

Trump's Second-Term Foreign Policy and the Transformation of Transatlantic Relations: Value Divergence and Strategic Realignment

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Abstract

The transatlantic alliance has undergone significant erosion and weakening during the US President Trump's second administration. This paper analyzes the shifting dynamics of the transatlantic relationship and attributes the erosion of this value-based alliance largely to Trump's endorsement of unilateralism, transactional diplomacy, and rising nationalistic populism. This study employs a dual theoretical framework grounded in Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism to assess the unraveling of shared liberal values that have underpinned the transatlantic partnership. This qualitative, case-study based analysis has drawn from various reports, official speeches, policy documents and other academic sources to facilitate the identification of critical policy shifts—such as trade conflicts with Europe, conditional aid to Ukraine, weakening of NATO's strategic unity and support for illiberal regimes. Collectively, these policies reflect a clear departure from longstanding American values and practices that have been a cornerstone of American foreign policy since World War II. Efforts to secure Europe's strategic autonomy, its push for regional defense integration, and revitalized diplomatic initiatives highlight the future trajectory of transatlantic relations. The research findings suggest that the underlying latent vulnerabilities in the transatlantic relationship were exposed when confronted by Trump's transactional policies, thereby prompting corresponding responses

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Introduction

During President Trump's first term in office, Angela Merkel, former Chancellor of Germany, stated in 2017: "The times in which we could completely rely on others are, to a certain extent, over" (Chrisafis, 2017). Her remark reflected the shifting dynamics of the transatlantic relationship that have endured well into the second term of President Trump and are defining the changing patterns of interaction between the US and its European partners.

Historically, for nearly eight decades, the transatlantic relationship has symbolized political and strategic alignment reflecting its unity of purpose and shared values. With the end of the Cold War, a new era emerged, famously described by Francis Fukuyama as the End of History, that not only marked the end of ideological confrontation, but also declared an unchallenged victory for economic and political liberalism championed by the West. Nowhere was this idea more accurately reflected than in transatlantic relations. The long-standing alliance between the United States and Europe, which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War and consolidated during the Cold War, was conceived as a comprehensive partnership, not limited to military cooperation. On the contrary, the foundations of the partnership were rooted in shared values of liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights, multilateral cooperation, and a rule-based international order. Charles Kupchan attributed the longevity and resilience of this alliance to shared deep-seated norms. This unique feature of the alliance defined its purpose as strategic and equally ideational (Kupchan, 2002). Meanwhile, John Ikenberry framed

the United States as a liberal leviathan that was able to uphold the postwar order through rules and institutions while embodying shared liberal values (Ikenberry, 2011).

Institutionalized by means of the United Nations (UN), the Bretton Woods institutions, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)—later, the World Trade Organization (WTO), this value-based order continues to shape responses to global crises from the Balkan Wars to the War on Terror. Considering these values integral to the post-war order, historian Timothy Garton Ash claimed that Europe (or the West) represents a place, a history, an ideal, a vision, and a set of institutions (Lobjakas, 2009). For decades, these values defined the western-led international order, enabling the transatlantic alliance to address global challenges. However, owing to evolving challenges emanating at the domestic and international levels, the coherence of the partnership is under significant pressure.

The liberal world order has been repeatedly threatened by the consequences of globalization—a phenomenon triggered by the liberal order itself. The reelection of Donald Trump and his America First Doctrine hold little resemblance to past US administrations in his open disregard for multilateralism, diplomacy, and steadfast support for NATO partners. His efforts at embracing unilateralism, economic nationalism, transactional diplomacy, and populist nationalism mark a significant departure from the traditional American foreign policy and erode the foundation of the transatlantic alliance. Alarmed by this increasing drift towards nationalistic populism, Fareed Zakaria raised concerns regarding the rise of populism being part of a broader global trend that threatens to disrupt international liberal norms (Zakaria, 2016). Similar appraisals are made in the Munich Security Report of 2024, which highlights a growing disdain and anxiety on both sides of the Atlantic regarding the durability of the transatlantic bond (Munich Security Conference, 2024).

Even though existing literature effectively explores the repercussions of Donald Trump's first term on the transatlantic alliance, there is still a gap regarding the emerging trends in his second term and their potential contribution to the erosion of value-based transatlantic relations. While Trump has been in office for only about nine months, a number of his latest policies indicate a continuation of patterns that challenge shared transatlantic values. Previous studies are either speculation-based or provide retrospective analyses; therefore, this study aims to fill this void by examining these early indicators in his second term, highlighting how they may signal further strains on the transatlantic alliance.

This study, therefore, addresses two main questions: To what extent have Trump 2.0 policies contributed to the erosion of shared liberal values that have long sustained the transatlantic relationship? How has Trump's second term accelerated a European attempt at pursuing strategic autonomy and an independent foreign policy? To answer these questions, the paper starts with a comprehensive overview of the historical and normative foundations of the transatlantic alliance. This is followed by an analysis of Trump's rhetoric and policies and their subsequent impacts on shared values that have defined the relationship for decades. The paper finally concludes with an examination of European responses to American unilateralism, and assesses whether this alliance will retain its viability or is likely to face disintegration and collapse in the future.

Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on a dual theoretical lens—combining insights from both Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism—to measure the extent of erosion and damage caused by President Donald Trump's second administration to the shared liberal values. Proponents of Liberal Institutionalism such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye contend that, irrespective of the anarchic nature of the international system and the rational behavior of states,

cooperation is still possible through institutions that reduce uncertainty, promote rules-based conduct, and foster interdependence in addressing shared challenges (Grieco, 1988, pp. 493, 495). This paper has applied the theory of liberal institutionalism to highlight how the U.S.-Europe alliance was built following the Second World War. This theory posits that institutions like NATO, the Bretton Woods system, and the United Nations have integrated the states into a network of rules, mutual commitments, and liberal values. As highlighted earlier, these institutions reduce conflict and promote collaboration, which is why this alliance surpasses the notion of being just a strategic alliance and embraces its foundational values. However, Trump's abdication from the global leadership role, rejection of multilateralism, and emphasis on unilateralism is a direct attack on the liberal framework that sustained the transatlantic alliance.

Constructivist theorists such as Alexander Wendt and Nicholas Onuf, on the other hand, focus on the role of social constructs—such as how ideas, norms, identities, and political discourse shape international relations (Reus-Smit, 2005, pp.196-197). It complements the liberal institutionalism by shedding light on how the collective identity of this traditional value-based order has been altered by Trump's rhetoric, his rejection of democratic norms, and his alliance with illiberal leaders. Moreover, it explores how Trump's America First doctrine and framing of allies as adversaries has driven a wedge in the normative and ideational convergence of the transatlantic alliance. Therefore, this theoretical framework is well-suited to depict the dismantling of the transatlantic alliance in both its material dimensions—such as institutional disruption—and its ideational aspects, including the erosion of shared values and political identities.

Research Methodology

This basic, descriptive, and analytical research is aimed at analyzing the extent of erosion that Donald Trump's second term has caused to the foundational values of the transatlantic alliance.

To explore the fragmentation of this inherently value-based alliance, this paper has applied a largely qualitative research methodology, while using the case-study approach as its research design. The particular focus on Trump's second term serves as an instrumental case to analyze the transition of U.S. foreign policy from normative alignment to transactional diplomacy. This research design is suited to offer an in-depth and contextual understanding of the current trajectory of U.S.-Europe relations. To ensure comprehensiveness, the paper has drawn from both primary and secondary data sources. For primary sources, the research uses various official speeches, U.S. foreign policy documents, NATO and EU reports or communiqués, and public addresses by key leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Donald Trump. Secondary data sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, think tank reports—such as those from Brookings, Chatham House, Carnegie—and media coverage from reputable outlets. Official texts and policy statements have been reviewed and interpreted by document analysis so that recurring patterns or themes, shifts in language, and normative decline in the transatlantic alliance could be traced. At certain places, document analysis is complemented by discourse analysis to analyze how identity, trust, and values are either intricately woven or repelled in political rhetoric.

Emergence of the Transatlantic Alliance

Ikenberry draws an analogy between Hobbes' Leviathan and the United States to explain its emergence as a stabilizing hegemon seeking to reshape the international system. However, rather than acting as a coercive hegemon and ensuring order forcefully through its uncontested power, Ikenberry (2011) preferred to construct an international order embedded in rules, institutions, and shared values—an idea that deviated from what Thomas Hobbes envisioned. This rules-based order was unprecedented among historical empires solely because the US used its unmatched power not to dominate the world, but to anchor it—thereby reassuring the

allies while simultaneously constraining potential rivals (Ikenberry, 2011). The liberal order was subsequently institutionalized through a multilateral framework that promoted cooperation among states to prevent wars.

Alexander Wendt argued that states construct identities on the basis of shared norms or inter-subjective understanding. Wendt stated that ideas complement the structural realities and help describe the “transatlantic community of value”—the post-WWII alliance—as a coalition of like-minded nations whose cohesion is rooted in their collective commitment to oppose authoritarianism, embrace democracy, and a shared belief in market capitalism. This ideational framework was materially translated when the Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced the European Recovery Program, also known as the Marshall Plan, in 1947. Offered to all the European states, the Plan had a budget of \$13.3 billion to rebuild war-torn countries and spanned from April 1948 to 1952. However, the aid served as a facade for institutionalizing liberalism, as it was deliberately contingent upon the adoption of liberal reforms. As Hogan (1987) argued, American aid was not mere charity; rather, it required Western European nations to embrace economic and political structures that were in line with American liberal democratic ideals. The Truman Doctrine proved to be another link in the chain of triumph. Truman allocated \$400 million to advance economic, political, and military assistance to states in need. The initial aim of doctrine—to defend Greece during its civil war and to support Turkey against Soviet pressure over the control of the Dardanelles—morphed into a greater strategy of containment. Gaddis (2005) rejected the monolithic nature of containment and argued that it evolved to incorporate a balanced mix of tools to contain communism while avoiding direct conflict. These strategies, eventually, culminated in the establishment of NATO in April 1949. Although NATO was initially created to deter the Soviet aggression by means of collective defense, the organization soon surpassed the notion of being strictly a defense pact due to its devotion to endorse

democratic values and peaceful conflict resolution. Kaplan (1994) argued that NATO represented an ideological and political partnership that viewed democratic values not only as domestic preferences but as guarantors of international peace and stability.

Risse (2010) argued that the liberal values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, free trade, and open markets serve as the glue of the transatlantic community, not only upholding the alliance but also ensuring long-term cooperation among nations. The central role of liberal values exemplified how they were not some rhetorical aspect but rather served as strategic tools that resisted authoritarianism, constrained unilateralism, and offered predictability in a not-so-predictable international system. Once these liberal values were translated into concrete institutional arrangements like the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the Bretton Woods system, they unleashed their maximum efficacy. These ideals were operationalized and adopted in the daily practices of governance and diplomacy to ensure the maintenance of the post-WWII order.

Consolidation of the Transatlantic Alliance

The transatlantic states were bound to abide by certain expectations and practices based on liberal values that surpassed the rhetorical status and served as tangible elements of policymaking through a process known as norm internationalization. The expansion and strengthening of NATO during 1950s and 1960s was a key manifestation of this idea, as it served as a central pillar of Western security due to its unparalleled devotion to the shared liberal norms and collective defense. President Truman's desire to see Greece and Turkey as reliable partners of the U.S. in the Cold War was realized in 1952 when both these states joined NATO, marking alliance expansion into the Mediterranean to counter the Soviet influence in the Balkans and the Middle East. The strategic significance of West Germany's admission into NATO in 1955 further solidified the alliance. It

legitimized the Federal Republic of Germany and hinted at the shift of Germany from a once-defeated power to a key Western ally. However, this prompted a swift response from the Soviet Union and its allies in the form of Warsaw Pact which further solidified the split of Europe into two hostile blocs. Although the French President Charles de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's integrated military command due to conflicting interests, the country remained a key political actor.

Regarding European integration, the Treaty of Paris led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, bringing various European nations together under the umbrella of a shared economic framework. This effort was later complemented by the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which created both the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom. By 1965, both of these bodies were unified into a single Commission and Council through a Merger Treaty to promote the common market. These integration steps promoted regional stability in post-WWII Europe, which was perceived as a great asset by the U.S. during the Cold War, thereby further solidifying transatlantic relations. Moreover, an attempt was made in 1973 to reduce tensions among NATO and Warsaw Pact nations by means of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which culminated in the ratification of the Helsinki Accords by 35 countries in 1975. Apart from recognizing the post-war European borders, the accords also promoted the inclusion of human rights, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms in Basket III. The elevation of shared values to international concerns further solidified ideological and political cohesion among the transatlantic nations.

Besides, in the post-Cold War era, NATO and the EU enhanced their cooperation through endeavors like joint military interventions in the Balkans. In September 1995, NATO for the first time launched a crisis response operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it used the Implementation Forces (IFOR) and the Stabilization Force (SFOR) to enforce aspects of the Dayton

Peace Agreement and maintain the security situation. Soon after, NATO launched an airstrike campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 to reinforce human rights in Kosovo. However, the axis of this alliance tilted after the 9/11 attacks, when NATO first invoked Article 5 of collective defense. After that, the agenda of NATO became more inclusive and adaptive as it started addressing emerging challenges like terrorism, climate change, hybrid threats, and Russian aggression.

Trump 2.0 and the Disruption of the Transatlantic Alliance

A Shift from Shared Values to Transactionalism

There has been a noticeable erosion of unity among transatlantic nations as the Trump administration turned out to be part of a greater trend that sought to undermine the multilateral and value-based foreign policy traditions. Unlike his predecessors, Trump was certainly outspoken about his disdain for the foundational values of the transatlantic alliance and therefore drove a major change in U.S. foreign policy. His “America First” doctrine held no resemblance to the previous administrations in its emphasis on unilateralism, economic nationalism, and transactional diplomacy. Daadler and Lindsay (2018) contended that the U.S. had come to view global leadership as a problem rather than a solution to its original challenges. Consequently, President Trump abandoned value-based leadership in favour of a narrower conception of national interest. However, Trump's actions had deep-rooted ideological alignment while being strategic. The Trump administration viewed international commitments as zero-sum transactions—an approach rooted in the realist school of thought—marking a sharp departure from the norms and institutions that had sustained global stability and peace for decades. Payne (2023) argued that this shift was rather an effort to advance unilateral advantage and to delegitimize the multilateral institutions. Moreover, dominance and transactionalism were the two key themes that shaped Trump's worldview and his ideological

alignment subsequently. McAdams (2020) highlighted Trump's rejection of multilateralism and insistence on immediate gain. McAdams (2020) wrote that "in Trump's worldview, strength is equated with dominance, and relationships even with allies are battles to be won," which suggests a decoupling of values and the weakening of alliance—militarily, morally, and ideologically.

Economic Nationalism and Tariffs

A situational and highly transactional mindset has motivated Trump to perceive global affairs as zero-sum transactions, similar to his perception of the real estate industry, where playing hardball and utilizing every possible tactic is justified to secure the best deal. This belief reinforced his perception of post-war economic arrangements as being exploitative for the U.S. while beneficial for foreign actors. He accuses foreign actors of being "thieves and cheaters" who tore apart the "once beautiful American dream" (Al Jazeera English, 2025). His necessary, albeit harsh, remedy was protectionist policies such as tariffs on imported goods that would bring the manufacturing factories and jobs back to the United States.

Trump signed a proclamation on March 27, 2025—invoking Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962—to impose a 25% tariff on imported automobiles or certain automobile parts. Trump claimed that these tariffs would fulfill the country's security needs and mitigate the vulnerabilities and chokepoints in global supply chains. Additionally, a stark contrast has been observed in automobile production in United States as 97% of automobiles were previously produced within the country during 1985, whereas now out of 16 million cars bought by Americans, 50% are imported, while in the other 50% assembled in United States the average domestic content is conservatively estimated at only 50% and is likely closer to 40% (White House, 2025).

Moreover, Donald J. Trump, on 2 April 2025, announced his Reciprocal Tariff Policy. This announcement was based on a

presidential memorandum, which aimed to investigate the harmful nonreciprocal trade arrangements. As a result, it was decided to subject the EU-originated imported goods to an additional ad valorem rate of duty of 10% starting from April 5, which then would be increased up to 20% by April 9 (EY Global Tax News, 2025). This prompted a swift response from the EU as it announced 25% retaliatory tariffs which targeted \$25 billion in U.S. goods.

This marked the U.S. retreat from the consensus-based framework of embedded liberalism and undermined core values such as mutual gain and interdependence. Trump's prioritization of unilateral advantage neglected the \$7.1 trillion transatlantic economy, which employed 16 million workers in mutually "onshore" jobs on both sides of the Atlantic (Hamilton & Quinlan, 2024). Schneider-Petsinger (2023) argued that the shift from multilateralism to economic nationalism is a form of "re-globalization" where countries prioritize their national interest over collective economic cooperation and emphasize strong regional links. This assertive state intervention in the market indicates the backsliding of the U.S. from the liberal order it once created for itself.

Undermining NATO

"What good is NATO if Germany is paying Russia billions of dollars for gas and energy (Watson, 2018)?" Trump and his sarcastic remarks about multilateral institutions—particularly NATO—accurately depict his disdain. Moreover, Trump's 2024-2025 campaign rhetoric suggested a subsequent retreat of the U.S. from the core norm of NATO—Article 5 of collective defense. Trump utilized every possible chance at multiple rallies to assert that the U.S. defense commitments were now heavily reliant on the European financial contributions, such as in Fayetteville. He stated: "We're supposed to protect you. And yet you're delinquent. You don't pay your bills" (Trump, 2024). Trump made similar

remarks in a Truth Social Post, “When I told the 20 Countries that weren’t paying their fair share that they had to PAY UP, and said without doing that you will not have US Military Protection, the money came rolling in (*The Korea Times*, 2024).” Trump’s verdict about NATO could be summed up in his now-infamous suggestion in Durham: “I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want” (Colvin, 2024). The conditionality in the U.S. defense commitments caused ambiguity in the alliance’s collective defense guarantee, which in turn triggered a credibility crisis in NATO deterrence. Deterrence theory requires some credible commitments to prevent adversaries from taking aggressive actions, but if the defense commitments themselves are subjected to conditions, then it would not only undermine NATO’s deterrent effect but would also increase the risk of conflict. This was a matter of great concern for the European allies, as the Munich Security Report 2025 also raised concerns about the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and trust in Article 5 if Trump were to assume the office again (Munich Security Conference, 2025, p. 12). Moreover, the key adviser Colby (2021) suggested that “the Europeans are more than capable of mounting a conventional defense more or less on their own” and also asserted that by “over-reassuring our allies, we’re not doing them, or ourselves a service.’ This is a stark representation of the great power competition with China being prioritized over transatlantic defense, which actively drives a wedge between the U.S. that is advancing unilateralism and the European nations that rely on collective security norms.

Conditional Aid to Ukraine

Donald Trump despised the idea of the U.S. acting as a global cop or defending the foundational values of the transatlantic alliance. His quid pro quo mindset shaped his perception of foreign aid as a transactional burden which, in his eyes, held no allegiance to American national interests and was therefore worth getting rid of. Reflecting this perspective, he has repeatedly cast doubt on what the U.S. gains from supporting Ukraine, asserting that “this war is

far more important to Europe than it is to us—we have a big beautiful ocean as separation” (Al Jazeera English, 2025). For Biden, leaving Ukraine out in the cold meant putting the whole free world at risk, which is why he was a dire advocate of supporting sovereignty and democracy. According to the Munich Security Report 2025, only 19% of Republicans supported the notion of increasing aid to Ukraine, while the rest of the party reciprocated Trump's manifesto (Munich Security Conference, 2025, p. 12). For Trump, the willingness to do business with Russia dominated his concern for Ukraine, which is why he has a less-warm relationship with Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

During an interview with Time Magazine in April 2025, Trump clearly stated that the U.S. support to Ukraine would only be resumed if Kyiv comes to the table with Moscow (Cortellessa & Jacobs, 2025). Moreover, he asserted: “I want to reach an agreement, and the only way you're going to reach an agreement is not to abandon” (Cortellessa & Jacobs, 2025). These statements indicated Trump's intention of forcing Ukraine into negotiations with Russia. Moreover, the tensions further deteriorated during the February 28 Oval Office meeting, where President Trump delivered a series of pointed remarks. He accused Zelenskyy of gambling with the lives of millions, displaying ingratitude towards the U.S., and even criticized him for not showing up in formal attire. However, the fallout point for the meeting was when Zelenskyy refused to trade land for peace, arguing that “Peace without justice is surrender” (Associated Press, 2025).

This statement infuriated Trump enough to abruptly cancel the rare earth minerals deal, suspend the military aid, and order Zelenskyy out of the White House. Trump stated: “He disrespected the United States of America in its cherished Oval Office. He can come back when he is ready for Peace” (Associated Press, 2025). These tensions not only caused a breakdown in US-Ukraine relations but also raised concerns among the European allies of the United States. However, subsequent diplomatic efforts resolved the earlier

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tensions and, eventually, on April 30, the United States and Ukraine signed the rare earth minerals agreement. Through the signing of this deal, the United States–Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund was established, which granted the U.S. preferential access to Ukraine's critical mineral resources.

Exit from Multilateral Agreements

Under Donald Trump's administration, the US actively endorsed unilateralism and transactionalism, characterized by its skepticism towards and withdrawal from several high-profile agreements. To President Trump, this transition merely meant that the U.S. was now openly acknowledging its core interests and shedding the illusion it had upheld for centuries. Trump favored the idea of abandoning the pretense and therefore suggested that the US no longer cling to the traditional rhetoric of being the global leader, championing democracy, and defending the underdog. The Executive Order 14162, titled "Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements," signed by Trump on January 20, 2025, formalized the immediate U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords and other climate commitments. Trump's portrayal of the Paris Climate Agreement as a draconian economic and financial burden is a clear manifestation of his rejection of multilateralism, given that he claimed to be elected to represent Pittsburgh, not Paris (Rucker & Johnson, 2017).

However, what cemented the allies' concerns regarding the U.S. abdication from global cooperation was Trump's decision to cut down funding to the World Health Organization during a global pandemic. Moreover, Trump also accused institutions like the World Trade Organization of allegedly facilitating the rise of China and jeopardizing the economic interests of the American middle class (Lighthizer, 2020). Financial Times editorial board echoed this concern, asserting that "the increasing volatility of US foreign policy... has led to uncertainty and exploitation by other nations," which impairs Washington's global influence ("US Foreign Policy Too Volatile," 2024, para. X). Analysts argued that Trump's transactionalism and indifference towards allies have far-reaching consequences for the traditional norms it once championed.

Mirroring Trump's skepticism of multilateral institutions, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent criticized the IMF and the World Bank for

mission creep, holding them responsible for treating financial stability and economic development as secondary issues while repeatedly pressing for cooperation on issues like gender equality and climate change (Real Clear Politics, 2025). He also criticized the World Bank for its “vapid, buzzword-centric marketing approach,” which bears no consistency with the core U.S. interests and, therefore, the continued U.S. support would now be contingent upon meaningful reforms (Axios, 2025). These policies prioritize national interests over collective responsibility, undermining the U.S. global leadership and raising concerns about the durability of the post-war liberal international order.

Endorsement of Illiberal Regimes and Populist Movements

The neoliberal policies, central to the liberal order, were now responsible for the populist surge in the West due to issues like income inequality, wage stagnation, job displacement, multicultural anxiety, and increased immigration. Trump mirrored and amplified the trends initiated by populist leaders like Viktor Orban, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini by increasingly capitalizing on people’s grievances and fear of demographic change, globalization, and immigration (Zakaria, 2016). Therefore, Trump could not be referred to as the pioneer of these forces but merely a promoter and legitimizer. Rhetorically, the U.S. under Trump seemed more inclined towards Europe’s illiberal leaders than the traditionally liberal statesmen like Merkel or Macron.

Viktor Orban, the Prime Minister of Hungary, had repeatedly posed himself as a dire advocate of Christian values against the anti-nationalist and anti-Christian ethos of the European Union. His party, Fidesz, secured victories by campaigning on themes of immigration and foreign interference, indicating the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. Trump, however, had repeatedly endorsed Orban for re-election, claiming that he is a strong leader who truly loves his country and is therefore striving to stop illegal immigration, create job opportunities, and secure Hungary (Bredemeier, 2022). Moreover, throughout his presidency, Trump

endorsed authoritarian figures like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, admitting that “[t]he ones I did the best with were the tyrants” (Bredemeier, 2022). George Simion, leader of Romania’s far-right party, Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), was seen repeatedly expressing his admiration for Donald Trump. He not only described his party’s political style as “Trumpian” but also confessed to being an ally of the Republican Party and sharing an ideological alignment with the Make America Great Again movement. Trump’s endorsement of national leaders reflects his ideological affinity with right-wing populists, which signals America’s defiance of one of the most foundational norms of the Transatlantic alliance—democracy. Additionally, Applebaum (2020) observed that Trump’s support for authoritarian leaders abroad and the attacks on democratic institutions at home have wedged a value divergence between the U.S., whose democratic moral authority has weakened, and Europe, which continues to make efforts to preserve democracy.

Erosion of Transatlantic Diplomacy and Alliance Norms

“The international world order is not a natural occurrence; if America walks away from the system it built, it will crumble, as it cannot survive an American abandonment” (Fareed Zakaria GPS, 2024). In light of Trump’s repeated attacks on multilateralism, Fareed Zakaria’s words best depict how the U.S. commitment to the global order has been rendered worthless. Trump’s second administration has openly expressed its disdain towards traditional diplomacy. This spiral started when Vice President J. D. Vance attended the 2025 Munich Security Conference and criticized the European nations for alleged backsliding from shared values or what he described as internal moral decay. Considering how their European counterparts mishandled immigration, suppressed free speech, and failed to ensure religious freedom, Vance argued that China and Russia are less of a threat to Europe as compared to what it is facing from within (“JD Vance Attacks Europe,” 2025). J. D. Vance questioned whether Europe still deserves the U.S. military support and whether it no longer reflects American

“cultural values” (The White House, 2025)? However, his pointed remarks were interpreted by many as a jab at NATO’s core principle: unconditional collective defense. J. D. Vance’s concerns prompted German Chancellor to reaffirm their commitment to freedom and democracy as he argued that “we are willing and able to defend these values” (Merz, 2025).

This pattern continued with Trump’s apparent disregard for diplomacy and his constant efforts at dismissing multilateral institutions and traditional allies while endorsing business deals with illiberal regimes (Mascolo, 2019). His persistent rejection of G7 communiqués implied not only procedural but also symbolic reasons, aligning perfectly with his unwillingness to engage in cooperative global frameworks. Due to his disregard for the shared history, Trump reluctantly avoided key commemorative events such as a visit to the WWI cemetery in France, which further signified the U.S. backsliding. Most importantly, the U.S. abdication from the global leadership role in various initiatives has severely weakened the foundations of liberal internationalism. This erosion not only weakened the transatlantic cooperation but also emboldened illiberal actors, benefiting from Western disunity.

European Responses to Trump’s Second Administration

European nations responded to the uncertain U.S. commitments during Trump’s second term by pushing for strategic autonomy. French President Emmanuel Macron rekindled strategic discussions regarding the French nuclear arsenal serving as a collective defense guarantee for its allies on the continent (France 24, 2020). Moreover, he argued that Europe’s future was not to be decided in Washington or Moscow, thereby asserting Europe’s strategic independence. German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, had also announced a “Zeitenwende” or strategic turning point that would increase Germany’s defense spending and would aim to build the strongest army in Europe (“*Germany’s Merz Vows*,” 2025).

The European Union established the Weimer+ alliance that brought together nations like Italy, France, Poland, Germany, and the UK to bolster cooperation on the Ukraine conflict to avoid dependence on the U.S. initiatives. To reduce the reliance on the NATO and the U.S., the European Union sought to strengthen defense collaboration among alliance members by expanding the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework. The Trump administration's stance on the Ukraine conflict further solidified the European nations' decision to pursue self-reliance, for which it launched the "Readiness 2030" initiative to mobilize €800 billion to enhance the EU's defense capabilities.

Moreover, the European public's contempt towards Trump administration is far too obvious to ignore, as majorities in nations like Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and the UK view Trump as a liability for the European peace and security rather than a reliable ally. In short, the European response to Trump's second term could be summed up as a transition towards ensuring strategic autonomy, enhanced defense capabilities, and reduced dependence on the U.S. security guarantees.

Conclusion

This research has sought to offer a critical examination of Trump's foreign policy during his second term in office and its impact on the transatlantic relationship, addressing questions about its resilience and future direction. It argues that the undermining of the value-based transatlantic alliance under Trump's second administration has fundamentally transformed the trajectory of US-Europe cooperation. Trump's endorsement of unilateralism and transactionalism has exposed the latent vulnerabilities in the partnership, widening the transatlantic divide and propelling a reassessment based on the pursuit of strategic autonomy and defense initiatives independent of the U.S. Such measures would not only strengthen Europe's defensive posture but also preserve its liberal democratic character, valued as integral to its identity.

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Trump's shift from shared values to transactionalism, economic nationalism, undermining of NATO, conditional aid to Ukraine, exit from multilateral agreements, and endorsement of illiberal regimes and populist movements have fractured the foundation of the relationship. Cumulatively, these measures have contributed towards the erosion of European trust in American foreign policy and urged a recalibration of Europe's strategic outlook. There is a growing realization that European states must step up to assume the collective security of Europe and safeguard its commitment to liberal international values in the absence of a consistent and value-based US foreign policy. Whereas such recalibrations do not signify a complete breakdown of the transatlantic partnership, they do indicate a long-term strategic adjustment based on forging internal cohesion and strategic independence to tackle challenges in the evolving global order with reduced reliance on the U.S. leadership.

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