondarza

Head of the EU/Europe Research Division

Dr Marco Overhaus

Deputy Head of the Americas Research Division

Dr Alexandra Paulus

Associate in the International Security Research Division

Dr Jacopo Maria Pepe

Associate in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Christian Schaller

Senior Fellow in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Sonja Thielges

Visiting Fellow in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Johannes Thimm

Head of the Americas Research Division

Dr Pedro Alejandro Villarreal Lizárraga

Visiting Fellow in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Daniel Voelsen

Head of the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Judith Vorrath

Senior Associate in the International Security
Research Division

Dr Christian Wirth

Senior Associate in the Asia Research Division

Dr Claudia Zilla

Senior Fellow in the Americas Research Division

