

# FOREIGN ANALYSIS

SPRING 2025



## EUROPE IN CRISIS

EU in the  
Post-American World  
BATUHAN GUNES

The EU's  
Lack of Leader  
ECATERINA MOROZ

The EU's Geopolitical  
Awakening  
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The EU's China  
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# FOREIGN ANALYSIS

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# FOREIGN ANALYSIS

ISSUE: 03

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# EU in the Post-American World

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## Beyond U.S. Hegemony

BATUHAN GUNES

**T**he end of the Cold War in 1991, along with the subsequent developments, have profoundly shaped the international order and the powers within the system. During the Cold War, the calculation was straightforward; the global system was bipolar, and it was colloquially known as the First World (the U.S.-led Western Bloc), the Second World (the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc), and the Third World (non-aligned countries). The end of the Cold War blurred these distinctions and paved the way for a U.S.-led neoliberal system, with the strongest actor being the United States of America (USA) until 2008. Some referred to this U.S.-led system as unipolar, although there was much debate surrounding this. Some political scientists even asserted that we were on the verge of witnessing the end of history, as the claim suggested that there was no ideology to challenge liberal democracy. Thus, this meant an overwhelming victory for liberal democracy, which might lead to the world domination of this idea.

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However, the claim of ‘the end of history’ was proven incorrect in 2008, a year commonly regarded as the year of the crisis of neoliberalism. The early 2000s were marked by chaos and instability, leading to a significant shift in U.S. attitudes towards the international system, which triggered a paradigm shift in the global context. We will refer to this international order, characterized by the gradual decline of the U.S.’s relative power and influence, as the “post-American world” throughout this article. The term “post-American world” was popularized by Fareed Zakaria’s book of the same title in 2008. He argues that although the U.S. remains a dominant world power, the world is shifting towards a multipolar order with other major rising powers such as China, India, Indonesia, Türkiye, Brazil, and so on. This article will primarily focus on Europe and the European Union (EU), as the effects of an increasingly multipolar world on Europe could be profound in this era of shifting global dynamics.

#### EUROPE AFTER U.S. DOMINANCE

The beginning of the 2000s witnessed a series of disturbing developments that proved to be highly detrimental to the international system. After the terrorist attacks in New York, U.S., on 11 September 2001, the U.S., under the auspices of NATO, invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the famous collective-defense clause, and garnered support and a coalition to retaliate against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The rift between transatlantic partners became apparent when the neoconservatives who were in power decided to follow a preemptive war doctrine, which would compel U.S. decision-makers and U.S. military power to strike the suspected counterpart before an imminent attack from that counterpart could reach the U.S. Therefore, the purpose was to strike the enemy before it gained an advantage over the U.S., and this decision alienated the U.S. from its transatlantic partners like France and Germany.

The U.S. decided to create a "coalition of the willing" to follow its preemptive war doctrine and achieve its objectives by intervening in and invading Iraq with a coalition in which some EU members like the UK, Poland, and Hungary also participated. The crisis we

are facing today, especially after the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, is similar to the one at the beginning of the 2000s, which we will further elaborate on. In American foreign policy, isolationism and detaching from the rest of the world are not new concepts but merely recurrences of history and the traumas of Americans since the beginning of the 1800s. After gaining independence from Britain in 1776 and the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1783, the U.S. consolidated its power in North America. Like all other newly independent states in history, the U.S. needed a purpose to stay dynamic and survive, as well as a common ideal that might unite the American people. This ideal was patriotism and anti-colonialism.

This idea of anti-colonialism shaped the American political mindset until the end of World War II. During the nation-building process and the establishment of the United States' institutional framework, Americans adopted a distinct approach to global events and developments. They believed that distancing themselves from, or expelling, colonial powers from the continent would be an effective strategy—a belief that held true until it no longer did. In the 1930s, the devastated international order, the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations, and economic problems led the world into chaos, and the Old Continent once again became a scene of massacre against Jews, Romani people, disabled people, and other ethnic and religious minorities. The U.S.'s principle of nonintervention in Europe, the functioning of the international order, and its policy of isolationism can be seen as a continuation of the American political mindset that was put forward with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and can be considered as contributing factors to the outbreak of the deadliest war in human history.

The ineffectiveness of American domestic politics and systemic challenges hindered the United States from integrating into the global international order and organizations like the League of Nations. Furthermore, the country's policy of isolationism only emboldened imperial powers such as Germany, Italy, and Japan, contributing to the deterioration of the international system. This downward spiral ultimately led to immense losses, widespread casualties, and one of history's most devastating wars and genocides.

Today, the declining influence of the U.S. in global political affairs, coupled with the world's transition from a predominantly unipolar system to a more multilateral post-American world, disrupts the international order and has far-reaching consequences. These impacts are evident in ongoing conflicts, such as those in Gaza and Ukraine, and it seems that the shift of power in the international order further destabilizes already fragile areas and countries, especially considering the declining influence of the U.S. in the international order and the rise of other powers and regional players.

In 2008, the global economic crisis and its severe repercussions had a profound impact worldwide, particularly in the Western world, which is closely tied to the U.S. Facing its worst consequences, the crisis ultimately upended the neoliberal system. After 2008, when the neoliberal system was shaken to its core, new ideas and perspectives gained momentum and popularity, as well as other crucial players like China, which could propose strong counter-ideologies to neoliberalism in the Western world. The Chinese system and the correlation between liberal democracy and economic development have long been debated using China as an example, and it has been proven otherwise—that for a successfully functioning economy, liberal democracy is not a prerequisite.

After the crisis, heavily impacted countries and other emerging powers in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa strived to find other approaches to deal with the crisis and other allies to align with. In this regard, the bloc of BRIC (later BRICS) emerged as a platform where traditionally non-aligned or non-Western countries can engage in dialogue and economic or political cooperation. The term BRIC was coined by British economist Jim O'Neill and was used frequently by Goldman Sachs in 2001 to refer to the emerging players and markets in the international order. The tension and polarization between the U.S. and Europe since the year 2000 have now reached their peak with the election of the 47th U.S. President Donald Trump. Previously, in 2003, due to the Iraq War and the U.S.'s decision to intervene unilaterally without a specific United Nations resolution, tensions between transatlantic partners increased.

Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld even classified the European countries who aided and supported the U.S. in its Iraq War as ‘New Europe’ and those who did not aid the U.S. as ‘Old Europe’. Therefore, the early 2000s saw a high level of polarization and an era of narratives ranging from conservatism to the idea of ‘America First,’ which President Donald Trump championed during his presidential term. Europe and EU bureaucrats worked well with the U.S. when there was a Democratic president such as Barack Obama or Joe Biden. However, Republican presidents such as George W. Bush and Donald Trump made things difficult for Europeans and triggered a quest for autonomy from the security umbrella of NATO and the U.S. After 2017, with the election victory of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. President, the EU started to consider a strategic autonomy concept that would make Europe independent from the U.S. in terms of security and defense matters, as European leaders frequently expressed their mistrust and concerns about the U.S. government after 2017.



*U.S. President Donald Trump (C) and Vice President JD Vance meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office at the White House on February 28, 2025 in Washington, DC. Trump and Zelensky are meeting today to negotiate a preliminary agreement on sharing Ukraine's mineral resources that Trump says will allow America to recoup aid provided to Kyiv while supporting Ukraine's economy. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)*

For this purpose, EU leaders and state leaders finalized and launched a long-awaited scheme: the Strategic Compass for the EU in May 2022. In the face of challenges like Russian aggression against Ukraine, the crisis and war in the Middle East, conflicts and instability in the Sahel region, and the rapid decline of trust in the



new U.S. government among Europeans, they have now realized that they must be self-sufficient in terms of security, defense, technology, and energy. This new, bold post-American world, in which all actors act for themselves, is now a multilateral one with a few great powers as well as regional aspiring powers across the world. Recently, we have been discussing the Global South, the 'Third World,' and aspiring powers more frequently, with an aim to decentralize the international order and to understand the rapid ascension of BRICS and China as major global powers.

### EU AT A CROSSROADS

Since its foundation in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Union has remained one of the most important blocs and actors in the international order. Until the 1960s and 1970s, apart from the U.S. and USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), the \*\*ECSC—or the European Economic Community (EEC), as it was known at that time—\*\*was one of the major powers in the international order, although the wave of decolonization made some European nations weaker in terms of wealth and access to resources compared to before. The 1970s marked the era of *détente*, during which the Western world sought to engage with and reconcile with the USSR through closer cooperation, shared prosperity, and the pursuit of a stable peace environment.

This effort was formalized under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which later evolved into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Subsequently, initiatives like the "Common European Home," introduced by Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, further strengthened Europe's and the European Union's role in the international order. The beginning of the 1980s also witnessed the rise of a neoliberal approach, first initiated by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—a predominant economic ideology that would last and dominate most of the world until 2008.

Furthermore, the period of strong collaboration among European

nations and the participation of new countries in the bloc, such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal, and later on in the 2000s, the membership of nearly all Central and Eastern European countries strengthened the bloc and improved its capacity, as well as its responses and measures to tackle the challenges of globalization, further crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans, and asymmetric threats such as terrorism. On the other hand, the rift between Europe and the U.S. reemerged after the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. due to the U.S.'s unilateral actions and decisions, such as its War on Terror and its goal of eradicating all those responsible, no matter what the consequences might be. All these factors, in fact, pulled transatlantic partners away from each other and paved the way for country-based or continent-based solutions such as “America First” and “European Strategic Autonomy.”

Meanwhile, the EU still continues to be one of the biggest economic and political actors in the international arena, as well as the world's biggest soft power in terms of human rights, justice, regulations, democracy, and the rule of law. It is a known fact that the EU, in its near neighborhood, has imposed conditionality to influence non-EU members who have an EU membership perspective, using its soft power instruments. Countries like Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine are some of the EU candidate countries, and the EU is known to have a significant impact over these countries in terms of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in exchange for commitments from these countries. The EU's foreign policy is also based on shared values, and it views the world through a values-based perspective, which could be challenging due to the fact that other countries or blocs might not share the exact same values as the EU.

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*This new, bold post-American world, in which all actors act for themselves, is now a multilateral one with a few great powers as well as regional aspiring powers across the world.*

Today, one of the biggest challenges with the EU's foreign policy seems to be its incapacity to renew and recreate itself in the face of the changing international and geopolitical context. Currently, the EU's relationships with the U.S., China, and other third actors like India and Türkiye can be challenging in times of crises and

differing perspectives. Furthermore, one might argue that the EU's conditionality toward its neighbors as well as the U.S. worked well in times of peace and in an international order based on shared values.

However, today, the international system is swiftly changing into a significantly different one, in which national characteristics and the sovereignty of states are seen as the utmost important elements, and states are racing to the bottom in terms of trade, financial matters, and even military aspects. Consequently, this race to the bottom intensifies competition among nations, driving them to prioritize profits and trade surpluses above all else. This is apparent in the recent additional tariffs imposed by former U.S. President Donald Trump on China and Europe.

#### EUROPE IN THE AGE OF STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY

Despite all the challenges in its internal affairs, bureaucracy, and the crises of unstable European governments—including in key countries like France and Germany—the EU seems to be staying together, except for a few states with their noncompliant behaviors. Since 2022, in the face of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the EU has stayed strong and worked with the U.S. under President Joe Biden, imposing more than 15 sanctions packages against Russia in the hope of deterring it from its invasion and operations in Ukraine. The effectiveness and consequences of these sanctions remain debatable, but the West's unity has empowered the position of European decision-makers—at least until 2025. The EU has many commitments and good relations with third countries and still has ongoing projects, operations, peacekeeping missions, and strong trade relations with both nations and trade blocs across the world.

In the year 2000, the U.S. was a dominant power in trade. Except for a few countries in Asia and Africa, the U.S. was the largest trading partner of many nations. However, as of 2024, except for a few countries in Latin America, Mexico, Canada, and a few U.S. allies like France, the UK, and Germany, nearly all countries now

have China as their largest trading partner. This shift may very well be one of the reasons why the U.S. is now opposing the rules of the international order and advocating a tariff regime that entails isolationism for the U.S., consequently leading to a post-American world in which the U.S. no longer wishes to be the world's police. The EU, on the other hand, does not follow isolationism and continues its humanitarian operations and missions in Africa and other fragile zones in the world. As of today, the EU has 21 ongoing Common Security and Defense Policy missions and operations across the globe.

The EU's strong collaboration with trading blocs and regional platforms such as Mercosur (The Southern Common Market), BRICS, the African Union, and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) also reflects its ongoing economic power and its soft power mechanism through trade, bilateral economic relations, and close political cooperation — either in a bilateral format or under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The EU also continues its peacekeeping missions and operations in fragile regions in Africa, alongside UN operations and missions. The EU's ongoing commitment to Africa and its recognition of the African Union as a strong platform for African countries is also commendable. However, the EU faces numerous strategic challenges and pressing issues, especially in the post-2011 Arab Spring period.

As of 2025, five pressing issues and challenges can be identified for Europe and the EU: Europe's lack of military power and assertiveness, energy dependency on different powers such as Russia and the U.S., internal divisions within the EU, lack of leadership and a strong steering power within the EU, and, last but not least, the decline of the current liberal world order. First, the issue of European autonomy and the efforts to create a strong European army independent from the U.S. and NATO have long been discussed by European politicians since the end of the Cold War, but the desire to do so has never been this real and tangible, especially after U.S. President Donald Trump's first term in 2017.

Since 2017, both French President Emmanuel Macron, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and EU bureaucrats have stated on different occasions that Europe should be self-sufficient




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and that there should be a military power to complement the EU's undeniable economic power. Thus, the initiative for a European army was reborn—this time with tangible actions such as Strategic Autonomy, the European Army Project, and the Strategic Compass Initiative. Second, Europe has been dependent on other powers and states for its own energy consumption. Although energy dependency on non-EU countries varies greatly between EU states, the average energy import dependency rate was 63% in 2022. There is no exact number demonstrating that the EU's dependency on energy from non-EU countries has declined.

As frequently pointed out by the European Commission, the EU's imports from Russia have indeed declined; however, this gap was quickly filled by other non-EU countries like Norway, the U.S., Egypt, Israel, and Azerbaijan. Moreover, it is suggested that Russian natural gas continues to be an important resource for some European countries due to the internal conflicts that some EU member states are having with the supranational administration in Brussels. Taking all these developments into account, one may argue that the EU has achieved some success in reducing its reliance on Russian energy. However, it remains dependent on other major suppliers, such as the United States, which the EU and its politicians themselves have labeled an unreliable partner following President Trump's election victory. Third, internal divisions and conflicts within the EU pose a significant challenge to the bloc.

As is well known, the EU derives its strength from its unity in facing other blocs or global powers, so a display of dissatisfaction or disobedience toward common EU policies or decisions puts the whole bloc in jeopardy. In recent years, countries like Hungary, Poland, and, from time to time, Italy and Slovakia have followed a different path from Brussels or have not joined common policies in areas such as energy, foreign policy, and migration. Furthermore, there still seem to be major differences between Western and Eastern European countries in terms of economic development, financial stability, humanitarian progress, and the status of the rule of law in these countries. In fact, the Iron Curtain, once thought to have divided the two camps at the start of the Cold War, may still persist in ideology, development, economy, and the way Western

and Eastern European countries perceive Russia: as a threat or as an inevitable partner.

Fourth, today, there is a lack of leadership even at the highest ranks of EU bureaucracy. The leaders of the most important EU institutions do not come into office through a direct election by the public but rather through selection by heads of state or formal appointment procedures. This not only signifies that there is still a democratic deficit—meaning that people have yet to be fully integrated into the system—but also that one competence (for instance, foreign policy or representing the union abroad) may be shared between two or more officials in power. This, in turn, may further trigger leadership discussions within the EU.

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*The desire to create a strong European army independent from the U.S. and NATO has never been this real and tangible, especially after U.S. President Donald Trump's first term in 2017.*

Moreover, in addition to the three or four most important EU leaders—such as Ursula von der Leyen (European Commission), António Costa (European Council), Roberta Metsola (European Parliament), and Kaja Kallas (High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy)—there are also the leaders of nation-states who chair meetings held in the Council of the EU. For instance, whenever agriculture ministers of EU member states gather in Brussels, the minister of the country holding the rotating presidency of the Union for six months leads and presides over that meeting.

The EU's foreign policy is another area where leadership appears inconsistent at times of distress and crises. While Kaja Kallas holds this position, she is occasionally overruled by national leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron or German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and at times by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who frequently asserts influence beyond her official responsibilities. In this regard, there is no clear task-sharing mechanism, as the European Commission and nation-states also have the right to represent or intervene in the affairs of the High Representative and its agency, the European External Action Service (EEAS). Last but not least, the decline of the current liberal

world order after 2008 has profoundly affected the U.S., as well as Europe and its ability to tackle the challenges of the new international order. After 2008, the world has gradually become more isolationist, bringing survivalism and nationalism back onto the agenda—nearly 60 years after the end of the Second World War.

Today, countries tend to become more isolationist and nationalistic to avoid the costly transactions of free trade or to promote their own agendas, as seen in the example of the U.S. The system that was created after the horrors of the Second World War had the U.S. as the dominant and balancing power, which meant that the U.S. took on the role of the world's police. This role, played by the U.S., worked in times of crises during the Cold War and between 1991 and 2008. However, after the so-called crisis of the neoliberal system, there was a paradigm shift, and it became obvious that every nation was for itself. Although the EU and regional players across the world remain committed to the international rules-based order and multilateral frameworks, the U.S.'s declining trust in the UN and multilateral institutions has gravely weakened and undermined the international order.

During the first term of President Donald Trump, the first signs of deterioration in the current international order emerged. President Trump unilaterally chose to leave the Paris Climate Agreement, pulled the U.S. out of several international funds and aid programs, as well as the World Health Organization. Moreover, there was no other power—including the EU and China—that was able to fill the financial gap left by the U.S. At the same time, the EU, although there had been discussions in the past regarding European independence and autonomy from the U.S. and NATO, especially after 2017, initiated formal procedures and initiatives that could make Europe an independent force less dependent on the U.S. and NATO in this post-American world.

Initiatives such as the concept of a Common European Army, the EU's Strategic Autonomy, and the EU's Strategic Compass represent the EU's attempts to establish its role in the evolving international order and to reduce its reliance on external powers for security, defense, energy, and foreign policy. Taking all of these



into account, transatlantic relations do not seem to be progressing in a positive and constructive way, as can be observed from the latest developments even in the first months of U.S. President Donald Trump's second inauguration in January 2025. Even the first month of President Trump's presidency has made Europeans anxious about the future and the ongoing war on the European continent. Trump's unilateral decisions regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, without even consulting or including Ukraine or other European powers, and his unilateral plans to turn Gaza into a Mediterranean riviera, as well as his stance on the future of the people in Gaza, seem extremely troublesome both to the countries in the region and to the EU.



*U.S. Vice President JD Vance delivers his speech during the 61st Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, southern Germany on February 14, 2025. (Photo by THOMAS KIENZLE / AFP) (Photo by THOMAS KIENZLE/AFP via Getty Images)*

Furthermore, U.S. President Trump's aggressive statements on the Panama Canal, Canada, and Greenland have justified European concerns. President Trump's aggressive rhetoric against NATO allies might offer some clues about the future, as it seems that transatlantic relations will be highly challenging and may never be the same as before. The decline of U.S. influence and the return of isolationist and neomercantilist policies (protective economic and trade policies aimed at strengthening one's own economy) have, in fact, paved the way for a world order with minimal Western influence and might promote other major powers like China or regional players like India, Brazil, Türkiye, and Egypt. At the 56th Munich Security Conference in 2020, the concepts of 'Westless-

ness' and 'the West vs. the Rest' gained popularity, especially among Global South countries.

Moreover, in February 2025, at the 61st Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's speech to high-ranking European leaders and bureaucrats had a seismic impact, as he once again publicly rebuked them. His remarks further reinforced European fears that they could be left to face Russian aggression alone, raising concerns about the future of security and military dynamics in Europe and the transatlantic region. It is now evident that Europe is entering a phase of enhancing its own capacity to address military and security challenges. Meanwhile, despite growing concerns and trust issues regarding NATO and the U.S., most European nations are likely to remain committed to the alliance. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative Kaja Kallas, and European Council President António Costa have, on different occasions, expressed the need to tackle regional and global problems on their own. In this regard, the efforts initiated in the post-2017 period—such as the Common European Army and European Strategic Autonomy—seem to be progressing rapidly.

On March 6, 2025, the European Commission ratified the decision to allocate €800 billion for the rearmament of Europe. All these efforts by the EU can be considered a result of the unilateral decisions and policy actions of the U.S., as well as a European effort to fill the gap left by the U.S. in Europe's military and security domains. The future of the European Union, particularly its security and military trajectory, as well as transatlantic relations, remains highly uncertain. It is unclear whether the EU will uphold its commitments, frameworks, and promises to the United States or any other global powers, as EU leaders such as Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa have repeatedly emphasized that the rules-based international order has weakened and that multilateralism is under severe strain, facing significant challenges.

EUROPE'S PATH TO  
STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Analyzing the challenges within the transatlantic bloc and emphasizing the negative impact of U.S. President Trump on these relations suggests that Europe may strive for greater self-reliance in the future. This shift would be crucial for safeguarding its long-term stability and enhancing its ability to effectively address emerging challenges. Given the ongoing power shifts and the erosion of the international rules-based order, we can anticipate that these transformations will be anything but quiet. We take an optimistic view of the future and argue that, rather than depending on other forces and non-EU countries, the EU will likely rely on itself in the future.

Having seen that many non-EU powers are assertive or uncooperative towards the EU, it has begun to shape its own destiny and has officially intensified efforts to strengthen its military and security capabilities through initiatives such as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), a Common European Army, and Strategic Autonomy. However, the EU recognizes that, rather than deepening rifts in transatlantic relations or clashing with the U.S., it must maintain a stable relationship despite existing differences and challenges. After all, the U.S. remains—and will continue to be—Europe's closest ally.

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Notwithstanding this, the EU is recognizing the influence of non-EU powers in its near neighborhood, such as the UK and Türkiye, which could assist the EU in diversifying its military and security perspectives amid the declining trust of Europeans toward Americans. In the future, it may be in the EU's best interest to recognize Türkiye as a key player in the European security framework. This would enable

more effective responses to Russian aggression, improved management of instability along its southern borders, and better handling of irregular migration from the Middle East and North

Africa. Additionally, closer cooperation with Türkiye in the military and defense sectors could significantly strengthen European security, given Türkiye's advanced military capabilities, strategic infrastructure, and technological expertise.

## EU IN A SHIFTING WORLD

As global dynamics evolve and the international order gradually drifts away from its core values, the EU is striving to navigate an increasingly volatile and unpredictable landscape. For the EU, the declining role of the U.S. in European affairs and the international order presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The decline of U.S. influence in the world means that, from now on, the EU no longer has a guardian angel in security and military issues related to its own continent. Instead, the EU will have to face other powers across the world that may not share its values or worldview.

Until now, the U.S. and the EU have worked in relative harmony: the U.S. would handle military dimensions and conduct operations if needed, while the EU would act as a soft power, influencing and shaping regions through instruments such as economic incentives, EU membership prospects, investment promises, and close collaboration with targeted countries or blocs. The 2008 economic crisis pushed heavily affected countries to seek alternatives from emerging powers like China, leading to a decline in the EU's economic appeal and normative influence on the global stage. However, by making strategic moves, reinforcing its commitment to the international order, and strengthening its military and defense capabilities, the EU could carve out a significant role for itself in a post-American world. Since 2017, one of the EU's top priorities has been to achieve self-sufficiency and reinvent itself within the changing geopolitical landscape.

Without further questioning the EU's capabilities or achievements, it is evident that, in the face of Russian aggression, instability along its southern borders, and the erosion of the international rules-based order, the EU must seek more dependable partners if the U.S. is deemed unreliable. Additionally, it should significantly expand its defense, security, and military expenditures to bolster its

strategic autonomy. In an ever-changing world where multiple major powers and aspiring regional players compete for influence, the EU needs to be closer than ever, must be self-sufficient, and should be able to assess threats and opportunities accordingly while working with reliable partners—if it values its continued existence.

# The EU's Lack of Leader

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Who Runs Europe?

ECATERINA MOROZ

**T**hese might be among the first associations that come to mind when hearing the word “leader”: attributes that define leadership in all its forms, political leadership included. However, the democratic world today aims at building strong institutions rather than vesting power in strong personalities. At the end of the day, institutions are the backbone of democracy, ensuring that the rule of law prevails and preventing any one individual from seizing excessive power.

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In this context, is a discussion about individual political leadership still relevant today, or is it a reminiscence of the past? Has the idea of charismatic leadership become a tool used only by authoritarian regimes, resurfacing now and then only to stir the waters in the liberal world? Could it be that citizens in the free world are no longer content with the democratic structures their countries are built upon, but rather aspiring to see someone similar to Putin, Erdoğan, or Xi Jinping in leading roles? It seems that even within the most well-established and institutionally robust democracies, leadership continues to matter, shaping the political discourse and policy direction, therefore managing (or not) to gain public trust.

However, what type of leadership and leaders do we refer to when discussing an organization fundamentally built on the values of democracy and institutional cooperation, as is the case with the European Union? In a system designed to dilute power across institutions and install power-limiting mechanisms so as to avoid authoritarian backsliding, leadership should not be about resounding names or big personalities, but about properly functioning democratic structures. Yet, in an era where politics is often reduced to a show and where strongmen thrive on visibility (there is no such thing as bad publicity), does the EU look rudderless? Should we associate the EU with one single name, the way we easily associate the U.S. with the current president, Donald Trump?

As Henry Kissinger famously put it: “Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?” In the years following the question posed by the former U.S. Secretary of State, the EU went through a series of institutional reforms conditioned by enlargement. While managing to structurally adjust in order to welcome new members, the question of leadership became even more pertinent, as the Union struggles not only to project a coherent voice on the global stage, but also finds it more difficult to articulate a unified stance within its borders.

It might be that the answer (or the absence thereof) to Henry Kissinger’s question holds the clue to the unique character of leadership within the European Union: there is probably no single person to take the call simply because there is an entire structure



designed to respond. The EU was never meant to be guided by one voice, but by a complex system that prioritizes cooperation over command and consensus over charisma. While certainly implying burdensome and slower decision-making (as compared to the straightforward stroke of an emperor's pen), democracy comes with the assumed cost of complex processes, especially when political decisions affect the lives of people in 27 countries. Nonetheless, the unique complexity inherent in the European project should not excuse inaction or indecision; a balance must be struck between having the voices of all members heard and responding to the constantly emerging challenges swiftly enough.



*President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy attends alongside President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the President of the European Council Antonio Costa the special EU leaders meeting with the head of states in Brussels, the Emergency Summit on Ukraine and Defence. The presidents spotted talking while arriving and giving a statement to international media and press. Brussels, Belgium on March 6, 2025 (Photo by Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via Getty Images)*

Yet, this complicated framework maintains the need for direction—the Union of (currently) 27 cannot move forward without a vision of where it's moving and what the means are to achieve its goals. Well-functioning institutions do not necessarily need strong leaders, but certainly require a leadership structure that is able to set a clear direction, have the necessary flexibility to address unexpected difficulties, and ensure that consensus does not paralyze the heavy bureaucratic machine. Without a coherent strategy, the EU risks becoming a reactive rather than a proactive force, constantly trying to find responses to crises as they come up, rather than having a say in shaping the global agenda. At this

point, it is worth asking: does the EU truly have the leadership architecture to set and navigate the future, or is it still trying to define one?

The European Union does not elect a single head of state (as there is no state to begin with); rather, it appoints leaders to oversee the main European institutions based on the results of the European Parliament elections. The Commission, the Council, and the Parliament receive their respective heads of office (presidents) based on the vote expressed by European citizens. The 2024 European elections have brought a (somewhat) new leadership team to charge of the Union for the next five years.

Ursula von der Leyen, Roberta Metsola, Kaja Kallas, and António Costa have emerged as key figures in representing and shaping the bloc's future. Experienced at the national level, the four key figures from across the EU pledged to defend Europe-wide interests. And while landing in these positions was conditioned by the vote cast by European citizens in the EU elections, it is not clear how recognizable these names really are beyond the Brussels bubble. This lack of recognition is symptomatic of a broader issue: the disconnect between EU institutions and the people they serve.

While Europeans generally know their national leaders, naming the key figures in the EU might be a more complicated task for an ordinary European citizen. This disconnect seems to be based on a certain level of mistrust in European politics and the European project as a whole, as shown by the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic movements across the continent. The skepticism displayed by some Europeans may have legitimate reasons, as the EU is facing tumultuous times: economically, the Union is navigating a fragile recovery, the Green Deal faces pushback, and the threat of Russia has not vanished from the Eastern border.

In this context, is the EU's leadership structure fit for the Herculean tasks, or does its fragmented decision-making leave it struggling to respond when a clear answer is needed? A leadership crisis is not just the absence of strong personalities—it is rather a failure of direction, coordination, and the ability to secure public trust. In the context of the European Union, a leadership crisis manifests itself

when institutions lack the ability to project authority and inspire confidence and stability. It is not about the lack of a single, charismatic figure, but rather about whether the EU's decision-makers can both provide clear and effective governance and bring Union-level politics closer to the citizens.

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And while the European Union was never designed to be led by a single figure, certain leaders in its history have played a key role in shaping its direction and serving as “faces” of the EU. Jacques Delors, the President of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, possessed the vision to lay the groundwork for the modern EU, the Single Market, and the euro. Leaders like the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, though primarily a national figure, exerted perceivable and, most importantly, recognizable influence over EU affairs, contributing to steering Europe through crises such as the eurozone meltdown. These well-known names represent examples of how leaders can set direction but, most importantly, build trust internally and represent the EU externally.

Yet, over the years, the European Union’s leadership has arguably become less visible and more fragmented. This is not entirely accidental—as the EU expanded from its founding members to the current 27 nations, decision-making became increasingly complex, requiring a redefinition of power sharing. The more voices involved, the harder it became for any single figure to emerge as the face of European leadership. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty reshaped the EU’s governance, creating new positions such as the President of the European Council, aimed at limiting the prominence of the Commission President. While successfully distributing power more evenly, the EU also made its leadership less recognizable. The rise of populism and nationalist movements across Europe has weakened the authority of EU institutions even further, as some national leaders frame Brussels in dictatorial terms, antagonistic to the national interests of member states.

Instead of contributing to building a stronger EU leadership, some members have grown more reluctant even when it comes to

competencies already given to the EU, leading to decision-making gridlock, as in the current case of enforcing sanctions against Russia and continuing to offer support to Ukraine. And while this political strategy brings short-term electoral gains at the national level precisely by exploiting the existing disconnect between the Union and EU citizens, it ultimately undermines the already weakened foundation of European cooperation, alienating Europeans further from the EU. While populist national leaders in some member states pledge to “regain” sovereignty at the expense of acting at the Union level, the EU continues to face problems that cannot be solved by individual action but instead require an EU-wide response.

Decisions on defense, the leveling up of strategic autonomy, migration, and financial reform often become trapped in prolonged negotiations. The lack of clear leadership has direct geopolitical consequences as well, eroding the global influence that the EU tried to build over the last decades. One of the very recent examples of this can be observed in the approach of the new U.S. administration towards the peace talks on Ukraine. The cabinet of Donald Trump has chosen to speak directly with Russia, sidelining Brussels completely and leaving the EU to warn against a “quick fix” and a “dirty deal” that cannot be implemented without the involvement of Ukraine and the EU, as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, put it.

Leadership in the EU has always been a balancing act between institutions and national governments. But when leadership is too diluted, the system risks stagnation. The challenge ahead is not just about finding strong personalities but also about creating a structure that allows for decisive action while maintaining the unparalleled complexity of the EU. The Union has strong institutions to act; what it might need could be a representative of the whole institutional structure—not a leader vested with extensive powers, but rather a powerful and coherent presence, especially on an international level.

Beyond leadership development, structural reforms are necessary to eliminate systemic obstacles to decisive action, as the EU’s decision-making process is often slow and fragmented due to

excessive reliance on unanimity. Transitioning to more qualified majority voting in areas of security and foreign policy would allow for swifter, more coordinated responses. The EU also needs stronger crisis-management mechanisms that empower leaders to act decisively when urgent situations arise, without getting lost in a bureaucratic labyrinth. However, this would involve a leveling up of the Union's competencies, to which member states might be reluctant to consent.

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*The lack of clear leadership has direct geopolitical consequences as well, eroding the global influence that the EU tried to build over the last decades.*

The problem of the EU is not the lack of leaders, but rather a lack of leadership resulting in political fragmentation, waning global influence, and low public engagement. Without proper reforms, the EU risks becoming increasingly vulnerable to internal division and external sidelining. A European Union with a clear leadership structure, backed by functional institutions and genuine public trust, would not only be able to respond more effectively to crises but also reclaim its position as a decisive actor in world affairs. The challenge ahead is not just about strengthening institutions but also about revitalizing the European project in a way that forges trust, unity, and resilience. Leadership in the EU is not about strong figures; it is rather about strong institutions and people with a strong presence to represent them.

# The EU's Geopolitical Awakening

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How the War in Ukraine  
Redefined Europe?

KARN ANUTARASOTI

**T**he unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia has changed the European Union's foreign policies in many ways. The invasion came as a shock to many Europeans, as war on European soil had seemed unimaginable. The outcome was that it reshaped European foreign policy — from arms supplies to full-scale sanctions— policies that were previously unimaginable in 2014.

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Prior to the war in Ukraine, the European Union had several gaps in its foreign policy. During the crisis in Crimea and Donbas in 2014, EU countries refused to supply arms to Ukraine, instead relying on limited sanctions and negotiations with Russia. The lack of arms meant that Ukraine was unable to ramp up its defenses prior to the 2022 invasion due to insufficient deterrence, which Russia saw as an opportunity to launch an invasion. Due to a lack of deterrence, Russia saw few costs in escalating its aggression in Ukraine, as the EU's diplomatic approach failed to pressure Putin, who, like many authoritarian leaders, only responds to strength.

The limited and targeted sanctions during the Crimea and Donbas invasions were also designed to have limited effects on European exports, which in turn meant the pressure put on Russia was insufficient. By prioritizing its commercial interests, the EU overlooked geopolitical threats, allowing Russia to continue its invasion of Crimea and Donbas while maintaining semi-normal trade relations with the EU due to the sanctions being targeted and symbolic rather than impactful. By allowing Russia to have escalation dominance in Ukraine, the EU effectively signaled to Russia that it did not see Ukraine as a vital interest and would not take action to prevent Russian coercion.

The soft-touch approach to Russia's invasion of Crimea and Donbas also led to an increased reliance on Russian gas, as the government of Angela Merkel in Germany supported the building of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. As a result, the EU failed to diversify its energy sources prior to the invasion and was left scrambling for new energy sources after imposing sanctions on Russia. The lack of a domestic energy supply chain and domestic investments was a key foreign policy shortcoming, as it meant the EU lacked energy security and therefore had to rely on authoritarian states that are hostile to the liberal international order that the EU upholds.

The absence of strategic autonomy is also evident in the EU's reliance on the U.S. for defense, leading to a lack of strategic autonomy. Prior to the war in Ukraine, defense spending in many EU countries, such as Germany, was quite low, meaning that the EU relied on arms imports from the U.S. to maintain its military strength. This left the EU vulnerable to political shifts in the U.S.,



notably the rise of Donald Trump, as reliance on the U.S. threatens the EU's security due to its dependence, which could, in turn, be exploited by an administration in the U.S. that is potentially hostile to the EU. As the future of NATO is now under threat, EU member states should form a European army, which would become the EU's answer to NATO, in order to establish a reliable forum for security where the EU could operate autonomously.

### EUROPE'S NEXT STEP

As a result of the invasion of Ukraine, many EU countries and the European Union itself drastically increased defense spending, as the war on European soil was, in many ways, a wake-up call for countries to take security matters into their own hands. In 2022, Germany, which had been criticized for its low defense spending, approved a fund of €100 billion for the Bundeswehr, intended to provide a range of new equipment, including air defense, cyber defense, and various weapons, ammunition, and drones. This is an important part of the EU's shift in defense strategy, as the less-committal stance from the U.S. in aiding Ukraine showed European countries that matters of European defense require strategic autonomy and self-reliance, rather than dependence on an alliance with the U.S.. In addition, to make the EU's strategy on Ukraine less dependent on the U.S., the European Peace Facility was formed to aid Ukraine, with €6.1 billion being transferred to Ukraine between 2022 and 2024 to address the beleaguered nation's defense needs.

This is an important step for European strategic autonomy, as it enables the EU to reduce its risk exposure to potentially isolationist currents in the U.S.. With the return of Trump to the U.S. presidency, initiatives such as the European Peace Facility are now critical to the EU's security, as Trump's isolationist views pose significant geopolitical risks to the EU, and EU-level initiatives allow the EU to distance itself from a potentially unfriendly administration in the U.S.. As a result of Trump's more isolationist policies, the EU has a budget plan to drastically increase defense spending by around €840 million to boost European security. Such actions strengthen European strategic autonomy, as they

allow the EU to gain security guarantees from within its own borders.



*Boeing AH-64 Apache attack helicopters of the U.S. Army 12th Combat Aviation Brigade participate in the Allied Spirit 25 military exercise at the U.S. 7th Army Training Command Joint Multinational Readiness Center on March 12, 2025 near Hobensfels, Germany. Approximately 3,000 troops from NATO member countries, including the United States, Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, are participating in the four-week exercise with the aim of improving interoperability. European countries have pledged large-scale defence spending following doubts cast by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump on the future of the U.S. commitment to the NATO military alliance. (Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images)*

Unlike the 2014 Ukraine crisis, when European countries continued to import Russian gas, the war in Ukraine saw a great reduction in reliance on Russian gas. After sanctions were imposed, imports of pipeline gas from Russia diminished drastically, while volumes of LNG imports from reliable partners like the U.S. (until Trump) or Norway have been increasing. The importance of such policy shifts is that by reducing reliance on Russian gas, the EU gains more leeway for assertive and confrontational policies to defend Ukraine's sovereignty. This also reduces the leverage that Russia has over the EU, as Moscow has historically used gas as a bargaining chip in geopolitics. The Net Zero Industry Act was also passed in response to the Inflation Reduction Act being passed in the U.S., aiming to build a European-based supply chain and reduce reliance on imports, thereby weakening the leverage that other countries have over the EU. The Net Zero Industry Act mandates that the EU must produce at least 40% of its annual deployment needs for key clean technologies like solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, heat pumps, and hydrogen electrolyzers by 2030.

This will reduce the need to import materials from countries like the U.S. and China, which helps the EU's strategic autonomy ambitions, as it makes the Union less beholden to foreign powers, removing their political leverage over the European Union. This will help the EU pursue more autonomous foreign policies independent of the U.S., as self-reliance means there is less need to concede to other countries on foreign policy, making them less able and therefore less likely to put the EU's supply chain at risk. Having a domestic energy supply chain also prevents other countries from manipulating the EU's politics by using energy as leverage. The Net Zero Industry Act also assists in reducing oil imports. This allows the EU to pursue a more assertive policy, as oil-producing states are often authoritarian states like Saudi Arabia, whose geopolitical and ideological positions do not align with the EU and which has cut oil production to increase prices as a tool of leverage. Therefore, the Net Zero Industry Act will remove the ability of countries like Saudi Arabia to exercise political influence within the EU and will provide energy security that is independent of authoritarian states.

#### EUROPE'S FIGHT FOR UKRAINE

One notable shift in the European Union's strategy after the Ukraine war is the comprehensive sanctions imposed on Russia. During the Crimea and Donbas crisis, the EU, especially Germany, relied on a mixture of sanctions and diplomacy, hoping to contain the conflict through diplomatic means. This failed, as it gave Russia escalation superiority and sent the message that it could get away with further escalation, as the EU did not consider Ukraine a vital interest. This set the stage for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as the weakness of responses unintentionally signaled to Russia that it could escalate the conflict further without concerns about a strategic backlash leading to its defeat.

Therefore, the sanctions imposed on Russia marked a departure from allowing Russian escalation superiority through de facto appeasement, as such sanctions attempted to pressure Russia by imposing negative impacts on its economy rather than serving simply as a negotiation tool. In addition, it allowed the EU to move away from Russian gas, which many countries, namely Germany,

still imported. The sanctions against Russia, the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, and the invasion of Crimea in general were considered weak and allowed Russia to commit its actions with impunity, as they put insufficient pressure on Moscow, ultimately leading to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, sanctions marked a departure from the non-confrontational foreign policy of the 2010s, in which the EU tried to use a mixture of limited sanctions and diplomacy. Such new attempts aim to ramp up pressure on Russia to abandon its invasion of Ukraine and return the occupied territories.

This affirms the shift in the EU's strategy towards a more active promotion of liberal values, as the sanctions were aimed at achieving a favorable political outcome for the liberal international order outside the borders of the traditional West and its longstanding allies, thereby shifting its interests from protecting the geopolitical status quo to actively defending the liberal order in regions and countries where its values are threatened. Unlike its approach to the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the EU now follows a policy of sending military aid to Ukraine and even providing security guarantees in the absence of the U.S., whose foreign policy has shifted to an isolationist stance under Trump.

In 2022, most Western European countries sent military aid to Ukraine to assist the threatened democracy in its defense against the Russian invasion. This means the EU shifted its strategy from containing the conflict, as it did in Donbas and Crimea, to attempting to prevent Russia from reshaping the international order through more active means. The military aid provided to Ukraine has largely been effective in preventing Russia from imposing its political and geopolitical will on Ukraine. In October 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pledged €1.4 billion in military aid to Ukraine, aimed at ensuring continuity in aid given the uncertainties surrounding the U.S. election.

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This highlights the EU's shift to a more assertive strategy on Ukraine, as the aid serves as a security guarantee for Ukraine in times of geopolitical uncertainty and enhances the Ukrainian military's ability to at least maintain the status quo on the battlefield against Russia. This also underscores the European Union's commitment to defending the liberal order, as the increase in military aid is a clear repudiation of Russia's attempts to shape the world based on spheres of influence rather than self-determination. Even in Germany, which has historically been averse to arms shipments to conflict zones, the country has become the second-largest supplier of arms to Ukraine, second only to the U.S. before Trump's return to the presidency. This highlights a shift in the EU's strategy from viewing Ukraine as a peripheral issue to one of strategic and ideological importance, as its approach now focuses on countering authoritarian aggression and defending threatened democracies.

After Trump's return to power and a rapid shift in U.S. foreign policy away from arming Ukraine, the EU has sped up military aid for Ukraine and increased the amount of assistance, as protecting the liberal international order is an important part of the EU's global strategy. The EU has accelerated military aid to Ukraine to replace the U.S. aid that was cut off by Trump. This highlights upholding the liberal international order as an integral component of the EU's global strategy, as such moves aim to prevent illiberal actors from influencing the order through illegitimate means. The importance of such strategic policies toward the liberal international order is that EU-supplied arms will enable Ukraine to resist being forced by Trump and Putin into a deal against its consent, which would be a severe violation of the liberal international order, where states' self-determination is paramount.

The EU's strategy, therefore, has shifted away from maintaining the balance of power to actively pushing back against authoritarian aggression, as the war in Ukraine demonstrated that if Ukraine fell, many EU member states would be under threat from Russia, and it would provide a blueprint for other authoritarian countries to reshape the order through illegitimate means. Moreover, the EU, in doing this, is supporting Ukraine's

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self-determination and Western aspirations, as the arms supplied serve as a bulwark against the rise of increasingly populist leaders across the world and will strengthen or at least maintain Ukraine's ability to avoid defeat.

In addition, the plan to send peacekeepers to Ukraine, should a ceasefire deal be agreed upon as a security guarantee, also serves to defend Ukraine's self-determination, as it would allow Ukraine to remain a free and independent state while preventing Russia from asserting political and military dominance over Ukraine. Furthermore, this highlights a shift in the EU's strategy from treating Ukraine as a peripheral issue to one central to European security, as the EU is aware of the threats that Russia poses, especially to EU members that border Russia, if Ukraine is defeated. In addition, the pledges of arms and peacekeepers to Ukraine amount to upholding the liberal international order, as they reject changes to borders and countries' internal policies through external coercion and illegitimate means.

#### EU VS AUTHORITARIANISM

While the EU has historically viewed China primarily in terms of commercial and economic interests, the invasion of Ukraine, including China's response, has led many EU countries—at least on paper—to adopt a more assertive stance on China. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, the EU had an approach of strategic ambiguity toward China, in which they were not aligned but, as Merkel stated, would try to avoid Cold War-style blocs in geopolitics. The prioritization of commercial interests led the EU to become dependent on China for raw materials and left its China strategy unclear. However, since the invasion of Ukraine is seen as a matter of democracy vs. authoritarianism, the EU views a potential conflict between China and Taiwan through a similar lens, with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen stating that the EU's aim is to deter China from invading Taiwan.

This highlights a shift from a foreign policy based on commercial interests to one more focused on the battle between democracy

and authoritarianism, as the EU views Taiwan as a democracy while seeing China as a hostile authoritarian state. This entails the return of liberal democratic ideology to the central role of European foreign policy, as it sees authoritarianism and authoritarian states' efforts to reshape the world order through coercive or illiberal means—which violate the self-determination of other states—as a threat to the liberal international order, which is central to a free and just world. Due to the Ukraine war, the EU now sees Taiwan and Ukraine as part of the same battle and has therefore strengthened ties with Taiwan to further support democracies and uphold the sovereignty and self-determination of democratic societies.

The EU's increasingly vocal support for Taiwan was evident when French President Emmanuel Macron stated in 2023 that the EU should not choose between the U.S. and China over Taiwan and that Europe should “steer clear of crises that are not ours.” European politicians were quick to clarify that Macron did not speak for the EU and that the EU supports the Cross-Strait status quo and opposes any attempts by China to change it by force. The backlash against Macron reflects the EU's commitment to defending and strengthening democracy, as Macron attempted to undermine the EU's liberal internationalist policy by aligning with autocrats and faced criticism for comments that were perceived as an embrace of great power realism. The responses of many EU leaders, including Germany, point to the EU's commitment to preventing authoritarian aggression, as it views Taiwan as an important democracy and a bulwark against Chinese authoritarianism.

In addition, the EU has made increasingly strong statements on Taiwan, with high-level documents praising the island nation's democracy and strengthening ties with Taiwan. An example of this is Taiwan's inclusion in the EU's Indo-Pacific Cooperation Strategy, which reflects the EU's efforts to build ties with democracies. Ties with Taiwan are also shaped by the fact that states often align with Ukraine or Russia based on their

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*The EU's strategy has shifted away from maintaining the balance of power to actively pushing back against authoritarian aggression.*



political systems, meaning the EU now sees over-reliance and excessive cooperation with authoritarian states as counterproductive to its interests, as those states prop up Russia's economy. This reflects the rise of certain neo-idealist elements, which seek to promote democracy against authoritarianism. Even if neo-idealism is not fully adopted, such policies highlight the importance of cooperating with democracies, especially those under threat from authoritarianism.

### THE BATTLE FOR EU LEADERSHIP

The challenge to unity in the European Union is the rule requiring unanimity, which allows rogue members to unilaterally block resolutions they oppose. Regarding Ukraine, this is evident with Hungary, which obstructs the European Peace Facility due to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's support and close ties with Russia. This makes strategic autonomy difficult, as it allows dissenting members to veto resolutions, which in turn prevents action. During the war, Orbán vetoed military aid for Ukraine, which meant that, in many cases, military aid had to come from individual member states rather than the EU, undermining the Union's resolve. This poses challenges for the European Union regarding the situation in Ukraine, as it hampers the EU's decision-making abilities as a bloc and limits its capacity to act unitedly on Ukraine.

As a policy recommendation, the EU should remove Hungary's veto powers by invoking the "nuclear option," which would eliminate Hungary's veto powers through a series of processes that would not necessarily involve Hungary. This would allow the EU to streamline the process of arms shipments to Ukraine, potentially replacing the weapons from the U.S. that are lost and preventing rogue governments from obstructing Ukraine's fight for sovereignty. Therefore, removing Hungary's veto powers is crucial to EU leadership, as it would enable the EU to take an assertive stance on Ukraine without being obstructed by a single member state.

In economic terms, a critical challenge to the EU's push for strategic autonomy and self-reliance is its continued reliance on foreign sources of energy, even after distancing itself from Russian energy sources. The dependence on oil and liquefied natural gas from Norway and the U.S. presents the EU with strategic vulnerabilities, as Donald Trump's presidency is largely unfavorable toward the transatlantic alliance. The EU's reliance on U.S.-based energy sources could become a tool for leverage by the Trump administration. This also prevents strategic autonomy, as it would require the EU to seek favor with an unfriendly administration. Therefore, it restricts the EU's ability to autonomously pursue foreign policies formulated by the bloc alone, as it must maintain good relations with a potentially hostile administration in the U.S.

In addition, Russia still accounts for 17.3% of natural gas in the EU and 17.7% of liquefied natural gas supplies, thereby weakening the EU's sanctions, as continued Russian gas imports allow Russia to continue profiting from its energy resources. This prevents the EU from being more effective in its leadership on Ukraine, as even a reduced reliance on one of Russia's most strategic industries means the EU is unable to significantly impact Putin's regime's finances. Therefore, it is crucial for the EU to transition to clean energy, as it lacks substantial fossil fuel resources within its own borders. A transition to clean energy will diminish reliance on any foreign power and remove external leverage over the EU in terms of strategic policy. If the EU can achieve a clean energy transition, its strategic role will strengthen, as it will have a secure supply chain independent of the political dynamics of other countries.

The lack of military industry capabilities will also hinder the EU's ability to replace the U.S. aid to Ukraine that Trump cut, as the U.S. possesses more advanced weapons than EU countries. A top European official has stated that Europe is unable to produce the weapons Ukraine needs. This will limit the EU's ability to replace the lost U.S. aid to Ukraine, as the inability to replace U.S. weapons means Ukraine will find it more difficult to remain effective in its battle to retain sovereignty. This also means the EU lacks the hard power capability to support Ukraine in the absence of the U.S., therefore restricting its ability to become a fully decisive player in

the conflict. One immediate solution is for the EU to agree to buy weapons from the U.S. to arm Ukraine, which would substitute for the lost U.S. aid under Trump, at least in the short term, providing Ukraine with the necessary military capabilities. However, the risk of this strategy is continued dependence on the now-unfriendly U.S., which would give the Trump administration more leverage over the EU's foreign policy strategy. This means Trump could impose additional conditions on selling arms to the EU, further limiting the EU's ability to take full leadership on Ukraine.

# The EU's China Conundrum

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## Unity or Division Against China?

ALVARO RODRIGUEZ FERNANDEZ

**T**ndoubtedly, no order is eternal, and post-Second World War international conventions find themselves at a critical juncture. Rising tensions over the last decade have shaped perception, policies, rhetoric, and the economics of today. The era of offshoring industries and supply chains while creating complex interdependent ties might be coming to an end. And although the transformation of the international economic architecture is a slow-paced process, sheer human determination to break it might be a powerful incentive. Additionally, defense alliances are also adapting to a new global arena and the systemic challenges that arise. How the upcoming world order will look remains unknown. However, global actors are steadily positioning themselves for what's to come. And among transatlantic relations, an uncomfortable question waits to be answered.

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*The Chinese and European Union flags hang during a speech by Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Union, unscen, at the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, in Beijing, China, on Tuesday, May 17, 2011. Van Rompuy said the euro is "too strong" compared with the yuan, and that Europe is an attractive investment market for China after taking "strict" measures to address its debt crisis. Photographer: Nelson Ching/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

For a long time, the nature of relations with China has been at the core of one of the most divisive issues within transatlantic relations. Its complexity underscores strategic foreign and security policies, power projection, and domestic economic concerns. But it runs deeper than that. Although it may seem like a minor issue, the truth is that it addresses a very interesting point. Chinese economic growth and increasing global influence pose a systemic challenge to that of the U.S. However, its ascension is not perceived equally on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since the early 2010s, U.S. foreign policy started to shift its attention from the Middle East toward the East, the so-called "Pivot to Asia." This had two main effects on its EU counterparts: the need for a security update from an outdated worldview and a discreet balance of interests in their approach to China. Being able to support two war fronts was the paramount objective of the post-1945 U.S.—a powerful testimony to its industrial, technological, and military prowess. On the other hand, it was enough for Europeans in general and consecutive EU members specifically to deal with a readjustment of the continent's

economic and power structure. As such, the Marshall Plan's incentives were also coupled with the deployment of hundreds of thousands of personnel and assets. Then, of course, Washington did not view China as it does today.

The security guarantees that the EU, and specifically NATO members, have enjoyed over the last couple of decades came at the expense of a disproportionate commitment to spending, industrial capacities, and technological and manpower capabilities. Most European capitals neglected their armies under the belief that, no matter what, their backs were strongly covered by Washington. Nevertheless, by 2014, the bells at the Wales Summit started to ring. By then, it was pretty much clear that the U.S. would not be as present on European soil as most partners were accustomed to. Today, that is a reality. The shift to the Indo-Pacific shows not only a reassessment of strategic, diplomatic, and foreign policy priorities but also a whole new mindset regarding the industrial and logistical capabilities of the U.S. defense sector.

While some commentators argue that the new Trump administration seeks to ultimately rearrange systemic competition into a map of spheres of influence, it is still too early to draw categorical conclusions. Yet, the latest declarations by the White House de facto pose a serious question regarding its commitment to allies worldwide. However, this has nothing to do with its own protection, hence the shipbuilding plans and investments allocated to renovations in Pacific bases. This comes as a response to growing Chinese projection in its neighborhood, mostly due to the increasing aggressiveness displayed in the last years in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, as well as the ever-confrontational dispute over Taiwan.

Up until now, defense and national security have dominated the conversation. Are relations with China so limited? Certainly, switching to the economic portfolio gives a much more nuanced perspective. Until 2017, the dynamic, driven by the huge opportunities opened with China's entrance into the WTO in 2001, had benefited both parties massively. This metric applies to the EU as well. Resulting deindustrialization and a growing trade imbalance created black holes in the U.S. geography and soon

started to raise the alarm. Thus, national security concerns regarding the CCP's control over Chinese multinationals and their investments and expansion—both inside and in third markets (see Latin America or Africa)—espionage, and several other issues (currency and debt manipulation, subsidization...) aligned, creating a two-faced challenge.



*United States and Chinese flags are set up before a meeting between Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse on July 8, 2023 in Beijing, China. (Photo by Mark Schiefelbein - Pool/Getty Images)*

On one side, the U.S. is dealing with a major threat to its security, international status, and image. On the other, it is trying to engineer a sustainable economic model capable of balancing domestic needs, the role of the dollar, and U.S. interests abroad. Summed up, it is fairly accurate to portray the competition between the two actors as a systemic challenge over the prevalence not only of one global power but of their respective worldviews. Where does the EU stand here? In order to unlock the nature of the drift between the EU and the U.S., it is fundamental to understand the basis of their relationship and where they diverge. While the latter is genuinely concerned over security aspects (both conventional and non-conventional), the former seems to be less worried.

Only the links between Beijing and Moscow in the ongoing war in Ukraine seem to have triggered some levers in European capitals and Brussels in the form of sanctions and broader condemnation.

This stems from lesser involvement, highlighted mostly in the form of cybersecurity (here again, heavily tied to the economy and intellectual property as well). For the European eye, China's danger is, above all, an economic affair. Like their transatlantic peers, the EU benefited from China's entrance into the WTO, and up until the 2010s, things went smoothly. Consequently, concerns over state-owned enterprises, unfair subsidies, and unlawful tactics—both in the production process and the export regime—made Brussels react.

Such tensions reached a turning point a few years after the first batch of tariffs by the U.S. Since 2019, trade and investment screening mechanisms and tariffs have increased the pressure on Chinese companies and products. Moreover, the COVID-19 experience made many officials realize the depth of their dependency, from finished tech products to basic medical gear or raw materials. As a response, a number of instruments have been introduced and enforced since, stressing the importance of economic security, compliance with competition laws and EU production standards, and a broader de-risking approach to Chinese imports and the EU's supply chains under the framework of strategic autonomy.

Overall, there are two main takes from both perspectives. The offshoring free trade era for 'Western' multinationals in China is gone. De-risking—or outright decoupling—policies are in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic, meaning higher tariffs and state protection of domestic industries or markets. And while this won't erase the deep commercial ties between the three actors, it will surely take a toll on the configuration of global supply chains and markets, prices, and ultimately on consumers. But this is not only a unilateral trend, as China has sought more self-sufficiency—mainly in technological affairs and high-end exports—taking advantage of the groundwork done through the Belt and Road Initiative. And it is exactly here that the division grows.

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While the U.S. has easier access to cheap energy, capital, and raw materials, the EU struggles with energy prices, venture capital and equity raising, and highly dependent supply chains. Moreover, the EU has suffered an important process of deindustrialization, resulting in a net loss of market share in different regions, often in favor of China. And not only would it struggle more than the U.S. to reindustrialize given the context, but it would also need to carefully navigate a possible shift in Chinese exports due to the increasing tariffs in the U.S. since January 2025. If the tariff wars keep up between Beijing and Washington, the former will have to make a decision: either accept the hit, seek a fast replacement elsewhere, or digest it at home.

Amid a growth slowdown, neither the first nor the third seems easy to implement. Additionally, rising tariffs might be applied to European imports as well. Even in the worst days of neo-protectionism and geopolitical disagreements of the late 2010s and

early 2020s, tensions were not enough to have a structural impact. By contrast, since January, a new paradigm seems to have rapidly settled. Fueled by strong control of both houses, Trump's return to the White House leaves a sour taste of revenge for many inside and outside the country. And a hectic first month seems to confirm the new wind for the upcoming years, dominated above all by one of the most difficult emotions to deal with from a foreign policy or economic perspective: utter instability. Therefore, it might be too late to try and pursue an in-depth revamping of the trade relationship across the Atlantic. Plus, fair criticism can be directed at EU officials (as well as many member states). Shock and unpreparedness describe the mood of many, seeing the lack of a coordinated or pre-planned response to what the Union could face.

This can further disrupt the balance of many export-oriented sectors, as they would be obliged to find a replacement that most likely won't appear at home. Under a somewhat similar scenario, fierce competition between European and Chinese firms would occur, leaving the former in a tug-of-war situation. If a more protectionist playbook is followed, retaliation in the form of import restrictions or operational restrictions in the Chinese market could backfire, damaging electronics, green tech, and automotive sectors, along with shortages of rare earths and raw materials. European targets in the field of climate action and the green transition, digitalization, and AI, or the pressing issue of defense rearmament, would be impossible to attain—not to mention growth projections for traditional core industries like the automotive, steel, or EU green tech manufacturers. Likewise, the same could happen in the case of Chinese protection aimed at boosting domestic consumption or autonomy.

And even if the EU would not like to see its domestic markets flooded with cheaper goods while being ousted from exporting markets, a second rift happens to take place in-house. What could seem at first as a two-bloc dichotomy portrays a much more complex reality. While the Commission and countries like the Baltics or Poland favor an alignment with the U.S. and more assertive policies, others such as Germany, Greece, or Spain favor a rather open position. A third position is taken by France or Italy, telling a more complete, although nuanced, story. Concerned

about strategic autonomy goals, they have significant commercial interests in the Asiatic giant.

Consequently, they reflect the delicate balance between the U.S. and China, where the EU stands. This inner split is not only proof of the complexities of EU policymaking; it also tells a story of geopolitical alignment—Baltic states being more exposed to Sino-Russian threats, thus more dependent on NATO's security guarantees—and economic interests—luxury (and conventional) exports to Chinese markets and recent multi-million-dollar investments in declining industrial sectors. To make it worse, both sides have powerful arguments. Although the new U.S. administration is openly fierce regarding the trade imbalance, that same stance could be seen as a comparative advantage by certain industries in need of market share.

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*Consequently, they reflect the delicate balance between the U.S. and China where the EU stands.*

Conversely, a fruitful bond with China could further strain the transatlantic relationship, potentially leading to retaliation against the EU externally and internally—assuming that China would demand less strict terms on investment and trade defense regulations. On

the inside, the political battle is also played at the national level, an element of crucial importance for a Union that often works through cooperative mechanisms. Industrial defense instruments under the economic security framework were developed little by little since the pandemic but now operate within the paradox of an autonomy-seeking yet vulnerable Union.

Foreign policy or domestic economy? Global power projection or global equilibrium cooperation? Maximal securitization of trade or the pursuit of shared interests? Whatever the future may be, the next few years are going to prove decisive for the future of 'Western'-Chinese relations and, therefore, the rest of the world. The equilibrium in areas spanning from international finance to climate action and global security commitments is absolutely fundamental for a safer, more prosperous, and sustainable planet. A potential drift among transatlantic allies could prove disastrous for both, while any potential direct confrontation among giants could accelerate systemic changes and alter the current order as we know it.

# The Price of Peace

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## Can Ukraine Win Without Losing?

TOM ARMBRUSTER

**T**hey say in a negotiation, the lion gets the lion's share. By that standard, one might think Russia should get the largest share of a Ukrainian settlement by virtue of its resources, war machine, and population. But when Volodymyr Zelensky said, "The fight is here, I need ammunition, not a ride," Ukraine became the lion.

With the U.S. administration still in transition, voices from Türkiye are important. There are ongoing political, military, diplomatic, and intelligence interactions every day, and I hope Türkiye's influence can help sway the Trump administration to be bold as a democratic leader. That includes being bold on NATO's status as a bulwark of stability, especially in Europe but also around the world.

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**TOM ARMBRUSTER**, former U.S. Ambassador to the Marshall Islands.



## THE MORAL HIGH GROUND

Ukraine and NATO have the moral high ground. Russia ceded any high ground when it started the conflict, violating the United Nations Charter. More high ground, if there ever was any, was lost when Russia committed human rights violations against the civilian population. That unjustified violence should also not be rewarded.

Russia has tried to use the argument of NATO encirclement to justify its action. But NATO was created to defend against Russia's and the USSR's own history of aggression. Finland, the Baltics, Afghanistan, Georgia, Czechoslovakia, Chechnya, Crimea, and the Donbas are some examples that predate the full-scale invasion of

Ukraine three years ago. Sovereign states have a right to choose their security arrangements. If Ukraine wants to pursue NATO membership, that is Ukraine's prerogative.

Winston Churchill said, "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing, after they have tried everything else first." We are in that phase right now. Trump's transactional, real estate mentality and insistence on a deal might lead to a settlement, but it will not last. Ukraine has fought too long, sacrificed too much, and come too close to victory to allow for an unjust peace. If a settlement is forced on Ukraine, it will only embolden Putin and provoke another attack elsewhere or again in Ukraine.

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## REALISM IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR IDEALISM

There is a strain of thought in the "realism" school of foreign policy that only power matters. But power requires legitimacy. Leaders who stay in power too long lose popular support and, thus, legitimacy. Leaders who silence the opposition likewise lose legitimacy. If you can't get the support of people through your policies and your ideals, you are not an actual leader. Ideals like democracy, the rule of law, and respecting international borders have proved to be effective means of ensuring security and stability.

There are voices in the United States from both parties advocating for Ukraine, but rational arguments only go so far with President Trump. I can't say the road ahead will be easy for Ukraine. Simply pointing out the facts will not be enough to change Trump's mind. His relationship with Vladimir Putin is contrary to everything his party used to stand for. Ukraine is a democracy, a sovereign country, and a contributor to world food security. Ukraine deserves a secure future, and we should be natural allies.

I worked in Russia for six years as an American diplomat. I admire the Russian people. I worked with talented people who are ready for Russia to join the modern world. Russia can be rightly proud of its culture and history, but to truly achieve greatness, Russia needs to respect the rule of law and use its resources to contribute to global security, not disrupt it. The U.S. and Russia could also be allies, and a resumption of relations is not a bad thing, as long as it is not at the expense of Ukraine.



*Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy holds a press conference at the forum 'Ukraine. Year 2025' in Kyiv, Ukraine, on February 23, 2025 (Photo by Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto via Getty Images).*

We could work jointly on reducing nuclear weapons, climate change, emergency response, disaster relief, and sustainability—all of which we've cooperated on in the past. During the initial window when the U.S. was engaged with Russia, we even worked on strengthening nuclear security at weapons plants, making sure Russian scientists had career possibilities in civilian endeavors,

installing cameras and alarms in nuclear facilities, and even blending highly enriched uranium into low-enriched uranium for burning in U.S. nuclear facilities. Russia walked away from that cooperation soon after the NATO Kosovo bombing. That seemed to set the whole Putin drive to return to a pseudo-Soviet path in motion.

RUSSIAN NORMALIZATION COULD BE BENEFICIAL:  
BUT NOT AT UKRAINE'S EXPENSE

Re-establishing full diplomatic relations also allows the consulates to get back in business. In Vladivostok, we were encouraging flights from Alaska to the Russian Far East. There should be rich trade and cultural links. It would benefit both countries. The consulates in San Francisco and St. Petersburg could also have rich cultural programs, allowing people on both sides to better understand each other and build a lasting relationship based on trust.

But that is still a step-by-step process and will take time. The Trump administration must stand up for the principles of the UN Charter and not reward aggression and human rights violations. Neither the United States nor Russia is on the right side of history with their present positions. Insistence on elections, focusing on mineral resources, and demanding territory for Russia is unacceptable. I hope the U.S. will come around again. For now, it is up to Ukraine and European allies to stand firm. And roar.

AMERICAN FOREIGN AID PROGRAM

Türkiye also has a huge stake in refugee programs and American assistance. As the Trump administration figures out its place in the world, allies can remind Trump of the importance of U.S. leadership, especially at a time when assistance programs are being cut. For many Germans, the indelible World War II memory is a U.S. GI handing them a chocolate bar. No doubt the candy was accompanied by a smile and maybe a few words in German. More than the sweetness, the humanity endured. The memory lasted



ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS CAN  
SHAPE NATIONS IN TRANSITION

While the U.S. passed the test in World War II, we failed after the fall of the Soviet Union. Our assistance came in the form of big capital outlays to keep the Russian government afloat. There were no American roads, hospitals, or schools built. We did a good job of securing Russian nuclear weapons and even buying highly enriched uranium to blend into low-enriched uranium to burn in American nuclear reactors. But the average Russian didn't see enough from America to give us a chance to be international partners and guide Russia towards respecting international rules.

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Part of the blame is Russia's for turning off the assistance from USAID and the Peace Corps. If Russia falls, as someday it will, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other American departments should be prepared to step in and guide the new government towards a better path with the West, oriented towards its neighbors as trading partners, not potential

new lands to be conquered. Assistance is a tricky business. It doesn't always work. But when it does, the results can last generations.

I counsel American soldiers getting ready to deploy to U.S. embassies worldwide. I tell them that the "Country Team," the ambassador's senior leaders from the agencies at the embassy, functions better than the interagency in Washington. An embassy hitting on all cylinders is a wonderful thing to experience. Public diplomacy programs with sports ambassadors create goodwill for American businesses. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs give the ambassador useful information about life "upcountry," since USAID and the Peace Corps are out in the field doing their specialized work. They are the eyes and ears for the embassy, providing important political and security intelligence.

The ambassador's knowledge of the country becomes as finely tuned as an alligator's. If a frog jumps into the pond, the alligator knows! USAID is meant to be a lifeline for the poor but is more than that. It is an outlet for American farm goods. It responds to disasters worldwide. It plays an essential role in the triad of development, diplomacy, and defense that makes up the foreign policy effort. Yes, it can do better. We can return to building schools, roads, and hospitals. We can even start in Gaza and Ukraine. But we can't cede this leadership role to others. The U.S. can and should lead. Let's craft an assistance plan for the 21st century. And let's be sure to include some chocolate.

# The Order of the Disorder

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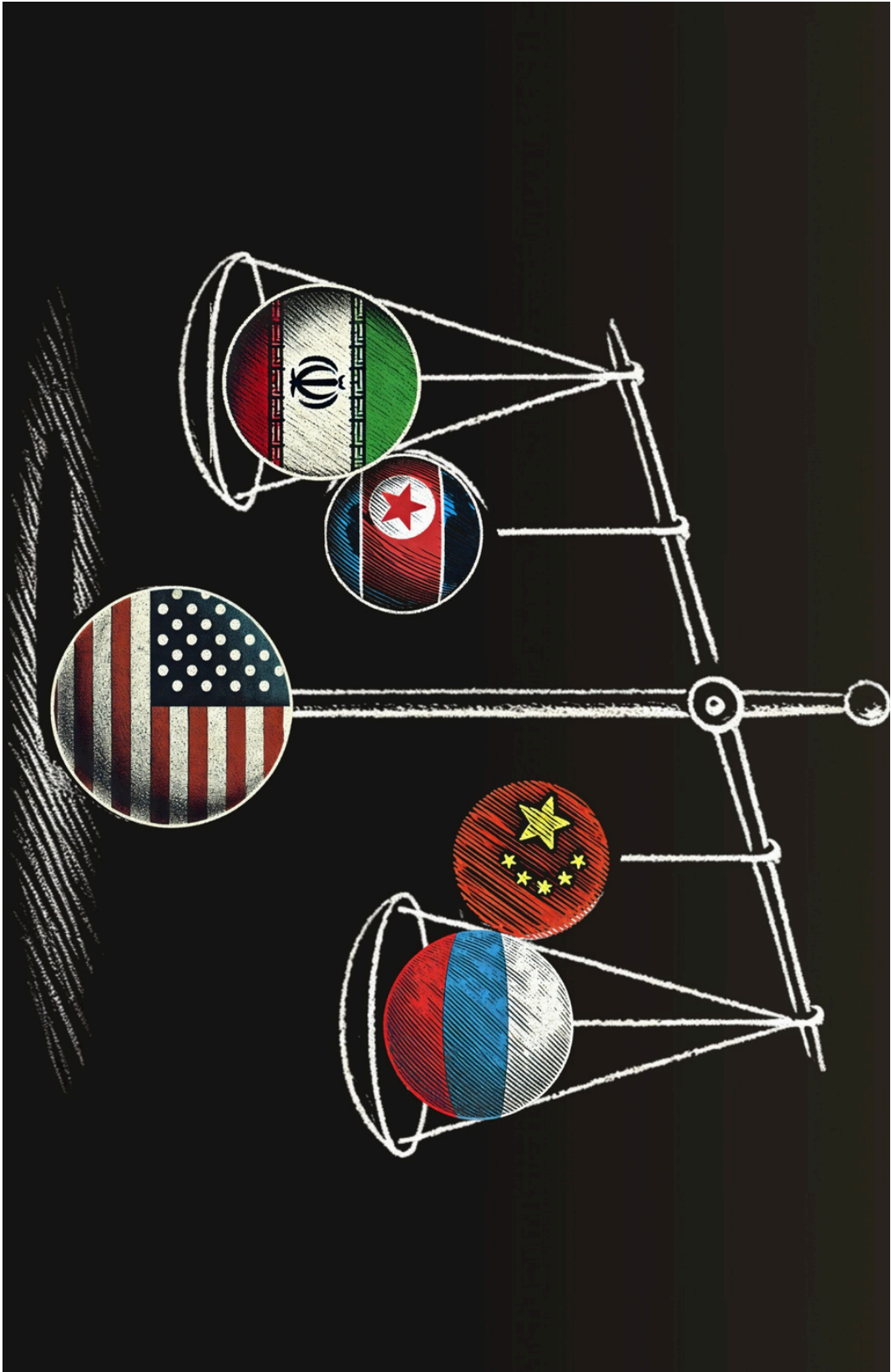
From Pax Americana  
to Global Uncertainty

JONG EUN LEE

**T**he decline of the so-called “liberal” international order is an increasingly prevalent theme in today’s international affairs. Alarmed by the geopolitical challenges from politically “illiberal” regimes and the domestic political crises among “liberal democracies,” multiple international commentaries have warned that the world is entering a period of crises and instability. As the “liberal” consensus and rules that have facilitated the establishment and enforcement of international cooperation face setbacks and even repudiation worldwide, pessimistic international predictions include the return of a “new cold war,” “global anarchy,” or even a “global apocalypse” from environmental- or military-related catastrophes.

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*Paradoxically, such geopolitical trends suggest the continuity of the 'order' over the increasing 'disorder' in the contemporary international system.*

There are indeed geopolitical trends shifting the international system away from the aspired goals and policies of the “liberal” international order. What, then, is emerging as an alternative international system? For now, the international order appears to be evolving into a “less liberal,” “more eclectic,” yet still U.S.-led order where the superpower imposes restraints against its lesser geopolitical rivals, albeit with changed ideological priorities and strategies. Paradoxically, such geopolitical trends suggest the continuity of the “order” over the increasing “disorder” in the contemporary international system.

#### LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

What constitutes “liberal” in the features of an international order has often been the subject of debates and controversies. Generally, the liberal international order has been defined by the set of principles promoted by Western democracies, chiefly the United States, at the end of World War II: state sovereignty, multilateral institutions, international trade, and political democracy. The aspired goals of a “liberal” order were for sovereign states (including former colonies that would gain independence from colonial powers) to participate in international institutions to establish collective rules for regulating international behavior, such as deterring military conflicts.

International institutions (supported by member states) would enforce these rules and promote the integration of the global economy (lowering state barriers to the movement of goods, services, finance, and even people) to provide positive incentives for international cooperation. They would also promote political democracy among their member states to bolster individual states’ commitment and credibility in supporting international rules and partnerships. The United States provided a leadership role in the maintenance of a “liberal” international system. Despite criticisms of inconsistencies and failures in performing such leadership, U.S.

“globalist” in their disconnection from the concerns and preferences of the domestic populace. Donald Trump’s election to the U.S. presidency in 2016 was a reflection of political shifts taking place in the West.

With the slogan “America First,” the Trump administration withdrew from international agreements and institutions, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO, which Trump perceived as not fulfilling U.S. national interests. Trump also took a transactional approach to diplomacy, prioritizing transactional benefits as the basis for the continuity of international partnership, more so than shared political values or the long-term stability of international institutions. Joe Biden’s election to the U.S. presidency in 2020 appeared at first to signal the reversal of geopolitical changes that occurred under Trump’s first term. With the slogan “America is Back,” Biden promised renewed U.S. commitment to upholding the institutions and values of the liberal international order. However, challenges to the maintenance of such an order were exacerbated under Biden’s presidency.

### GROWING CRISES AND DISORDER

The liberal order did not achieve complete international unity or stability even during its ascendancy after the end of the Cold War. There were rogue states such as North Korea, which refused to integrate into the international order. The member states, including the United States, did not consistently uphold or enforce the order’s aspired values and policies. Moreover, as during the Iraq War, there were at times contentious foreign policy divides among the key stakeholders. However, recent geopolitical crises and tensions have heightened doubts about whether today’s international system could remain unified or even “liberal.”

The “revisionist” countries (such as Russia and China), which have criticized the multilateral rules and institutions as “rigged” or “biased” in favor of the West, have become bolder not only in their attempts to revise the institutions but also in advancing their geopolitical objectives outside the liberal order’s framework and norms. For example, in 2022, Russia launched “special military

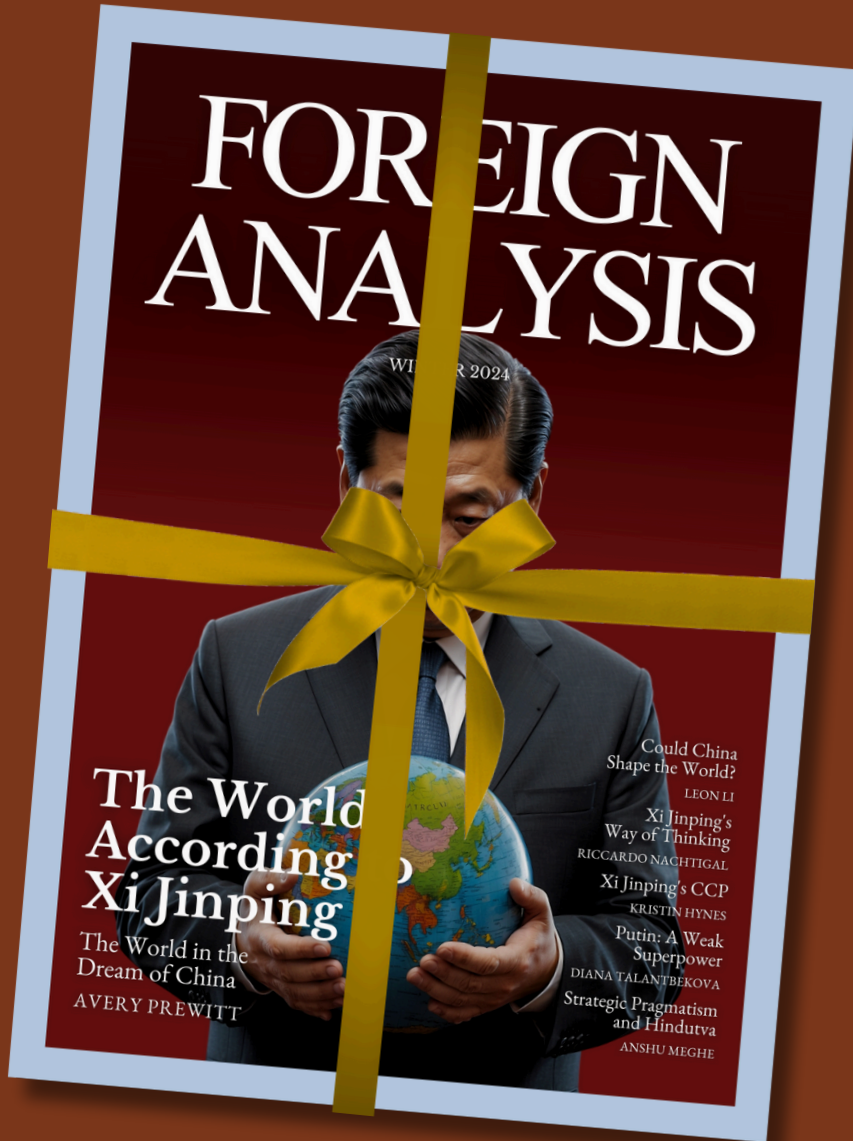
operations" against Ukraine, starting the first major conventional warfare in Europe since the end of WWII. China has escalated territorial disputes with Southeast Asian countries over the ownership of the South China Sea, threatening maritime trade in this region. The revisionist countries have also strengthened alternative strategic partnerships. Iran and North Korea have provided military support to Russia in its war with Ukraine.

Russia has defied international sanctions by sending economic and technical assistance to North Korea. The two countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in 2024, bolstering North Korea's confidence in advancing its nuclear and ICBM capabilities. The liberal order's proponents have attempted to counter challenges from revisionist states by revitalizing "value-based" international strategic partnerships. The Biden presidency advocated for an "alliance" of democracies against autocracies. Though more restrained in rhetoric than Trump's, the Biden presidency has regarded China as a "strategic rival" engaging in "rule-breaking" behavior and has continued the economic sanctions implemented during Trump's first term. The West's strategic measures, however, have revealed limitations in its capacity to decisively punish and isolate revisionist states. Western sanctions have not been successful in forcing Russia to end its war in Europe.

Many countries in the Global South have maintained neutrality and continued trade partnerships with Russia. Russia continues to have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and membership in multilateral institutions such as the G20 and BRICS. In strategic and economic disputes with China, the West has also shown measured restraint (such as continued affirmation of an official "One China" policy on Taiwan) to mitigate risks of conflict escalation. Perhaps more critically, even countries professing to defend the current international order have become "less" liberal in their policy priorities and preferences.

Encountering domestic political pressures driven by socioeconomic anxieties and political polarization, multiple Western governments have become more reserved or protectionist on issues such as trade and migration. Western governments have

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maintained or renewed strategic partnerships with countries (such as Saudi Arabia, India, Vietnam, Türkiye, and Hungary) that have been criticized for “illiberal” political behaviors. Several “liberal democracies” themselves have been criticized for becoming more “illiberal” in their domestic politics. With the reelection of Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2024, the trends of geopolitical disunity, conflicts, and ideological shifts are likely to continue.

After Trump’s second inauguration, his administration withdrew the U.S. again from the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO and temporarily froze spending on foreign aid. Furthermore, Trump signaled an intention to purchase Greenland from Denmark, regain ownership over the Panama Canal, increase protectionist trade policies, and pressure U.S. allies in Europe and East Asia regarding defense spending. The policies pursued by the Trump administration’s second term are likely to result in varied reactions from other states: compliance, defiance, and hedging. In the aftermath, a realignment of the international system is likely to follow.

#### REALIGNMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The existing multilateral institutions, such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, and WTO, will likely continue to function in their roles in promoting international cooperation. However, their institutional authority and tasks will overlap with the emergence of alternative institutions. Countries frustrated by paralysis and divisions within existing institutions may seek opportunities within new institutions and partnerships that represent countries with similar strategic interests. For example, China-supported institutions such as the AIIB and SCO, and U.S.-supported institutions such as IPEF and QUAD, may compete for international influence.

The majority of countries in the world will likely continue to affirm support for political democracy. However, political variations among “democracies” will likely increase, even in the West. As a result, either the requirements of “liberal democracy” may become relaxed, or “illiberal democracies” may become tolerated under a

broad framework of democracies versus explicit autocracies. NATO already tolerates such ideological heterogeneity, as several of its member states are viewed by others as “illiberal.”

The expansion of complexities and uncertainties within the international system may be mitigated by another factor: the strategic interests of countries in seeking geopolitical stability through strategic alignment and constraints. The Trump administration, for instance, may seek geopolitical stability in Europe and the Middle East to strategically prioritize China and the Asia-Pacific. U.S.-China strategic conflicts may be mitigated by constraints designed to prevent mutually detrimental economic and military losses.



*World leaders pose for a family photograph during the Group of 20 (G-20) Leaders' Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024. G-20 leaders meeting in Brazil this week are set to show unity on climate action and global trade rules, two areas threatened by US President-elect Donald Trump, as talks continue on how to characterize Russia's war in Ukraine and tensions in the Middle East. Photographer: Dado Galdieri/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

However, the basis for strategic stability and alignment will be a transactional collaboration among countries with convergent geopolitical interests. Trump's signaling of diplomatic overtures to Russia and North Korea may be a reflection of such a calculation: that a geopolitical order may be maintained by strategically aligned states with different political systems. The dynamics of regional and international stability may become more fluid and unpredictable, as individual countries weigh and bargain over their strategic alignment. Many countries in the Global South, for

example, may engage in transactional hedging between the U.S. and China, creating fluctuations in geopolitical balance on certain international issues.

## EVOLUTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The geopolitical trends of competing geopolitical actors and institutions, shifting political values, and transactional strategic alignments will likely result in the transformation of the current liberal order. However, such a transformation does not assume the dismantling of the international order into chaos, but rather an evolution into a new version of the international order. One important continuity from the previous world order would be the role of the United States in asserting global influence and utilizing strategic alliances. To be sure, domestic political fatigue toward “nation-building” and “peacekeeping” projects abroad has galvanized political support behind Trump’s “America First” slogan.

Yet, Trump’s second term, far from advocating an isolationist foreign policy, appears to be committed to defending U.S. geostrategic interests in the Western Hemisphere and maintaining strategic and technological superiority over China. Many U.S. allies will likely continue their strategic alignment with the superpower. They may encounter contentious bargaining and pressures to accommodate Trump’s transactional demands. However, many U.S. allies will calculate that in turn, their transactional benefits from the alliance (even with reduced U.S. involvement in certain policy areas) will outweigh the costs and uncertainties. Skillful allies may also perceive the opportunity to attain their key objectives through quid pro quo dealmaking with the U.S.

In contrast, the alternative bloc of revisionist countries lacks sufficient capacity to dominate the international order on an equal footing with the U.S.-aligned bloc. While fighting a war in Ukraine, Russia has lost much of its regional influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Even after the war’s end, recovering from the war’s socioeconomic costs would constrain Russia’s geopolitical

capability. China is falling behind in its quest to surpass the United States, hampered by economic recessions and social unrest. Despite the expansion of its international influence (through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative), China has fallen short in consolidating strategic alliances, as countries, especially in Asia, maintain wariness toward its regional leadership.

Similar to the practice of *realpolitik* during the Cold War period, strategic interests may be more openly prioritized over strict adherence to “liberal” political principles in the evolved international order. Some countries may welcome diplomacy based on strategic interests as more authentic and credible than ostentatious value-based or moral-based diplomacy. However, a complete return to an unrestrained “illiberal” international system appears less likely. Liberal political values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law will still be practiced by multiple countries, and their governments’ (or populaces’) political sensitivity will remain a consideration in geopolitical decisions.

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To conclude, I predict that the international order is currently trending toward a still largely U.S.-alliance-led system, but one that is less liberal and more restrained in its goals and aspirations. In contrast to the commonly cited “Thucydides Trap” (which predicts a declining world power being replaced by a newly rising power), the stagnation of alternative powers such as China allows the current superpower to, by default, retain superior international influence. Yet, aversion to the burdens of past decades in enforcing a “liberal” order will motivate future U.S. governments to downscale their geopolitical objectives and maintain a more limited order of international stability.

A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER  
FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE?

In retrospect, what has been commonly described as a liberal international order has lasted for a relatively short period. Though formally established after 1945, it truly became a global system in the 1990s and lasted for about two decades before experiencing significant challenges and divisions. The potential decline of the liberal world order has evoked anxieties that international relations may return to historical periods of destructive conflicts, isolation, or domination by a few autocratic powers. While the risks of such future outcomes should be considered with prudence, there is also the prospect of less turbulent transitions in the international order.

Should the current geopolitical trends result in changes to an international system that retains the strategic superiority of a U.S.-led alignment over revisionist blocs but prioritizes mutual strategic interests and transactional benefits over shared “liberal” political principles and norms, an international order that promotes stability and cooperation may still function. Whether such an order will be more effective than a “liberal” order may be open to debate. The “less liberal” and “more transactional” world order may struggle to facilitate long-term international cooperation for the distribution of public goods.

The geopolitical stability and balance maintained primarily through shared strategic interests may be fragile and fail to deter certain levels of conflict and disorder from continuing within the international system. For those who may be disappointed by the prospects of the decline of a liberal international order, perhaps a hopeful perspective is to view changes in the international system through the lens of a swinging pendulum. In past decades, “liberal” endeavors to establish an international system have faced challenges and resistance that have caused trends toward “less liberal” geopolitical models. Yet, the limitations of such new models may, in turn, reinvigorate a new wave of geopolitical changes toward the restoration of the liberal world order.

# Could The Middle East Fix Its Problems by Itself?

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War Without End?

SYDNEY BAUM

**T**he Middle East is a complicated web of social, political, economic, and military issues that make the region difficult to understand and navigate. There is a distinct set of historical issues that every nation must contend with. The persistent tensions and shaped relationships are products of the long-lasting effects of colonialism, religious intolerance, and previous military conflicts.

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The strategic location of the Middle East further complicates matters. Its location at the meeting point of three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—gives it tremendous strategic importance. The region's geopolitical position makes it a hotspot for international diplomacy, a platform for influence peddling and power struggles, and a common site for foreign military interventions. The region's significance is amplified by its abundant natural resources, especially oil and gas. International interest and rivalry for these resources can deteriorate preexisting conflicts and complicate regional ties. The precarious power dynamics are further exacerbated by the ever-present scrutiny from outside parties and their ambitions to exert influence.

### ISRAEL'S ONGOING STRUGGLE

Israel faces major security, economic, and societal issues that stem from its diverse religious and ethnic population. The demographic is predominantly Jewish, with approximately 77% of the population identifying as such. 21%, primarily Palestinians, identify as Arab and the remaining portion of the population don't identify as either. This intricate makeup fosters persistent disputes concerning citizenship rights, social equality, and cultural integration, leading to a multifaceted societal landscape plagued by tension.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the greatest barrier to societal cohesion in Israel and poses a chronic threat to the country's security. The conflict originated in the early twentieth century. The birth of Zionism, a movement calling for a Jewish homeland in the land now known as Israel, coincided with the Ottoman Empire's developing Arab nationalism. This collision of goals was amplified by the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine during World War I, which attempted to balance competing claims but ultimately failed. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, following the U.N. Partition Plan, was a watershed moment, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and sparking the first Arab-Israeli war. This event continues to be a source of dispute, with the Palestinian demand for the right of return for refugees displaced in 1948 serving as a key component of the conflict.



## *Could The Middle East Fix Its Problems by Itself?*

While cultural and religious strife plays a major role, the conflict's core lies in deeply contested claims over land, with both parties referencing religious texts in attempts to validate their claims. Palestinians seek an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem, while Israel maintains control over these territories. The expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, deemed illegal under international law, further exacerbates the situation and hinders the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. The status of Jerusalem, a city of immense religious and cultural significance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, remains a highly contentious issue, with both sides claiming it as their capital.

On October 7, 2023, the simmering tensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict boiled over as Hamas launched a surprise attack, marking a significant and violent escalation in the decades-long struggle. The assault, unprecedented in its scale and brutality, involved thousands of Hamas militants breaching the fortified border between Gaza and Israel. They targeted civilian communities, military installations, and even a music festival, resulting in the deaths of over 1,100 Israelis, including women, children, and elderly individuals. The attackers also took hundreds



*Supporters of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu protest near the Knesset (parliament) in Jerusalem on June 10, 2021, against a proposed coalition that could end Netanyahu's 12 straight years in power. - After weeks of political wrangling the Israeli parliament is set to vote on June 13 on whether to install a "change" coalition and end Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's record 12 consecutive years in power. (Photo by Menabem KAHANA / AFP) (Photo by MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP via Getty Images)*

of hostages, further traumatizing the Israeli population. The sheer ferocity of the attack, coupled with the graphic images and videos that quickly circulated online, initially sent shockwaves across the globe and ignited a firestorm of condemnation against Hamas.

The immediate impact within Israel was one of profound grief, anger, and a sense of vulnerability. The attack exposed significant intelligence and security failures, shaking public confidence in the government's ability to protect its citizens. The national trauma galvanized a powerful response, Israel declaring war on Hamas and launching a massive retaliatory campaign in the Gaza Strip. This response, characterized by intense airstrikes and a subsequent ground invasion, resulted in a staggering number of Palestinian casualties and widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure.

Beyond the devastating human cost, the October 7 attack and its aftermath have had a cascading effect with broader ramifications. The already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated dramatically, with hundreds of thousands displaced and facing shortages of food, water, and medical supplies. Moreover, Israel's response sparked pro-Palestinian protests worldwide, and the conflict is now one of the most debated and contentious issues in the West. As the war persists, the divide between the pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel sides deepens, reigniting international attention on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, with global powers taking sides and calls for a permanent ceasefire and a negotiated solution growing louder. Furthermore, the war has aggravated existing social and economic challenges. The constant state of alert has strained the Israeli economy, thus impacting tourism, trade, and investment. The defense budget has increased significantly, diverting resources from other crucial sectors such as healthcare and education. The heightened social tensions within Israeli society have initiated debates about the government's response and the future of the conflict, further dividing public opinion.

Aside from the immediate security challenges, Israel faces significant socioeconomic disparities. Growth in Israel's economy has not been dispersed equitably, despite the fact that it is dynamic and driven by technology and innovation. Israel ranks among the OECD countries with the highest economic disparity, with

approximately 2 million Israelis living in poverty. The labor market shows significant polarization, with lower wages remaining "shockingly low." Unfortunately, many people experience economic and social exclusion; this is especially true for the Arab population in Israel. High living costs, particularly in urban centers, have made housing unaffordable for many, contributing to a growing gap between the rich and the poor. This lack of equitable distribution has led to rising discontent among segments of the population that feel marginalized and left behind in the wake of economic progress. The stark contrast between affluent urban environments and economically deprived rural areas fuels social instability. It heightens tensions within Israeli society as communities grapple with its impact on the quality of life and access to essential resources.

While the reality of Israel's national circumstances is grim, the January 2025 ceasefire between Israel and Hamas offers the potential for alleviating the compounding effects of the conflict on the Israeli and Palestinian people. However, cautious optimism is necessary. The ceasefire represents a fragile hope rather than a definitive end to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Past ceasefire attempts did not progress beyond the initial phases of the agreements, and the demands of both sides are unrealistic at this point in time. International pressure on Israel and Hamas to be faithful to the agreement is palpable, but this does not ensure that either side is going to heed foreign advice. We must remember that there was a ceasefire in place on October 6, 2023. Thus, these agreements and ceasefires are essentially bandages for a greater problem that will prolong the conflict if not thoroughly recognized and addressed with sensitivity and persistence.

#### IRAN'S AUTHORITARIAN GRIP

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 has profoundly shaped Iran's recent delicate dynamics, creating a system where political power is concentrated, social freedoms are often restricted, and the economy struggles under the weight of sanctions and internal pressures. Iran's social fabric is fraying, owing to high youth unemployment and deep-rooted gender

discrimination. Iran's demographic profile is notably youthful, with more than half of the population under the age of thirty. This demographic has the potential to drive change; however, the reality for many young Iranians is starkly different. Iran's history is marked by the silent struggles of its counterculture, a smoldering rebellion against the Islamic Republic's restrictions.

For millennia, artists, academics, and ordinary citizens have sought ways to voice their discontent, often in hidden settings. This heritage of quiet disobedience has influenced Iran's Gen Z, a generation that is more connected to the world than ever before. They are knowledgeable, interconnected, and growing impatient for change. Also, despite their education, many of these young people are unable to find meaningful employment. This disparity and fatigue from oppression has resulted in a surge of public anger and unrest, with large-scale protests emerging as a common form of expressing opposition. Women have played an important role in these demonstrations as they continue to confront considerable constraints on their personal liberties and public engagement due to conservative interpretations of Islamic law governing numerous aspects of their lives.

Politically, Iran is governed by an authoritarian regime characterized by a distinct concentration of power. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sits at the apex of this system. He exerts considerable control over critical institutions, including the military, the judiciary, and key administrative bodies. Consequently, dissent is routinely suppressed, and political freedoms are severely limited, with the government employing various tactics to stifle opposition and curb free expression. The electoral landscape is heavily manipulated to ensure minimal competition and to marginalize reformist factions. This fosters pervasive disenfranchisement among the electorate, who yearn for democratic reforms and greater political representation. Due to four decades of unfulfilled promises made by Khamenei and other Iranian politicians, voter turnout for the 2024 snap presidential election—held following the death of former President Ebrahim Raisi—hit a 45-year low, with just 41% of the electorate participating. Additionally, systemic corruption within various layers of government worsens the challenges faced by citizens and

hampers economic growth. The rampant misappropriation of resources stifles potential development and erodes public trust in governmental institutions. Thus, there are intensifying calls for transparency and accountability from a populace increasingly weary of the status quo.



*Two Iranian women wearing protective face masks cross an avenue as they walk under portraits of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (L) and Late Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tebran's business district amid the new coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak in Iran, on July 5, 2020. (Photo by Morteza Nikonbazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images)*

Iran's economic situation is equally as dire, and it has been substantially influenced by international sanctions, particularly those imposed by the U.S. Iran's economy has been significantly weakened by these sanctions, which have restricted its capacity to participate in global trade. This has resulted in escalating inflation rates and further exacerbated the already precarious living conditions of numerous citizens. The nation's economic prospects are further complicated by its substantial dependence on crude exports, which renders it exceedingly susceptible to fluctuations in global oil prices. Thus, many citizens are unable to make ends meet in the face of financial instability and uncertainty, and initiatives intended to stimulate economic recovery encounter formidable challenges. The Biden administration adopted a more permissive approach to sanctions on Iran, but President Trump has pledged to reinstate the restrictions imposed during his first term. President Trump's philosophy of "peace through strength" suggests he will likely utilize sanctions enforcement to maximize the impact on Iran's economy. Additionally, the imposition of sanctions on

nations that import Iranian oil is under consideration. This may compel Iran to cease its uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons program, as called for by a majority of the international community, or lead Iran to implement economic measures, such as increasing tariffs on its goods to counteract the sanctions. Both choices are disadvantageous for Iran as it aspires to attain nuclear power status and aims to circumvent regional trade conflicts due to its precarious economic condition.

Iran's regional strategy has been fundamentally shaped by its "Axis of Resistance," a network of Shiite militant organizations and political actors that spans the Middle East. Members of the alliance include Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, Syria's Assad regime, Hamas in Gaza, and Shiite militias in Iraq. The landscape has been considerably altered by recent events, particularly the deterioration of Hezbollah and the Assad regime's collapse in Syria, which has the potential to result in the complete dissolution of this alliance. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militant organization, has been a critical component of the Axis, acting as Iran's proxy in Lebanon and a significant player in the Syrian conflict. The Israeli bombardment and assassinations that resulted in Hezbollah's destruction were a catastrophic strike to Iran's regional influence. Iran has forfeited a substantial foothold in Lebanon and a critical connection to Syria in the absence of Hezbollah's political influence and military prowess. This loss not only undermines Iran's position in the Levant but also affects its capacity to project influence throughout the region. Additionally, Iran faces further challenges due to the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Iran has made significant investments in supporting Assad's government, making the Syrian conflict a significant battleground for the Axis. The absence of this ally deprives Iran of a land conduit that connects it to the Mediterranean and Lebanon, as well as a crucial strategic depth. Moreover, it provides a boost to Iran's regional adversaries, who have been competing for influence in Syria.

#### SYRIA AFTER ASSAD

The humanitarian crisis in Syria has escalated dramatically, transforming a once-stable nation into a volatile conflict zone that has displaced millions. The civil war, beginning in 2011 at the

height of the Arab Spring, has resulted in over 500,000 deaths and forced more than 6.8 million Syrians to seek refuge in neighboring countries, alongside millions more displaced internally. This mass displacement has spurred a severe refugee crisis, mostly affecting Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. Resources are stretched thin, and social tensions are on the rise as these nations come to terms with the influx of refugees. In the wake of this prolonged conflict, Syria's healthcare and educational infrastructure have been ravaged. Since hospitals were often targeted by aerial bombings, they now operate at a reduced capacity due to the lack of supplies and medical professionals fleeing the country for safety. Access to essential medical treatment has dramatically diminished, leading to disease outbreaks and mounting malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable communities. Schools also lie in ruins, depriving children of their right to education.

Following an 11-day assault in December 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Turkish-backed Sunni Muslim group from Idlib, overthrew the Assad regime, bringing Syria's political situation to the forefront of international news. HTS is classified as a terrorist organization, notably by the United Nations, the U.S., the European Union, and the United Kingdom, having established itself as a breakaway group of al-Qaeda in 2016. Its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, stated that HTS should be removed from the list of terrorist organizations because it is not one. He claims that HTS has not targeted civilians or civilian areas and that the group's members are also victims of the Assad dictatorship. However, HTS's assumption of power continues to raise global concerns due to the organization's extremist background and history of human rights violations in areas previously under its control.

HTS's takeover of Syria introduces a complex scenario, offering a comprehensive vision for the state while attempting to shape crucial aspects of its future governance. Despite public assurances from Ahmed al-Sharaa regarding minority inclusion, its actions suggest a predetermined move towards centralization. A centralized government contradicts the aspirations of many local populations, particularly the Kurds and Druze, who have historically resisted centralized control. HTS's perspectives on

state-religion ties aggravate the situation even more. Its assertions about Syria's Muslim identity and the necessity of instituting Sharia law, especially within the police force, indicate that it potentially intends to carry out its rule without substantial discussion or public consensus. This concern has grown in response to the recent posting of a new school curriculum for all ages on the Education Ministry's Facebook page. The curriculum underwent significant revisions, such as replacing the phrase "Defending the Nation" with "Defending Allah" and removing Darwinism and the Big Bang Theory from science classes. Other worrying changes include the removal of any teachings or photographs of statues of gods worshipped in Syria before the rise of Islam, as well as the reduction of lectures covering the renowned Syrian queen, Zenobia.

The lack of significant U.N. involvement, while logical given the organization's prior failures in Syria, leaves the process vulnerable to HTS dominance. The uncertain timescale for constitutional deliberations raises the possibility that the constitution may be drafted by HTS appointees rather than elected legislators. Majority voting rather than consensus-building carries significant risks and puts HTS's preferences ahead of the protection of minority rights. The group's intention to delay presidential elections for several years, though seemingly understandable in a post-conflict setting, is contentious. HTS's portrayal of future governance as a presidential system prematurely dictates a key component of the constitutional framework. This disregard for traditional constitutional procedures, which typically involve extensive debate and agreement on the political structure, is concerning, especially given the adverse experiences with presidential systems in the region, as seen in Syria, Libya, and Tunisia.

Al-Sharaa predicts that a significant portion of the Syrian population will gradually support an Islamist political system. Despite Al-Sharaa's aspirations and yearning for political legitimacy, the diverse society, with substantial non-Muslim and non-Sunni communities like Christians, Druze, Alawites, Turkmen, and Kurds, may resist a Sunni Islamist state. Images and videos depicting the burning of Hafez al-Assad's grave and attacks on Alawite monuments indicate that societal cohesion will be a major



obstacle. There are also potential tensions within the Sunni community itself, between Salafists and followers of the Sufi tradition, which could further complicate dynamics. Also, Al-Sharaa only held power and control in northern Syria. Therefore, he has no authority over the militias in the center and south of Syria, which have varying ideologies and could potentially rival the transitional government in the future.

Given Syria's turbulent history, these concerns are understandable, yet how HTS was established provides a glimmer of optimism. When Al-Sharaa split from Al-Qaeda, he only allowed indigenous Syrian activists to lead his new organization. With a group of Syrians who resisted the Assad dictatorship, cautious optimism is warranted in the hope that fresh, pragmatic administration and patriotism will triumph — provided that HTS's aims are not centered on power and profit. To alleviate concerns, HTS must sincerely engage in a consensus-oriented constitutional dialogue to avoid escalating instability and violence in Syria.

Despite its shortcomings, the international community also has a responsibility to advocate for a more transparent and fair approach. Interactions must balance security needs with the upholding of global standards and values. Initial steps should include comprehensive assessments of HTS's goals, capabilities, and adherence to international law, especially regarding human rights. Moreover, it is vital to establish diplomatic channels with well-defined criteria for governance improvements, the rule of law, and the protection of minority rights. Giving humanitarian issues top priority guarantees that relief will reach the Syrian people without unintentionally arming HTS. This calls for strict oversight to stop resource diversion and close collaboration with unbiased humanitarian organizations.

## YEMEN'S ENDLESS WAR

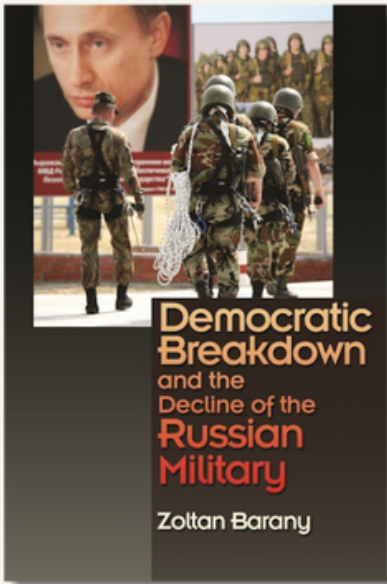
Entering its eleventh year in 2025, Yemen's civil war has resulted in a complex crisis of immense proportions. The myriads of issues include a profoundly destabilizing security vacuum, a humanitarian catastrophe, and a devastating economic collapse. The country's infrastructure has been shattered, millions have

been pushed to the brink of famine, and a protracted conflict with far-reaching regional implications has been fueled by the interwoven nature of these crises, resulting in a perfect storm of suffering. Approximately 21.6 million individuals are in dire need of immediate aid, highlighting the magnitude of the distress. Food insecurity affects over half the population, with 4.7 million experiencing severe hunger in government-controlled regions alone. The critical situation is worsened by a lack of humanitarian aid, marked by reduced rations and inconsistent distribution.

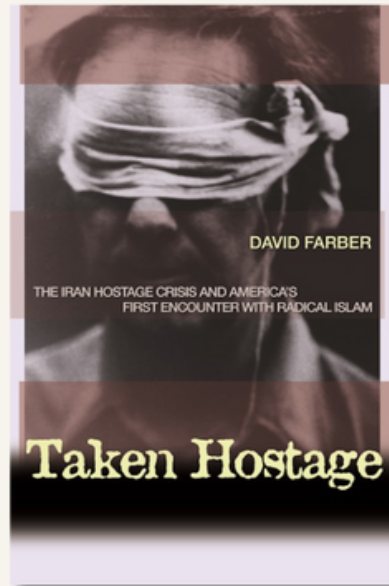
Due to significant funding shortages, the World Food Program was only able to provide two cycles of General Food Assistance between January and July 2024, demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining aid and highlighting the gravity of the situation. The disintegration of Yemen's healthcare system exacerbates this catastrophe. Forty-six percent of health institutions are either partially operating or entirely closed, resulting in 17.8 million individuals lacking access to essential medical treatment. This has fostered an environment conducive to disease epidemics, with measles and rubella cases approaching 20,000 by October 2024, leading to a devastating number of deaths. The situation is further worsened by the proliferation of cholera, with 186,000 suspected cases documented across 22 governorates. The population of Yemen confronts a confluence of famine, disease, and an absence of critical services, illustrating a bleak scenario of a nation in urgent need of help.

The military landscape in Yemen remains an entanglement of competing interests, where the presence of three distinct forces—the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—complicates any path to lasting peace. In the south, the STC, advocating for an independent South Yemen, challenges the authority of the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG). Their presence creates a volatile situation, often leading to clashes with government forces and further fragmenting the country.

Adding to this already precarious mix is the presence of AQAP, a terrorist organization that exploits the chaos of the conflict to establish a foothold in Yemen. Its presence not only poses a direct threat to regional and international security but also further



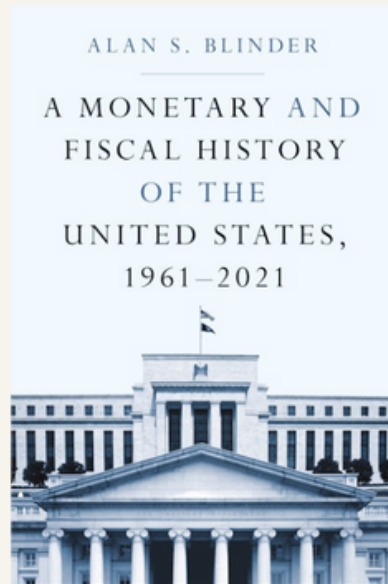
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destabilizes the country, hindering humanitarian efforts and complicating peace negotiations. In a significant operation, AQAP killed a military commander and three soldiers from the Security Belt Forces, a coalition of STC forces, in August 2023. The organization's sudden deployment of advanced drone technology suggests possible external support, marking a concerning development in its operational capabilities.

The Houthis, a Zaidi Shia movement, control significant portions of northern Yemen, including the capital Sana'a, and have proven themselves a formidable fighting force. Their motivations are multifaceted, ranging from local grievances to broader regional ambitions, and their relationship with Iran adds another layer of geopolitical complexity. In October 2023, the group intervened in the Israel-Hamas war on behalf of the Palestinians. They have demonstrated advanced military capabilities, deploying ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and hypersonic missiles. Initially launching attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, the Houthis have conducted over 200 missile and drone strikes against Israel and shipping targets. Subsequently, their operations expanded to include attacks on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Aden. The impact on global shipping has been immense, with container transit through the Suez Canal plummeting from 2,068 vessels in November 2023 to 877 in October 2024.

These operations prompted the formation of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a U.S.-led multinational mission to protect maritime commerce. However, the Houthis have vowed to persist until humanitarian aid is allowed into the Gaza Strip and Hamas is victorious. Though advocating for the plight of the Palestinians was initially viewed as an obligation, the Houthis have garnered international attention and have proven competitive with the global hegemony. Regardless of whether a ceasefire is reached, the Houthis' heightened standing as an established lethal combatant in the Middle East may embolden them to pursue additional military action against Israel and the West. It is also worth noting that, with the overthrow of the Assad regime and the degradation of Hezbollah, the Houthis are now the most indispensable ally of Iran. The interplay between these three actors in Yemen, each with its own distinct agenda and military capabilities, creates a fluid and

unpredictable battlefield. With alliances shifting and territorial control remaining constantly contested, this makes a resolution to the Yemeni civil war exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Beyond the internal power struggle, Yemen's economy is in a serious recession. This economic degradation is the outcome of a combination of factors, each of which exacerbates the others. The Yemeni rial's value has plunged, and this currency devaluation has spurred hyperinflation, raising the cost of vital items to unsustainable levels. The Minimum Food Basket, a basic indicator of nutritional needs, has reached a record high per household, putting basic sustenance out of reach for many. Compounding these problems is a severe drop in real GDP per capita, which has decreased by 54% since 2015, illustrating Yemen's long-term economic collapse. The restriction of oil exports, combined with already dwindling foreign exchange reserves, has inflicted a crushing blow to government revenues, which fell by 42% in the first half of 2024. This financial strain greatly restricts the government's ability to meet the demands of its citizens, deepening the problem. The general economic prognosis remains bleak, with living conditions deteriorating dramatically for the vast majority of the population. This is especially true for the internally displaced, as a startling 80% lack a consistent source of income and frequently live on less than \$40 per month. Yemen's economic collapse has made essential goods increasingly expensive, leaving the populace facing further devastation.

While international efforts to broker peace frequently make headlines, local peace groups and initiatives aid in the fight for a better future. These grassroots activities, often led by ordinary Yemenis—including tribal elders, community organizers, women's groups, and youth activists—represent an important but often underestimated aspect of the peace process. The Yemen International Forum (YIF) has emerged as a crucial, civil-society-driven force for peace, providing a vital platform for dialogue and collaboration. Bringing together over 500 political representatives, policymakers, and civil society members, the YIF facilitates Yemeni discussions across a range of critical themes, offering crucial support to the formal U.N.-led peace process. This type of engagement is further strengthened by expanding local consultation efforts.

Inclusive committees have been established in three governorates, working in coordination with existing administrative structures. These committees play a key role in advising governors on development and peacebuilding priorities. They encourage local governance participation and ensure that the peace process reflects the needs and aspirations of Yemeni communities. The combined efforts of the Yemen International Forum (YIF) and these local committees create a multi-layered approach to peacebuilding, bridging the gap between high-level negotiations and the realities on the ground.

Additionally, tribal mediation has become a vital tool in negotiating the difficult terrain of conflict resolution. From large-scale efforts, such as arranging the release of thousands of prisoners between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, to localized initiatives like halting combat in Al-Motoon, tribal chiefs have demonstrated their effectiveness. Their initiatives in Taiz and Marib have also facilitated the reopening of key routes, including major roads linking Aden with southern cities. Additionally, tribal mediation is essential in reducing conflicts between security forces and local communities, particularly in rapidly urbanizing areas. Strategic alliances between tribal leaders and civil society organizations can help amplify this success. Modern technologies for conflict mapping and analysis, introduced by civil society, offer insightful data and assessments that complement the traditional time-tested approaches of tribal negotiation. This combined approach leverages the strengths of both conventional and modern methods, thereby strengthening the foundation for peacebuilding.

#### IRAQ'S POST-WAR GAMBLE

Iraq is experiencing its most stable period since the ouster of Saddam Hussein. Despite the involvement of various Shia Iraqi groups in the Israel-Hamas conflict and intermittent ISIS attacks, Iraq remains relatively peaceful. While this may inspire hope for those who equate Iraq solely with war, the country continues to grapple with the long-term consequences of its war-torn history and governance abuse. The humanitarian crisis in Iraq, resulting from years of conflict and displacement, remains one of the country's most critical challenges. The effects of the rise of ISIS and

the destruction left in its wake continue to plague the Iraqi population, despite more than a decade having passed. Millions of Iraqis remain displaced, living in camps or attempting to rebuild shattered lives. Some have endured secondary displacements due to ongoing struggles for power among tribal and militia groups in many regions.

The sheer scale of destruction—including homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure—makes returning home even more difficult. In addition to physical damage, the presence of explosive war remnants poses an ongoing and insidious hazard, particularly to vulnerable children. Beyond the visible wounds, psychological trauma from war and displacement continues to affect individuals and communities, leaving lasting scars on the social fabric. This anguish is amplified by the uncertainty surrounding the fate of thousands of missing Iraqis, many of whom were minorities forcibly disappeared during the rise and fall of ISIS.

This humanitarian crisis is further exacerbated by significant threats to political stability and good governance. Iraq suffers from a crippling combination of corruption, weak institutions, and ongoing political infighting. Sectarian tensions and power struggles continue to impede progress toward a cohesive and stable state. The widespread absence of accountability for previous crimes and human rights violations undermines the already weak public trust in political institutions. This results in a vicious cycle of instability and adversely affects efforts to address humanitarian needs.

Iraq's economy, heavily reliant on oil and scarred by decades of conflict, faces complex challenges that hinder its potential for sustainable growth and development. While the country possesses significant natural resources, translating this potential into tangible benefits for its citizens requires addressing deep-rooted structural issues and fostering diversification. For the last decade, oil has accounted for 99% of Iraq's export revenue and 85% of government income. Ultimately, this renders the economy extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. This has inhibited diversification, impeding the growth of other industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services. A lack of

economic diversity creates a volatile climate, as observed during periods of low oil prices, which can result in substantial budget deficits and reduced investment in other sectors.

Another key concern is widespread corruption at various levels of government and institutions. Corruption diverts public funds, undermines the rule of law, and deters international investment. It provides an uneven playing field for firms, favoring those with connections while preventing fair competition. This culture of corruption erodes public trust and fuels social discontent, further destabilizing the economy. While there is an anti-corruption institution in place—the Integrity Commission—only around 7% of the cases are prosecuted. Additionally, the Commission relies on paper-based data that is neither consistently reliable nor accessible and does not account for electronic transactions. The lack of authority also hinders the Integrity Commission from being effective.

One of the most pressing security concerns remains the enduring threat of terrorism. While the territorial defeat of ISIS marked a significant turning point, it did not usher in an era of lasting peace. ISIS continues to operate in Iraq, carrying out sporadic attacks, particularly in rural areas and disputed territories. These attacks aim to destabilize the country and sow fear. The group's continued presence underscores the complex nature of counterterrorism efforts, requiring not only military action but also addressing the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, marginalization, and political grievances. Additionally, the porous borders of Iraq and ongoing regional instability contribute to the flow of foreign fighters and weapons, heightening the terrorist threat.

Beyond the threat of ISIS, Iraq contends with a volatile political landscape that frequently spills over into security challenges. Deep-seated sectarian divisions and power struggles among various political factions often undermine the authority of the state and hinder effective governance. These tensions can manifest in armed clashes between rival groups, further destabilizing already fragile regions. The proliferation of weapons, a legacy of past conflicts, adds another layer of complexity to the security environment. The easy availability of firearms empowers both





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criminal gangs and armed militias, contributing to a climate of lawlessness and violence. Disputes over land, resources, and political influence can quickly escalate into armed confrontations.

#### TURKIYE AND THE WEST

Türkiye maintains a facade of electoral participation and a dynamic civil society. However, recent years have witnessed a gradual erosion of institutional checks and balances, a growing concentration of power in the executive branch, and persistent concerns about the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. These interwoven issues raise serious questions about the future of Turkish democracy and its ability to uphold the rights and liberties of its people. Under the leadership of President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), Türkiye's political landscape has progressively shifted toward a more centralized governance structure. The 2017 constitutional referendum transitioned Türkiye to an executive presidential system, significantly expanding the president's authority while simultaneously weakening the parliament and the judiciary. This shift has resulted in a system where the president holds vast executive powers, including the ability to issue decrees, appoint key officials, and significantly influence judicial processes. The concentration of power has raised alarms about the diminishing role of checks and balances, making it increasingly difficult to hold the executive branch accountable and raising concerns about potential abuses of power. This constitutional change has drawn significant criticism, both domestically and internationally.

Freedom of expression and media freedom are also under increased scrutiny. The Turkish government has faced criticism for cracking down on journalists, academics, and civil society activists who hold opposing viewpoints. Many journalists have been imprisoned, media outlets critical of the government have been closed or taken over by government-linked entities, and self-censorship has become widespread. The employment of restrictive legislation to suppress dissent has had a chilling impact on public debate, significantly limiting the space for critical voices to be heard.

dependence on foreign financing. Türkiye's economy is additionally affected by regional instability and geopolitical risks. Conflicts in neighboring countries, such as Syria, and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean contribute to uncertainty and the potential disruption of trade and investment flows. These geopolitical factors further complicate Türkiye's economic outlook, making future economic trends and risk management more challenging.



*Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan walks off the stage after delivering a national statement during the high level segment on day two of the UNFCCC COP29 Climate Conference at Baku Stadium on November 12, 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The COP29, which is running from November 11 through 22, is bringing together stakeholders, including international heads of state and other leaders, scientists, environmentalists, indigenous peoples representatives, activists and others to discuss and agree on the implementation of global measures towards mitigating the effects of climate change. According to the United Nations, countries made no progress over the last year in reducing global emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. (Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images)*

Türkiye's unique geopolitical location comes with the consequences of an evolving array of international security challenges. The presence of various extremist groups, including remnants of ISIS, poses a direct threat to Türkiye's security. Furthermore, the complex relationship with Kurdish groups in Syria, like the YPG—which Türkiye considers an extension of the PKK, a designated terrorist organization by Türkiye, the U.S., and the EU—adds another layer of complexity. Türkiye's concerns about the potential for Kurdish autonomy in Syria have led to military incursions and strained relations with its NATO allies, especially the U.S. The Black Sea region is another area of strategic importance for Türkiye and has also witnessed increasing tensions in recent years. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have heightened concerns about

Russian assertiveness in the region. Türkiye, as a Black Sea power and a NATO member, must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining its relationship with Russia and upholding its commitments to the alliance. The control of the Turkish Straits, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, adds another dimension to Türkiye's security considerations in this region.

The fall of the Assad regime presents a multitude of opportunities for Türkiye. Cooperating with the U.S. in Syria would offer Türkiye several strategic advantages. A renewed partnership would address critical security concerns, enhance Türkiye's regional influence, and improve its international standing. Specifically, it offers a pathway to significantly reduce the threat posed by Kurdish groups whose presence along Türkiye's border is seen as a major security risk. U.S. President Donald Trump has stated that there will be a shift in U.S. policy away from Kurdish autonomy and having U.S. military personnel stationed in Syria.

A potential partnership addresses Türkiye's concern, and U.S. cooperation in limiting YPG influence in Syria further mitigates the threat of cross-border incursions. This cooperation also lends international legitimacy to Türkiye's actions, countering criticism and potentially yielding financial and diplomatic support. Additionally, it strengthens joint efforts to limit Iranian influence. Increased Russian and Iranian influence in Syria would pose a significant threat to both nations; thus, this shared goal provides an avenue for restoring U.S.-Türkiye cooperation and strengthening NATO as a result. There are also economic opportunities for Türkiye that could arise through investment and streamlined trade if there is U.S. involvement in Syrian reconstruction. Ultimately, this cooperation has the potential to enhance Türkiye's security, alleviate a major source of tension in U.S.-Turkish relations, and facilitate broader collaboration.

#### A BLURPRINT FOR THE MIDDLE EAST'S FUTURE

The Middle East teeters on the brink of irreversible turmoil, as its nations grapple with a confluence of crises that threaten to engulf the region in further suffering and instability. Though international intervention has been the norm and often an

expectation, this should not automatically be the initial course of action for addressing challenges in the Middle East. There are various historical, political, and cultural contexts that external actors may not fully understand, leading to misguided policies that fail to address the core issues. Furthermore, some past interventions have resulted in long-term instability, as seen in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, where foreign involvement led to power vacuums, prolonged conflicts, and weakened institutions. Regional solutions led by Middle Eastern nations themselves are often more sustainable, as they consider local dynamics, traditions, and priorities. Diplomatic efforts, economic partnerships, and intra-regional cooperation should be prioritized to empower Middle Eastern nations to resolve their own disputes. Only when all regional avenues have been exhausted should international involvement be considered, and even then, it should focus on supporting—not dictating—local solutions.

Internally, Middle Eastern nations must prioritize inclusive governance and address deep-seated grievances within their societies. This includes fostering genuine political participation, ensuring representation for diverse ethnic and religious groups, and combating corruption. Strengthening the rule of law and promoting accountability are crucial for creating a stable environment conducive to reconstruction. Furthermore, investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure is paramount. A well-educated populace is essential for economic growth and social progress. Access to quality healthcare improves overall well-being and reduces vulnerability to disease. Empowering youth to drive real and sustainable change must also be a priority. Rebuilding infrastructure, from roads and bridges to power grids and communication networks, is vital for economic recovery and facilitating the delivery of essential services.

Economic diversification is another critical step. Many Middle Eastern economies are heavily reliant on oil, making them vulnerable to price fluctuations and hindering the development of other sectors. Investing in renewable energy, promoting entrepreneurship, and fostering innovation can create more resilient and sustainable economies. Addressing youth unemployment is also crucial, as a large and disaffected youth

population can become a breeding ground for extremism and instability. Creating job opportunities through targeted training programs and support for small and medium-sized enterprises can empower young people and contribute to economic growth.

Reconciliation and transitional justice are essential for healing the wounds of conflict and building social cohesion. This involves acknowledging past abuses and promoting dialogue and understanding between different communities. Regional and international leaders must be willing to make concessions in response to worsening realities. Truth and reconciliation commissions can play a vital role in documenting past atrocities and facilitating healing. Addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of access to resources, is crucial for preventing future violence.

Given the array of challenges afflicting Middle Eastern nations, the international community can play a vital role in supporting these internal efforts for self-sustentation. Financial assistance is crucial for reconstruction and development. However, aid must be delivered in a transparent and accountable manner to avoid corruption and ensure that it reaches those who need it most. Technical assistance and capacity-building are also essential. Sharing expertise in areas such as governance, economic development, and security sector reform can help Middle Eastern nations build stronger institutions and develop their own capacity for sustainable development. This process must be pursued with sensitivity and deep cultural understanding, as Western interference remains a point of contention for many Middle Eastern nations. Patience and understanding that governance tactics, societal realities, and values can vastly differ from those of international partners are essential.

Diplomatic efforts to support the resolution of ongoing conflicts and prevent future ones are another critical form of assistance. The international community must engage with all parties to conflicts, including non-state actors, to promote dialogue and find peaceful solutions. Supporting regional cooperation and integration can also contribute to stability and prosperity. Promoting trade,

investment, and cultural exchange can foster greater understanding and interdependence between nations. Furthermore, the international community must address the root causes of instability in the region, such as climate change, water scarcity, and food insecurity. Investing in climate adaptation and mitigation measures, promoting sustainable water management, and supporting agricultural development can help build more resilient communities. Addressing the refugee crisis is another critical challenge. Providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, supporting host countries, and working toward durable solutions—such as repatriation or resettlement—are essential for alleviating human suffering and promoting regional stability.

A critical examination of the international community's historical interventions in the Middle East is essential. Reflecting on past actions and inactions illuminates pivotal junctures that could have fundamentally altered the trajectories of individual nations and the region as a whole. While national security and international competition may inform decision-making, it is imperative to prioritize the long-term consequences of such interventions. Careful consideration must be given to whether an action risks perpetuating instability and creating unforeseen future challenges or if it is genuinely necessary and beneficial for the region's long-term well-being.

The region possesses the capacity and responsibility to shape a collaborative and stable future, but this requires deliberate and sustained efforts from all key stakeholders. In a moment of reckoning, Arab states and regional powers must rise to the occasion and establish lasting frameworks for cooperation. The formation of robust regional multilateral institutions is essential, not only to address immediate crises but also to build long-term stability through economic integration, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. These institutions must be reinforced at the national level through policies that promote political inclusion, social cohesion, and mechanisms to mitigate threats posed by extremism, sectarianism, and external interference.

Additionally, open channels of communication between historical adversaries, as well as between national governments and local

leadership, can serve as a foundation for de-escalation and reconciliation. Dialogue, trust-building measures, and pragmatic engagement should take precedence over zero-sum politics and reactionary policies that have long fueled instability. The Middle East must recognize that while external actors may play a role in mediation and support, sustainable peace and development can only be achieved from within. True progress begins with a commitment to shared interests and a genuine willingness to break from cycles of conflict. By embracing a vision of collective stability, the region can redefine its trajectory and take ownership of its future.



# Could NATO Become a Global Security Umbrella?

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## The Alliance's Search for a New Identity

KERRY SHEA

**I**n the aftermath of World War II, Europe had a death toll of approximately 36.5 million, catalyzing tensions into fully-fledged volatile relationships across the globe. The U.S. and the Soviet Union (USSR) rose as global superpowers and rivals at this time – the former championing democracy over the latter's communism. As a facilitator in the years after the war ended, mounting distrust and instability across Europe were key to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) not only to boost political amalgamation and inhibit Soviet enlargement during the Cold War era but also to ensure that nationalist militarism did not revitalize throughout Europe.

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On April 4, 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed between 12 nations: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. Conceived as a peacetime military alliance, NATO has upheld its original commitment to provide collective security and military cooperation across Europe and North America. As the first NATO Secretary General Hastings Ismay asserted, its aim was “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” As a response to West Germany joining the alliance in 1955, the Warsaw Pact was formed the same year by the USSR, with Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania joining.

The agreement sought to counterbalance NATO, along with bolstering Soviet control over its satellite states and introducing international diplomacy in hopes of a future East-West collective security pact. From the Cold War to now, NATO has increased its membership to 32 states (Allies), plus more than 40 non-member countries and international organizations referred to as NATO partners. This, along with a newfound concentration on political and military concerns ranging from terrorism to climate change, has led NATO to garner support from members and non-members alike. Since 1990, advocates of NATO’s existence have asserted that, as the world continues to evolve, so should the alliance. With its primary objectives of providing defense, stability, arms control, and the encouragement of political reform, it has been claimed that NATO is needed in the ever-changing realm of international politics.

Yet, the primary issue is that NATO has remained oriented toward Europe and North America, overlooking many allies worldwide. As the War in Ukraine continues and political unrest rises exponentially, NATO looks to immerse itself as a multidimensional security organization. Leaders within NATO believe that the alliance’s “Russia strategy,” in addition to its role as a potential global security actor, must be evaluated alongside its original commitment. However, the re-emergence of 'legacy threats'—China, North Korea, and Russia—poses new challenges.

## FROM EUROPE TO EVERYWHERE

From 1949 until the end of the Cold War in 1991, the primary intent behind NATO's foundation was straightforward: to respond to any aggression by the USSR and its satellite states under the Warsaw Pact against NATO members and Europe in its entirety. The founding countries of the alliance held that the core function of NATO was to provide collective defense against a prospective Soviet attack – as Article 5 declares, “an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all allies.”

In June 1950, a year after the establishment of NATO, North Korea led an invasion of South Korea, headed by Communist leader Kim Il Sung and backed by the USSR. Thus began the Korean War, sparking fear among NATO members of a communist takeover. While NATO forces did not get involved in the war, it was the start of NATO's contemplation on strengthening its commitment to Western Europe. Two years later, Greece and Türkiye became NATO members in response to facing civil wars and a communist rebellion concurrently. At the same time, the U.S. looked to promote the European Defense Community, which would have included a rearmed West Germany. This was rejected by the French Parliament in 1954. On May 9, 1955, West Germany was admitted to NATO; its immediate effect was the USSR's creation of the Warsaw Pact just five days later. Throughout the Cold War, the configuration of NATO remained the same.

In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, the nuclear tactic of Massive Retaliation, which meant that NATO members could go from peace to complete nuclear war in response to an attack, was transformed into a more advantageous defense strategy. Flexible Response, which came to also be known as *détente*, meant the easing of hostilities and strained relationships. According to the U.S., using an assortment of diplomatic, economic, and military alternatives would allow for a more open exchange among East and West Europe. In 1979, the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan and use of ballistic missiles led to a suspension of *détente*. NATO constructed an offensive strategy positioned around deploying nuclear capabilities and ground missiles if a peaceful end was not reached soon. Until 1985, with

the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet Premier, the potential deployment of the missiles loomed until the U.S. and the USSR signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987.

This continued until the late 1980s when the Soviet Premier instituted a widespread series of reforms in the USSR. Gorbachev presented a new openness toward arms control, which led to a substantial reduction of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe and the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Suspicious of his intentions and aware of a possible reversal of these reforms in the future, policymakers in the West cautiously responded to Gorbachev and his calls for a “common European home.” NATO’s first official response to global security efforts came in July 1990, with the London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance. Acknowledging the changes to the USSR, leaders of NATO agreed on alterations to the structure of NATO’s forces, emphasized the crucial role of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and instructed the alliance to formulate a new strategic concept and complementary defense strategy.

NATO was reconceptualized as a cooperative security organization with two key objectives: fostering dialogue and cooperation with former Warsaw Pact adversaries and managing conflicts on Europe’s periphery. The subsequent breakdown of the Warsaw Pact and the reunification of Germany appeared to have ended the threat of a Soviet-led invasion that had been NATO’s core concern since its inception. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the alliance and its member states were forced to adapt to a new security environment. This global shift in Europe’s security landscape led historians and scholars to question NATO’s necessity, prompting the alliance to reassess its role in providing multilateral collective defense in the 21st century. Many U.S. officials believed that NATO’s post-Cold War vision should extend beyond its core defense commitments and focus on addressing challenges outside its membership.

NATO enlargement was still widely debated throughout the mid-1990s, as policymakers and analysts investigated its implications, costs, and results. The United States held a general belief at the

A person wearing patterned blue and white pants and white sneakers stands on a green golf course. A golf club is visible on the right, and a golf ball is on the grass in the foreground. The background is a soft-focus green field under warm, golden light.

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time that NATO was becoming obsolete, as U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar stated in a 1993 speech that the “common denominator of all the new security problems in Europe is that they all lie beyond NATO’s current borders.” On the other hand, the United Kingdom feared that the expansion of the alliance would dilute the alliance, while France believed it would give NATO, most notably the United States, excessive influence. The principal unease shared by most member states was centered around the effect of enlargement on Russia, with fears that the expansion of NATO to the East could threaten its fragile democracy and prospective cooperation between Russia and Western democracies. During this time, Europe and North America remained at the top of the alliance’s security priorities.

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*With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the alliance and its member states were forced to adapt to a new security environment.*

The North Atlantic Cooperation Council – replaced by the all-encompassing Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997 – provided an open environment for discussion between NATO and non-NATO members on political and security matters, as well as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994, which was created to enhance European security and stability through joint

military training exercises with NATO and non-NATO states, including former Warsaw Pact members. Then, in 1995, the alliance published the results of a Study on NATO Enlargement, which measured hypothetical advantages of admitting new members and how they should be incorporated.

The study held that the post-Cold War era offered a rare opportunity for the alliance to develop enhanced security measures across the entire Euro-Atlantic and that NATO enlargement would contribute to enhanced stability and security for all. NATO invited Czechia, Hungary, and Poland to begin the accession process at the 1997 Summit – these were the first former members of the Warsaw Pact to join NATO in 1999. At the 1999 Summit, the Membership Action Plan (MAP) was launched to help other hopeful countries prepare for membership. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia were invited to begin accession talks at the alliance’s summit in 2002 and joined NATO in 2004. Concrete expansion into transnational security operations began the day after the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

On September 12, 2001, NATO met in an impromptu session and, for the first and only time in its history, invoked Article 5. All 18 of the United States' allies pledged support for their response to the attacks. In addition to a review of the alliance's intelligence structures, several initial support measures were agreed upon at the request of the United States, such as enhanced intelligence-sharing on terrorism, assistance to allies and other states facing increased terrorist threats due to their support for the counterterrorism campaign, blanket overflight clearances for military flights related to counterterrorism operations, access to ports and airfields for such operations, and the deployment of NATO naval forces to the Eastern Mediterranean.

In addition, a Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit was set up to improve intelligence-sharing and analysis on terrorism, using civilian and military intelligence from both the alliance and its partner states to provide assessments to NATO's Council and staff. From 2001 until 2021, troops from NATO allies fought together with American soldiers in Afghanistan. The alliance developed a consistent policy concerning terrorism, which included the forceful condemnation of all terrorist acts, a commitment to unity and solidarity with its members, and a determination to combat terrorism. NATO additionally launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) as an offer to engage in real-world security cooperation activities with the Broader Middle East.

In 2002, NATO leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration on NATO-Russia Relations, which established the NATO-Russia Council as a consensus-based body of equal members. The NATO-Russia Council led to collaboration in counterterrorism, crisis management, arms control, and theater missile defense. NATO and Russia also cooperated in supporting efforts in Afghanistan—including Russia's provision of transit routes for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), counter-narcotics training for officers from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan, and assistance for the Afghan helicopter fleet.





*Prime Minister of Belgium Alexander de Croo speaks to the press during the 75th NATO Summit in the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, on July 11, 2024. (Photo by Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto via Getty Images)*

Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia were invited to begin accession talks at the alliance's summit in 2002 and joined NATO in 2004. At the 2008 Summit, NATO leaders made significant strides related to the opportunity for alliance enlargement—viewing the integration of Western Balkan countries as essential to guaranteeing long-term, self-sustaining stability and security. NATO had been heavily engaged in peace-support operations in the Western Balkans since the mid-1990s, culminating in the NATO membership of Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020. NATO had also agreed that Georgia and Ukraine, which were already in Intensified Dialogues with the alliance, would eventually become members at the 2008 Summit. Later that year, NATO leaders decided to enhance opportunities for assisting the two countries in their efforts to meet membership requirements through the NATO-Ukraine Commission—now the NATO-Ukraine Council—and the NATO-Georgia Commission.

## RUSSIA'S RED LINE

Whether it's the Soviet Union or Russia, the Eastern European nation has had a cyclical relationship with NATO, reinstating itself as an international security concern from the alliance's start to the

present day. Throughout its history, Moscow has always chosen to be close to either North Korea or China—but never at the same time. Since his election in 1999, Putin’s aggression against NATO has steadily increased. The alliance promised Ukraine and Georgia, both former Soviet republics, that they could one day join; the eastward growth of NATO has angered Moscow, which has periodically issued warnings that attempts to expand to its borders are a “direct threat.” Putin’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has shattered Europe’s contemporary security framework, prompted a major reevaluation of the foreign policies and defense commitments of NATO members, and produced the greatest tensions between Russia and NATO in the post-Cold War era.

Under Putin’s rule, Moscow has systematically challenged international norms and undermined regional stability. Since the early 1990s, Russia has illegally occupied Moldova’s Transnistria region, maintaining a military presence despite international opposition. In 2008, it invaded Georgia, occupying parts of the country to this day while exerting political influence over its governance. In 2014, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, illegally annexing Crimea, and in 2022, it escalated the conflict further with a full-scale war. Meanwhile, Moscow has aggressively militarized the Arctic, reopening Soviet-era bases and constructing new military installations to reinforce its territorial claims in the Arctic and even Antarctica.

Beyond direct military aggression, Russia has employed economic coercion, using embargoes and trade restrictions to intimidate its European neighbors. It has also engaged in a broad spectrum of “gray zone” operations—subversive activities that fall short of open warfare—including election interference, cyberattacks, targeted assassinations, GPS jamming, and even the weaponization of migration to destabilize NATO allies and partners. At the same time, Russia has significantly expanded both its conventional and nuclear military capabilities while systematically violating, suspending, or withdrawing from key international arms control treaties, including the New START Treaty, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the Open Skies Agreement.

## BEIJING AND PYONGYANG

Unease over Indo-Pacific security has grown significantly as NATO has garnered an interest in global defense and deterrence. NATO's ability to address traditional and unconventional threats in Europe has now become intertwined with the alliance's security interests concerning China and North Korea. The People's Republic of China's goals and "assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to alliance security," as it has been accused of employing "coercive policies," modernizing its armed forces, and working to undermine the global order through disinformation.



*China's President Xi Jinping listens as France's President addresses the sixth meeting of the Franco-Chinese Business Council at The Marigny Theatre in Paris on May 6, 2024, during an official two-day state visit hosted by the French president. (Photo by MOHAMMED BADRA / POOL / AFP) (Photo by MOHAMMED BADRA/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)*

Presently, China does not pose a direct military threat to NATO and its members—unlike Russia, North Korea, or terrorist organizations—yet Beijing's international economic and diplomatic vigor is certain to have major implications for the transatlantic economy and security. China was first recognized as an important topic at the 2019 Summit when NATO leaders argued that its "growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an alliance."

It took Chinese behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, diplomatic and economic coercion across Europe, territorial disputes over Bhutan, India, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the South China Sea, and enhanced security ties with Russia for China to be perceived as a security concern. For both China and NATO, one of the predominant concerns is exactly how to tackle North Korea's nuclear and missile proliferation. NATO leaders have expressed concern over North Korea's nuclear capabilities and violations of arms control rules. NATO has called on North Korea to cease its provocative actions and return to dialogue to achieve sustainable peace and the complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Last month, North Korea denounced Japan's recent opening of a new diplomatic mission for military cooperation with NATO, accusing the country of "dangerously escalating... military tension in the region... pursuant to the United States' strategy for world domination to expand NATO's sphere of influence into the Asia-Pacific region." In addition, Sino-North Korean relations have theoretically been consistent, as they have had a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty calling for mutual assistance if either is attacked since 1961. However, with a recent defense pact between North Korea and Russia, a rare alignment has emerged for the United States and China to work together for stability on the Korean Peninsula.

NATO has been adapting to information threats since its creation, but in recent years, it has faced a sharp increase in hostile information operations, foreign interference in critical infrastructure, and disinformation linked to contemporary terrorism. Adversaries such as China, North Korea, and Russia have integrated cyberattacks and disinformation into their standard warfare tactics, exploiting the digitalized and interconnected world to undermine democratic institutions, destabilize societies, and erode public trust.

By taking advantage of open networks, these actors target civilian values and security, often using proxies to amplify their impact. Their goal is not only to disrupt but also to create division and uncertainty within societies. In response, NATO has strengthened

its approach to countering information threats by enhancing its understanding of the information environment, preventing the spread and impact of disinformation, mitigating and containing incidents as they arise, and continuously learning from past experiences to build resilience. Through proactive communication and strategic adaptation, NATO remains committed to safeguarding democratic principles and the security of its member states in an evolving information landscape.

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#### LEGAL AUTHORITY VS MILITARY POWER

Both founded in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations (UN) is an intergovernmental organization given legal status and is often responsible for making international laws focused on maintaining peace, security, and cooperation around the world. Due to its goal of being instituted as an international body of global nations, there are no geographical restrictions on members joining the UN. NATO, on the other hand, is a transnational military alliance that exists to protect its members, partners, and territories through defensive and, if attacked, offensive measures. Although both were formed to preserve peace and security in their respective regions, the UN and NATO did not directly collaborate until the 1990s. Relations between the UN and NATO have remained a sensitive topic, as both organizations “have overlapping yet distinctly different histories, tasks, and memberships.”

The key difference between the two is that the UN acts as an international arbitrator and must be as neutral as possible, acting

# FOREIGN ANALYSIS



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impartially in conflicts, disputes, and disagreements. NATO is not a neutral or impartial organization, as the objective of NATO is to defend its member states. In “troubled regions” such as Afghanistan, the Balkans, Darfur, Iraq, Somalia, and more, the UN Security Council Resolutions have provided mandates for missions in these locations, while NATO has provided support to UN-sponsored operations. In 2008, the first agreement was passed for broadened consultations and cooperation; a modified Joint Declaration setting out plans for future cooperation between NATO and the UN was signed a decade later. NATO’s Strategic Concept, the alliance’s core policy document published in 2022, commits NATO to preventing crises, managing conflicts, and ensuring stability for fragile states by reinforcing coordination and cooperation with the UN and the European Union.

#### BEYOND THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and NATO is similar. As the EU is a supranational economic and political coalition, it pursues its own foreign policy based on consensus, as members cede some authority and sovereignty to the group and equip it with defensive and crisis management tools. It is important to note that NATO is not a supranational organization, as it allows members to meet and make collective decisions, enabling them to achieve national security objectives through a communal effort. The two organizations share common values, strategic interests, and a majority of member countries. The EU and NATO have aligned joint efforts in addressing strategic challenges posed by Russia and China, the security situation in the Western Balkans and the Middle East, cyber and hybrid threats, and fighting disinformation.

Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both organizations have demonstrated their political unity and efforts in solidarity. A NATO Permanent Liaison Team has been operating at the EU Military Staff since late 2005, while an EU Cell was set up at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in March 2006. Cooperation has significantly expanded in recent

years, building on three Joint Declarations (2016, 2018, and 2023), as well as the NATO Strategic Concept and EU Strategic Compass in 2022. NATO and the EU currently have 23 members in common; the predominant claim held is that, for the development of the partnership between NATO and the EU, non-EU allies' fullest involvement in EU defense efforts is vital in the coming years.

#### IP4 & NATO

NATO has been focusing on strengthening dialogue and cooperation with its four main partners in the Indo-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. In today's complex security environment, NATO's relations with like-minded partners are increasingly important for addressing advanced security issues and global challenges. Cultivating a mutual relationship with the Indo-Pacific 4 (IP4) is important for the alliance, as developments in the region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security. NATO and the IP4 have built partnerships over common strategic concerns and are working together to uphold the rules-based international order.

At this time, NATO's focus on the Indo-Pacific is quite limited. As NATO undertook missions outside of its European area of focus—such as efforts in Afghanistan, counter-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean, or supporting Ukraine in its defensive efforts—having countries to partner with in the Indo-Pacific area who were also outside of the European area was seen as a major advantage. Since the end of the Cold War, strong partnerships in the Indo-Pacific have come to the forefront of NATO; each of the IP4 countries has signed Individually Tailored Partnership Programs (ITPPs) to identify similar areas of mutual bilateral interest for potential cooperation and has assisted in at least one NATO mission.

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*NATO is not a neutral or impartial organization, as the objective of NATO is to defend its member states.*

#### NATO's AMERICAN DILEMMA

At a time when global partnerships are at the height of NATO members' and its partners' concerns, uncertainty surrounding the



United States' commitment to NATO has grown exponentially in recent years. United States officials insinuated at the 2025 Munich Security Conference that European allies continue to underinvest in their militaries and rely disproportionately on American security guarantees; in total, Europe must do more for its own defense. NATO leaders in Canada and across Europe have also contemplated the reliability of American leadership, the extent to which Europe can or must stand on its own, and the implications of a world in which the security guarantees of the United States can no longer be taken for granted.

Concurrently, the second Trump administration has been standing behind its departure from traditional United States diplomacy with its isolationist "America First" policies. As the West's foremost defense organization, NATO has come under fire as the United States' president has often criticized its members for not meeting defense spending commitments and questioned the value of long-standing international institutions. At the same time, American hegemony is being contested in a multipolar world. The fundamental reasoning behind the United States' leadership in the alliance no longer holds, as today's geopolitical realities have little in common with the past NATO was built to secure.

The United States' present strategic challenge is global, as the growing alliance between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea has presented itself as both a security concern and a strategic dilemma for the Trump administration. NATO leaders are concerned that the Trump administration will pull back from alliances reinstated by former President Biden or potentially withdraw military and economic support in adversarial regions where China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are involved.

Without the United States, NATO would face significant challenges, as it has played a critical role in the alliance's ability to provide deterrence and defense. The alliance heavily relies on the United States as a nuclear umbrella and for its key capabilities in operational intelligence, air-to-air refueling, missile defense, nuclear deterrence, and more. NATO's ability to sustain a long-term fight and act as a transnational security actor would be tested, as Europe would have to depend on Canada, France, and the

## *Could NATO Become a Global Security Umbrella?*

United Kingdom—all of which are unable to provide comprehensive coverage equivalent to the United States' nuclear arsenal.



*U.S. Vice President JD Vance gestures as he speaks with NATO Secretary General during a meeting on the sidelines of the 61st Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, southern Germany on February 14, 2025. (Photo by Tobias SCHWARZ / AFP) (Photo by TOBLAS SCHWARZ/AFP via Getty Images)*

Differences in strategic priorities do not come from just the United States. Several Alliance members and partners have raised questions about NATO's agenda taking a more defensive stance against China, worried it could sever political and economic cooperation with Beijing. Many aligned with NATO rely heavily on trading and investment from China, neglecting dependencies and opportunities for Chinese coercion that the economic ties created. These Allies also insist that the Alliance should focus solely on its mission of Euro-Atlantic security and refrain from expanding to the Indo-Pacific. The evolving dynamics of transatlantic cooperation in China highlight the urgent need for updated and coordinated strategies from the United States and Europe.

### ADAPTING TO A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

In recent years, NATO has taken several actions to strengthen its defense and deterrence. Due to the war in Ukraine, NATO has resumed its more traditional defensive strategies (without U.S. forces), as alliance forces in the East have increased significantly,

along with its ability to reinforce any ally that comes under threat. A new generation of regional defense plans was agreed upon at the 2023 Summit, which will significantly improve the coherence of NATO's collective defense planning with the allies' national forces, posture, capabilities, and command and control. In addition, a new NATO Force Model was introduced to expand high-readiness forces, along with the Strategic Space Situational Awareness System (3SAS), a structure designed to better understand space events and their effects.

NATO has also initiated Baltic Sentry, a military activity to protect critical undersea infrastructure. With the new NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge in 2024, members of the alliance will increase defense spending (at least 2% of GDP on defense, and at least 20% of defense expenditures for new major equipment spending, including research and development). Allies will also assist in restocking NATO arsenals while simultaneously supporting Ukraine through the foundation of the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU).

Five new multinational cooperation initiatives were also launched in the same year, in which allies introduced projects to enhance interoperability, including new Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS).

NATO has also taken significant strides in the cyber realm with the Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability (VCISC), the NATO Integrated Cyber Defense Centre, an AI Strategy, and the development of an Autonomy Implementation Plan. All of this is to say that, with the spread of Islamist extremism, Russian exceptionalism, renewed ethnic conflict, the proliferation of weapons, widespread poverty, the growth of transnational organized crime, and a troubling rise in nationalist rhetoric around the world, NATO is on course to fundamentally alter transatlantic relations as an all-encompassing security actor.

However, a range of security concerns—from the United States' internal policies to Russia's invasion of Ukraine; from climate change to trade embargoes; and from cyberwarfare to Chinese, Russian, and North Korean provocation—could lead to NATO members and partners clashing repeatedly. That is, unless the core

mission of NATO is transformed from a purely military alliance into a multidimensional diplomatic, defensive, and economic organization. The alliance must prove and reinforce itself as a transnational security framework without the guarantee of United States support. Overarching policies that govern relations within the liberal international order must be anchored in principled values and designed to defend the liberal international order.

In contrast, executive relations and policies between international orders must prioritize rules-based cooperation in areas of shared interests instead of imposing liberal democracy. For NATO, dedicated members and partners should acknowledge the importance of the past while also adapting to the new global order—a multipolar one that diminishes the importance of the alliance—which requires NATO to differentiate between the global rules-based order and the liberal international order, of which NATO is viewed as a key institution. From the Cold War to the War in Afghanistan, NATO has accomplished much in its time, but this is not to say that it will not struggle in the future.

After 30 years, NATO is returning to an era of great power competition as the influence of the liberal international order dwindles. To act as a transnational security organization, the alliance will have to continue on its path of change, specifically through strategic partnerships. Neither the NATO 2030 Initiative nor the 2022 Strategic Concept has spurred a revision of the programs, agreements, and procedures designed to assist partners in implementing global security objectives. NATO partnerships should enhance, complement, and extend the effects of allied policies—especially toward the Indo-Pacific Four and third-party countries—while remaining cognizant of potential conflicts.

Relying on outdated structures and mechanisms to strengthen the alliance's resilience against existing and imminent security threats is no way for the world to progress when the international order is repeating itself. To uphold the instrumental value of partnerships for allies, NATO must remain a steadfast and efficient actor in its international security efforts. Throughout the alliance's history, transformation has been the root cause of its ability to do what it has done best since 1949: deliver security where and when it

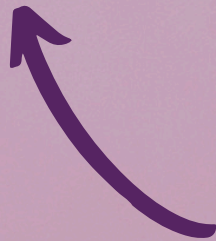
matters. Though efforts have been made in cybersecurity and the modernization of NATO's force structure—such as the three-tiered Allied Reaction Force (ARF)—there is still work that needs to be done for NATO to become a fully capable global security framework. In the wise words of former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, “NATO has changed as the world has changed,” so one can only see what the future will bring.

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