



**The “Maga Effect”: the Impact of US
Domestic Politics on Security in
Europe and the Indo-Pacific**

Sean Nottoli



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Image: U.S President Donald Trump speaking to reporters on the South Lawn of the White House



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About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasising the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with centre-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic centre-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

About the Author



Sean Nottoli is an expert on American and Conservative politics, having nearly a decade of experience running and consulting on campaigns across the United States, most recently serving as a Director on the Trump Campaign. He is also experienced in international relations, having worked for 5 years in NGOs to advance democracy worldwide. His research includes security issues across the globe, state sovereignty, and great power competition. A Gilman Scholar, he holds a degree in Political Science and a Minor in Japanese language from Clemson University. He has been published on a variety of global issues in various formats, from Baltic Security and Russian Disinformation to covering protests and events as they unfold on the Korean peninsula, China, Japan, and beyond.

The “MAGA Effect”: the Impact of US Domestic Politics on Security in Europe and the Indo-Pacific

Sean Nottoli

Abstract

America and its allies are facing a new era of great-power competition, revealing immense internal and external forces that compel them to evolve as they contend with rising challengers to the current global order. This paper explores how changing attitudes in domestic politics, particularly the “MAGA” movement in the United States, and the rise of more conditional, capability-driven policies are reshaping alliance dynamics in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This study argues that US alliances are no longer evaluated solely on the basis of historical commitments or status, but on the specific strategic value that allies can provide in an era of intensifying great-power competition. Using personal experience in US domestic politics and policy, and drawing on intense qualitative analysis and field research, this paper develops a framework of “strategic complementarity,” in which allies are assessed based on the roles they play within the broader security architecture. These roles can include acting as a regional hub for coordination, industrial capacity, forward deterrence posture, diplomatic access, and more. Utilizing comparative case studies from across Europe and the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia, Hungary, and Estonia, this paper demonstrates how different states are adapting to evolving US expectations and identifies the varying and differing pathways through which allies can enhance their strategic relevance.

The findings of this paper purport that the current alliance system is rapidly undergoing a dynamic shift in which allies are no longer evaluated on their historical status but on their capability to fulfill needed strategic niches in the broader alliance framework. This shift has large implications for the future of or burden-sharing, deterrence credibility, and regional stability. While this change creates uncertainty and concerns for America’s allies, it also creates opportunities for both established and emerging partners to redefine their roles within US-led security frameworks. By revealing the intrinsic link between domestic politics and alliance behavior, this paper provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how future U.S. foreign policy, across administrations and parties, may continue to reshape the structure and function of global alliances.

Introduction

The Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement is in the ascendant. President Trump is back in office for a historic second term. His electoral victory in November 2024 was decisive, as he swept key swing states and won the popular vote. Commentators (and governments) are often perplexed by the impact, both within the United States and globally, of the America First policies that are espoused by the MAGA movement.

Outside the United States, governments have to deal with the Russian invasion of Ukraine (which is now in its fifth year) and China’s massive military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region. Challenges are particularly acute for allies of the United States (i.e. NATO members in Europe and bilateral treaty partners in the Indo-Pacific). The resurgence of MAGA and America First Policies represents a major change relative to the situation that existed before. Life under the US security umbrella is not what it used to be.

For a start, unilateralism is back – and not just in Latin America, the geopolitical backyard of the United States. Recent events in Cuba, Nigeria, Greenland, Venezuela and – especially – Iran are all examples of the United States acting alone. Traditional allies have been left wondering exactly when the United States is likely to act and when it is not.

Moreover, the United States is beginning to reward allies who fall into one of two clear groups. The first group includes those who aid in the strategic containment of the US’s primary competitors. The second group includes those who aid in strategic engagement in advancing America’s foreign policy and diplomatic goals.

This paper looks at three broad issues. First, it considers what is MAGA and where it came from. Second, it examines America First policies – especially as they relate to security and international relations: in doing so, it uses original research to show how America First policies accurately reflect the attitudes of the MAGA supporters who voted for President Trump. Third, and most crucially, it looks at the responses of particular countries, in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, to the America First agenda.

Those responses vary widely. Some of the countries have seen MAGA and America First policies as an opportunity, and have reaped substantial benefits. Others, often seen by conventional wisdom as key allies (perhaps enjoying Special Relationships with the United States), have responded in ways that – so far – have yet to deliver major benefits. Some of the outcomes are surprising.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a White House meeting with President Donald Trump (Shutterstock)

What are the origins of Make America Great Again (MAGA) and America First policies?

President Donald Trump has returned to the White House for a historic second term, being only the second person (after Grover Cleveland) to serve two non-consecutive terms. In the opening remarks of his 2025 Inaugural address, President Trump stated, “The golden age of America begins right now. From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer. During every single day of the Trump Administration, I will, very simply, put America first. Our sovereignty will be reclaimed. Our safety will be restored.” With President Trump’s pledge to pursue an “America First” strategy, America’s allies in the Indo-Pacific (and, indeed, elsewhere) are left asking, “What is MAGA, and how does it affect me?”

Outside the United States, there seems to be a sincere misunderstanding about what MAGA is. Many nations and persons of authority across the globe are quick to accept the views of domestic forces within the United States that wholly oppose President Trump and MAGA. This quick acceptance of domestic criticisms as gospel truth leaves the foreigners unprepared to deal with the nuanced realities of the Trump Administration.

A study conducted by the British Journal of Social Psychology on self-proclaimed Republicans and Democrats in the United States concluded that “the present data suggests that normatively acceptable viewpoints for Republicans on gay marriage, abortion rights, and environmental protection through business regulation range from mild agreement to extreme disagreement, hence, providing a potential space for political negotiation”. In contrast, when studying self-proclaimed Democrats, their research’s conclusions were as follows: “Not only does the presented data suggest that Democrats embrace more extreme viewpoints on the selected issues compared with Republicans, but also that the Republican cluster includes some surprising issue positions that (under interval assumptions) might be assumed to fall into the Democrat cluster.” This data should provide clear, concise evidence of the reality of domestic politics in the United States and provide proper context on who the ruling party and the powers that be actually are.

Simply put, MAGA is a diverse, broad coalition of all Americans from every religion, ideological subset, race, and economic class. Despite their disagreements on many issues, they have banded together out of necessity to reject the previous cultural trajectory of the United States under President Biden. Further they have sought to overcome the very real problems that affect all Americans regardless of their age, sex, religion, or gender identity.

To better understand the true preferences of Trump supporters, I interviewed dozens in swing states such as Georgia and collected anonymous quotes. While many supporters responded, the views of MAGA can best be summed in this one provided by an anonymous respondent:

“We love the other countries of the world but it’s not fair to Americans as a nation and as a people to take the role we once had, (i.e intervening on behalf of other nations with no tangible benefit for us.) We do not have infinite wealth and resources and our quality of life has gone down from excessive foreign aid, bad trade deals, and the debt/inflation associated with it. Obviously, it’s not our single largest expenditure but we need to start being frugal and putting America First if our children and grandchildren are to enjoy the quality of life that our parents and grandparents enjoyed.”

The MAGA movement emerged from longstanding frustration that has become mainstream in both parties. To be clear, its America First policies were never about isolation, but about recalibration and reciprocity. The vast majority of Americans, regardless of age, race, or gender, believe that the quality of life in the United States has been getting worse. Research conducted by Gallup in 2024, just before the presidential election, found that Americans’ satisfaction with their current lifestyle was at the second-lowest point since the turn of the century: it was only in 2011 that satisfaction was one percentage point lower – at a time that the country was still recovering from the 2008 recession.

A further study conducted by Ipsos in March 2025 revealed that 60% of respondents felt the cost of living was getting worse. These feelings are supported by hard data acquired by the Ludwig Institute for Shared Economic Prosperity, whose analysis found that between the years 2001-2023, “the cost of affording basic economic security in America doubled, rising 99.5%, 38% faster than the Consumer Price Index. Housing costs soared by 130%, healthcare by 178%, and the savings required to attend an in-state public university by 122%.

Meanwhile, median earnings have declined for this group by 4%.” It is during this same timeframe that we saw a historic rise in US spending on defense and foreign aid, with the Pentagon’s budget growing to a staggering \$916 billion in 2023 from \$294 billion in 2000.

The surge in defense spending has been unpopular for a while. A Pew research poll conducted in 2018 found that 64% of Americans at the time aged 65 and over stated that it should be the top priority for the United States to maintain its military advantage over the rest of the world.

However, among Americans aged 30 and under, only 30% responded that the United States should maintain its military advantage. A majority stated that the country should reduce its military presence overseas.

This is the origin and rationale of MAGA and the America First concept: the American quality of life has continually declined, the cost of living has continued to rise, and government spending has increased exponentially. Trump’s supporters demand a greater share of the burden in preserving the world order that they worked so hard to create.

They feel it is unfair that the world should prosper from their sacrifices when they apparently receive nothing in return. This perception of the American people did not come from President Trump. Rather, it has been a slowly growing movement among the majority of Americans that President Trump brought to the forefront.



*United States Capitol Hill
(Shutterstock)*

The MAGA Effect: What does MAGA want in relation to foreign policy?

It is no secret that there has been growing dissatisfaction among voters in the United States with America’s foreign policy. For those of us who grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s in the wake of 9 September 2001, we understood the necessity of retaliating and hunting down the terrorists who were responsible for these attacks against our country. However, as we grew up and began to be more politically aware, we began to notice justifiable criticisms of the Bush Administration and the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It is amongst this backdrop, during the war in Iraq, that many millennials began to become politically aware of the issues affecting our country. As the American and Iraqi death tolls from the war rose, so too did the skepticism of America’s youth towards the United States’ foreign policy and intervention strategies.

In October 2025, the *Wall Street Journal* conducted a poll on the views of Republicans and Democrats in the United States on their thoughts on America’s foreign policy. Findings were as follows:

- 81% of Republican respondents believed that the United States’ allies have not taken enough responsibility for their own defense and that US taxpayers should cease funding them. In contrast, 83% of Democrat respondents believed in continued funding.
- 92% of Republicans stated they wanted to cut foreign aid, while 85% of Democrats opposed cutting it
- Only 31% of Republicans stated they supported NATO compared with 81% of Democrats

These results are roughly what one would expect given newsflow from the United States. However, there are a few issues that this poll fails to address. In particular, we do not get a clear of how *those who are specifically Trump supporters* feel about these issues. Republican voters are not unanimous in their views. Crucially, the poll does not consider how the respondents see the Indo-Pacific region.

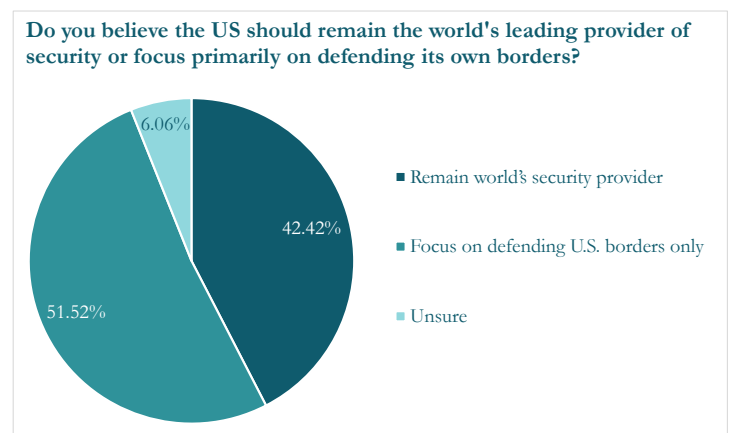
Using experience working for the Trump campaign and dealing directly with MAGA supporters, I worked with Republican parties throughout the swing states from the past election, polling the opinions of Trump voters on the United States’ alliances and foreign policy.

This survey included quotes from questionnaires and interviews of 35 respondents from predominantly left-leaning districts in swing states from the 2024 US presidential election, surveying Trump supporters from counties that primarily vote Democrat.

The vast majority of respondents to this survey came from the swing state of Georgia, particularly DeKalb County, which was arguably very important in determining whether President Trump would win. DeKalb County forms part of metropolitan Atlanta. A predominantly Democrat county, it has served as the main centre of Democrat power in the state of Georgia. This makes DeKalb County an excellent, diverse example for monitoring and understanding Americans’ changing attitudes about how the United States should interact with the rest of the world. This survey included quotes from questionnaires and interviews of 35 respondents from predominantly left-leaning districts in swing states from the 2024 US presidential election, surveying Trump supporters from counties that primarily vote Democrat.

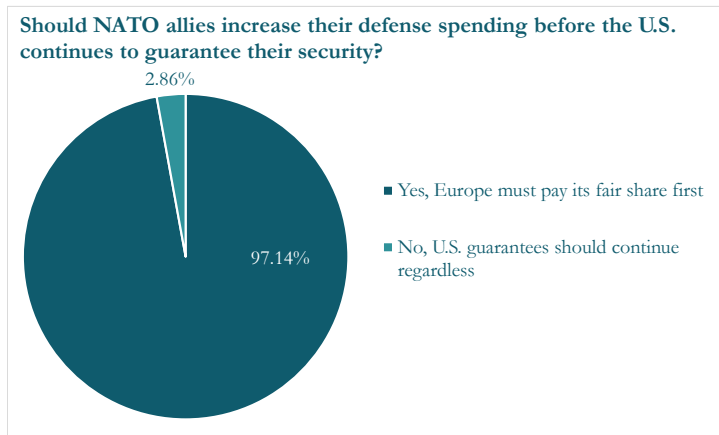
To further illustrate this point, When asked whether they had ever voted Democrat before, nearly 40% of respondents replied in the affirmative, saying they had previously voted for and supported that party. When asked: “Do you believe the United States should remain the world’s leading provider of security, or focus primarily on defending its own borders?”, 51.5% responded that the United States should focus on defending its own borders, 42.4% said the country should remain the world’s security provider, and 6.1% said that they were unsure.

Figure 1: Most survey respondents believe the US should focus on defending its own borders only



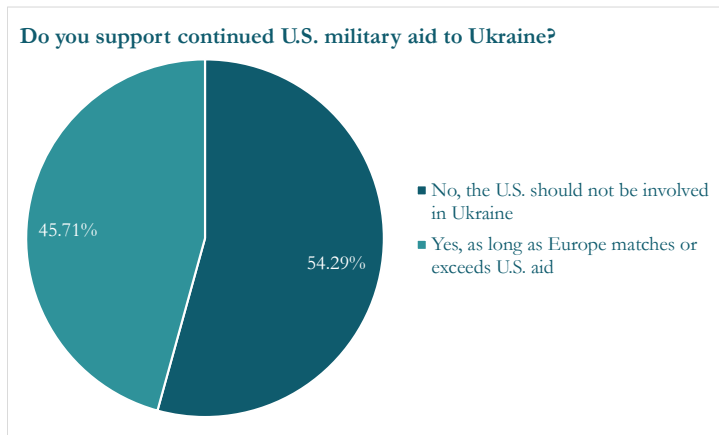
Respondents were asked: "Should NATO allies increase their defense spending before the United States continues to guarantee their security?" Nearly 98% replied in the affirmative.

Figure 2: Overwhelming portion of respondents believe Europe should increase its NATO spending



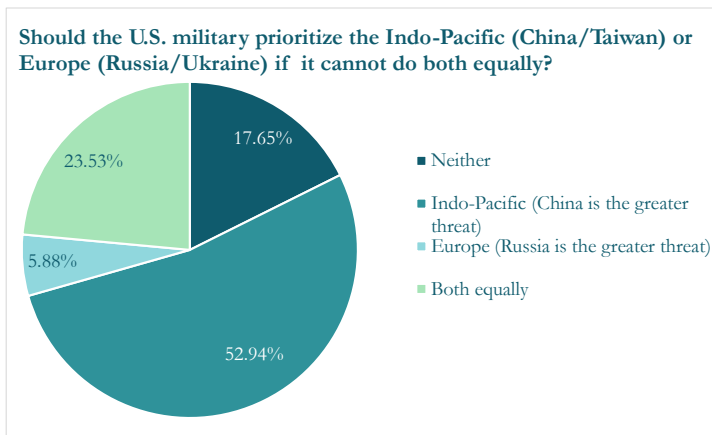
Replies to the question of US military support for Ukraine were more nuanced. A small majority - 55% - of respondents said that the United States should not be involved with the war in Ukraine. The remainder supported U.S. involvement, but only if European countries matched or exceeded the assistance being provided by the United States.

Figure 3: Respondents are split between supporting U.S. military aid to Ukraine



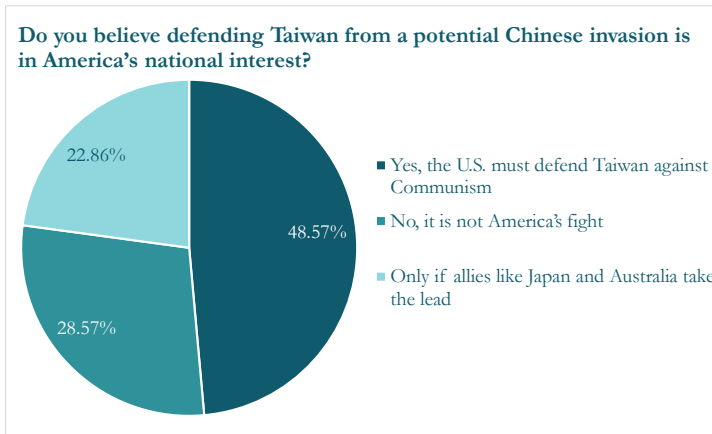
Crucially, attitudes of Trump supporters to issues in the Indo-Pacific are rather different. One question asked: "should the U.S. military prioritise the Indo-Pacific (China/Taiwan) or Europe (Russia/Ukraine) if it cannot do both equally?" Some 53% of respondents stated that the United States must prioritise the Indo-Pacific region, while 24% stated that it should emphasise Europe and the Indo-Pacific equally.

Figure 4: Majority of respondents support greater U.S involvement in the Indo-Pacific



Another question asked: "Do you believe defending Taiwan from a potential Chinese invasion is in the United States' national interest?" Some 49% stated that the United States must defend Taiwan from China. Another 23% stated that the United States must defend Taiwan, but only if allies in the Indo-Pacific allies take the lead. In other words, over 70% of Trump supporters favour US intervention on behalf of Taiwan in face of an invasion by China.

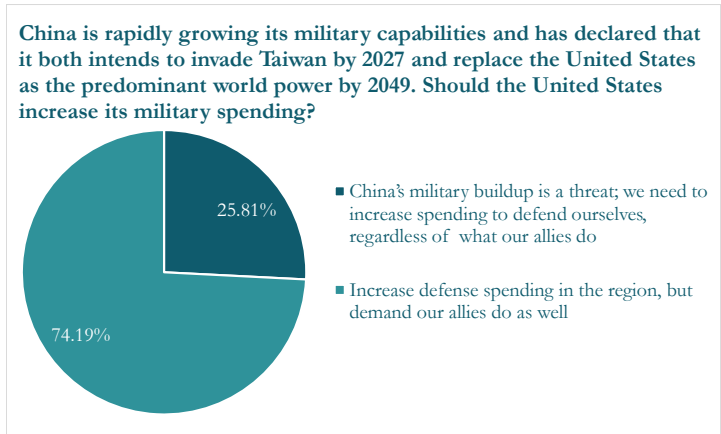
Figure 5: Most respondents believe the U.S should defend Taiwan, especially with allied support



The results of this study when it comes to Trump supporters' views of Europe largely tracks with the poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal*. However, it is clear that Trump supporters do not view events and situations in the Indo-Pacific the same way they view Europe. However, that's not to say that they believe things should stay the same way as they have been between the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

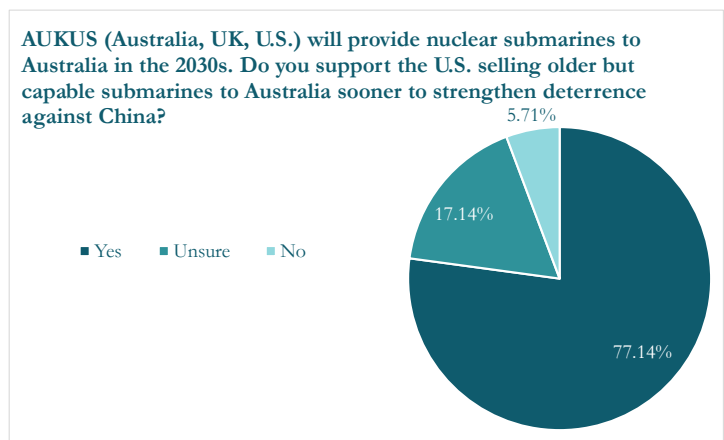
When confronted with the question of the reality of China’s naval build-up in the region, 94% of respondents were in favour of increasing defense spending in the area. However, for 70% of respondents, that defense expenditure increase was solely dependent on a rise in spending by US allies in the region. Only 24% stated they were in favour of increasing spending in the region regardless of what America’s allies did.

Figure 6: Respondents believe the U.S should increase military spending, but would like allies to follow suit



When asked about specific cooperation with allies in the region, such as with Australia under the AUKUS framework, 77% stated they were not only in favour of AUKUS, but were interested in expanding the AUKUS framework to provide other classes of submarines to Australia to help plug the capability gaps in Australia’s navy.

Figure 7: Most respondents support US sales of older submarines to strengthen presence in the Indo-Pacific



In other words, the MAGA movement is not isolationist. It believes that US military might should be used - unilaterally, if necessary - to support the key interests of the United States. Those key interests include the recent capture of Nicolás Maduro, the former President of Venezuela. They include the move towards regime change in Iran. They include countering the military rise of China in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, those key interests do not necessarily include countering Russia. Russia is not seen as a serious, let alone primary, threat. In this respect, Trump supporters’ view of the world is very different to that of most European governments.



President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping attending the 2025 APEC summit in South Korea (Shutterstock)

What has been the effect of MAGA and America First policies on US allies?

From the point of view of US allies, the America First policies of President Trump and the MAGA movement have a consequence that can be summarised in one word: uncertainty. It can no longer be taken for granted that the United States will continue to play a central role in their security arrangements.

Allies can react to the uncertainty in three ways. First, they can try to draw closer to the United States in order to counter the uncertainty. Second, they may try to build their own defense capabilities and strengthen their relationships with other countries that are operating within the US-led security framework. Third, and as a final resort, they may develop nuclear weapons. In other words, by creating this strategic uncertainty, the United States is encouraging its allies not only to provide for their own defense but also to increase cooperation with other states to compensate for perceived losses in US security guarantees.

What does the “MAGA Effect” mean in practice in Europe?

European countries are having to face the new reality that they will not be able to rely solely on the United States for security anymore. NATO frontline states, on the border of the current war in Ukraine or directly on Russia's frontier, serve as an excellent example of how smaller countries within an alliance system contend with growing external pressures and changing alliance dynamics.

The nations of Europe have responded to these pressures in differing ways. Larger countries such as France, Germany and the UK initially reacted with shock towards President Trump's new transactional policies. They have even at times resisted pressure to act in certain ways and are beginning to question their relationships with the United States. Other smaller European states that are located closer to the war's periphery have adopted an almost opposite approach. Estonia, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has been more proactive than most European nations, voluntarily increasing its NATO contributions and defense spending to 3.2% of GDP by 2024, before President Trump resumed office.

Estonia has doubled down on its alliance with NATO and its member states at the expense of its relations with Russia. Hungary, on the other hand, has adopted a hedging strategy, maintaining its commitments to NATO while ensuring its support to Ukraine remains purely humanitarian: it continues to seek better relations with both Russia and China through its central connectivity strategy. Hungary aims to balance protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine with acting as a mediator between the East and West. To date, the Hungarian strategy of connectivity and of seeking to arbitrate and end the war has earned significant approval from US policymakers.

France, Germany and the UK

Governments in France, Germany and the UK have been vocal in their opposition to the new direction of the United States in the second Trump Administration. France, in particular, has used the United States' new push for transactional policies to renew its vision of European strategic autonomy. While not seeking a total rift from the United States, President Emmanuel Macron has increasingly argued for an independent “Army of Europe” that is no longer reliant on the United States but open to cooperating with it when interests align.

US policymakers do not question the overall importance of the NATO alliance, as some allege: rather, there are serious concerns about the pace and preparedness of European leadership to combat the emerging threats of the 21st Century. While the polling data discussed above clearly indicates perceived exasperation among Trump supporters with the current status quo in the alliance's dynamics, it doesn't question the alliance's value in its entirety.

Germany has been vocal in its opposition to President Trump and his policies, even since his first term. In 2019, at the Munich Security Forum, then-German Defense Minister and current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, offered strong criticism of President Trump's demands that allies contribute more financially, stating that NATO is more about values than cash. Perhaps, the most telling of all, debate has started amongst the German people on whether or not they should develop their own nuclear weapons.

While this discussion has remained largely outside the Bundestag, the current German government has begun taking steps to create European nuclear deterrence independent of the United States. In March 2025, Friedrich Merz, Chancellor of Germany, publicly announced his plans to discuss the sharing of nuclear weapons between Germany, France, and the UK. While this move is not meant to entirely replace the US nuclear umbrella over Europe, uncertainty is prompting Germany to consider alternatives it would not normally consider.

Deterioration of personal relationships between European leaders and President Trump has led to harsher rhetoric and strain, but not to abandonment. Perceiving the rebuke as further evidence that European leadership is not taking emerging threats seriously, the Trump Administration has responded by using harsher tactics, such as tariffs, to force cooperation. Nevertheless, the foundational principles and institutions of the NATO alliance remain strong. What has changed is perceptions and the manner in which allies coordinate, which has led Western European powers like France to hedge and seek greater autonomy. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has been emboldened to use more coercive methods to achieve its policy goals within NATO.

It is important to note, however, that each of Germany, France and the UK are at least planning to significantly increase their respective contributions to the NATO alliance. The values of the alliance are not in question: the true “MAGA Effect” here has been increased uncertainty and the emergence of voices, primarily France but also the UK, to secure Europe's strategic autonomy and ensure it can act without relying on American security guarantees.

Thus far, this has involved a lot of talk but no concrete action to achieve this aim. There is still considerable debate about how a separate, autonomous European military structure would operate alongside NATO, how it would be funded, and, ultimately, who would lead it. These questions will take time to answer, and it remains unclear whether they will be answered before 2028, when the United States elects a new President who may ultimately reverse the policies of President Trump.

Estonia

Estonia, despite being a small nation of approximately 1.3 million people, has long been seen as a model ally of the United States.

In fact, when I ran a congressionally funded security program dubbed the “Transatlantic Security Initiative”, it used Estonia as the example of an ideal ally that the United States wished for its other European allies to emulate. The one word reason for this is: proactivity.

Estonia understands that it is a tiny country bordering a much larger and more aggressive one, and that it needs security guarantees from the United States and NATO to ensure its survival. But, rather than resting on its laurels and remaining a true dependent on the United States and the larger NATO countries, Estonia has found a way not only to be a net security provider for NATO but also to be seen as a vital asset by its NATO partners.

Estonia has achieved this status for three primary reasons. First and foremost, as mentioned above, Estonia has taken proactive steps to keep pace with reality. Before President Trump even returned to office, Estonia pledged to increase its defense spending to 3.4% of GDP. Now that President Trump has mandated that NATO allies spend at least 5% of GDP on defense, Estonia has instead increased its spending target to 5.4% of GDP.

Second, Estonia has found a way to plug itself in and become an asset to NATO's major powers in their foreign and security policy goals beyond Europe. Estonia's aid to the French, in particular by sending troops to assist them in their missions in Mali, helped fund regular patrols of French fighter jets over Estonian skies to deter Russian aggression. And third, and perhaps most importantly, Estonia has successfully identified its niche in providing security expertise that its allies lack.

That niche is cyber defense, an area where Estonia has no peer. Being the early target of Russian hybrid warfare strategies and massive cyberattacks in 2009, Estonia has developed a robust defense. This is so much so that the country runs its elections completely digitally while the rest of the world continues to use traditional paper ballots out of security concerns. Estonia is so recognised as a leader in cyber defense that NATO established its Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in the heart of Tallinn, Estonia's capital.

Even in the era of America First politics, dating back to President Trump's first term in 2020, the United States has been steadily increasing its defense funding for the Baltic region. This is despite calls to ensure Europe pays more for its own defense generally.

As part of the 2026 Defense Appropriation Act signed into law by President Trump on 3 February, the Trump administration approved \$200 million for the Baltic Security Initiative and an additional \$10 million explicitly to aid Estonia in acquiring HIMARS and Javelin missiles.

Estonia’s response to the increased demands of the Trump Administration has been to double down on the country’s security relationship with the United States. This strategy has worked, in that Estonia has engaged the support of the United States and has become, or at least been seen to become, an invaluable part of NATO.

Hungary

It is no secret that the United States and Hungary are in the midst of a renaissance in their bilateral relationship. The personal relationship between Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Trump is well-documented. President Trump has been very public about his positive views of the Hungarian leader, going so far as to fully endorse him in his bid to remain Prime Minister in 2026 during a speech he gave in Egypt in October of 2025 to discuss the ongoing peace negotiations in Gaza. The importance and strength of the personal relationship between Prime Minister Orbán and President Trump was later strongly re-emphasised by Secretary of State Marco Rubio in his state visit to Budapest on 16 February this year where he stated “At the end of the day, we are still human, we're still people, and that person-to-person connection that you've established with the President has made all the difference in the world in building this relationship.”

Hungary has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of the “MAGA Effect” on the international stage. Hungary has been quick to highlight all the areas of agreement that it shares with a United States that is moving towards more transactional defense policies. Both leaders have similar views on a myriad of concerns, from the war in Ukraine to illegal immigration and everything in between. Hungary has long been seen as a black sheep in international relations, going against the European Union's consensus, and it has had to pay a price for that reputation. From its decision to build a border wall with Serbia to curb the flow of illegal migrants into the European Union, which has resulted in a fine of €200 million by the European Court of Justice and a further €1 million a day fine on Hungary’s government until the wall is taken down, to the government’s public emphasis on conservative values,

Hungary has attracted controversy. A pariah to the global left, the country is a trendsetter for the global right. Sharing many of the same values, the Trump Administration has greatly amplified Hungary’s influence on the global stage. After President Trump founded his new Board of Peace as an alternative to the United Nations Peacekeeping forces, Hungary was among the first to receive a personal invitation from the President to join. Coupled with Prime Minister Orbán’s frequent visits to Washington, this has sent high-level signals, especially among conservative political movements throughout Europe.

It is essential to recognize that personal perceptions, whether of voters in an election or of national leaders, are among the most critical facets of the dance we call politics. At all levels, both on the domestic and international stages, politics is about perception and human relationships. In an era when the United States is becoming more transactional in its security and economic relationships, leaders in many nations have been quick to decry the country in general and President Trump in particular. Instead of following suit with the rest of Europe and heavily criticising the United States and its direction under President Trump, Orbán doubled down on his personal relationship with President Trump. And that personal relationship has begun paying dividends. Hungary, with its connectivity strategy aimed at making the country a new hub for diplomacy, has aligned itself with President Trump and his regional strategic goals, especially finding an end to the war in Ukraine. Orbán was also the only European leader who did not criticize the increased tariffs imposed by the Trump Administration on 2 April 2025. As a result of this pro-US alignment, Hungary has secured a one-year exemption that allows it to continue purchasing Russian gas and oil.

There have been other economic benefits, too. In 2025, the United States invested almost \$692 million (approximately €582 million) in new ventures in space, R&D, defense, and emerging artificial intelligence firms in Hungary, according to the Hungarian National Bank. As noted, many European governments have scrambled to adapt to the United States' shifting demands and strategic pivot towards the Indo-Pacific. By contrast, Hungary has successfully deepened its partnership with America. By focusing on Orbán’s personal relationship with President Trump, Hungary has placed itself on a trajectory to become a stronger diplomatic partner in the region and the world with the United States.



*Prime Minister of Hungary Victor Orbán
(Shutterstock)*

What does the “MAGA Effect” mean in practice in the Indo-Pacific

In contrast to Europe, where the security architecture is dominated by the NATO alliance, the United States delivers security guarantees in the Indo-Pacific through a series of bilateral treaties. Nevertheless, US allies in the region also have to consider the implications of the resurgence of the MAGA movement and its America First policies.

Australia

From the perspective of the United States, Australia remains an indispensable ally in the Indo-Pacific region. No US policymaker would ever seriously question Australia’s commitment or reliability as an ally. Australia’s value to the United States lies less in rapid signaling and more in structural integration, geographic depth, and long-term defense cooperation. However, friction has begun emerging in the United States-Australia relationship. It is important to note that the issue is not commitment, but tempo and signaling. There has been hesitation in Australia regarding President Trump’s request that it increase its defense spending to 3.5% of GDP. After meeting with US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth in Singapore this past year, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese responded to the United States’ request to meet a 3-3.5% defense spending target by saying, “We’ll determine our defense policy.” The current Australian Prime Minister would go on to say “The Americans have been very clear about wanting to see more from their friends and allies around the world. It’s a sentiment that we understand... We have already engaged in the last couple of years in the single biggest peacetime increase in defense expenditure in Australia’s history. AUKUS is something which is seeing our defense expenditure increase – as it should.”

That historic rise in defense spending that Albanese has mentioned is a shift from 2% of GDP to 2.4% of GDP, within the next 10 years. Australia’s public is divided over whether to increase defense spending, especially at the expense of social programs. When asked whether they favoured increasing defense spending, voters supporting the Australian Labor Party (ALP - the ruling party of which Albanese is leader) were split: only 28% favoured increasing the defense budget, while most favoured slashing it.

The most prominent and preferred expansion of military spending in Australia is the AUKUS deal, and Australia’s leadership has been vocal about its preference for increasing defense spending through the AUKUS framework. Recently, Australia made a US\$500 million down payment, a first installment of the US\$3 billion commitment to invest in the United States’ submarine manufacturing capabilities: the objective is the delivery of three nuclear-powered submarines by the 2030s. Nevertheless, the slow rise in defense spending relative to GDP indicates that Australia is beginning to hedge its bets in its security arrangements.

Understanding the rising threats from China in their neighborhood, Australia has been seeking to build alliances outside of, but still consistent with, its alignment with the United States. On 6 October 2025, Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG) announced the signing of a new joint security pact, dubbed the Pukpuk Treaty (the name coming from the word for crocodile in Tok Pisin). This treaty marks the third security agreement Australia has ever signed, alongside the AUKUS agreement and ANZUS treaty. China issued an official statement criticizing the new alliance, stating that Papua New Guinea should not make an agreement that is “exclusive in nature, nor should it restrict or prevent a sovereign country from cooperating with a third party for any reason.”

I believe that the Pukpuk Treaty is a step in the right direction for Australia as it contends with China’s “Great Naval Wall” strategy that I have discussed elsewhere in the recent past. Australia is currently in the midst of negotiating a new security pact with Fiji. If successful, it will place two very large cracks in China’s “Great Naval Wall” strategy and will aid in deterrence in the region.

Japan

Alliance relationships within large networks, such as the United States-led security umbrella in the region, are rarely evaluated in isolation. As with human nature, policymakers tend to compare and contrast using certain allies as reference points, whether or not it is fair.

When it comes to the United States’ preferences under the current Trump Administration, Japan has increasingly set the benchmark for what the Administration perceives as an ideal ally.

With the election of Sanae Takaichi as Prime Minister, we have seen a renewed enthusiasm for the United States-Japanese alliance in Japan’s reactions to President Trump and his America First policies. Under the former Prime Minister, we saw large debates in the Japanese Diet over President Trump’s request that Japan increase its defense spending to at least 3.5% of GDP. While there was consensus that spending needed to increase, there was significant resistance to meeting the 3.5% figure. Agreement has been reached on raising spending from 1.8% to 2% of GDP.

Japan, under Takaichi’s leadership, is placing a clear priority on speed. The aim is to reach the 2% goal by March 2026. There are also plans to deploy deterrence more rapidly through long- and medium-range missiles. Japan has also started building its anti-ship capabilities to counter China’s growing naval power. All this represents a significant, and arguably historic, shift away from Japan’s longstanding pacifist policies that limited its military capabilities after the end of World War II.

The United States has enthusiastically welcomed this move, and Japan has begun to reap the rewards. At the 29 October meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Takaichi, the former announced that he had authorized the immediate shipment of the missiles Japan has been waiting for to arm its squadron of American-made F-35s. It is clear that Takaichi is planning to build Japan’s military capabilities, and well beyond what any of her predecessors has done since the end of World War II. At the conclusion of the meeting, President Trump was quoted as offering, “anything you want, any favors you need, anything... to help Japan.”

Takaichi’s efforts to increase her personal relationship with President Trump has done more than to just earn rhetorical praise. Her signaling of her personal willingness to at least meet President Trump halfway on the issues he raises has earned Japan at least a temporary reprieve from one of his most coercive tools: tariffs.

The United States had looked to impose a 25% tariff on Japanese cars. When the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe focused on his personal relationship with President Trump, he successfully delayed those tariffs.

Following in her mentor’s footsteps, Takaichi is creating options for Japan by maintaining her country’s high-level access and prestige in the United States. While initially threatened with President Trump’s 25% tariffs on cars, Takaichi successfully negotiated with the President to reduce tariffs to a reciprocal 15%. In contrast, other countries - such as France, where the personal relationship between leaders has cooled - face threats of tariffs of up to 200% on certain goods.

While Takaichi has been extremely successful in her diplomatic efforts with the United States, her hawkishness on America’s perceived primary competitor, China, has begun exacting a real diplomatic and economic cost on Japan. As a result of Takaichi’s statements on Taiwan in November 2025, China has begun massive economic retaliatory campaigns, such as restricting the export of processed rare-earth materials and any goods the government deems to have potential dual civilian-military use. According to a Reuters survey of top Japanese companies and firms, more than two-thirds of Japanese corporations expect the Japanese economy to take a significant hit.

However, it is important to note that, in an era of emerging global tensions, states have historically been willing to accept economic costs in pursuit of their own security arrangements. The steps that Japan has been taking to ensure its security have certainly paid dividends not only in its relationship with the United States but also in its position overall on the global stage.



*Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi
(Shutterstock)*

Japan, and Hungary: two different, but successful responses to the “MAGA Effect”

At first glance it seems that the divergent approaches that Japan and Hungary have taken in their engagement with the United States and its overarching foreign policy goals are contradictory. They are in fact complementary. Each is being used by the United States to achieve separate but equally important objectives. Japan has become an increasingly significant actor for the United States’ goal of the strategic containment of its geopolitical foes and strengthening its allies. Hungary has become representative of America’s policies for strategic engagement both within and outside its global alliance framework. That is not to say other states aren’t beginning to fall in line with those niches as well. However, Japan and Hungary are the two countries that have been fastest and most vocal to support the United States in an era of America First policies.

Japan has increasingly been filling the niche for strengthening America’s alliances and strategically containing Chinese military advancement in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to note that other allies in the region, such as Australia, have been making moves towards this goal, if at a slower pace. Australia and Japan have significantly increased their security ties to the point that Japan considers Australia a de facto ally. Both countries have begun forming their own mini-coalitions and alliances compatible with the United States-led security framework that is still in place. Their growing relationships with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, in particular, are consistent with the United States’ aims for the region. Japan has emerged as the leader of the security framework in the Indo-Pacific, having deepened its ties with the United States.

Hungary, on the other hand, has greatly increased its influence and partnership with the United States by emphasizing a strong, personal, and cultural alignment - while sharing a strategic vision of Europe. Instead of offering harsh criticism and offense to President Trump’s new strategies, Viktor Orbán has been quick to emphasize shared concerns. From mass illegal immigration and the war in Ukraine, the Hungarian leadership has leveraged its shared values and common vision of national sovereignty to strengthen its ties with the United States.

This is in contrast to Estonia, which has doubled down on America’s need for allies to act in accordance with the strategic containment role. Estonia, like Hungary, is being rewarded for its efforts with increased financial support. Estonia also gains from US weapons systems that it desperately needs. Like Japan in the Indo-Pacific, Hungary has emerged as a highly aligned and accessible partner for the United States in Europe, positioning itself particularly well under current US-political dynamics. This does not diminish the structural importance of traditional allies such as the United Kingdom, France, or Germany, particularly in areas such as nuclear deterrence, intelligence cooperation, and expeditionary capability.

The evolution of Japan’s role

Japan’s strategy has two central observable key points that have placed it well ahead of the other Indo-Pacific powers. The first point, which it shares with Hungary, is the successful re-engagement of the United States. Japan has arguably been the most successful of the US allies in recapturing American support. Prime Minister Takaichi may be the only leader of a G7 nation to truly understand the United States and the Trump Administration that governs it. While it may seem small on paper, the speed with which she has pledged to raise Japan’s defense spending, reaching a 2% goal within a year, was music to President Trump’s ears. In response to the news, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth said he welcomed this increase after the meeting between President Trump and Takaichi on 29 October. He made an interesting statement, saying that the decision was “wonderful”, and commented that “the US Government had not demanded Japan’s spending increase.”

The second key step Japan has taken as a regional leader is to focus on defense industry outreach. In the Indo-Pacific region, Japan’s defense industry has emerged as a primary source for plugging holes in allied defense capabilities. That is why, in September 2025, Australia’s Defense Minister Richard Marles met his Japanese counterpart Gen Nakatani at the JSDF naval base in Yokosuka to survey an example of a Mogami class frigate.

This class could be ideal for an expansion of capabilities and plugging of gaps in the Royal Australian Navy. Indonesia is also in discussions with Japan to collaborate on building Mogami class ships. Talks in early 2025 focused on cooperation in defense industries and maritime security.

The Philippines is also talking to Japan about naval ships. The Philippines has had to contend with Chinese naval vessels blasting their ships with water cannons and even being hunted down and rammed. The Philippines has been scrambling to deter this aggression and expand its navy by purchasing Japan’s Abukuma class destroyer escorts. These ships, produced between 1989 and 1993, boast stealth capabilities and are designed for both anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare. Though a 30-year-old platform, the Abukuma class is still lethal. As of October 2025, the deal was still under negotiation; if approved by Tokyo, it would mark a significant milestone in Japan-Filipino defense cooperation.

Beyond the Indo-Pacific region, we have begun to see more cooperation with Japan and Europe than ever before. In April 2025, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte met with then Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in Tokyo: they jointly announced the decision to synchronize Japan’s defense industries and capabilities with those of NATO.

The purpose of this decision was not only to increase cooperation to counter new emerging threats from Russia and China, but also to ensure the standardization and interoperability of new technologies. This decision opens up the European market for Japan’s defense industry. Indeed, it provides further deterrent in the Indo-Pacific region for any actions against Japan, and significantly increases Japan’s influence and reach throughout the world.

As a result of this decision, not only will NATO forces begin to use equipment that is Japanese in origin, but they will also naturally look at Japan as the gateway and source of expertise for the NATO alliance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan is quickly becoming a force multiplier for the United States’ alliances, not only in the Indo-Pacific but throughout the world. Its work to help plug holes in capability gaps for the Australian and Philippine navies, will have direct, concrete effects on various flashpoints throughout the Indo-Pacific.

From the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoals to the Tasman Sea and the Strait of Taiwan, Japan and its defense industry are making a difference.

Hungary’s emergence as a diplomatic hub and investment magnet

By aligning its interests with the Trump Administration’s vision for Europe, Hungary is far more influential on the global stage than it normally would be.

Hungary has also been promoting connections with other key countries. Rather than building coalitions with other countries that live under the security umbrella of the United States, Hungary has been working to establish itself as a global hub for business and diplomacy. This means expanded business outreach, gaining more direct foreign investment, and in doing so, promoting diplomacy between the countries with which it trades. In his efforts to be a global mediator, Viktor Orbán has made several attempts to bring the war in Ukraine to a close. Destinations for official visits include Moscow, Kyiv, Beijing, and Washington to promote discussion among all parties involved. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was the first EU leader to meet with President Vladimir Putin directly since Russia began amassing troops on Ukraine's borders in 2022. At the meeting, Orbán stressed that while the differences were substantial, there was still a possibility of striking a deal between Moscow and NATO and ensuring peace in the region.

Hungary has made increased economic cooperation the key facet of its foreign policy. Through its strategy, Hungary has significantly grown its inwards foreign direct investment from around the world and has remade itself as a vital hub for manufacturing and investment in the region. At the time of writing, Hungary has become the recipient of upwards of 31% of China’s total investment in Europe, has become a producer of Japanese cars (Suzuki and Toyota) to be sold on the European market, and has even become the European manufacturing centre for Taiwanese firms like Foxconn and Giant.

What's next?

Viewed from the United States, Japan and Hungary are having metaphorical time in the sun.

While in no way replacing the United States as guarantor of security in the Indo-Pacific, Japan has positioned itself as the primary ally of the United States and the other NATO powers in the region. Prime Minister Takaichi has long signaled her intent to expand Japan’s security relationships, including its ties with Taiwan. In April of 2025, before she became Prime Minister, she openly proposed that Japan form a “quasi-security alliance” with Taiwan that would include Australia, India, and the Philippines during a visit to Taipei.

As for Hungary, the unique personal nature of President Trump's and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's relationship has given Hungary greater access to the Administration. This is so much so that, during his visit to Budapest, Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that the Central European region was viewed through the lens of Hungary, and that the success of the region, Hungary, and the United States were deeply intertwined. Inwards foreign direct investment from the United States into Hungary has increased. The United States sees and uses Hungary as a proactive partner in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. Hungary’s role in the Board of Peace is just one example of this. Hungary’s relationship with the United States enables it to play an outsized role in international relations.

Japan’s ability to play a leadership position, both in the Indo-Pacific and globally, is excellent. However, maintenance of such a position cannot be taken for granted. Prime Minister Takaichi is known for her zeal and affection for Yasukuni shrine visits and tendency to overlook Japan’s actions in World War II. Domestic issues – a declining population, a sluggish economy, resistance to immigration among others – complicate matters.

However, for the moment, Takaichi has made clear her intentions to improve Japan’s relationships in the region. After meeting with her South Korean counterpart in Seoul on 1 November last year, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung said: “I believe ... that Prime Minister Takaichi's thoughts and actions differ when she is an individual politician versus when she bears overall responsibility for managing Japan as a nation.” We are early into her tenure as Prime Minister. Still, the reactions from leaders across the region have thus far been positive, sending a strong signal that President Myung is right, and that Takaichi will behave differently as the leader of the Japanese nation versus when she was an individual politician. We will see how domestic Japanese voters’ preferences regarding defense spending evolve as Japan approaches the 2% of GDP mark in March 2026. However, for the moment, the signs are encouraging.



*U.S Army 250th Anniversary Military Parade, Washington DC
(Shutterstock)*

Conclusions

The “MAGA Effect” is real. Changing attitudes in American domestic politics are significantly affecting America’s security alliances. However, those effects are not as pronounced in the Indo-Pacific region as they are in Europe with NATO. While Americans advocate for more transactional partnerships across the board, there is still consensus among policymakers in the United States that it needs to remain heavily involved in the Indo-Pacific.

As a result of perceptions of America First policies, America’s allies around the world have become more active, increasing their own defense spending and hedging their bets. In France, Germany and the UK, we have seen an increase in calls for intra-European cooperation and, in some quarters, for strategic autonomy. Further east, however, we see states like Estonia and Hungary taking extremely proactive steps to meet the United States’ security demands and/or its overall foreign policy goals in the region. Hungary, in particular, has worked to both greatly improve its personal relationship with the Trump Administration and to advance US interests. In both cases, the benefits have been substantial. As noted, Hungary has received increased inwards foreign direct investment, while Estonia has gained additional security guarantees from the United States.

In the Indo-Pacific, the biggest impact of the “MAGA Effect” has been the emergence of Japan as the ideal ally of the United States. Doubling down on its relationship with the Trump Administration, it has begun to act as a force multiplier not only for the United States’ allies in the region but also, more broadly, across the globe. Any discussion of the “MAGA Effect” in geopolitics must, in addition, include the role that Japan’s defense industry can play as armorer for other important countries such as Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In sum, Japan and Hungary understand the “MAGA Effect” and the opportunities that are presented by the transactional America First policies of the Trump Administration. Japan and Hungary have successfully deepened their engagement with the United States amid these transactional policies. Both have increased their influence at the global level. In Europe, Hungary has become the United States’ preferred partner. In the Indo-Pacific, Japan has, in several key areas, moved faster to align with US expectations, particularly in areas such as defense spending, capability development, and regional security engagement.

This is not to say that the Trump Administration favours working exclusively with Japan or Hungary: these are two of the very few countries in the world that have seen, and exploited, the “MAGA Effect” as an opportunity. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio stressed at the Munich Security Forum in February 2026, the United States still greatly values its alliances in Europe (as well as the Indo-Pacific) and is seeking greater cooperation.

From the perspective of the United States and the Trump Administration, the purpose of the “MAGA Effect” and America First policies is, emphatically, not to destroy longstanding alliances. In the words of Secretary Rubio, the aim is to preserve the current global order, and “[the United States hopes] to do this together with you, our friends.”

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