

The Transatlantic Relationship in the “Age of Sovereignty”

Juan A. Soto



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Image: Press conference of Donald Trump, President of United States of America, during NATO



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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



Juan Soto graduated in Business Administration and Management and Law from the University of Navarra, and in Political Science and Administration from the UNED. He has a master's degree in Political and Legal Theory from University College London (UCL) and is currently pursuing a PhD in political science at St. Mary's University, London. In 2015, he founded Fortius, a strategic consulting firm specialised in think tanks and operating in Europe, America and Africa. He has also held different executive positions in various think tanks, being executive director of the Civismo Foundation (2018-2021) and international director of the Disenso Foundation (2021-2023). He is a social entrepreneur and has founded numerous student and civic organisations, such as Fortius Foundation and Principios, of which he is president. He contributes regularly in Spanish and international media outlets and teaches political theory at the University of Navarra. He is a Visiting Fellow of the Danube Institute.

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Abstract

The transatlantic relationship — between the United States (and Canada) on one hand and European countries on the other — is changing in an era that can be described as an “Age of Sovereignty”. Geopolitics is moving away from liberal internationalism toward much more transactional and sovereigntist approaches designed to benefit individual nation states rather than alliances. This paper explains in detail the impact of the return of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2025 and the publication of the United States’ new National Security Strategy (NSS). It also considers the significance of various geopolitical developments through 2025 and 2026. These developments include: the Munich Security Conferences of both years; greater friction in international trade relationships; the rise of sovereigntist ideas within the conservative movement worldwide as well as recent events in Venezuela, Greenland and Iran. The paper looks in depths at the relationships between the United States, countries in Europe and China. It considers various scenarios for Europe in the “Age of Sovereignty” including: rebalanced Atlanticism; European strategic autonomy; hedging by global powers and progressive fragmentation within Europe. The paper identifies dilemmas for leaders in both Europe and the United States. In the former, there are rising expectations for strategic responsibility — but in a continent where foreign relations are handled by individual countries (and not necessarily in concert). In the latter, there is the possibility that a sovereigntist and transactional U.S. foreign policy will inadvertently accelerate the emergence of Europe as a distinct geopolitical pole — within a multi-polar system. The clear conclusion is that the impact of the “Age of Sovereignty” is still being defined.

“America First” and the “Age of Sovereignty”

The very words “America First”, the key concept that underpins many of the policies of the Trump Administration, carry a lot of weight. They highlight just one country. They show what is the position that that country will seek to maintain. They convey the idea that one particular nation state is greater than the alliances and partnerships of which it is part. They emphasise national sovereignty.

From these two words flow other ideas. Will other nations also promote national sovereignty over alliances and established relationships? If we are living in an “Age of Sovereignty”, what are the implications? In particular, what are the implications for the transatlantic relationship between the United States (and Canada) and Europe?

By the “Age of Sovereignty,” this paper refers to a reconfiguration of the international system in which national interest, strategic autonomy, and state-centred competition once again become the primary organising principles of global politics, displacing the liberal assumption that interdependence and institutional cooperation are inherently stabilising.

These questions have become very relevant in the recent past. I am a Spanish conservative active in building an intellectually vibrant and politically robust conservative movement across Europe and the Americas. Over the past year, I have often begun conversations with my American friends with a phrase that tends to raise a smile: *“I come in peace. Don’t shoot. I am one of yours.”*¹

It is partly humorous, of course, but the sentiment behind it is sincere. Many of us in Europe who share deep intellectual sympathies with the conservative revival now unfolding in the United States increasingly find ourselves in an uncomfortable position. We are supportive of much of what is happening in American politics, yet also aware that the geopolitical consequences of the United States’ new direction may place Europe in a far more complicated strategic situation than either side currently acknowledges.

This became clear to me during a demanding couple of weeks in the United States in February of 2025, barely a month after Donald Trump’s return to the White House.

That fortnight was dominated by two major events that I attended. The first, in Washington DC, was CPAC — a meeting of some of the leading conservative voices from across the Western world. The second, hosted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, was the Texas Policy Summit in Austin. That event positioned the Lone Star State in the vanguard of what many participants saw as a new American resurgence under President Trump.

Taken together, those two gatherings offered something like a balanced diet of spectacle and substance — both reflecting the vitality of American conservatism and a nation that seems only partially aware of the strategic consequences of its decisions beyond its borders

Throughout that week, I had the privilege of engaging with leading experts on geopolitics, national security, and international trade. I learned much from those conversations. Yet I also encountered several assumptions among my conservative friends in the United States that deserve to be addressed frankly, as the ramifications of these assumptions for the transatlantic relationship are very consequential and, under some scenarios, fatal.

There is one initial misunderstanding that concerns the nature of the geopolitical transformation now evident, but then already still nascent. In Washington, I repeatedly encountered the belief that the Trump Administration was seeking to restore something like the international order that existed before the Second World War — or even earlier, a return to a supposedly “pre-Wilsonian” world. In this interpretation, the adversary is the liberal international order itself, and the ultimate goal is the restoration of a system centred on sovereign nation-states.

But here lies a critical historical misunderstanding. The world before Woodrow Wilson and the First World War was not a world of Westphalian nation-states competing on equal footing. It was a world dominated by empires. The order Wilson sought to dismantle was not a system of sovereign states but one of imperial structures: the British Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and others.

The Great War marked the twilight of all of those empires but the British, which would perish after the Second World War.

From their collapse emerged a new global configuration, one ultimately defined by two twentieth-century super-powers that were themselves imperial in scale and influence: the Soviet Union and the United States. When the Cold War ended, only one of those empires remained standing.

For more than three decades since then, the United States has exercised a form of global hegemony that combined military primacy with an ambitious ideological project — the construction and maintenance of what came to be known as the liberal international order.

Yet the discussions I had in the United States in early 2025 suggested that many within the American conservative movement were already preparing to move beyond that project. The language of global stewardship was giving way to the language of national interest. The emphasis on institutional multilateralism was being replaced by a more transactional approach to alliances and partnerships.

At the time, this shift was still largely rhetorical — expressed in speeches, policy discussions, and the broader intellectual climate surrounding the new Administration. But within months, that rhetoric would become doctrine.

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy² (NSS) would codify many of the themes that were already circulating in those conversations, and define what can be described as the practical effect of the “Age of Sovereignty” in American grand strategy. There would be more explicit emphasis on economic security as national security, a redefinition of alliances in terms of measurable reciprocity, and a willingness to treat even longstanding partners through the lens of strategic competition.

None of this should be particularly surprising. Great powers periodically revise the frameworks through which they interpret the world. What matters, however, is how those revisions are perceived by their allies.

For Europe, the implications of this shift are profound. In the emerging geopolitical landscape suggested by the new American strategy, Europe’s disunited nations struggle to present a compelling partnership proposal to Washington. That realisation struck me repeatedly during my conversations in both Washington and Texas.

Again and again, I heard some version of the same argument: if Europe wishes to remain relevant to the United States, it must make itself attractive again — both in absolute terms and in relation to other regions or blocs around the world.

This analysis, however, rests on two flawed assumptions. First, despite all the rhetoric about sovereignty and strategic competition, the United States often seems to overlook a simple structural fact: Europe is not a nation-state. Nor is the EU a fully coherent geopolitical actor. It is a grouping of diverse countries with overlapping — but often divergent — national interests and without a truly unified foreign policy.

Is the only way to restore the transatlantic relationship to transform Europe into some version of the “United States of Europe”? That seems to be politically unrealistic, at least for the short run. Further, such a change is not necessarily desirable — even for the United States. However, in an era of geopolitical volatility, it is as likely an outcome as is the total disintegration of the EU.

Further, even if European states were able to present a perfectly unified front, it would still be extremely difficult for Europe to outbid other regions purely in economic or strategic terms. If alliances are judged exclusively through the prism of trade balances, defence spending, or transactional benefits, then other actors — from resource-rich regions to emerging economic blocs — may well appear more attractive partners to Washington.

The same logic operates in the opposite direction as well. If the transatlantic relationship were reduced to a purely transactional calculation, the United States might not always represent the most advantageous partner for Europe either. Economically, China already presents an increasingly compelling proposition for several European industries, offering vast markets, investment capital, and integration into rapidly expanding technological ecosystems. In the realm of security, alternative arrangements — however controversial they may appear within the current geopolitical climate — could also emerge over time, whether through energy partnerships with Russia or broader strategic accommodations involving Eurasian actors such as China.



Attendees at the 2024 Republican National Convention
(Shutterstock)

The uncomfortable implication is clear: once alliances are interpreted solely through the language of deals, all partners inevitably begin to compare alternatives. This is also true in Hispanic America,³ where a purely transactional approach to alliances risks pushing parts of the region further into China’s economic orbit.

In other words, any renewed framework for transatlantic cooperation cannot rely solely on accounting metrics. Our shared history, traditions, and civilisational ties must also form part of the equation.

If we are to reconfigure the global order, we must remember something fundamental about the transatlantic relationship. America is not the “New World.” It is, rather, the ripest fruit of the Old. Europe cheered for America’s rise and benefited from its protection during two World Wars and two Cold Wars—one against the Soviet Union, and now another against China, even amid proxy conflicts in Ukraine, Iran and elsewhere. Yet today the United States sometimes appears determined to fulfil the archetypal narrative of the rising son overthrowing—if not killing—the father.

Europe must wake up quickly to this new reality. J.D. Vance’s speech at the Munich Security Conference last year served precisely that purpose by providing a shock to the system. Conversely, Marco Rubio’s speech at this year’s Conference indicated that a restoration of the transatlantic alliance is possible.

Europe is imperfect, but so too is the United States. American conservatives today rightly criticise many of the ideological excesses of the past decades. Yet it is also true that many of those ideas, from identity politics to corporate DEI orthodoxy, were originally exported from American universities, technology companies, and philanthropic networks before taking root in Europe.

Undoing that legacy will take time on both sides of the Atlantic. Foreign relations, after all, take decades to construct but can unravel surprisingly quickly. The speed with which the Trump Administration began reshaping America’s international posture in early 2025 has understandably left policymakers in many European capitals struggling to adjust. And they will still struggle, as there is no new world order to readjust around.

There is just a transitional period in which the very meaning of the United States is being redefined under the Trump Administration. As noted at the beginning of this paper, we are in an “America First” and an “Age of Sovereignty” world.

Analysis is complicated by the fact that the very concept of “America First” is evolving as the Trump Administration encounters new strategic opportunities and constraints. The concept is often interpreted in a pragmatic way, being adjusted for different regions on the basis of political feasibility and strategic utility. Nowhere is this more visible than in the Western Hemisphere. Recent developments suggest that the administration is willing to deploy American military power and build new operational partnerships across Hispanic America in ways that would have been politically far more controversial in other theatres.

After the operation in Venezuela, which resulted in the capture of Nicolás Maduro and his transfer to the United States to face charges related to drug trafficking and weapons conspiracy, it has become clear that America is prepared to conduct direct operations against cartel-linked networks while simultaneously promoting new regional security frameworks with sympathetic governments.

The Trump Administration has already begun to institutionalise this approach through initiatives such as the “Shield of the Americas”⁴ summit convened in Miami in March 2026. The summit gathered twelve Hispanic American leaders to discuss the creation of a regional counter-cartel coalition and broader cooperation aimed at limiting Chinese economic and political influence in the hemisphere.⁵

These initiatives illustrate how the Administration can expand American strategic influence most easily in the one arena where the domestic political case is strongest: the Western Hemisphere itself. In other words, while the rhetoric of “America First” often emphasises restraint abroad, its practical application may yield a more assertive posture in regions where the United States’ leadership is framed as the defence of continental security rather than the management of distant alliances.⁶

This report begins from that moment of disruption. The rhetoric that was already circulating within American conservative circles in February 2025 has since taken clearer shape in the strategic doctrine outlined in the 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS). Understanding how that doctrine redefines alliances, economic competition, and geopolitical priorities is essential for understanding the future of the transatlantic relationship.

This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive empirical model of transatlantic relations but rather a strategic interpretation of the evolving geopolitical environment. The pages that follow therefore examine what the new American strategic framework means for Europe, not from the perspective of alarmism or anti-Americanism, but from the perspective of realism. If there is one conclusion that Europeans should draw from the political earthquake triggered by America's latest election, it is this: the transatlantic alliance is clearly being renegotiated. And it may well be that Europe ceases to be the central focus of the United States just as much as pleasing America ceases to be Europe's strategic obsession.

The analysis that follows is structured around various possible trajectories for the transatlantic relationship: rebalanced Atlanticism, European strategic autonomy, hedging behaviour among global powers, and progressive fragmentation. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive but represent competing tendencies already visible in current geopolitical developments.

Beyond these scenarios, this paper advances a central argument that remains often implicit in contemporary debates: the ongoing transformation of American strategy may inadvertently accelerate the emergence of Europe as a distinct geopolitical pole.

As the United States redefines its alliances in increasingly transactional and sovereignty-driven terms, it reduces the structural incentives for Europe to remain a permanently subordinate strategic partner. In this evolving context, Europe may gradually be compelled to consolidate its capacity to act as an autonomous actor within a multipolar international order.



*Vice President JD Vance in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room
(Shutterstock)*

The Sequence of Geopolitical Shocks (2024-2026)

The inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025 marked more than the beginning of a new presidential term. It represented the reopening of a strategic debate that had largely been settled in Western policy circles since the end of the Second World War. While previous administrations had occasionally challenged elements of the post-1945 international order, Trump’s return to the White House signalled a far more explicit rupture with the intellectual assumptions that had governed American foreign policy for decades.

For much of the post-war era, the United States’ grand strategy rested on a broad bipartisan consensus: America would maintain a system of alliances, institutions, and economic arrangements designed to stabilise the international system while preserving the country’s primacy. NATO, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the architecture of liberalised trade all formed part of this framework.

Trump’s second term has not dismantled those structures overnight. But it has certainly challenged their underlying logic. The rhetoric⁷ surrounding the ceremony — and the policy signals that followed — communicated the return of strategic disruption as a central feature of American statecraft.

Rather than presenting alliances as expressions of ideological solidarity or guardians of a rules-based international order, the new Administration has framed international relations in more transactional and state-centred terms. Alliances are no longer assumed to be permanent structures of solidarity but arrangements whose legitimacy depended on measurable reciprocity and demonstrable contributions to American security and prosperity.

This shift did not emerge suddenly in 2025. The intellectual groundwork had already been laid during Trump’s first presidency and within the policy debates that followed it. Scholars both analysing and building the foundations of foreign policy “Trumpism”⁸ have identified two central pillars underpinning this world-view: The reassertion of nation-state power and the demand for burden-sharing among allies — the essence of the “Age of Sovereignty”.

These principles reflect a broader reinterpretation of the international system. Rather than viewing global governance and economic integration as inherently stabilising forces, the Trumpian framework interprets them through the lens of competition among sovereign states. From this perspective, the expansion of globalisation over the previous three decades had produced structural imbalances, and particularly for American industrial workers and strategic industries, that required correction.

Trump’s return to power, therefore, represents not merely a political shift but a doctrinal one. The concept of “America First” is thus reaffirmed not as a campaign slogan but as a structural organising principle of domestic and, above all, the United States’ foreign policy.

It would, however, be a mistake to interpret this shift as entirely discontinuous with previous Administrations. Many of the structural concerns underpinning the current doctrine – burden-sharing within NATO, strategic competition with China, and the vulnerabilities of global supply chains - were already visible during the Obama and Biden Administrations.

Indeed, American policymakers across party lines have spent more than a decade urging European allies to increase defence spending and assume greater responsibility within NATO. Initiatives such as the Transatlantic Security Initiative during the early 2020s reflected this bipartisan concern.

In this sense, Trump’s second presidency may be less a rupture than an acceleration and a more explicit articulation of trends already present within American strategic thinking.

According to this framework, the national interest becomes the primary metric for evaluating international commitments. Economic relations, security partnerships, and diplomatic engagements are assessed according to their direct contribution to American strength.⁹

This perspective also reflects a deeper reassessment of globalisation itself. By the mid-2020s, many policymakers in Washington had come to view the era of hyper-globalisation as drawing to a close. Supply-chain disruptions following the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying technological competition with China, and the weaponisation of economic interdependence had all reinforced the perception that economic integration could no longer be separated from strategic competition.

In this environment, the logic of “America First” appears less ideological than structural. If other major powers — most notably China — were already pursuing strategies aimed at maximising their national advantage, then the United States could no longer justify maintaining an international framework that constrained its own strategic flexibility.

For Europe, the implications have been immediate and unsettling. Many European governments had grown accustomed to an American leadership style that prioritised predictability and institutional continuity. Trump’s return has shown that the United States is now willing to renegotiate the terms of cooperation in ways that could place even longstanding allies under pressure.

This dynamic became visible almost immediately after the inauguration. Trade policy, defence spending, and industrial policy all began to be framed within the same strategic logic: Allies are expected not only to align politically with the United States but to contribute materially to the balance of power.

This emphasis on burden-sharing had already appeared during Trump’s first term, particularly in his insistence that NATO members meet defence spending commitments. The principle extended beyond military expenditure, however. It implied a broader recalibration of international cooperation in which each partner would be expected to carry a proportionate share of the strategic burden in a chessboard of great-power competition.

For many observers — particularly in Europe — the event represented the opening shock in a broader sequence of geopolitical disruptions that would unfold throughout 2025. The debates that had previously circulated within American conservative intellectual circles for nearly a decade were now being translated into foreign policy, forcing allies and adversaries alike to reassess their strategic assumptions.

Understanding this moment is essential for interpreting the developments that followed. Trump’s inauguration did not simply introduce policy adjustments; it reshaped the conceptual framework through which the United States interpreted the international system.

In short, Trump’s comeback marked the transition from a period in which American foreign policy remained rhetorically anchored in the language of liberal order to one in which sovereign competition among major powers once again became the dominant organising principle of international politics.

The 2025 Trade War Escalation

If Trump’s inauguration represented the doctrinal rupture with the post-war strategic consensus, the trade war escalation of early 2025 marked the first operational test of that doctrine. What had previously existed as rhetoric and intellectual positioning was now translated into concrete economic instruments with immediate geopolitical consequences.

At the centre of this shift proved to be the systematic revision of existing trade arrangements. The Trump Administration approached trade policy not as a technocratic domain governed primarily by economic efficiency, but as a strategic arena directly tied to national power. Agreements negotiated during the previous decades of globalisation were reassessed through a different lens. They were evaluated on the basis of whether they strengthened or weakened the United States’ industrial base, technological leadership, and geopolitical leverage.

This reassessment reflected a broader transformation in how American policymakers interpreted the global economy. For decades, economic interdependence had been presented as a stabilising force in international relations. By the mid-2020s, however, that assumption had eroded significantly. The rise of China as a systemic competitor, the weaponisation of supply chains during geopolitical crises, and the strategic vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic had all reinforced the perception in the United States that economic openness could be exploited by rival powers.

Within this framework, trade policy became an instrument of strategic competition rather than merely a tool of economic management. Tariffs, long considered a relatively blunt economic instrument, were reintroduced as deliberate geopolitical leverage.



*G7 leaders event to announce a Joint Declaration of Support to Ukraine
(Shutterstock)*

The use of tariffs served several purposes simultaneously. On one level, they served as protectionist measures to shield key American industries from external competition and encourage the reshoring of manufacturing capacity. On another level, they operated as bargaining tools in negotiations with both rivals and allies. Tariffs created pressure points that could be adjusted to align with political and strategic objectives.

In this sense, tariffs were no longer simply economic barriers: they became instruments of statecraft capable of shaping the behaviour of other governments. The January 2025 confrontation between the United States and Colombia, under the government of President Gustavo Petro, provides a telling illustration. When the Colombian government initially refused to allow U.S. military flights carrying deported Colombian migrants to land, the Trump administration threatened punitive tariffs on Colombian exports. Faced with the prospect of a trade confrontation with its largest export market, the Petro government quickly reversed its position and agreed to accept the flights. This episode provided a good example of how tariff-related threats could function as immediate leverage in diplomatic disputes.

The impact of this shift was not confined to America’s strategic competitors. Europe, despite being a longstanding ally of the United States, found itself directly affected by the new logic of economic pressure. Several sectors were particularly exposed. The European automotive industry, one of the pillars of the continent’s industrial economy, quickly became a focal point of trade tensions. American policymakers argued that structural imbalances in the transatlantic trade relationship disadvantaged U.S. manufacturers, particularly in sectors where European exports enjoyed strong market penetration.

Beyond automobiles, the escalation of trade pressure extended into areas with clear strategic implications. Energy markets became increasingly intertwined with geopolitical considerations, especially as the Trump Administration sought to promote American liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports while reducing Europe’s dependence on alternative suppliers.

At the same time, defence industrial policy emerged as another arena of competition, with the United States encouraging European allies to purchase American defence equipment rather than investing in independent European capabilities.

This approach marked a significant departure from the traditional assumptions that had long governed transatlantic economic relations. During the Cold War and the early post-Cold War period, trade disputes between the United States and Europe certainly occurred, but they were generally managed within a framework that prioritised alliance cohesion. Economic disagreements were treated as secondary to the broader strategic partnership.

This shift was not necessarily intended to weaken alliances. Rather, it reflected the Administration’s belief that alliances should be recalibrated to yield tangible benefits for the United States. Economic pressure was therefore seen as a legitimate mechanism for renegotiating the terms of cooperation.

For European governments, the implications were both economic and psychological. The message conveyed by the Trump Administration was clear: The transatlantic relationship would continue, but under new rules. Europe was no longer exempt from the competitive dynamics shaping the global economy. If alliances were now to be evaluated according to measurable reciprocity — whether in defence spending, industrial policy, or trade balances — then even the closest partners of the United States would find themselves subject to the same strategic calculus applied to other actors.

In retrospect, the trade escalation of 2025 can be understood as the second shock in the sequence that began with Trump’s inauguration. The first shock was conceptual: A redefinition of the principles guiding American foreign policy. The second was operational: The deployment of economic instruments to translate those principles into practice.

For Europe, this development forced a gradual but unavoidable realisation. The transatlantic alliance was not disappearing, but it was entering a new phase in which economic leverage, industrial competition, and geopolitical bargaining would play a far more central role than in the past.

The Munich Security Conference of February 2025: The Psychological Turning Point

If the escalation of trade tensions represented the operational dimension of the new American strategic posture, the Munich Security Conference of February 2025 marked its psychological consolidation.

The annual gathering, traditionally a forum for reaffirming U.S. conservative and transatlantic unity, became instead the moment when the increasing divergence in strategic expectations between the United States and Europe was expressed with unusual clarity.

For decades, the Munich Security Conference had functioned as a symbolic stage on which American officials reassured European allies of the United States' enduring commitment to the continent's security. Even during periods of disagreement — over Iraq, trade, or defence spending, for instance — the Conference maintained a ritualistic quality, reaffirming the fundamental stability of the transatlantic relationship.

In 2025, however, the tone shifted noticeably. Vice President JD Vance used the forum not primarily to reassure European partners but to deliver a message that had already been implicit in earlier policy moves: Europe could no longer assume the automatic continuation of the security arrangements that had defined the post-Cold War era.

The core of the message was straightforward. Europe's long-standing dependence on American military power was no longer sustainable in a world increasingly defined by great-power competition. The United States, facing simultaneous challenges in the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia, and the Middle East, could no longer be expected to shoulder the majority of the security burden in Europe while its allies maintained comparatively limited defence capabilities.

This argument was not entirely new. Previous American Administrations had been encouraging European allies to increase defence spending for more than a decade. What changed at the Munich Security Conference in 2025 was the message's directness and strategic framing.

The message was also brutally simple: Europe must pay, produce, and protect itself. In terms of paying, defence spending targets within NATO were no longer presented as aspirational benchmarks but as minimum requirements for maintaining credible deterrence. The expectation was that European states would significantly increase military investment to reduce their structural dependence on American capabilities.

Production was the second requirement. The strategic competition emerging in the global economy required industrial capacity capable of sustaining long-term military and technological rivalry.

For the Trump Administration, this meant that European partners needed to strengthen their own defence-industrial base rather than relying primarily on American production or outsourcing critical technological components to external actors.

Self-protection was the third objective. This involved not only strengthening military capabilities but also developing the institutional and political capacity to manage regional security challenges more autonomously. From the Trump Administration's perspective, Europe's security architecture would need to evolve toward a model in which European states assumed greater responsibility for the stability of their own neighbourhood.

The clarity of this message had a profound psychological impact on European policymakers attending the Conference. For many participants, the speeches delivered in Munich served as a confirmation of a structural transformation of American policy.

Yet the interpretation of that message across European capitals varied considerably. Some European governments understood the American position as a strategic warning — a deliberate attempt to force Europe to accelerate reforms that had long been postponed. From this perspective, the United States was not abandoning the alliance but attempting to rebalance it. A stronger, more capable Europe would ultimately strengthen the Western alliance by reducing asymmetries within NATO.

Other observers, however, perceived the message differently. To them, the Conference's tone suggested something closer to strategic disengagement. If American policymakers increasingly prioritised competition with China and redirected strategic resources toward the Indo-Pacific, then Europe might gradually lose its central place within the United States' geopolitical calculations. This ambiguity created a sense of unease in Europe. The fundamental question was no longer whether the transatlantic alliance would continue to exist — it clearly would — but rather what form it would take in a world where American strategic priorities were evolving so rapidly.

In this sense, the Munich Security Conference of 2025 functioned as a psychological turning point. It forced European policymakers to confront a reality that had been gradually emerging but had not yet been fully acknowledged: the security architecture built during the Cold War could no longer be taken for granted.

This came as something of a shock given that the war in Ukraine was raging on without any sign of an armistice. For Europe, the implication was clear. Strategic maturity would require moving beyond a posture of dependency toward one of greater responsibility. Whether European governments would be able or willing to undertake that transformation remained uncertain. What was no longer uncertain, however, was that the strategic expectations of the United States had fundamentally changed.

CPAC Washington of February 2025: Consolidation of the New Doctrine

If the Munich Security Conference represented the moment when the new American strategic posture was delivered to Europe in the language of statecraft, CPAC Washington 2025 represented the moment when that posture was consolidated ideologically within the broader conservative movement.

The CPAC conference, long a central gathering point for the American conservative ecosystem, increasingly functions as a global forum for the emerging international right, with a growing international presence each year. In 2025, however, its significance went beyond the usual mixture of advocacy, networking, and ideological debate. CPAC became the stage where many of the strategic themes already emerging in American policy were translated into a coherent political narrative shared by conservative actors across multiple continents.

One of the most visible developments during the conference was the normalisation of sovereigntist discourse as the dominant framework for interpreting international politics. Whereas earlier conservative debates often oscillated between traditional Atlanticism and nationalist retrenchment, the tone at CPAC suggested a synthesis of both: A worldview grounded in national sovereignty but coordinated through transnational ideological networks.

The language of the “Age of Sovereignty” was not limited to American speakers. Politicians, commentators, and activists from Europe and Hispanic America echoed many of the same themes. Concepts such as border sovereignty, cultural identity, demographic decline, and resistance to progressive international institutions formed a common lexicon that circulated with remarkable ease among participants.

In many ways, the conference illustrated the growing emergence of what could be described as a conservative international ecosystem — a network of political parties, think tanks, media platforms, and advocacy groups operating across borders with increasing coordination. Events such as CPAC, NatCon, and other international gatherings have helped consolidate this shared vocabulary and symbolic identity among movements that, until recently, operated largely within their national contexts.

Yet the internationalisation of this conservative discourse also revealed a growing tension within the movement itself. For many European participants, the political optics surrounding the conference proved controversial. Leaders of several European New Right parties faced intense criticism in their home countries for maintaining close ties with Donald Trump and the broader American conservative movement at precisely the moment when the escalating trade tensions threatened significant economic consequences for Europe.

This tension was not merely theoretical; it was visibly embodied by European political leaders attending the conference. Santiago Abascal, for instance, illustrated the difficulty of simultaneously sustaining ideological alignment with the United States and a coherent defence of Spain’s national interest. Others opted for damage control. Jordan Bardella cancelled his intervention at the last minute, effectively choosing to be criticised as a coward by the American press and (rather famously) Steve Bannon rather than be portrayed as disloyal by the French media.

A few actors did understand the nature of the moment. As a senior adviser to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni related to me, she requested that her speech be postponed by one day. That delay proved strategically decisive. It allowed her to perform what has arguably become the most complex rhetorical exercise for the contemporary Western right: articulating a discourse that is simultaneously aligned with the White House and deeply rooted in national interest, while unapologetically reaffirming the Atlantic alliance. The Italian Prime Minister was the only European leader who managed to take the stage and emerge from it politically strengthened.

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky during the 2020 Munich Security Conference (Shutterstock)



Overall, domestic critics accused these politicians of prioritising ideological alignment with the American right over the material interests of their own nations. In countries whose export sectors, particularly in automotive manufacturing and agriculture, stood to be affected by the emerging trade conflict, this accusation carried considerable political weight.

For the first time, a paradox emerged that would have been difficult to imagine only a decade earlier: European nationalist and sovereigntist parties were being accused of acting in an “unpatriotic” manner because of their perceived alignment with a foreign ideological ally. This was especially true in the days following Vice President Vance’s speech at the Munich Security Conference.

The increasingly confrontational rhetoric and policy posture adopted by the Trump Administration turned the United States into political poison for some of its ideological allies abroad. European and Western conservative movements that have aligned themselves too closely with Trump started facing the danger of suffering the domestic political consequences of that association. Like Icarus’ flying too close to the sun, proximity to the heat of Trumpism proved dangerous — in electoral terms at least. The defeat of Pierre Poilievre in Canada’s General Election, for instance, showed how ideological solidarity could become a political liability.

The phenomenon where closeness to the Trump Administration becomes a political problem reflects a deeper tension within what might be called the international conservative movement. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ the rapid internationalisation of the New Right risks creating a situation in which ideological affinity across borders begins to compete with, or even override, the traditional conservative principle that political loyalty must ultimately be anchored in the national interest.

The paradox becomes particularly visible among opposition parties. Unlike governments, which must balance ideology with economic and diplomatic realities, opposition movements often operate with fewer institutional constraints. As a result, they may be more inclined to frame their political identity within a broader international ideological struggle rather than through the narrower lens of national strategic interest.

The consolidation of the new doctrine, therefore, produced both clarity and contradiction.

On the one hand, the CPAC conference confirmed the emergence of a coherent intellectual framework: Sovereignty, civilisational identity, and strategic competition with China are the defining pillars of the new conservative worldview.

On the other hand, the conference also exposed the potential risks of a movement whose transnational ideological cohesion may sometimes collide with the concrete interests of the nations it claims to defend.

For Europe, this tension would become increasingly relevant in the months that followed. As the geopolitical consequences of the new American strategy unfolded, European conservatives would find themselves navigating a delicate balance between ideological partnership with the Trump Administration and the enduring demands of national political responsibility.

When Theory Meets Practice: The 2025 US NSS Strategy at Play

The theoretical transformation described in the previous sections did not remain confined to speeches, conferences, or policy debates. It was formally consolidated in December 2025, when the Trump administration released its 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS) — the document that traditionally articulates the strategic foundations of American grand strategy.

The publication of the NSS marked a moment of doctrinal clarification. Ideas that had circulated throughout the year in policy discussions, diplomatic signals, and conservative intellectual circles were now codified as official strategy. The document placed economic vitality and national resilience at the centre of American power, explicitly asserting that economic strength underpins national security.

More broadly, the NSS reflected a decisive shift in American policymakers’ interpretation of the international system. The language of liberal international stewardship gave way to a framework more explicitly grounded in sovereignty, national interest, and strategic competition. Rather than assuming the continued expansion of a universal liberal order, the strategy acknowledged a world defined increasingly by rivalry among major powers — the “Age of Sovereignty”.

Equally significant was the document’s geographical orientation. The NSS emphasised the Western Hemisphere as a priority theatre of American security policy, reviving a modernised version of hemispheric strategic thinking that treats migration, organised crime, and the influence of external powers as core national security concerns.

In this sense, the NSS did not merely summarise existing policies or the constellation of scholarly work, think-tank reports and CPAC-type speeches. It established a new strategic framework, declaring that economic security, hemispheric stability, and great-power competition would serve as the organising principles of American statecraft in the coming decade.

The geopolitical developments that followed throughout 2025 and early 2026, therefore, offer the first operational manifestations of this doctrine. In several theatres — from Hispanic America to the Arctic and the Middle East — the United States demonstrated a willingness to exercise power in ways that increasingly resemble classical great-power behaviour.

This period can thus be interpreted as that in which strategic theory began to translate into geopolitical practice.

Venezuela: The Western Hemisphere as the Primary Strategic Theatre

One of the developments that most clearly illustrated the practical application of the emerging American doctrine occurred in the Western Hemisphere.

The Trump Administration’s handling of the Venezuelan crisis revealed how the reinterpretation of “America First” could translate into a far more assertive regional policy. For decades, the United States’ engagement in Hispanic America had oscillated between diplomatic pressure and targeted economic sanctions. By contrast, the actions undertaken in 2025 and early 2026 suggested a renewed willingness to shape the political balance of power in the hemisphere more directly.

The United States moved decisively against the regime in Caracas, culminating in the capture of Nicolás Maduro during a large-scale military operation in January 2026 that combined air strikes, intelligence operations, and special-forces actions against strategic targets in the Venezuelan capital.

The operation surprised many international observers — and even several European governments, which had not been consulted in advance.

The implications extended far beyond Venezuela itself. First, the episode signalled that the Western Hemisphere remains the geopolitical arena in which the United States retains both overwhelming military superiority and broad domestic support for decisive action. Unlike interventions in the Middle East or Asia, operations within the Americas can be framed domestically as the defence of continental security rather than the management of distant geopolitical crises.

Second, the operation also carried a clear geopolitical dimension: it effectively dismantled a strategic foothold that several U.S. adversaries had developed in Venezuela over the previous decade. The Maduro government had relied heavily on political, technological, and military support from Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba, including Russian air-defence systems, Chinese surveillance and satellite technologies, and Iranian military and logistical cooperation. By removing the regime and restructuring the Venezuelan state apparatus, the Trump Administration effectively expelled these actors from one of their most important strategic entry points into the Western Hemisphere.

Third, the episode demonstrated that the evolving interpretation of the “America First” concept does not necessarily imply global retrenchment. Instead, it may involve a selective reassertion of American power in regions where political costs are lower and strategic returns more immediate. In this sense, the operation also functioned as a broader strategic signal to other regimes in the hemisphere — most notably in Cuba — that Washington is once again prepared to act directly against hostile governments within its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood.

Finally, when viewed retrospectively, the Venezuelan operation appears to have served a dual strategic purpose. On one level, it delivered an early and highly visible geopolitical victory for the Administration. On another, it secured access to one of the world’s largest proven oil reserves and stabilised a major potential supply source at a moment when global energy security was becoming increasingly uncertain.

The legal and political groundwork for the operation had been carefully constructed in advance. In late 2025, the United States formally designated Venezuela’s Cartel de los Soles — a network allegedly linked to senior officials in the Maduro regime — as a foreign terrorist organisation, a move that expanded the legal instruments available to the Trump Administration in confronting the Venezuelan government.

By framing the Venezuelan leadership as part of a narco-terrorist structure responsible for trafficking drugs into the United States, the Administration effectively blurred the line between counter-terrorism and regime-change policy. The designation enabled U.S. authorities to argue that actions against Maduro were not merely geopolitical interventions but part of a broader campaign against transnational organised crime and terrorism.

Critics, however, argued that this legislative manoeuvre was deliberately designed to create a legal rationale for direct action on foreign soil. Several analysts noted that the designation provided the Trump Administration with a flexible legal framework through which military operations, arrests, and sanctions could be justified as part of counter-terrorism enforcement rather than conventional interstate conflict.

International reactions to the operation were deeply divided. Across Hispanic America, several governments condemned the intervention as a dangerous precedent. The governments of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia warned that the bombing of Venezuelan territory and the capture of a sitting head of state risked undermining regional stability and violating fundamental principles of international law.

European reactions were similarly cautious. While many governments openly welcomed the end of Maduro’s rule, which had long been criticised for electoral manipulation and authoritarian practices, they also expressed concern about the method through which the outcome had been achieved. European leaders emphasised that international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter must be respected, even when confronting regimes that are widely considered illegitimate.

Notably, criticism was not confined to governments traditionally sceptical of U.S. foreign policy. Several conservative political actors in Europe also voiced reservations.

In France, leaders of the Rassemblement National (while strongly hostile to the Maduro regime) warned that unilateral American military action risked setting a precedent whereby powerful states could remove foreign leaders without multilateral authorisation or concern for international law. Similar concerns were expressed by segments of the European conservative spectrum that traditionally emphasise national sovereignty and non-interference as core principles of international order.

In short, the result was an unusual political alignment: while many governments and political movements across Europe agreed that Maduro’s regime had lost legitimacy, they remained deeply uneasy about the unilateral manner in which the Trump Administration had resolved the crisis.

In this sense, the Venezuelan operation revealed a defining feature of the emerging American doctrine. The United States appears increasingly willing to act decisively within its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood—even at the risk of diplomatic friction with allies—when it perceives that its continental security or strategic interests are at stake.

For the Trump Administration, the Western Hemisphere remains a privileged strategic space in which American power can be exercised with relatively limited geopolitical risk. For many of its allies, however, the operation raised uncomfortable questions about the future boundaries between alliance cooperation, international law, and unilateral great-power action.

Greenland and the Arctic: Strategic Geography Returns

Developments in the Arctic illustrated another dimension of the emerging American strategic outlook in the “Age of Sovereignty”. The renewed American interest in Greenland — already visible during Trump’s first presidency — re-emerged as part of a broader reassessment of Arctic geopolitics. Melting ice opens new trade routes and facilitates development of new resource opportunities. Together with growing Russian and Chinese activity, this has transformed the Arctic from being a peripheral region to becoming a zone of increasing strategic competition.

For the Trump Administration, Greenland occupies a uniquely valuable position within this evolving landscape.

The island controls key North Atlantic maritime routes, hosts critical early-warning radar infrastructure linked to American missile defence systems, and provides proximity to emerging shipping corridors in the high Arctic.

The renewed attention directed toward Greenland, therefore, reflects a broader effort to reinforce the northern dimension of the Western Hemisphere's strategic perimeter, integrating Arctic geography more firmly into the American continental security architecture.

Here again, the underlying logic mirrors developments in Hispanic America: strengthening strategic depth within the United States' immediate geopolitical neighbourhood.

This strategic framing has been articulated increasingly explicitly in recent American political discourse. Most notably, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth recently argued that the United States should conceptualise its security perimeter not simply as the traditional Western Hemisphere but as a broader "Greater North America," stretching from Greenland in the Arctic to Ecuador in South America. In this formulation, the entire northern half of the American continent — and its surrounding maritime spaces — constitutes a unified strategic theatre whose stability is essential to U.S. national security.

Such thinking reflects a geopolitical doctrine rooted in the logic of continental defence: securing the approaches to the United States before rival powers can establish a foothold within them. Yet the renewed American focus on Greenland has generated strong criticism across Europe and among NATO allies.

Given that Greenland is a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Danish government reacted particularly forcefully to any suggestion that the island could be treated as a strategic asset subject to geopolitical bargaining. Danish officials emphasised that Greenland is not for sale and that its political future must be determined by its population within the constitutional framework of the Danish realm. The Danish government also expressed concern that public discussions in Washington about American control over Greenland risked undermining the principle of sovereignty between allies.

The controversy reached its most serious point when President Trump did not rule out the use of military pressure in securing American strategic interests related to Greenland. While such statements may partly reflect negotiating tactics, their implications were profound. For the first time in decades, the possibility — however remote — of coercive measures directed at a NATO ally introduced a level of strategic uncertainty unprecedented in the post-war transatlantic relationship. Crucially, this rhetoric altered psychology within the alliance by signalling that geographic and strategic considerations may, under certain conditions, override traditional norms of allied sovereignty.

Several European governments publicly backed Denmark's position. Leaders in France, Germany, and other EU member states framed the issue not merely as a bilateral dispute but as a broader matter of respect for allied sovereignty. European officials warned that the language emerging from the Trump Administration appeared to treat allied territory as an object of strategic negotiation rather than as part of a partnership among equal states.

The EU itself issued unusually direct statements on the matter. Senior EU officials stressed that the territorial integrity of EU member states and their associated territories was non-negotiable and that the Arctic should remain a zone governed by international law, multilateral cooperation, and regional stability rather than great-power competition over territory.

Within NATO, the reaction was more diplomatically phrased but nonetheless revealed considerable unease. Several allied governments privately criticised what they viewed as an unnecessary provocation that risked creating divisions within the alliance at a time when NATO was already confronting major strategic challenges from Russia and China. NATO officials therefore sought to de-escalate the controversy by emphasising the collective importance of Arctic security and the need for coordination among Arctic allies, including Denmark, Norway, Canada, and the United States.

At the same time, NATO deliberately avoided endorsing any concept resembling American territorial ambitions regarding Greenland.



*United States Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth
(Shutterstock)*

Instead, the alliance framed Arctic security in terms of shared situational awareness, infrastructure resilience, and collective deterrence against external actors — particularly Russia’s growing military activity in the far North and China’s increasing economic and research presence in the Arctic region.

The episode therefore exposed a subtle but important tension within the alliance. While all NATO members recognise the growing strategic importance of the Arctic, many European governments remain wary of approaches that appear to redefine the region primarily through the lens of American continental security doctrine.

In this sense, the Greenland debate illustrates a broader pattern visible in several areas of contemporary U.S. strategy. The Trump Administration increasingly conceptualises security in terms of expanding and reinforcing its immediate geopolitical perimeter — from the Arctic to the Caribbean and into South America. European governments, by contrast, tend to interpret these developments through the lens of alliance stability, international law, and respect for sovereignty among partners.

The result is not open confrontation, but it does reveal a growing divergence in how the transatlantic partners understand the evolving geography of Western security.

If the Western Hemisphere doctrine seeks to reinforce America’s continental strategic depth, the Arctic has now become its northern frontier. Yet the controversy surrounding Greenland demonstrates that even within long-standing alliances, the geopolitical logic of great powers can generate friction when strategic geography overlaps with the sovereignty of allied states.

The Munich Security Conference of 2026: Rubio's Reaffirmation of NSS 2025

If the tensions surrounding Greenland revealed the extent to which strategic geography had returned to the centre of American foreign policy, the Munich Security Conference of February 2026 offered a parallel development in the realm of diplomatic signalling: specifically, there was an attempt an attempt to stabilise the doctrinal shift codified in the 2025 NSS.

The address delivered by Secretary of State Marco Rubio must be understood within this context. One year after Vice President JD Vance had shocked European leaders with a confrontational message questioning the assumptions of the transatlantic relationship, Rubio’s intervention adopted a markedly more conciliatory tone. He emphasised that the United States and Europe “belong together” and reaffirmed that a rupture in the transatlantic relationship “is neither our goal nor our wish.”¹¹

This rhetorical shift was not incidental. It reflected a conscious effort by Washington to recalibrate the presentation of a strategy whose substance remained largely unchanged. Rubio underscored the depth of historical, cultural, and civilisational ties between Europe and the United States, repeatedly framing America as a “child of Europe” and positioning the transatlantic relationship as one of the deepest bonds between nations.

European leaders, for their part, largely welcomed the tone of the speech. Figures such as Ursula von der Leyen described it as “reassuring,” interpreting it as a signal that the United States remained committed to a strong Europe within the alliance framework. At a moment of accumulated tension — marked by trade disputes, the Greenland controversy, and increasing unilateralism in U.S. decision-making — this reassurance was politically significant.

Yet beneath this conciliatory rhetoric, the structural logic of the new American doctrine remained firmly intact. Rubio made clear that, in the “Age of Sovereignty”, transatlantic cooperation would continue only under conditions aligned with Washington’s strategic priorities. The United States sought partnership, but not at the expense of its own economic, political, or civilisational objectives. As several observers noted, the speech effectively reaffirmed the core tenets of the Trump administration’s worldview: alliances grounded in reciprocity, scepticism toward the liberal international order, and a renewed emphasis on national sovereignty.

This duality — conciliatory tone combined with doctrinal continuity — was perhaps the defining feature of the 2026 conference.

On the one hand, Rubio softened the edges of the message delivered in 2025, signalling that the United States did not seek to dismantle the transatlantic alliance. On the other, he left no doubt that the terms of that alliance had fundamentally changed. Europe was expected to assume greater responsibility, increase defence capabilities, and align more closely with American strategic priorities, particularly in areas such as migration, industrial policy, and geopolitical competition.

Indeed, the contrast with the previous year’s conference illustrates not a change in direction, but a progression in strategy. If the Munich Security Conference of 2025 represented the moment of disruption — forcing Europe to confront the limits of its strategic dependence — the Munich Security Conference of 2026 represented the moment of consolidation. The objective was no longer to shock, but to stabilise the relationship on a new foundation.

However, this recalibration did not fully eliminate underlying tensions. While many European policymakers welcomed the more diplomatic tone, several remained sceptical about whether it reflected a genuine shift in policy or merely a change in presentation. Analysts noted that, despite the more reassuring rhetoric, the United States continued to define the parameters of cooperation largely on its own terms, reinforcing the perception that the alliance was becoming increasingly asymmetrical in decision-making.

Moreover, Rubio’s emphasis on civilisational identity — while well received in some quarters — also generated unease among segments of the European policy community. By framing the transatlantic relationship in explicitly cultural and ideological terms, the speech risked narrowing the basis of cooperation at a time when Europe itself remains politically and socially heterogeneous.

In this sense, the Munich Security Conference of 2026 revealed the emerging equilibrium of the transatlantic relationship. The United States was not retreating from Europe, nor was it abandoning the alliance. Rather, it was redefining it by seeking to combine strategic continuity with structural adjustment.

Rubio’s speech therefore stood as a reaffirmation of the 2025 NSS, not in its rhetorical form, but in its underlying logic.

It confirmed that the era of liberal stewardship has given way to a model of conditional cooperation among sovereign actors. The alliance endures, but no longer as an unquestioned framework of solidarity. It persists as a negotiated arrangement, shaped increasingly by power, interest, and strategic necessity.

Placed between the tensions over Greenland and the escalation toward conflict with Iran that would soon come, the speech acquired an even clearer significance. It represents the moment at which the Trump Administration attempted to reassure its allies — without relinquishing the very strategic posture that had unsettled them in the first place.

The Iran War and the Broader Paradox

The most dramatic manifestation of the new American strategic posture emerged with the outbreak of war at the end of February 2026 between the United States and Israel, on one side, and Iran on the other.

The joint U.S.-Israeli strikes against Iranian military infrastructure and nuclear-related facilities represented one of the most significant escalations of hostilities in the Middle East in decades. The conflict quickly expanded into a regional confrontation involving missile exchanges, drone warfare, and threats to global energy supply routes such as the Strait of Hormuz.

The strategic significance of this episode lies not only in its regional implications but also in what it revealed about the evolving nature of American power. First, the operation demonstrated the Trump Administration’s continued willingness to deploy overwhelming military force when core strategic interests are perceived to be at stake.

Despite rhetoric surrounding restraint and prioritisation of national interests, the United States remains capable of projecting decisive power far beyond its immediate geographic sphere.¹²

Second, the crisis exposed a growing gap between American strategic decision-making and traditional European consultation mechanisms. Many European governments were caught by surprise by both the scale and timing of the operation, reinforcing the perception that the Trump Administration is increasingly prepared to act unilaterally when necessary.



*US Secretary of State Marco Rubio
(Shutterstock)*

Third, the conflict underscored the Middle East’s continuing centrality in global geopolitics. The confrontation rapidly produced disruptions in energy markets, fears of escalation across the Gulf region, and renewed debates about the stability of global energy supply chains - and particularly those running through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most critical maritime corridors in the global economy.

Yet another consequential implication of the Iran war may lie elsewhere: in the reaction it has provoked across Europe. Across the continent, governments have largely refused to participate in offensive military operations against Iran. While some countries have allowed limited logistical cooperation through existing NATO frameworks, most European leaders have made clear that they do not consider the conflict to be Europe’s war.

This refusal has revealed a deeper transformation within the transatlantic alliance. For decades, Europe largely followed American leadership in major geopolitical crises, even when internal disagreements existed. That was particularly the case in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the frequent mockery from figures such as Donald Trump about European “free-riding” on American security guarantees, the European military participation and sacrifice was significant. European NATO allies deployed tens of thousands of troops over two decades and collectively suffered more than 1,200 military fatalities in the two conflicts — approximately 1,000 in Afghanistan and around 300 in Iraq. The United Kingdom alone lost 457 soldiers in Afghanistan and 179 in Iraq, while other European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, Denmark, and the Netherlands also sustained combat losses.

In the case of Iran, however, European governments have drawn clear strategic boundaries. Leaders such as Keir Starmer in the UK have explicitly stated that that country will not be dragged into a conflict that does not serve its national interest. France and Spain have adopted even firmer positions, restricting the use of their airspace or military infrastructure for offensive operations.

The underlying logic is unmistakable: ideological affinity or shared history — as Trump has reminded Europeans many times — should not override national interest. The latest conflict in Iran provides perhaps the clearest demonstration of a principle that has always governed international politics but is often obscured by political rhetoric.

Countries ultimately act according to their strategic interests rather than ideological alignments. The United States and Israel have pursued military escalation because they believe it serves their national security objectives. European governments, facing different strategic realities and vulnerabilities, particularly regarding energy markets and regional stability, have concluded that participation in the conflict does not serve theirs. Europeans seem to have learned Trump’s lesson... yet not in the way he presumably wanted.

Europeans do not see Iran as an existential threat to them. Indeed, most even claim it was not for the U.S. either. Spain’s, and the world’s, first modern novel provides a valid metaphor:

“Look, your Grace,” responded Sancho; “what we see there are not giants but windmills, and what seem to be their arms are the sails that turned by the wind.”

Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes

In this sense, the Iran war illustrates the broader paradox within the contemporary conservative international ecosystem that is discussed above. While ideological networks linking conservative actors across the Atlantic have grown stronger over the past decade, the behaviour of governments demonstrates that national interest remains the ultimate organising principle of foreign policy. Even leaders politically sympathetic to the current American administration have been forced to draw limits once the concrete strategic consequences for their own countries became clear.

Beyond the immediate diplomatic tensions, however, the war may carry even deeper geopolitical implications for Europe itself. Several European leaders — most notably Emmanuel Macron and Pedro Sánchez — have already begun to frame the crisis as evidence of the need for greater European strategic autonomy. Both have argued in recent years that Europe must gradually develop the capacity to operate as an independent geopolitical actor rather than relying indefinitely on American leadership.

The Iran conflict may provide precisely the catalyst such arguments required. For years, debates about European strategic autonomy remained largely theoretical, often dismissed either as unrealistic or as incompatible with NATO. The experience of the Iran crisis has begun to shift that conversation.

If the United States is increasingly willing to take major geopolitical decisions without consulting its European allies, then the argument follows that Europe must develop the institutional and strategic capacity to respond independently.

This does not necessarily imply a rupture with the transatlantic alliance. Rather, it suggests the gradual emergence of a third geopolitical pole within the Western world. In this vision, Europe would increasingly seek to consolidate itself as a distinct strategic bloc — alongside the United States and the major Eurasian powers — capable of defending its own interests in a more competitive international environment.

If that transformation occurs, the implications for the international system would be considerable. A more integrated European bloc would alter the balance of power not only within the transatlantic relationship but also within the broader competition between the United States, China, and other emerging powers.

Ironically, the war launched in part to reinforce American strategic credibility may therefore accelerate the very geopolitical evolution that Washington has historically sought to prevent: the emergence of a more autonomous Europe.

At the same time, the crisis has also revealed a structural limitation of American power itself. Military power, that is the ability to destroy, is only one dimension of geopolitical strength. Equally important is the ability to build, stabilise, and maintain the systems upon which global order depends.

The United States retains unmatched military capabilities. Yet reopening and stabilising the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a military challenge. It is a political, diplomatic, and economic one. In this respect, the Iran conflict illustrates a growing asymmetry in the international system. The United States possesses extraordinary capacity to project force, but its ability to stabilise the geopolitical consequences of that force has become increasingly constrained.

Europe, by contrast, may lack the military reach of the United States, but it retains something America increasingly struggles to mobilise: diplomatic credibility and economic interdependence across multiple regions.

If the United States represents the hard power of the Western alliance, Europe may increasingly become its stabilising force — the actor capable of rebuilding diplomatic channels and economic frameworks once military escalation has run its course.

For the transatlantic relationship, this dynamic could prove decisive. The Iran war may not mark the end of the transatlantic alliance. But it may represent the moment when Europe finally begins to recognise that the geopolitical environment of the twenty-first century requires it to define its own strategic path.

In that sense, the war may ultimately prove to be the last drop—the event that forces Europe to awaken to the reality that the era of comfortable strategic dependence is coming to an end.

From Liberal Stewardship to Imperium

Taken together, these developments reveal an important transformation in how American power is exercised, engaging in the structural consolidation of the “Age of Sovereignty” as the dominant organising logic of contemporary international politics. For decades, U.S. foreign policy was often framed in the language of international stewardship, which meant maintaining global stability, supporting institutional governance, and defending the liberal international order. The events of 2025–2026 suggest that a different pattern is emerging.

In the “Age of Sovereignty”, the United States continues to function as the central organising power of the international system, but it increasingly does so through the language and behaviour of a traditional great power. Strategic geography, spheres of influence, and the selective use of military force are once again visible features of American policy.

In other words, the United States has long operated as a form of global imperium. The international order that emerged after the Second World War was itself the product of overwhelming American power and strategic dominance. What may be changing under the new doctrine is not the existence of that power, but the degree to which it is now openly acknowledged and strategically embraced.

For European observers accustomed to interpreting American foreign policy through the language of the liberal global order, this shift requires an important conceptual adjustment. The United States has not withdrawn from the world. It is instead redefining the terms under which it exercises power within itself. An order that resulted from imperial dominance is now being described more openly as such. The United States has long acted as an empire; it now increasingly speaks as one.

Europe's Response to the “America First” Foreign Policy

If the previous sections have examined the intellectual foundations and operational manifestations of the emerging American strategic doctrine, the next question concerns how Europe has begun to respond to this transformation. America's foreign policy posture, particularly as it is described in the 2025 NSS, forced European governments to reassess assumptions that had long structured the transatlantic relationship.

For much of the post–Cold War period, Europe operated within a strategic environment defined by American leadership and institutional continuity. Security guarantees provided through NATO, combined with a broadly cooperative economic framework, allowed European states to concentrate primarily on internal integration and economic development rather than on geopolitical competition.

The re-emergence of great-power rivalry and the increasingly transactional character of American foreign policy have begun to challenge this equilibrium. As the Trump Administration places greater emphasis on burden-sharing, industrial competition, and strategic reciprocity, European governments find themselves navigating a new geopolitical landscape in which the assumptions of the previous era no longer hold.

Europe's response to this shift has been neither uniform nor immediate. Instead, it reflects the continent's structural complexity: a collection of sovereign states with different historical experiences, economic interests, and security perceptions. Some governments have interpreted the American message primarily as a warning that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own defence. Others have viewed it as a signal that the transatlantic relationship itself may be entering a more uncertain phase.

Understanding these different reactions requires moving beyond short-term diplomatic disputes and examining the deeper structural constraints that shape Europe's position in the international system. The challenge facing European policymakers is not simply how to respond to a more assertive American strategy, but how to define Europe's own geopolitical role in a world increasingly organised around strategic competition among major powers.



*US Army 250th Anniversary Military Parade
(Shutterstock)*

The Structural American Red Line: No United States of Europe & No Eurasian Consolidation

Beneath the shifting rhetoric of American administrations — whether liberal internationalist or sovereigntist — there exists a remarkably consistent geopolitical principle that has shaped U.S. grand strategy for more than a century. That principle is the prevention of a consolidated power bloc capable of rivaling the United States’ primacy.

This strategic instinct is not uniquely American. In fact, it represents the continuation of a much older geopolitical tradition that long guided the foreign policy of another maritime power: The British Empire.

For centuries, British strategy was built upon a simple but relentless principle: No single power should be allowed to dominate the European continent. Whether the potential hegemon appeared in the form of Habsburg Spain in the sixteenth century, Bourbons and later Napoleonic France in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Imperial Germany in the early twentieth century, or the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Britain repeatedly intervened — sometimes militarily, sometimes diplomatically, often financially — to preserve a balance of power on the continent.

Yet the British conception of the *balance of power* was never purely mechanical. It was not merely a matter of keeping states numerically equal. Rather, British policymakers sought to prevent the emergence of any continental hegemon capable of mobilising Europe’s industrial, demographic, and military resources under a unified strategic direction.

The logic behind this policy was rooted in Britain’s geopolitical position. As an island power with a vast maritime empire, Britain depended upon freedom of navigation, open sea lanes, and access to global markets. A unified or hegemonic Europe — particularly one controlled by a powerful continental state — would possess the economic and military capacity to challenge Britain’s maritime supremacy and potentially threaten the integrity of its imperial system. As historian Paul Kennedy has shown,¹³ British grand strategy throughout the modern era rested on the careful management of the European balance, precisely to safeguard its global imperial network.

During the period commonly referred to as *Pax Britannica* (1815–1914, the century following the defeat of Napoleon), this strategic logic became the central organising principle of British grand strategy. Having emerged from the Napoleonic Wars in a favourable position, Britain’s primary objective was to maintain a stable balance of power on the European continent while concentrating its resources on global imperial expansion.

Strategically, this reflected a clear conception of grand strategy. In political and military thought, strategy is the pursuit of defined objectives through the coordinated use of actions and resources. A grand strategy extends this logic over the long-term and across multiple domains of state activity. Once a state defines its overarching objectives, its diplomatic, economic, military, and political policies should align with and contribute to the realisation of those goals. As Henry Kissinger observed,¹⁴ grand strategy represents the framework through which states reconcile their long-term objectives with the distribution of power in the international system.

Although the concept originated in military theory, grand strategy encompasses a broader range of instruments: diplomacy, trade, financial influence, industrial development, and military power. Even relatively small states may pursue a grand strategy if they possess a coherent long-term vision, though in the case of the British Empire, the scale of its grand strategic ambitions was truly global.

The institutional foundations of Britain’s nineteenth-century strategy were laid at the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815). Following Napoleon’s defeat, the victorious power — Great Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia, with France later reintegrated as a fifth major power — sought to establish a durable European order.

The resulting system, commonly referred to as the *Concert of Europe*, rested on the recognition that stability depended upon maintaining a balance among the major powers while respecting their territorial spheres of influence.

Periodic diplomatic congresses were intended to manage crises and prevent the escalation of conflicts that might destabilise the continental equilibrium. The Vienna system was one of the most successful diplomatic frameworks in European history precisely because it institutionalised the principle of balance rather than imposing ideological uniformity across the continent.

Unlike the other major powers gathered in Vienna, Britain had relatively few territorial ambitions within Europe itself. The wealth and power of the British Empire derived primarily from overseas possessions in the Americas, Africa and what is now called the Indo-Pacific. What London required from the European continent was not territory but strategic equilibrium.

The emergence of a dominant continental hegemon — whether France, Russia, or later Germany — could threaten Britain's maritime supremacy and disrupt the global trade networks upon which its empire depended.

British strategy, therefore, evolved around what later scholars would describe as a form of "offshore balancing." Rather than maintaining permanent military commitments on the continent, Britain preferred to remain strategically detached, intervening only when the balance of power appeared threatened. As John Mearsheimer notes,¹⁵ offshore balancing represents the strategy typically adopted by powerful states located outside major continental power centres.

This approach allowed Britain to minimise the costs of continental warfare while retaining the ability to influence the outcome of major conflicts. It relied on a flexible combination of diplomacy, financial subsidies to allied powers, limited interventions involving land forces, and above all, naval supremacy.

The Royal Navy constituted the central pillar of this strategy. Throughout the nineteenth century, its capabilities exceeded those of any European rival, allowing Britain to secure its homeland against invasion while simultaneously protecting imperial trade routes and projecting power worldwide.

British military doctrine, therefore, reflected the empire's global priorities. The army remained relatively small compared to those of continental powers and was often deployed in colonial conflicts on the empire's periphery.

When continental wars did occur, Britain preferred to finance and support allied armies while using its naval power to impose economic pressure on the adversary through blockades and control of maritime trade.

This strategic posture was reinforced by what Victorian statesman Lord Salisbury famously described as "splendid isolation."¹⁶ Britain avoided permanent alliances on the European continent whenever possible, preferring to maintain diplomatic flexibility while concentrating on imperial expansion and global commerce. In short, the geopolitical principle underpinning British grand strategy can be summarised succinctly: Maintain balance in Europe, prevent continental consolidation, and preserve maritime supremacy.

When global leadership passed from the British Empire to the United States after the Second World War, this strategic logic did not disappear. It evolved. The period often described as Pax Americana — the international order that emerged after 1945 under American leadership—shared several structural similarities with the earlier Pax Britannica. Like Britain before it, the United States became the principal maritime and financial power of the international system, maintaining open trade routes, underwriting global security arrangements, and shaping the institutional architecture of the global economy.

At the same time, the United States inherited a similar geopolitical imperative: preventing the emergence of a dominant power capable of consolidating Eurasia. In this context, American policy toward Europe has always contained a subtle but important ambiguity. While successive U.S. administrations have rhetorically encouraged European unity and frequently expressed the desire for a more coherent interlocutor in Brussels, Washington has never been fully comfortable with the prospect of a truly sovereign and geopolitically autonomous "United States of Europe."

A fully consolidated European political entity — particularly one capable of pursuing an independent strategic course across the Eurasian landmass — would represent precisely the type of continental power configuration that Anglo-American grand strategy has historically sought to prevent.



*HMS Queen Elizabeth arriving in Portsmouth
(Shutterstock)*

Seen through this lens, the occasional American sympathy for European Eurosceptic movements becomes easier to understand. Support for parties critical of deeper European integration is often interpreted in Europe as an expression of ideological affinity with nationalist or sovereigntist politics. Yet the underlying logic is more structural than ideological. A fragmented Europe composed of sovereign states interacting individually with America remains far easier for the United States to manage strategically than a unified continental bloc capable of acting as an independent geopolitical pole. The issue, therefore, is not primarily about sovereignty or ideological alignment, but about geopolitics.

In many respects, the United States appears today to be moving toward a strategic posture that echoes certain elements of Britain’s earlier approach. As the Trump Administration increasingly prioritises domestic industrial resilience and hemispheric security, it is seeking to reinforce its position as a continental-scale power spanning the North American landmass and its surrounding maritime space.

Within such a framework, parallels with Britain’s nineteenth-century posture become more visible. Just as Britain once sought to remain strategically insulated from continental power struggles while preserving the balance of Europe, the United States may increasingly seek to maintain its dominance within the Western Hemisphere while preventing the consolidation of rival power centres across Eurasia.

The intellectual articulation of this concern is most famously traced to the work of Sir Halford Mackinder at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mackinder’s Heartland Theory warned that control over the central Eurasian landmass, stretching from Eastern Europe through Russia and Central Asia, could generate a geopolitical entity powerful enough to dominate the “World Island” of Eurasia and ultimately challenge maritime powers.

His famous dictum captured the essence of the argument:

“Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the world.”¹⁷

Although Mackinder wrote at a time when Britain still stood as the dominant global power, the structural insight he articulated would prove equally relevant for the United States as it assumed the role of the principal extra-continental power responsible for maintaining balance across Eurasia.

While American policymakers rarely cite classical geopolitical theories explicitly, the structural insight behind them continues to shape strategic behaviour in practice. The central concern guiding U.S. grand strategy remains the prevention of a consolidated Eurasian power configuration capable of rivalling American global influence.

From this perspective, the most dangerous geopolitical outcome for Washington would not necessarily be a strong Europe or a strong Russia individually, but rather the emergence of a stable strategic accommodation between the two. A geopolitical space combining Europe’s industrial and technological capacity with Russia’s vast natural resources and strategic depth could form the nucleus of a much broader Eurasian configuration extending toward Asia. Such a development would fundamentally alter the global balance of power.

This concern is not new. It echoes anxieties that already shaped British strategic thinking in the late 1930s, when London viewed the possibility of a durable accommodation between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union with profound alarm. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, which temporarily aligned the two continental powers, appeared to British strategists as the nightmare scenario of Eurasian consolidation: the industrial might of Central Europe combined with the Soviet Union’s territorial depth and resources. Even though the alliance ultimately proved temporary, the episode reinforced the longstanding British fear that cooperation among major continental powers could produce a geopolitical configuration capable of overwhelming maritime powers.

Therefore, the persistent strategic tension between Europe and Russia serves an important structural function within the existing international system. As long as the two remain locked in mutual suspicion, or even direct confrontation, the possibility of a consolidated Eurasian bloc remains remote.

Why the United States Cannot Accept a Europe-China Strategic Alignment

This dynamic produces a paradox for the transatlantic alliance. A Europe weakened by prolonged confrontation with Russia may appear, on the surface, to represent a liability for the Western alliance and even for NATO’s long-term cohesion. Yet from a purely geopolitical standpoint, such a situation also ensures that Europe remains strategically dependent on the United States for security guarantees.

This does not imply that the Trump Administration actively seeks instability on the European continent. However, it does suggest that the United States has strong structural incentives to prevent the emergence of any political arrangement that could produce a stable Europe–Russia strategic accommodation.

As long as the geopolitical fault line between Europe and Russia remains active, the transatlantic security architecture retains its central organising role. NATO may face tensions and internal debates, but the fundamental dependence of Europe on American strategic leadership persists.

From this perspective, the continuation of rivalry between Europe and Russia — even if it produces periods of instability — may be viewed in Washington as a manageable cost compared to the far more consequential risk of Eurasian consolidation.

The strategic objective is therefore not necessarily to produce a permanently weakened Europe, but rather to prevent the emergence of a geopolitical configuration in which Europe could act as the western anchor of a broader Eurasian power structure capable of challenging American primacy. At the same time, a Russia that remains strategically separated from Europe is also easier for the United States to manage diplomatically. A Russia that is neither fully integrated into a European system nor firmly embedded within a Sino-centric bloc remains more susceptible to geopolitical balancing. In this sense, preventing Russia’s long-term alignment with China — nowadays, America’s principal geopolitical competitor — constitutes an additional structural objective of U.S. strategy. The logic echoes an earlier moment of Cold War diplomacy: just as part of the strategic logic of the first Cold War involved preventing the consolidation of a Sino–Soviet bloc, the emerging geopolitical competition of the twenty-first century may increasingly revolve around preventing the formation of a durable Russia–China strategic axis.¹⁸

If a strategic rapprochement between Europe and Russia represents one potential challenge to the geopolitical balance traditionally favoured by the United States, an equally sensitive scenario would be the emergence of a deep economic and technological alignment between Europe and China.

From the perspective of American grand strategy, such an alignment would risk fragmenting the Western technological and industrial ecosystem at precisely the moment when strategic competition with China is intensifying. Yet the implications of such a development go well beyond trade and industrial cooperation.

In the contemporary strategic environment, technology cannot be dissociated from defence and security capabilities. Technological infrastructure increasingly underpins military systems, intelligence gathering, cyber operations, communications networks, and critical national infrastructure.

As a result, a deepening technological integration between Europe and China would inevitably carry security implications. The greater the technological dependence on Chinese systems, platforms, standards, and supply chains, the greater the likelihood that Chinese actors—state-linked companies, digital platforms, telecommunications providers, and infrastructure operators—would acquire structural influence within European technological ecosystems. Over time, this could translate into a broader security footprint, whether through data access, strategic participation in infrastructure, cyber capabilities, or dual-use technological integration. In other words, technological proximity inevitably carries the potential for strategic proximity.

The concern is not hypothetical. Over the past two decades, China has become one of the EU’s most significant trading partners. European companies have built extensive commercial and manufacturing ties with Chinese markets, while Chinese firms have increasingly sought access to European technological expertise, industrial networks, and consumer markets.

This growing economic interdependence presents America with a strategic dilemma. The United States now views the competition with China not merely as a geopolitical rivalry but as a systemic contest over technological leadership, industrial dominance and control over the critical infrastructures of the twenty-first-century economy. Semiconductors, artificial intelligence, telecommunications networks, rare-earth supply chains, and advanced manufacturing systems have all become arenas for strategic competition.

Europe possesses several assets that are particularly valuable in this competition: highly specialised industrial sectors, advanced engineering capabilities, globally competitive manufacturing firms, and a sophisticated consumer market that can accelerate technological diffusion.

If Chinese companies were able to integrate these assets into their broader economic system — through investment, joint ventures, acquisitions, or supply-chain integration — the result could significantly strengthen China’s long-term technological trajectory. In other words, the European market could become a multiplier for Chinese technological power.

A second concern relates to the structure of global supply chains. Over the past two decades, many European industries have developed significant manufacturing and sourcing dependencies on Chinese production networks. From pharmaceuticals and rare-earth processing to electronics and renewable energy technologies, China has become an indispensable provider to numerous European supply chains.

If this dependency were to deepen further, Europe’s industrial orientation could gradually shift toward Asia. From the United States’ perspective, such a development would undermine efforts to construct a coherent Western industrial base capable of competing with China. Instead of reinforcing a shared technological ecosystem across the Atlantic, Europe would therefore increasingly find itself embedded within China-centred supply chains.

A third concern lies in the geopolitical consequences of technological fragmentation. The United States has increasingly framed its competition with China as a contest between rival technological systems.

Export controls, investment restrictions, and technology-transfer limitations have been designed to prevent China from gaining access to critical Western innovations in fields such as advanced semiconductors, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence.

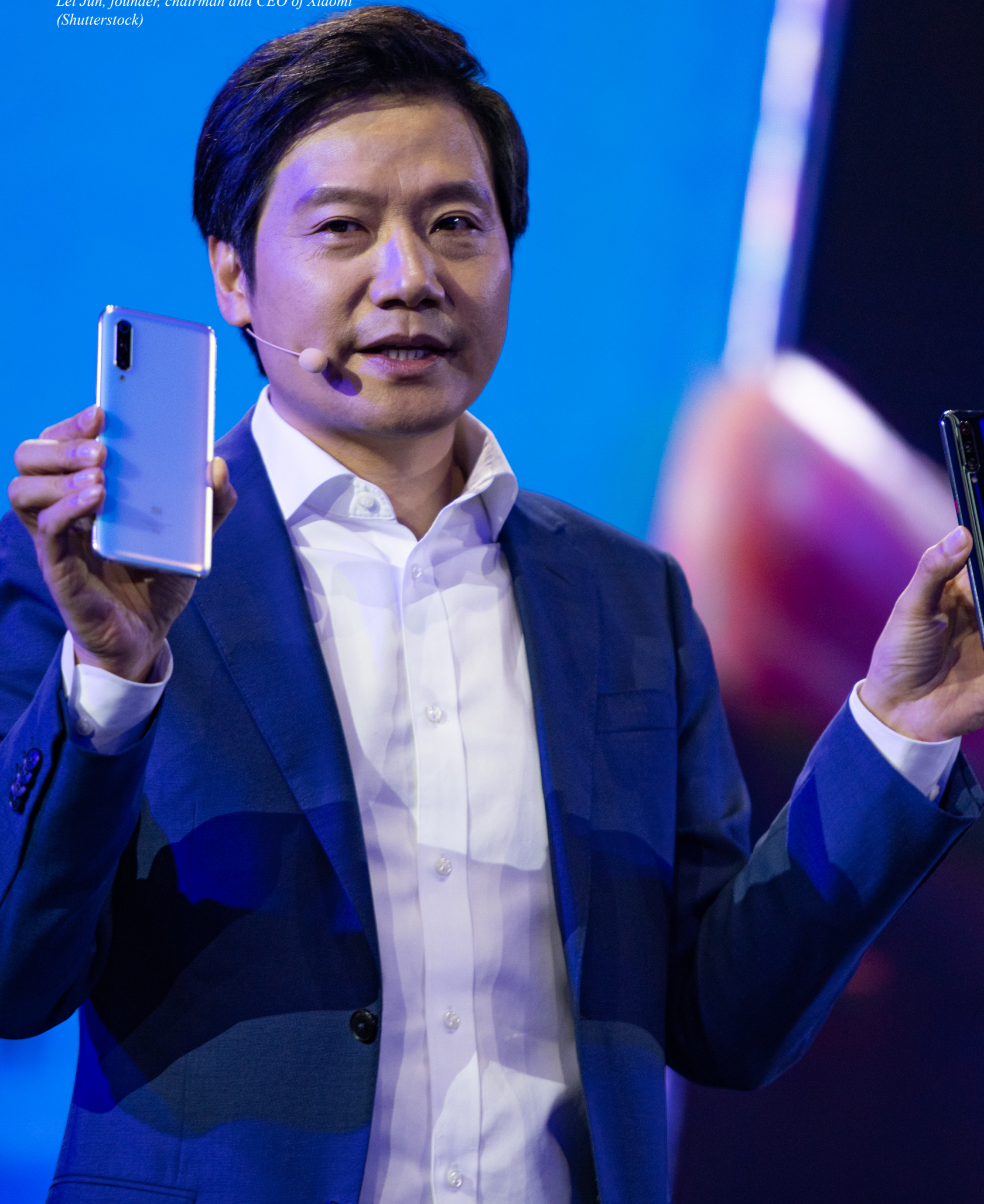
However, these restrictions can only be effective if they are broadly coordinated among allied economies. If European governments were to pursue a significantly more open technological relationship with China than the United States, the result could be a fragmentation of the Western technological front. Chinese firms might gain indirect access to Western technologies through European partnerships, undermining the effectiveness of American restrictions.

For America, maintaining technological cohesion among Western economies is therefore a strategic priority. Yet the underlying tension here is clear. European governments and corporations often view their relationship with China primarily through the lens of economic opportunity. China represents a vast market, a source of investment, and a major industrial partner for several key European sectors.

Paradoxically, some of the political dynamics currently shaping the transatlantic relationship may themselves be contributing to the very drift that the United States fears. The increasingly confrontational tone adopted by the Trump Administration toward European allies, particularly in relation to defence burden-sharing and trade disputes, has introduced new friction into the relationship.

By framing the alliance in highly transactional terms, centred on defence spending targets, tariff disputes, and economic concessions, the United States risks pushing European governments to reconsider the range of their strategic options. In this environment, China’s economic offers — investment flows, industrial partnerships, market access, and participation in large-scale infrastructure and technological ecosystems — can appear increasingly attractive to European policymakers and corporations seeking alternative sources of growth and stability.¹⁹

*Lei Jun, founder, chairman and CEO of Xiaomi
(Shutterstock)*



If the transatlantic relationship were to be reduced purely to balance-sheet calculations — trade flows, defence spending, or transactional economic benefits — then the incentives for European actors to deepen economic engagement with China could become even stronger. From a strictly material perspective, China may well be one of the most attractive economic partners for Europe over the remainder of the twenty-first century. Its vast domestic market, industrial scale, financial resources, and growing technological ecosystem offer virtually unmatched opportunities.

At the same time, the ideological dimension of this emerging geopolitical competition in the “Age of Sovereignty” may be less decisive than is often assumed. Contrary to the ideological confrontations that characterised much of the twentieth century, neither China nor the United States appears to be engaged today in a systematic global effort to export a coherent ideological model comparable to Cold War communism, liberal democratic universalism, or, now, conservatism under Trump. China is not actively promoting a global communist revolution, just as the United States under the current “America First” framework is not seeking to export a unified conservative political doctrine. Both powers primarily pursue influence, power projection, and geopolitical advantage.

This shift is already producing subtle political consequences within Europe itself. In recent years, strands of the emerging European New Right — particularly those most strongly committed to national sovereignty — have begun to express growing scepticism toward the United States. This sentiment does not necessarily translate into sympathy for China, but it does reflect a broader unease with what some perceive as the increasingly transactional and interventionist nature of American foreign policy. The debate over trade disputes, defence spending pressures, and sanctions regimes has contributed to the perception that Washington may treat allies no differently from competitors when national interests are at stake.

At the same time, Beijing has begun to develop its own outreach strategy toward conservative and sovereigntist political forces across Europe. Chinese diplomacy has increasingly framed its international posture in terms of respect for national sovereignty, non-interference in domestic political affairs, and resistance to what it characterises as Western ideological conditionality.

This messaging is clearly designed to appeal to political movements that prioritise national autonomy and state sovereignty. While such efforts remain limited and often discreet, they illustrate how geopolitical competition is beginning to extend into the ideological and political ecosystems of European states themselves.²⁰

In this environment, the distinction between ideological alignment and national interest becomes increasingly blurred. Some conservative political forces and governments—particularly those that place a strong emphasis on national sovereignty—may come to perceive China not necessarily as an ideological ally but as a power that is less intrusive in domestic political affairs than the United States sometimes appears to be.

At the very least, this dynamic could encourage more states to adopt a strategy of geopolitical hedging. Rather than aligning unequivocally with one bloc, governments may seek to cultivate relations with both major powers simultaneously. By maintaining economic ties with China while preserving security links with the United States, smaller and mid-sized powers may hope to benefit from the competition between the two geopolitical centres while preserving their own strategic autonomy. In such a configuration, the rivalry between America and China could itself become a mechanism for indirectly protecting the sovereignty of smaller states, as neither great power would wish to push them decisively into the rival camp.

A frequently cited example of such an approach within Europe itself is Hungary’s so-called “Connectivity Strategy,”²¹ developed in recent years by that country’s government as a guiding principle of its foreign and economic policy. Rather than choosing between competing geopolitical blocs, Hungary has sought to position itself as a node of connection between them. The strategy emphasises maintaining strong security and institutional ties with the Western alliance — Hungary remains a member of both NATO and the EU — while simultaneously expanding economic and technological cooperation with non-Western partners such as China, South Korea, Turkey, and the Gulf states. At the same time, Hungary has maintained energy cooperation with Russia, continuing to rely on Russian oil and natural gas supplies through long-term contracts and infrastructure links.

In practical terms, this approach has attracted large-scale foreign investment from multiple sources, including Chinese battery manufacturers, South Korean electronics firms, German automotive companies and Middle Eastern financial partners. Hungarian policymakers argue that such diversification reduces strategic vulnerability by preventing excessive dependence on any single economic partner while maximising access to global supply chains. This positioning has also allowed Hungary to cultivate a diplomatic posture that it presents as capable of facilitating dialogue between rival camps. By maintaining working relations with both Western allies and Russia, Hungarian leaders have occasionally portrayed their country as a potential intermediary in entrenched conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. Whether one views this strategy as pragmatic balancing, controversial hedging, or geopolitical opportunism, it nonetheless illustrates how some mid-sized European states are attempting to navigate an increasingly multipolar environment by cultivating simultaneous relationships with multiple centres of power rather than aligning exclusively with one geopolitical bloc.

Hungarian officials themselves frame this approach explicitly in terms of connectivity rather than bloc alignment. As Balázs Orbán has argued, Hungary’s strategy is to “build connectivity between East and West rather than force countries to choose between them,”²² emphasising that the country seeks to remain integrated within Western security structures while simultaneously serving as a meeting point for global economic flows.

This concept has also been elaborated in analytical work by the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, which describes connectivity as a strategy aimed at positioning Hungary “as a hub linking the major economic and geopolitical centres of the global economy,”²³ allowing the country to benefit from competing supply chains and investment networks while avoiding overdependence on any single bloc. Such a development would not necessarily mean a formal geopolitical realignment. But it could gradually erode the strategic cohesion that has historically defined the Western alliance. In this sense, the American concern is less about Europe choosing China than about Europe drifting toward strategic ambiguity.

If the economic incentives associated with the Chinese market begin to outweigh the perceived benefits of transatlantic alignment, then the geopolitical architecture that has underpinned Western cooperation since the Second World War could slowly weaken. For the United States, preventing that drift has therefore become a central strategic objective.

This explains why American policymakers have increasingly pressured European governments to restrict Chinese involvement in critical infrastructure, limit technological cooperation in sensitive sectors, and reconsider large-scale Chinese investment projects.



Railway in Vientiane, Laos: A part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Shutterstock)

Europe's Structural Dilemma

If the previous sections examined the strategic logic shaping American policy in the “Age of Sovereignty”, the next question concerns Europe’s position within that system. The difficulty facing European policymakers is not merely external. It is structural.

The EU occupies a unique position in global politics. It represents one of the largest economic areas in the world, possesses advanced technological and industrial capabilities, and exercises considerable regulatory influence over global markets. Yet it lacks several of the attributes traditionally associated with geopolitical actors.

This asymmetry produces a structural contradiction: Europe possesses the economic weight of a great power but the political coherence of a coalition — at best. As the international system becomes increasingly competitive, this contradiction becomes increasingly visible, yet ongoing geopolitical stress points might provoke a sudden shift in that status quo.

Europe is Not a Country

The first element of Europe’s dilemma lies in a simple but frequently overlooked reality: Europe is not a country.

Despite decades of institutional integration, the continent remains a grouping of sovereign nations whose strategic priorities often diverge. Historical experience, geography, economic structure, and security perceptions vary widely across the continent.

For the Baltic states and Poland, Russia represents the central geopolitical concern. For Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Italy, or Greece, the worries are different, including instability in North Africa, migration flows, and energy security in the Mediterranean basin. Germany’s export-driven industrial model generates sensitivities regarding trade relations with China that differ from those of other member states.

These divergences do not prevent cooperation, but they complicate the development of a unified strategic posture.

Taken together, these factors create a paradox. Europe collectively possesses immense economic and technological capabilities, yet it struggles to translate those capabilities into a unified geopolitical posture. As a result, the EU functions less as a single geopolitical actor than as a coordination framework among national governments. Foreign policy authority ultimately remains concentrated in national capitals. Decisions regarding military intervention, sanctions regimes, defence partnerships, or energy security continue to be shaped primarily at the national level.

The Temptation of Strategic Autonomy

Within this context, the concept of European strategic autonomy has gained prominence in recent years.²⁴ The appeal of the idea is clear. A more autonomous Europe could, in theory, pursue its own geopolitical interests without excessive dependence on external powers. It would possess stronger defence capabilities, resilient industrial supply chains, and greater diplomatic flexibility when navigating global rivalries.

The Iran war of 2026 has given new urgency to this debate. For many European policymakers, the episode confirmed a long-standing concern: that the United States is increasingly willing to take major geopolitical decisions with limited consultation with its European allies, even when the consequences of those decisions fall disproportionately on Europe itself. The crisis therefore reinforced the perception that Europe must develop greater capacity to defend its own interests when the United States’ priorities diverge from those of its allies.

The Iran war does not stand alone. It has reshaped the political meaning of another debate that had already been destabilising the transatlantic relationship for years: the recurring American accusation that Europe is a free-rider on defence. From a European perspective, America’s credibility to lecture its allies about what it means to be a loyal partner has been severely weakened. It is difficult for European governments to accept moralising appeals to alliance solidarity from a Trump Administration that, only weeks earlier, was openly pressing for U.S. control over Greenland, a territory belonging to the Kingdom of Denmark, a NATO ally.

In March 2025, President Trump told NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte that U.S. control of Greenland was necessary for international security and said, "I think that will happen." For many Europeans, that episode was not a secondary diplomatic eccentricity but a revelation: the United States was simultaneously demanding allied loyalty and openly advancing claims against allied territory.

The result is that the defence-spending debate is no longer heard in Europe as a good-faith conversation about burden-sharing alone. It is increasingly interpreted through the prism of power asymmetry and hegemonic interest. When Washington insists that Europeans must pay more for their own defence, many in Europe no longer hear only a legitimate call for responsibility. They also hear a demand issued by a power that is prepared to instrumentalise the alliance in pursuit of America's own strategic objectives, whether in the Arctic, in the Gulf, or in the broader restructuring of Europe's security and energy dependence.

This matters because the empirical basis of the free-riding argument is more complicated than American rhetoric often suggests. The United States still dominates NATO spending, but the gap has narrowed, and European spending has risen sharply. NATO's 2025 estimates put total defence expenditure at about \$1.405 trillion, of which the United States accounts for roughly \$845.3 billion, or about 60.2 percent, while European allies and Canada account for about \$559.3 billion, or roughly 39.8 percent.²⁵ NATO also states that European allies and Canada increased their collective defence spending from 1.43 percent of GDP in 2014 to 2.02 percent in 2024,²⁶ and by 2025 all allies were expected to meet or exceed the old 2 percent benchmark.

At the national level, the same picture emerges. NATO's 2025 estimates place U.S. defence spending at 3.22 percent of GDP, down from 3.71 percent in 2014.²⁷ By comparison, the Council of the EU says that EU member states' defence spending is expected to reach 2.1 percent of GDP in 2025, up from 1.9 percent in 2024, with total spending of about €381 billion.²⁸ That is still below the American military burden, but it is not indicative of a continent that is doing nothing. It is the picture of a continent belatedly but unmistakably rearming.

Nor is it entirely accurate to suggest that the United States bears an unlimited European burden at its own expense.

Even the Pentagon's dedicated FY2025 European Deterrence Initiative request was \$2.91 billion.²⁹ Against the FY2025 Department of Defense topline of \$849.9 billion, that is roughly 0.34 percent of the Pentagon budget. That figure does not capture all costs associated with U.S. basing and deployments in Europe, so it should not be treated as a complete accounting. But it does illustrate a broader point: the specifically earmarked U.S. outlay for deterrence in Europe is relatively small when set against the scale of total American defence spending.

In addition, a growing number of European policymakers have begun to reinterpret the historical role of the American military presence in Europe. For decades, the extensive network of U.S. bases and security guarantees on the continent was widely perceived as a form of strategic protection generously extended to Western Europe during the Cold War. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the immediate existential threat to Western Europe, the persistence of this security architecture has increasingly been seen differently.

From this new perspective, the American security umbrella did not merely provide protection; it also had the structural effect of disincentivising European countries from developing autonomous defence capabilities of their own. As long as the United States remained the ultimate guarantor of European security, European governments faced little incentive to invest heavily in independent military capacity. The result was the gradual emergence of a deeply asymmetric security relationship in which Europe became structurally dependent on American protection.

The financial realities of the American military presence reinforce this interpretation. Although the United States maintains significant military infrastructure across Europe, the direct budgetary cost of sustaining that presence represents only a very small fraction of total American defence spending. Taken together, this explains why the Ukraine war has become so politically explosive in European strategic debate. It is true that the United States did not provoke Russia's invasion. Russia launched the full-scale invasion in February 2022, and that remains the central legal and moral fact. At the same time, it is also true that many Europeans increasingly believe that years of US-led NATO enlargement and Western forward pressure helped create the strategic context³⁰ within which President Vladimir Putin framed his claims and escalated his revisionism.

What is less contestable is that the war has generated major strategic and economic benefits for the United States, even as it has imposed severe costs on Europe. Europe increased its support for Ukraine in 2025, even as U.S. assistance stalled. Meanwhile, much of the spending by the United States found its way back across the Atlantic. According to some estimates, 70 percent of American spending on the Ukraine war has been used to buy weapons from U.S. manufacturers, replenish and modernise U.S. stocks, and support U.S. forces in Europe.³¹

Seen from Europe, the cumulative effect is clear. The war accelerated Europe’s break with Russian pipeline gas, increased dependence on LNG, and strengthened the position of U.S. suppliers. U.S. gas covered 16.7 percent of EU gas imports in 2024. By January 2026, the corresponding figure was 60 percent.³²

One of the more dramatic episodes in the war fits into this narrative. The identity of who destroyed the Nordstream pipelines remains one of the mysteries of the war. What is clear is that American LNG exporters were major beneficiaries — at the expense of their counterparts in Russia.

The military consequences are equally important. European arsenals were depleted by transfers to Ukraine. European countries were pushed to rearm quickly; and a significant share of that rearmament flowed through purchases from the American defence industry. From Washington’s perspective, this was a rational strengthening of the Western arsenal, with its budget spent on its own military industry. From a more sceptical European perspective, it also meant that the war increased Europe’s dependence on U.S. energy, U.S. systems, U.S. ammunition chains, and U.S. strategic direction. In that reading, Ukraine was not only a war of resistance against Russian aggression. It also became a war through which the United States revitalised parts of its defence industrial base, tested tactics and systems in a proxy environment, and locked Europe more tightly into an asymmetrical transatlantic security architecture.

This is why the Iran war changes the tone of the burden-sharing debate so decisively. Once European governments conclude that Washington invokes solidarity selectively — demanding it when it serves U.S. interests, discarding consultation when it does not, and leveraging crises in ways that reinforce European dependence — the old language of “free-riding” loses moral force.

Europeans are now more likely to answer that they are indeed increasing defence spending, but that this does not oblige them to follow the United States into every strategic adventure. That is especially true for a conflict like the Iran war, which was launched with minimal consultation and potentially catastrophic consequences for Europe’s own energy and security interests.

In that sense, the debate is no longer simply about percentages. It is about legitimacy. The United States still has the power to demand more from Europe. What it increasingly lacks is the unquestioned legitimacy to define, by itself, what “partnership” is supposed to mean.

Beyond the defence debate itself, the broader strategic question remains unresolved: what kind of geopolitical actor Europe intends to become.

One possible answer lies in the deepening of European integration itself. If Europe wishes to achieve meaningful strategic autonomy, it may ultimately require a far greater degree of political and institutional consolidation. A fragmented Europe composed of 27 sovereign defence policies will always struggle to act coherently in geopolitical crises. In contrast, a more integrated EU — potentially evolving toward a federal structure in areas such as defence procurement, foreign policy coordination, and industrial strategy — could provide the institutional framework necessary for Europe to operate as a genuine geopolitical pole.

Such an evolution would not necessarily replace NATO. Rather, it would rebalance the relationship within the alliance by creating a European pillar capable of acting independently when necessary while still cooperating with the United States where interests align.

Beyond internal integration, however, strategic autonomy also raises more controversial questions about Europe’s external economic orientation. One less frequently discussed scenario envisions the emergence of a broader Eurasian economic space that links Europe more closely with Russia’s resources and Asia’s markets.

From a purely economic perspective, such an arrangement might appear attractive. Russia possesses vast natural resources and energy reserves. China offers immense industrial capacity and a massive consumer market. Europe contributes technological expertise and advanced manufacturing capabilities.



*Lockheed F35 Lighting Demo Team
(Shutterstock)*

Yet this possibility collides directly with the geopolitical logic that has historically guided American grand strategy. For more than a century, American strategic thinking — from Halford Mackinder’s heartland theory through the Cold War containment strategy and into the present day — has emphasised the importance of preventing the consolidation of the Eurasian landmass under a single coherent economic and political framework.

This structural reality places Europe in a complex strategic position. On the one hand, economic logic might encourage deeper engagement with Eurasian markets and resource networks. On the other hand, the geopolitical architecture of the post-1945 transatlantic system strongly discourages any such consolidation. But now that the United States seems preoccupied with rapacious isolation in the Western Hemisphere while also threatening European sovereignty, peace and prosperity, it might be time for Europe to pivot towards Eurasia.

Whether that pivot ultimately leads to a stronger European pillar within NATO, a more deeply integrated European federation capable of acting independently, or a hybrid arrangement balancing both possibilities remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the pressures driving the discussion are unlikely to disappear.

Strategic autonomy, once considered a distant aspiration, is increasingly becoming a structural necessity within Europe’s evolving geopolitical environment. As French President Emmanuel Macron stated in April 2026, “we [Europeans] don’t want to be the vassals of two dominant powers”.³³

The Rise of Sovereign Pragmatism

If Europe cannot easily become a fully unified geopolitical actor, and if deep Eurasian integration remains constrained by American strategic concerns, a third option may gradually emerge. That option is pragmatic sovereignty within the transatlantic alliance. This approach recognises the realities of a multipolar system while avoiding direct confrontation with existing alliance structures. Here again, a useful illustration of this logic can be observed in Hungary’s foreign policy strategy over the past decade.

Hungarian policymakers have, as noted, described their approach as a “connectivity strategy”, aimed at maintaining economic and diplomatic relations with multiple global actors simultaneously.

Rather than aligning exclusively with a single geopolitical bloc, Hungary has pursued a policy designed to connect Western capital, Eastern investment, and global supply chains within its national economy. This has involved maintaining membership and security alignment within NATO and the EU while simultaneously attracting Chinese investment, preserving energy cooperation with Russia, and cultivating relations across Asia and the Middle East.

Such a strategy inevitably generates controversy within the EU. Critics argue that it risks weakening Western cohesion. Supporters counter that it reflects a realistic understanding of how smaller and medium-sized states must operate in an increasingly multipolar world.

Regardless of the normative debate, the Hungarian case illustrates a broader phenomenon: the gradual emergence of national hedging and diversification strategies within Europe itself.

What the Numbers Say

A further complication arises when the transatlantic relationship is framed primarily in quantitative terms. In recent years, debates surrounding the alliance have increasingly focused on measurable indicators such as defence spending levels, trade balances, industrial output, and relative economic scale. While such metrics certainly matter, relying on them exclusively risks creating what might be called a numbers trap.

The economic comparisons themselves are striking. The EU and the United States together still represent the largest economic relationship in the world, yet their internal balances and external trade dynamics have evolved significantly over the past two decades.

Demographically, the EU today counts roughly 450 million inhabitants, compared to about 335 million in the United States. Economically, however, the gap is narrower than the population alone would suggest.

In nominal terms, U.S. GDP currently stands at roughly \$30 trillion, while the EU’s combined GDP is approximately \$22.5 trillion, reflecting the stronger productivity growth and technological dominance of the American economy over the past two decades.

At the same time, Europe’s economic relationship with China has expanded dramatically since the beginning of the century. In 2000, total EU–China trade amounted to roughly €100 billion, with the trade balance relatively modest. By 2024, however, bilateral trade had grown to over €732 billion, making China one of the EU’s largest trading partners. Yet this expansion has been accompanied by a sharp structural imbalance: the EU now runs a trade deficit with China exceeding €390 billion annually, reflecting Europe’s growing dependence on Chinese-manufactured imports in sectors ranging from electronics to machinery and green technologies.³⁴

By contrast, the transatlantic trade relationship remains both vast and comparatively balanced. EU–U.S. trade in goods and services exceeded €1.7 trillion in 2024,³⁵ and while the EU runs a goods surplus, the United States maintains a strong surplus in services and the digital sector. The result is an economic relationship that, despite periodic tensions, remains far more symmetrical and structurally integrated than Europe’s trade relationship with China.

If alliances are evaluated primarily through such economic comparisons, however, it becomes inevitable that alternative partnerships will become more attractive. Other regions may be able to offer favourable trade terms, access to natural resources, or investment opportunities that appear economically advantageous in the short term. Under such conditions, even longstanding alliances risk being interpreted as transactional arrangements that are subject to renegotiation whenever more advantageous opportunities appear elsewhere.

The transatlantic relationship, however, was never built solely on balance sheets. It emerged from a deeper set of historical, cultural, and strategic foundations that cannot easily be reduced to numerical calculations. If those foundations are forgotten, the alliance risks being weakened not by external threats but by internal misinterpretations of its purpose.

Europe’s dilemma, therefore, lies in balancing two competing realities. On the one hand, the continent must adapt to a world increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition and economic statecraft.

On the other hand, it must avoid reducing its strategic relationships to purely transactional terms that could ultimately undermine its own position within the global system. Navigating this tension will require a degree of strategic clarity that Europe has not always demonstrated in recent decades — but the emerging international environment may leave it with little choice.

Yet the same quantitative comparisons that sometimes feed anxieties about Europe’s position can also reveal a different reality. Taken together, the EU remains one of the most formidable economic blocs in the world. It constitutes the largest integrated single market on the planet, surpassing both the United States and China in the size of its unified domestic consumer space.

Its combined industrial capacity, technological base, financial markets, and regulatory power continue to shape global economic standards in fields ranging from competition policy to environmental regulation.

History also offers an important reminder. For nearly a millennium, Europe was not merely a participant in global power politics — it was its principal arena and, often, its primary engine. The continent developed the institutions, technologies, and military capabilities that defined modern warfare and enabled global projection of power. Europe’s history is therefore not one of inherent weakness, but of extraordinary strategic capacity — sometimes constructive, sometimes destructive.

If confronted by a genuinely competitive international environment, Europe may indeed face internal strains. Yet history suggests that the continent should not be too quick to underestimate its own potential. If pressed hard enough, Europe might fracture — but it might also rediscover the formidable power that once allowed it to shape the international system itself.



French President Macron, UK Prime Minister Starmer, German Chancellor Merz, Polish Prime Minister Tusk, Ukrainian President Zelensky on Independence Square Kyiv Ukraine (Shutterstock)

Civilisational Capital in the “Age of Sovereignty”

While the previous sections emphasised structural tensions within the transatlantic relationship, focusing exclusively on strategic calculations risks overlooking a deeper dimension of the alliance.

The transatlantic partnership has never been sustained solely by military cooperation or economic convenience. It has also been anchored in a shared civilisational heritage. This shared inheritance — political, legal, philosophical, and cultural — constitutes what might be called the civilisational capital of the Western World. Since the end of the Second World War, this capital has been the essence of the transatlantic alliance.

A Shared Intellectual Tradition

The political institutions that define modern Western societies emerged primarily within the European historical experience before crossing the Atlantic and evolving further within the American context.

From the philosophical foundations of classical Greece and Rome to the Christian intellectual tradition of medieval Europe, from the development of constitutional government to the evolution of representative political institutions, these ideas formed the cultural foundation upon which both Europe and the United States built their political systems.

In this sense, the United States represents not simply a geopolitical ally of Europe but one of the historical extensions of European civilisation. The American republic emerged from European philosophical traditions, legal concepts, and political experiences that had developed across centuries. European intellectual history provided the conceptual vocabulary through which the American constitutional order was constructed.

This shared heritage explains why the transatlantic alliance has historically demonstrated remarkable resilience even during periods of political disagreement.

The Limits of Civilisational Sentiment

Civilisational affinity alone, however, cannot sustain an alliance indefinitely. The transformation of the international system is gradually shifting the foundations upon which strategic partnerships operate.

In an environment increasingly defined by great-power competition, alliances are no longer sustained primarily by shared identity or historical memory. Instead, they must increasingly justify themselves through concrete strategic contributions and reciprocal benefits.

From the United States’ perspective, the longstanding imbalance in defence spending across the Atlantic has become progressively more difficult to defend politically. Successive American administrations — Republican and Democratic alike — have called on European allies to assume a greater share of responsibility for regional security. What has changed in recent years is not the substance of this demand but the framework through which it is articulated. Under the emerging strategic doctrine reflected in the 2025 NSS, alliances are increasingly considered in terms of measurable reciprocity and tangible strategic value rather than of liberal solidarity that dominated the post-Cold War era.

This recalculation has begun to operate in both directions. European governments are increasingly assessing the transatlantic alliance in similar terms. The logic of reciprocity that America has introduced into the relationship has inevitably encouraged European actors — both collectively through the EU and individually through national governments — to evaluate the partnership according to their own strategic and economic interests.

The debates surrounding the Iran conflict, trade disputes, and industrial policy have raised a question that was rarely articulated openly in previous decades: to what extent does the alliance continue to serve Europe’s own strategic priorities?

This dynamic reflects a broader structural development, which is the gradual divergence of geopolitical priorities between the United States and Europe. America’s strategic focus is increasingly directed toward the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific, where competition with China defines the central axis of American grand strategy. Europe, by contrast, remains primarily concerned with the stability of its immediate neighbourhood, energy security, and the management of conflicts on its eastern and southern peripheries. Recent crises have revealed that these priorities do not always coincide, and that European governments are increasingly prepared to define their responses according to their own national or continental interests.

In such a context, historical affinity alone is unlikely to guarantee the long-term durability of the transatlantic alliance. Europe therefore faces an unavoidable strategic adjustment.

The era in which many European states relied heavily on American security guarantees while maintaining limited defence capabilities is gradually coming to an end. A credible partnership in the coming decades will require Europe to assume a far greater role in the management of its own security architecture.

Paradoxically, this transformation may ultimately strengthen the transatlantic relationship. By reducing the structural asymmetries that have long characterised it, a more capable Europe could emerge as a more balanced strategic partner rather than a — real or perceived to be — dependent security consumer. Civilisational capital remains a powerful asset within the Atlantic community, but it is less important than it used to be.

What is Next in the “Age of Sovereignty”: Strategic Scenarios for 2026–2030

The transformation of the United States’ strategic doctrine, combined with Europe’s structural constraints and the intensifying competition among global powers, introduces a period of considerable uncertainty for the transatlantic relationship. So, what are the most likely strategic scenarios?

Scenario I. Rebalanced Atlanticism

In this scenario, the transatlantic alliance successfully adapts to the new strategic doctrine emerging in the United States. European states respond to sustained American pressure by significantly increasing defence spending, strengthening their military capabilities, and assuming a greater share of responsibility for regional security.

The United States, while maintaining its security guarantees to Europe through NATO, increasingly focuses its strategic attention on the Indo-Pacific and on the Western Hemisphere. Europe consequently takes a more prominent role in managing security challenges in its immediate neighbourhood, including instability along its eastern and southern flanks. The transatlantic alliance remains intact, but its internal balance evolves. The relationship becomes less hierarchical and more transactional, with cooperation based increasingly on reciprocal strategic contributions rather than on implicit American leadership.

Scenario II. Strategic Hedging

Under this scenario, European governments adopt a strategy of selective alignment in response to growing great-power competition. While maintaining their security partnership with the United States, European states simultaneously pursue pragmatic economic and diplomatic engagement with other major powers, including China and regional actors in the Global South.

The result is a form of strategic hedging in which Europe avoids full alignment with any single geopolitical bloc. Cooperation with Washington continues in the security domain, but European governments increasingly resist American pressure in areas such as trade policy, technology regulation, industrial policy and relations with China.

The transatlantic alliance persists but becomes more limited in scope, with cooperation concentrated primarily on defence and intelligence while economic and geopolitical interests diverge more openly. However, such a configuration would likely prove inherently unstable over time. In practice, the boundaries between economic policy and security strategy are increasingly difficult to maintain. Trade flows, financial networks, supply chains, and technological ecosystems have become deeply intertwined with national security considerations. As strategic competition intensifies, attempts to separate economic engagement from security alignment would generate growing tensions within the alliance.

Consequently, while a period of strategic hedging might temporarily emerge, it would likely prove limited in duration before major geopolitical crises force European governments to clarify their position. The structural interdependence between trade, finance, technology, and defence means that economic and security alignments cannot ultimately be disentangled indefinitely.

Scenario III. Fragmented Europe

In this scenario, the external pressures generated by great-power competition reveal deep internal divisions within Europe itself. Member states pursue increasingly divergent foreign policy strategies, reflecting differences in economic structure, geopolitical exposure, and domestic political priorities.

Some governments, particularly those that perceive Russia as the primary strategic threat, strengthen their alignment with the United States. Others seek greater autonomy or develop closer economic ties with China and other emerging powers. Still others prioritise national sovereignty and adopt more independent foreign policy positions.

As a result, Europe fails to articulate a coherent strategic response to the changing international environment. The EU remains an important economic actor but struggles to function as a unified geopolitical player. The transatlantic relationship continues to operate largely through bilateral relationships between America and individual European countries rather than through a cohesive European bloc.

In fact, such a scenario may be more plausible than it might initially appear. From America’s perspective, there are structural incentives to maintain a degree of flexibility — and disunity — in its European partnerships rather than encouraging the emergence of a highly integrated European strategic actor. A Europe composed of multiple sovereign governments competing to demonstrate their strategic value to the United States may offer America greater room for manoeuvre than a fully consolidated European geopolitical bloc capable of negotiating collectively.

At the same time, the EU itself continues to face significant institutional and political constraints in projecting a unified strategic position. Diverging national interests, different threat perceptions, and the limited integration of defence and foreign policy structures make it difficult for the EU to present a coherent geopolitical offer to the United States. This is another reason why bilateral relationships between the United States and individual European states may continue to play a central role in the functioning of the transatlantic alliance.

Scenario IV. Fragmented Europe

A further variable that may influence the evolution of the transatlantic relationship is the likely political composition of the European Parliament following the 2029 European elections.

Current political trends across several member states suggest the possibility of a Parliament with a stronger presence of conservative, sovereigntist, and nationalist political forces. Such an outcome could reshape the ideological landscape of European politics. On the one hand, a more conservative European Parliament might appear to favour a renewed or restored transatlantic alignment. Historically, many conservative political traditions in Europe have maintained strong Atlanticist instincts, rooted in shared civilisational ties, security cooperation within NATO, and ideological affinity with parts of the American political right.

From this perspective, a shift toward a more conservative parliamentary majority could potentially reinforce political alignment between Europe and the United States...or maybe not.

Many of the political movements currently gaining strength across Europe also emphasise national sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and economic protection of domestic industries.

If these forces become more influential at the European level, their political priorities may not always align with American strategic preferences.

In particular, tensions may emerge if the United States continues to pursue policies that effectively treat Europe as a strategic extension or operational theatre of American geopolitical competition with other powers.

Under such circumstances, a more conservative European Parliament — while rhetorically sympathetic to transatlantic ties — might simultaneously seek to diversify Europe’s external partnerships, strengthening relations with other actors in order to safeguard European economic and strategic interests.

Paradoxically, therefore, a more conservative European political landscape could produce two contrasting tendencies at once: a reaffirmation of civilisational Atlanticism alongside a stronger insistence on European strategic autonomy and even independence.

Which of these impulses ultimately prevails may depend on the balance between shared values and perceived national interests.

Scenario V. European Strategic Consolidation

A final possibility is that the strategic uncertainty generated by shifts in American foreign policy serves as a catalyst for deeper European coordination and integration, irrespective of the ideological orientation of individual governments.

Faced with the prospect of a more transactional transatlantic relationship and an increasingly volatile international system in the “Age of Sovereignty”, European governments may accelerate efforts to strengthen collective defence capabilities, expand joint industrial policy in the defence and technology sectors, and improve coordination in foreign policy. Under this scenario, Europe gradually develops a more coherent strategic identity and becomes a more autonomous geopolitical actor while remaining broadly aligned with the United States on fundamental security issues.

Rather than replacing the transatlantic alliance, such consolidation would likely transform it into a partnership between two more balanced strategic poles within the Western world.

Conclusion: The Transatlantic Relationship in the “Age of Sovereignty”

The emerging international environment is increasingly shaped by the “Age of Sovereignty”. In this new strategic context, countries are rediscovering the centrality of national interest in foreign policy. Economic interdependence continues to exist, but it now operates within a framework increasingly defined by geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, and the reassertion of state power.

For the EU, adapting to this environment will require a profound shift in strategic mindset. Europe cannot easily transform itself into a fully unified geopolitical actor overnight, nor can it ignore the structural constraints imposed by American strategy toward Eurasian consolidation. Instead, Europe will need to develop a pragmatic approach capable of navigating between these realities — maintaining cooperation with the United States while gradually strengthening its own capacity to act independently when its interests require it.

Some European countries may experiment with connectivity and diversification strategies. Others may prioritise deeper integration within the transatlantic alliance. The challenge for the EU will be to reconcile these different approaches while preserving the broader stability of the European political order and avoiding fragmentation at a moment when geopolitical pressures are intensifying.

The transatlantic relationship will therefore remain central to Europe’s strategic future — but its foundations are evolving. In an era increasingly defined by sovereignty and geopolitical competition, the durability of the alliance will depend not only on shared history but also on both sides’ ability to adapt to a changing world.

Ultimately, both Europe and the United States would do well to remember a lesson that statesmen have long understood. As a British statesman famously observed in the nineteenth century:

“We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

Lord Palmerston³⁶

In an international system once again shaped by competition among great powers, this principle of strategic realism cannot simply be ignored. Yet realism alone cannot sustain a durable international order. As the American theologian and political thinker Reinhold Niebuhr warned, responsible statecraft requires reconciling the contingencies of power with the principles of justice. And such challenges should apply equally on both sides of the Atlantic.

Europe must recognise the realities of power politics in a world where American priorities are shifting and where global powers increasingly pursue their interests with little regard for the stability of the broader international system. At the same time, the United States must recognise that alliances cannot be sustained purely through transactional calculations or through unilateral decisions whose consequences fall disproportionately on its partners.

The deeper lesson of the current moment may be that Europe must begin to think more seriously about its own political capacity to act in a world increasingly defined by geopolitical competition.

In a world dominated by continental-scale powers — the United States, China, and potentially other emerging blocs — individual European countries, even the largest among them, face growing structural limitations in their ability to defend their interests independently. Economic scale, military capacity, technological development, and strategic influence increasingly operate at levels that exceed the capabilities of most nation-states on their own.

For those who hold a conservative and patriotic worldview, this reality presents an uncomfortable but unavoidable paradox. The preservation of national independence may, in practice, require forms of political cooperation and institutional integration that allow European countries to maintain collective strategic weight in an increasingly competitive world.

Seen from this perspective, European integration need not be understood as a project aimed at dissolving nations or erasing national identities.

Rather, it can be interpreted as a framework through which European nations pool certain capacities in order to preserve their ability to act, to defend their interests, and to protect their civilisational inheritance in an international system increasingly shaped by the strategic calculations of global powers.

The alternative may be a far less sovereign Europe — a continent fragmented into medium and small states, each individually exposed to the pressures, expectations, and interventions of larger geopolitical actors.

The transatlantic relationship is not ending; it is being redefined under new strategic conditions.

What is emerging is not a rupture, but a reconfiguration — one in which the United States increasingly acts as a sovereign great power among others, and Europe is gradually forced to confront the limits of its strategic dependency.

The key result of the “Age of Sovereignty” may not be the weakening of the transatlantic alliance, but the emergence of a new equilibrium within it. A Europe capable of acting as a distinct geopolitical pole would not necessarily dissolve the alliance, but it would fundamentally alter its nature—from a relationship of structural asymmetry to one of negotiated alignment between sovereign actors. One certainty is that the “Age of Sovereignty” is still being defined.

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²The White House. (2025, December). *National security strategy of the United States of America (2025)*. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

³Soto Gómez, J. Á. (2025, 16 de junio). *En defensa de Hispanoamérica*. Escuela Hispánica. Available at: <https://www.escuela-hispanica.org/publicaciones/en-defensa-de-hispanoamerica>

⁴U.S. Department of State. (2026, March 6). *The United States to host the Shield of the Americas summit*. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/the-united-states-to-host-the-shield-of-the-americas-summit>

⁵Berg, R. C. (2026, March 5). *The Shield of the Americas gathering and a new strategy to counter China in the Western Hemisphere*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shield-americas-gathering-and-new-strategy-counter-china-western-hemisphere>

⁶The meeting brought together leaders from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Trinidad & Tobago to discuss the formation of a regional coalition against organised crime and drug cartels. The initiative followed a U.S. military operation that resulted in the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and reflected the administration's broader effort to strengthen hemispheric cooperation while countering Chinese economic and political influence in Hispanic America.

⁷The atmosphere surrounding the inauguration reflected the broader expectation that the second Trump Administration would pursue a significantly more assertive approach to hemispheric policy. The author attended the *Hispanic Inaugural Ball* in Washington, D.C., two days before the inauguration, where one of the recurring themes in informal conversations among political attendees and policy observers was the incoming Administration's intention to symbolically rename the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America." While presented partly as a rhetorical gesture, the proposal was already then interpreted as a clear signal of the Administration's intention to reassert a stronger strategic focus on the Western Hemisphere. Subsequent developments in U.S. policy toward the region suggest that this early signal reflected a broader strategic orientation that has since become increasingly visible.

⁸Humire, J. M. (2024). *The foreign policy foundations of Trumpism*. Norteamérica, Revista Académica del CISAN-UNAM. Advance online publication. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.22201/cisan.24487228e.2024.1.675>

⁹*Ibid.*, Humire (2024).

¹⁰Soto Gómez, J.Á. (2025). *Towards a brave new world: Are conservatives the new globalists?*, Danube Institute. Available at: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/research/towards-a-brave-new-world-are-conservatives-the-new-globalists>

¹¹U.S. Department of State. (2026, February 14). *Remarks by Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference*. Hotel Bayerischer Hof, Munich, Germany. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>

¹²This development has also generated growing criticism among some observers who argue that recent decisions risk deviating from the original logic of the "America First" doctrine. In their view, certain policy choices—particularly in the Middle Eastern theatre—appear to prioritise the strategic interests of Israel to such an extent that the doctrine risks being perceived, at least rhetorically, as "America Second." While such critiques remain contested, they illustrate the emerging debate within parts of the American conservative and foreign-policy community regarding the precise meaning and application of the America First framework.

¹³Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

¹⁴Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

¹⁵Mearsheimer, J. J., & Walt, S. M. (2016). The case for offshore balancing: A superior U.S. grand strategy. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(4), 70–83.

¹⁶See Salisbury, R. A. T. G. C. (1896). Speech in the House of Lords, 25 November 1896. In *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*. The phrase “splendid isolation” is commonly associated with British foreign policy in the late 19th century and is widely attributed to Lord Salisbury, although historically the expression itself was first used by George Eulas Foster, a Canadian politician, in 1896 to describe Britain’s diplomatic posture. Salisbury later embraced the idea in practice, even if he did not coin the exact phrase. For a better examination of the concept, see Charmley, J. (1999). *Splendid isolation? Britain, the balance of power and the origins of the First World War*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

¹⁷See Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The geographical pivot of history. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421–437 and Mackinder, H. J. (1919). *Democratic ideals and reality: A study in the politics of reconstruction*. London: Constable and Company.

¹⁸A striking and somewhat paradoxical consequence of this strategy is that efforts intended to isolate Russia from the Western economic system may simultaneously accelerate the very Sino–Russian convergence Washington seeks to avoid. The war in Ukraine and the subsequent redirection of Russian energy exports away from European markets have significantly increased Russian oil and gas sales to China. More recently, the escalation of conflict between Israel, the United States, and Iran has further reinforced this dynamic: as sanctions and geopolitical pressures disrupt Chinese access to Iranian fossil fuels, Russia has increasingly filled that supply gap. In other words, policies designed to weaken Russia’s geopolitical position can, under certain conditions, deepen the structural economic ties between Moscow and Beijing—illustrating the inherent strategic tension in attempting simultaneously to contain Russia and prevent its alignment with China.

¹⁹Europe’s search for alternative economic partnerships is not limited to China. In January 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited India to finalise negotiations on what she described as the “mother of all deals”: a landmark EU–India free trade agreement designed to create one of the world’s largest trade zones, covering roughly two billion consumers. The agreement seeks to significantly reduce tariffs, expand bilateral trade, and deepen cooperation in sectors such as advanced technology, pharmaceuticals, clean energy, and industrial supply chains. Von der Leyen’s participation as guest of honour at India’s 77th Republic Day celebrations underscored the strategic importance of the partnership, which European policymakers increasingly view as a means of diversifying supply chains and reducing dependence on China while strengthening economic and security cooperation with another major Indo-Pacific power.

²⁰Examples of this dynamic can be observed across different parts of the European political spectrum. In Spain, left-wing governments have in recent years pursued deeper economic engagement with China, expanding cooperation in trade, investment, and infrastructure. At the same time, segments of the European New Right have also shown signs of reassessing their relationship with the United States. Figures within Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have promoted closer economic relations with China and criticised what they describe as Europe’s excessive strategic dependence on Washington, with some party representatives undertaking visits to China and advocating broader Eurasian cooperation. In France, leaders of the Rassemblement National have likewise expressed growing criticism of certain American foreign-policy initiatives—including the U.S. intervention in Venezuela and the pressure exerted over Greenland—which they interpret as examples of unilateral American power politics that could undermine European sovereignty. These developments illustrate how both Beijing’s diplomatic outreach and Washington’s more transactional posture may be reshaping political attitudes toward the United States across parts of Europe’s evolving conservative landscape.

²¹Balázs Orbán. (2023). *The Hungarian strategy of connectivity in a fragmented world economy*. Budapest: Mathias Corvinus Collegium / Danube Institute lectures and policy statements. Also see Orbán, B. (2023, March 6). *Connectivity: A Hungarian globalisation strategy*. European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/connectivity-a-hungarian-globalisation-strategy/>

²²Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. (2024). *Hungary's connectivity strategy is already paying dividends*. Budapest: HIIA. Available at: <https://hiia.hu/en/hungarys-connectivity-strategy-is-already-paying-dividends/>

²³Idem.

²⁴See European Commission. *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. Brussels, 2022 and Howorth, Jolyon. *Strategic Autonomy and European Defence*. London: Routledge, 2023.

²⁵NATO. *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)*. Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2025.

²⁶NATO. *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)*.

²⁷Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2025*.

²⁸Council of the European Union. *Defence Data 2024–2025*. Brussels: European Defence Agency.

²⁹U.S. Department of Defense. *European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) Budget Overview FY2025*.

³⁰Mearsheimer, John. “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014).

³¹Hoffman, E. (2024, April 18). *How supporting Ukraine is revitalizing the U.S. defense industrial base*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-supporting-ukraine-revitalizing-us-defense-industrial-base>

³²Reuters. *U.S. LNG Becomes Europe's Dominant Supplier After Russian Gas Collapse*, January 2026.

³³Ray, S. (2026, April 3). *Macron urges countries to stand up to “hegemonic powers” U.S. and China amid growing Trump feud*. Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2026/04/03/macron-urges-countries-to-stand-up-to-hegemonic-powers-us-and-china-amid-growing-trump-feud/>

³⁴European Commission. (n.d.). *EU trade relations with China*. Available at: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en

³⁵Council of the European Union. (n.d.). *EU–US trade: Facts and figures*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-us-trade/>

³⁶Palmerston, H. J. T. (1848, March 1). *Speech in the House of Commons on foreign policy*. In Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, vol. 97.

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