

Athens without Sparta? Europe's Security Burden in a Post-Atlantic Order

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The foreign policy direction of the current Trump administration presents Europe with a strategic environment defined by uncertainty, transactional alignment, weakened institutional cohesion, and accelerating systemic rivalry. These dynamics are not occurring in isolation as they intersect with long-term geopolitical megatrends, such as democratic backsliding, the erosion of international institutions, the fragmentation of alliances, and intensifying competition between democratic and autocratic models. In this article, potential alternative futures will be discussed alongside four critical structural challenges, transatlantic cohesion, democratic integration capacity, systemic rivalry, and societal legitimacy. They provide a useful framework for assessing the challenges Europe will face in the coming years under a Trump-led United States. In other words, Europe must finally contemplate what it means to be Athens without Sparta - a maritime, democratic, economically dynamic actor facing mounting security burdens in a system no longer guaranteed by a hegemonic partner.

Transatlantic Political Cohesion under Stress

One of the central structural factors is the degree of transatlantic political cohesion. When this cohesion erodes, the strategic capacity of the democratic world weakens, institutions like NATO operate with less clarity, and Europe is forced to consider pathways toward autonomous capabilities rather than relying on the United States as the keystone of collective deterrence and security governance. The Trump administration's foreign policy doctrine as recently enshrined in the National Security Strategy is characterized by skepticism toward multilateral institutions, a preference for bilateral bargaining, and explicit military and economic conditionality attached to security guarantees. Such a hegemonic approach directly undermines the old assumption that Washington will automatically treat European security as integral to American national security. In practical terms, NATO commitments are no longer treated as unconditional, European defence spending is increasingly framed as a transactional requirement rather than a shared strategic priority, EU security interests are subordinated to U.S. short-term bargaining tactics, particularly in relation to China and Russia, and multilateral agreements are deprioritized in favour of power politics and leverage. This shift places Europe in a world where transatlantic cohesion is weak or absent, and Europe must navigate systemic rivalry without a unified democratic leadership core. Strategically, Europe must assume that US priorities can shift abruptly in response to domestic electoral and political cycles. This volatility is not compatible with Europe's long-term security planning horizon, which typically spans for decades.

Democratic Integration Under Conditions of Fragmentation

A second major factor is the democratic world's capacity to integrate and its ability to coordinate standards, institutions, supply chains, defence capabilities, and diplomatic posture. The Trump administration weakens this factor in several ways. First, by treating the EU as an economic competitor rather than a pillar of a shared democratic project, Washington incentivises internal economic fragmentation within Europe. This plays into existing divides between industrial and non-industrial economies, between net contributor and net beneficiary states, and between Atlanticist and continental strategic cultures. Second, by delegitimising multilateral institutions, the Trump administration strengthens the hand of political actors inside Europe who seek re-nationalisation and oppose deeper EU-level defence and foreign policy integration. This represents the core dynamic and driver of strategic fragmentation. The future challenge for Europe is blunt: deep integration in foreign, security, and industrial policy becomes a survival mechanism rather than a political choice. Without further integration, democracies suffer capability deficits, fragmented deterrence, and reduced global influence relative to autocratic states that can mobilise resources rapidly and strategically.

Under the Trump foreign policy environment, Europe must confront a series of uncomfortable questions regarding its capacity for strategic action and institutional adaptation. Central to this challenge is whether the EU can make the political leap toward qualified-majority voting in foreign and defence policy, thereby overcoming the chronic constraints of unanimity. Equally important is the question of whether Europe can develop a coherent defence industrial base to replace the current landscape of twenty-seven parallel national projects, which undermines efficiency, interoperability, and competitiveness. The EU must also determine whether it is capable of coordinating China policy, export controls, and industrial strategy without the strategic framing and diplomatic leverage historically provided by the United States. Finally, Europe faces the dilemma of whether political legitimacy for major security and industrial investments can be sustained domestically in the absence of a transatlantic narrative that traditionally helped justify such costs to European electorates. These questions underscore that a shifting transatlantic environment is not merely altering external threats but is forcing a fundamental reassessment of Europe's internal decision-making capacity and strategic coherence. Failure on these fronts leads directly to an erosion of democratic order, as democratic institutions decay under the weight of internal fragmentation and external pressure.

Escalating Systemic Rivalry with China and Russia

The third structural factor, systemic rivalry, continues to escalate regardless of who sits in the White House. But the Trump administration accelerates the competitive logic while weakening coalition capacity. This creates an asymmetric risk exposure for Europe. Trump's China strategy

is heavily geoeconomic and transactional, built around tariffs, supply chain decoupling, and dominance in critical technologies. However, it does not prioritise coalition-building among democracies. Europe is thus trapped between US demands for alignment in strategic decoupling and Chinese leverage over key markets, supply chains, and critical raw materials. In parallel, Russia benefits from any weakening of transatlantic focus. The Trump administration signals a willingness to reduce commitments to Europe while simultaneously framing Ukraine's defence as conditional or negotiable. This undercuts deterrence by ambiguity and increases the likelihood that Russia will probe NATO's periphery, particularly in the Baltic, Black Sea, and Arctic theaters. It also emboldens other autocratic powers such as Turkey or Iran to test the determination and cohesion of western democracies. For Europe, the challenge is stark. Systemic rivalry unfolds under conditions of fragmentation, not unity. Europe must therefore invest in autonomous abilities to secure sea lines of communication, protect critical infrastructure, build a unified China strategy, harden against hybrid and cyber-attacks and restructure dependencies in energy, technology, pharma, and metals. In a nutshell, when systemic rivalry rises while democratic integration collapses, autocracies gain freedom of maneuver and democracies become reactive rather than shaping the environment. Under a Trump foreign policy, Europe risks landing precisely in that zone.

Societal Legitimacy and the Domestic Cost Problem

The fourth structural factor identified is the societal legitimacy of security and democratic costs. Democratic societies need public support to sustain defence spending, industrial policy, military deployments, resilience enhancement and political risk-taking. Currently, the Trump administration's approach raises the political cost burden for European leaders. If the United States demands higher defence spending while simultaneously questioning alliance solidarity, European leaders must justify major security investments without being able to point to guaranteed American partnership. That is politically toxic in several European states with strong pacifist or fiscal conservative constituencies. Furthermore, Trump's rhetoric aligns with populist, Eurosceptic, and sovereigntist forces inside Europe who already oppose integration and defence spending. This creates a domestic legitimacy problem. When costs rise but legitimacy declines, democracies lose strategic endurance and populist actors gain narrative dominance. The resulting future challenge is thus straightforward- Europe must build public consent for strategic autonomy at the exact moment when external conditions make that consent harder to obtain.

Strategic Autonomy: Inevitable, Difficult, and Time-Sensitive

The logical conclusion of the discussed framework is that in any future where the United States reduces its strategic guarantees, Europe must pursue deeper integration to avoid strategic

erosion. Under the Trump administration, the timeline compresses dramatically as Europe has to move decades of integration forward in a handful of years. Meeting these challenges would require Europe to undertake a substantive transformation of its security, industrial, and technological posture. This includes the development of integrated defence procurement mechanisms to replace fragmented national programs, as well as joint force planning encompassing stockpiles, logistics, command structures, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. Moreover, Europe would need to secure greater industrial sovereignty in critical domains such as semiconductors, energy systems, and strategic technologies. Enhancing maritime power projection in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indo-Pacific would also become necessary to safeguard trade routes, contribute to coalition operations, and deter coercive state behaviour. Complementing these efforts, the EU would have to formulate a unified China strategy that aligns export controls, investment screening, and supply chain resilience. Finally, collective cybersecurity and counter-disinformation capabilities are essential to protect democratic institutions, secure critical infrastructure, and preserve societal cohesion against hybrid threats. Together, these requirements point to a profound restructuring of European strategic capacity that extends well beyond incremental reforms. None of these approaches are optional if Europe wants to remain a strategically relevant democratic actor in a world of intensifying autocratic coordination.

Realistic Outlook for Europe in the Next Decade

Under Trump and like-minded successors' foreign policy, Europe confronts a set of difficult but structurally predictable challenges. First, the credibility of U.S. defence commitments is eroding. While NATO remains legally intact, its political assurances are becoming increasingly conditional, selective, and transactional in nature. Second, the intensifying Sino-American rivalry is generating external pressure on European states to align with Washington's decoupling agenda without being accorded genuine strategic co-authorship status, thereby risking Europe's relegation from an autonomous actor to a geopolitical object. Third, the broader ecosystem of democratic cooperation is weakening as coordination on sanctions, technology governance, and supply-chain resilience becomes more fragmented in the absence of U.S. anchoring. Fourth, this fragmentation produces a more permissive international environment for authoritarian powers, enabling Russia, China, and regional autocracies to expand influence and maneuver strategically as democratic collective action deteriorates. Finally, these external dynamics reverberate domestically by strengthening nationalist and sovereigntist currents within Europe, undermining political support for integration, and further constraining the EU's capacity to formulate coherent strategic responses.

Europe is now in a strategic environment where the old model of cheap security under US leadership, slow integration, and hedging toward China is over. Under Trump's foreign policy doctrine, transatlantic cohesion cannot be assumed, democratic integration becomes a survival

requirement, systemic rivalry accelerates without unified democratic leadership, and societal consent becomes a critical bottleneck. In sum, Europe is being pushed toward a geopolitical moment in which it must assume responsibilities that have long been outsourced to the United States. The prospect of becoming ‘Athens without Sparta’ is no longer a metaphorical provocation but an emerging strategic reality shaped by eroding transatlantic cohesion, intensifying systemic rivalry, and declining domestic legitimacy for collective action. Whether Europe can adapt to this post-Atlantic order depends on its ability to integrate quickly, invest decisively, and sustain public consent for strategic autonomy. None of these conditions is guaranteed, and all of them are time-sensitive. The coming decade will therefore determine not only Europe’s security burden, but also its status as a relevant democratic power in a world where autocracies have regained the initiative. That is Europe’s future challenge, and it is as serious as it sounds.

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