

CONCLUSION

NAVIGATING UNDER LOW TRUST

Europe's path forward in the age of Trump

by

STEVEN EVERTS AND GIUSEPPE SPATAFORA

For decades the transatlantic partnership was something unique – in the world and history. Together, Europeans and Americans developed the world's biggest economic relationship in terms of trade and investment as well as the most structured defence alliance, with a standing integrated military command. It was underpinned by a deep well of common values centred on democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Despite episodes of tensions and even crises, it remained a solid partnership, based on deep trust and mechanisms for managing differences. All this is now in doubt.

Since January 2025 Europeans, like others around the world, have been facing the 'Trump 2.0 tornado' and are left disoriented – unsure what to make of it and unsure what to do. Every day, they are confronted with announcements and decisions that undo decades of trust-based transatlantic cooperation. The list of unilateral actions, threats and coercive tactics (reviewed in the introduction to this volume) is by now depressingly long and familiar.

At the same time, the US role in European security remains essential. The US continues to exert outsized influence in almost every international issue and arena. In most strategic domains – security, finance, technology and ideas – what the US government thinks, says and does, sets the pace and direction. Trump and his supporters openly advance a political agenda which not only seeks to transform America, but politics around the world and the international order as such. Europeans must find a way to handle this reality. They need a shared understanding of what Trump 2.0 entails: what is new, what is different and what does it all mean?

This *Chaillot Paper* aims to provide such a clear-eyed understanding. It has documented the varied impact of three factors that shape policymaking under Trump: radical uncertainty; ideological hostility; and personal loyalty to the President. Seen through this prism, a nuanced yet still troubling picture emerges.

Many reports and analyses have already explored the implications of Donald Trump's second term in the White House.

This *Chaillot Paper* has taken the issue of trust – or rather its erosion – as its analytical entry point. It examines the numerous ways in which US actions have undermined trust. Under President Trump's second term, European governments have had to confront the hard fact that the US no longer behaves as a predictable partner and fully committed ally. Even more than during Trump's first term, the US is no longer interested in anchoring and upholding the 'rules-based international order' that transatlantic allies have pushed for since 1945. It plays power games, disrupts long-standing cooperation and weaponises uncertainty.

It is crucial to recognise that in all this Europe is not powerless – and it is not alone. This *Chaillot Paper* has shown that growing mistrust in Washington is shared across the globe, from East Asia to the Gulf, from Latin America to Africa. Allies, adversaries and fence-sitters alike are re-thinking their reliance on US leadership. Some started to do so well before January 2025. For others, this is a new world.

The challenge for Europeans is to respond with both strategic clarity and pragmatic action. In broad strokes, this requires European governments and institutions to adopt a dual approach: tactical moves to reduce immediate risks in an unfavourable context combined with strategic investments to build European leverage and reshape the future balance of power. Based on lessons drawn from across the chapters of this report, five core principles emerge that should guide Europe's response.

Being pragmatic and transactional does not mean giving up on our values.

1. PRAGMATISM

Keep channels open and cooperate where interests align

Even in a context of low trust, some interests remain shared. Global problems have not gone away. And European countries still need US cooperation and support in many areas. So, even while they may clash on methods, they can and should cooperate on Ukraine, military deterrence and selected trade matters like countering Chinese overcapacity.

At times this means pursuing **transactional cooperation**. A good example is the purchase of US military equipment for Ukraine, paid for by Europeans but really targeted on those capabilities – such as air defence and deep range strike – where European alternatives are lacking in the short term. At the same time, growing US restrictions on such weapons sales should encourage the development of European alternatives.

Being pragmatic and transactional does not mean giving up on our values. It is true and regrettable that these days, transatlantic cooperation is no longer about championing shared democratic values around the world. But there are still mutual interests to advance. And **Europeans can and should cooperate with other like-minded partners to uphold democratic values world-wide**.

In the short term and in some areas, Europeans may have to **prioritise stability in negotiations over symmetry**. This means sometimes accepting that deals will be imperfect, such as the one on trade concluded in summer 2025 whose main

goal was to prevent a breakdown in the transatlantic partnership and buy time⁽¹⁾.

2. PERSISTENCE

Stay in the game and where needed buy time

The Trump administration operates on personal loyalty, media-driven narratives and constant disruption. Decisions announced in the morning are reversed in the afternoon, or the next day. It may be tempting for European decision-makers to conclude that nothing can be done. But the EU cannot afford that attitude. It needs a strategy for successful engagement and persistence is a key ingredient.

> **Engage at the top and act together.** Decisions in the Trump White House are made at the highest level with only a handful of advisors. Europeans must maximise all channels that provide direct access to the President himself. And they need to act together. The joint meeting where seven European leaders accompanied President Zelensky in early August to the Oval Office showed that on this basis good results are possible – or at least very bad outcomes are avoided⁽²⁾.

> **Use the right language and symbols.** The game plan for the NATO Summit, with European allies signing up to a 5% defence spending target, linked to a Trump recommitment to article V, was smart. But saying that ‘Europe is going to pay in a BIG way, as they

should, and it will be your win’ does not help Europeans to maintain credibility *vis-à-vis* their publics. It should be clear that Europeans are increasing defence spending for Europe’s benefit, not Trump’s.

Persistence does not mean endorsing Trump’s vision; it means using the best tactics to prevent worst-case outcomes, such as an open rift over NATO’s mutual defence guarantee, or a dangerously bad deal for Ukraine, and ultimately Europe.

3. PREPARATION

Expect future shocks and get ready now

Because of Trump’s volatility, new transatlantic crises are inevitable. Old tensions over trade and tariffs, US troop presence in Europe or aid for Ukraine, are set to resurface. New clashes over digital rules or Ukraine’s reconstruction are bound to emerge. Hence, Europe must treat unpredictability as a structural feature of transatlantic relations and prepare accordingly. Two main action tracks stand out:

> **Plan responses in advance and prepare political strategies.** It is always best to avoid having to scramble for a response once a crisis hits, and to have retaliatory measures and messaging strategies agreed in advance. The lesson of the trade agreement struck in the summer of 2025 – with its asymmetric modalities – is that

(1) European Commission, ‘EU-US trade deal explained’, 29 July 2025 (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_25_1930).

(2) Everts, S., Spatafora, G., Ditrych, O. and, Scazzieri, L., ‘Where do we stand after the Alaska and Washington summits?’, EUISS Commentary, 20 August 2025 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/where-do-we-stand-after-alaska-and-washington-summits>).

having retaliatory options ready is not sufficient: political will and unity are essential to maximise European leverage.

> **Deepen like-minded coalitions.** The EU should work more closely with Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and other traditional US democratic allies. They, like us, are looking for ways to deal with coercive tactics while still relying on US security guarantees. There is certainly room for greater coordination and sharing best practices on how to deal with Trump's America. Concretely, the EU should maximise the potential of newly agreed security and defence partnerships with these countries. It could also throw its weight behind attempts to rescue the World Trade Organization (WTO), which is in crisis due to Trump's unilateral tariffs and the US blockage of its dispute settlement system.

crash programme for a 'European power build-up'. Much of this agenda was already set out in Mario Draghi's report. More than one year since its publication, the pace of implementation needs to accelerate significantly⁽³⁾. This includes efforts to:

- > **Increase defence capacities** where US withdrawal would leave a dangerous vacuum. Governments should prioritise areas like intelligence, air defence, mid-range strike capabilities and rapid deployment forces.
- > **Invest in strategic industries.** This means enhanced support to high technology sectors, diversifying supply chains including for critical raw materials and reducing exposure to US-controlled digital platforms.
- > **Reboot Europe's economic security** by making the EU more self-reliant in trade, investment, monetary power and sanctions implementation.

4. POWER

Build the capacity to act without America

Europe can prepare better, persist for longer and be more pragmatic. But its core problems stem from its own weakness: a lack of power. A degree of tactical accommodation may be necessary to avoid an open trade war or a halt in US weapons and intelligence flowing to Ukraine. But the strategic goal must be to strengthen European power in all domains. This means EU governments and institutions working together on a

5. PARTNERSHIP

Build new alliances in a fragmented world

Europe's Atlanticists, who grew up with a certain idea about what the US stands for and what it means for Europe and the world, now feel a sense of abandonment, even strategic loneliness. That feeling is understandable. But in truth, Europe is far from alone. East Asian allies, democracies across the Americas and Gulf states are all having to adapt as well. Many are looking for new anchors – and

(3) European Commission, 'The Draghi Report: One year on', September 2025 (https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report/one-year-after_en).

Europe must be ready to step up as ‘partner of first resort’. As shown throughout this *Chaillot Paper*, this means:

- > **Making concrete partnership offers.** The EU must offer attractive policy packages including infrastructure investments, digital deals and security cooperation. Many countries across the world will not wait for Europe, as they have other offers. The EU should aim to be seen as a credible alternative, not as a lecture-giver.
- > **Linking strategic theatres.** The US under Trump may prioritise its own hemisphere and prefer to treat other regions as separate entities. Europe does not and should act accordingly. European policy responses should recognise and leverage the deep linkages across theatres: from East Asia to the Middle East and East Africa, from Latin America and the Caribbean to the Gulf, and from the Arctic to the Antarctic – all of which are linked and directly affect European security.

The basic message of this *Chaillot Paper* is clear: this is not a one-off crisis. It is not a storm that will pass. It is a multi-round contest in which power, alliances and resilience are built over time.

So far, given Europe’s relative weakness, the emphasis has been on tactical accommodation – avoiding the worst and buying time. To prepare for the next rounds, Europe must collect more cards – and learn to play them smartly. If it manages to do so, it will not only preserve its ability to protect its own security and democratic future. It will also help stabilise a rules-based global order that others still want to preserve or reform. This task is both urgent and feasible.