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REASSESSING THE TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP: EUROPE'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA IN AN EVOLVING GLOBAL ORDER

Ijaz Ahmad

Bachelors of Science in International Relations

ORCID: 0009-0001-0537-0444

Email: raijazkhan@gmail.com

Abdul Qadir

Lecturer COMSATS University Lahore

Email: aqadir2727@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The shifting dynamics of the global order have reignited vital debates about Europe's enduring security alliance with the United States. This study explores whether Europe should reassess the foundations of its transatlantic partnership in light of emerging multi-polarity, the evolution of Eurasian institutions, and the growing uncertainty surrounding U.S. strategic commitments. Using an integrated theoretical approach that merges Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism, the research analyzes the structural, institutional, and ideational factors shaping Europe's strategic dependence. Rooted in the post-World War II security framework, the transatlantic relationship has gradually evolved from a system of collective defense into one of asymmetric reliance, where Europe continues to depend heavily on Washington for defense, intelligence, and deterrence.

Drawing on historical precedents, policy documents, and scholarly evaluations, the study finds that although Europe has strengthened its economic and diplomatic standing, its path toward strategic autonomy remains limited by internal divisions and technological vulnerabilities. Contemporary developments, such as the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin, the revival of Trump's "America First" doctrine, and the European Union's internal discourse on "Strategic Sovereignty" underscore the increasing complexity of Europe's geopolitical landscape. The analysis suggests that Europe's challenge lies not in choosing between alliance and independence, but in redefining its transatlantic relationship through a framework of "responsible autonomy."

Ultimately, the paper argues that Europe must transition from a security-dependent partner to a self-reliant and normatively engaged global actor. Achieving this requires deeper defense integration, diversification of global partnerships, and a recalibration of Europe's strategic identity to meet the demands of an evolving global environment. Through its combination of historical inquiry and theoretical insight, this research enriches academic discussions on transatlantic relations and proposes a forward-looking perspective on Europe's strategic and security trajectory in the 21st century.

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Introduction

The global landscape of the 21st century is witnessing deep structural transformations that are redefining the principles of governance, power distribution, and collective security. Europe, in particular, stands at the center of this transformation, as its post World War II identity has been closely intertwined with its enduring transatlantic alliance with the United States. For more than seven decades, this partnership anchored through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has shaped Europe's defense system, economic resurgence, and geopolitical direction. Yet, as multipolarity intensifies, growing concerns over the sustainability, balance, and sovereignty of this alliance have resurfaced with renewed intensity (Ikenberry, 2011; Howorth, 2019).

The transatlantic security framework emerged in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when the United States assumed the role of Europe's principal security guarantor. Through initiatives such as the Marshall Plan (1948) and the creation of NATO (1949), Washington not only provided economic reconstruction aid but also established a durable military and political bond that tied Western Europe to American influence (Leffler, 1992). This alliance extended beyond mere defense cooperation; it represented a shared ideological commitment to liberal democracy and a collective stand against Soviet expansionism (Gaddis, 2005). As Ikenberry (2001) notes, this integration fostered what became known as the "liberal hegemonic order," in which the United States institutionalized its leadership through multilateral cooperation and a rules-based global system.

However, the post–Cold War era introduced a range of new strategic challenges. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 shifted NATO's mission from traditional collective defense toward crisis management, counterterrorism, and global stabilization efforts (Smith, 2017). NATO's involvement in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya illustrated both the adaptability and limitations of the alliance. These interventions exposed the enduring asymmetry of transatlantic relations: America's overwhelming military power contrasted sharply with Europe's cautious diplomacy and operational dependence (Kupchan, 2012). This imbalance laid the groundwork for Europe's continuing strategic dilemma: the difficulty of aligning its economic capabilities with autonomous military strength.

By the end of the 2010s, this asymmetry evolved into what many termed a "strategic dependency paradox." The European Union had become a major global economic actor but continued to function primarily as a "security consumer" rather than an independent "security provider" (Biscop, 2023). The ongoing Ukraine crisis (2014–present) reaffirmed NATO's importance but simultaneously revealed Europe's inability to sustain deterrence without American leadership (Walt, 2019). Meanwhile, the Trump administration's transactional approach to alliances questioning NATO's Article 5 commitments and pressing for greater European burden-sharing raised doubts about the reliability of U.S. security guarantees (Nye, 2021; Kitchen, 2023). These developments forced European policymakers to confront a critical question that had long been

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deferred: in an era of uncertain American engagement, can Europe truly ensure its own defense and strategic sovereignty?

Amid this evolving uncertainty, the transformation of the global order driven by China's ascent, Russia's renewed assertiveness, and the growing institutional diversity of global governance through bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS has further weakened the traditional Western-centric power hierarchy (Acharya, 2014; Allison, 2020). The 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, attended by leading Eurasian states, symbolized this shift toward a multipolar institutional order, where Western liberal norms increasingly face contestation (Borrell, 2025). Positioned at the intersection of the transatlantic and Eurasian spheres, Europe now faces a profound strategic crossroads: whether to preserve its historical alliance with the United States or pursue greater strategic autonomy to effectively navigate a plural and competitive global environment (Kilic, 2024).

The European Union's Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016 formally introduced the ambition for "strategic autonomy," highlighting the need for Europe to develop the capacity to act independently when circumstances demand (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2016). However, turning this aspiration into tangible policy remains a significant challenge. Political divisions among member states most notably between Atlanticist countries like Poland and the Baltic nations, and continental powers such as France and Germany—continue to hinder the formation of a unified European defense identity (Fiott, 2023). Although the EU's defense initiatives, including the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), have strengthened coordination and industrial collaboration, they still lack the technological sophistication and logistical scale of U.S. defense systems (Bruegel Institute, 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, Europe's strategic dilemma can be understood through multiple international relations perspectives. Realist scholars argue that Europe's ongoing reliance on American security assurances reflects the persistent logic of power asymmetry inherent in alliances (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2018). Liberal institutionalists, in contrast, stress the importance of interdependence and shared values that sustain transatlantic cooperation, maintaining that NATO continues to deliver collective benefits to both sides (Ikenberry, 2011). Constructivist thinkers offer a different lens, emphasizing Europe's evolving identity as a normative power attempting to harmonize its liberal democratic ethos with the realities of an increasingly pluralistic international system (Risse, 2022).

This study seeks to critically examine whether Europe should reconsider the foundations of its security partnership with the United States in light of these global transformations. It will trace the historical evolution of transatlantic relations, assess the impact of current geopolitical shifts, and apply major theoretical approaches to interpret alliance behavior. Additionally, the paper will explore Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy, investigate institutional and political challenges, and evaluate potential trajectories for Europe's security future within a multipolar world. Through a combination of historical analysis, theoretical exploration, and policy assessment, the research aims to clarify Europe's strategic choices in an era of diminishing U.S. hegemony.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the future of transatlantic relations will hinge not

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merely on the consistency of American commitments, but on Europe's willingness and ability to share leadership in global security. Whether this takes the form of comprehensive NATO reform, strengthened autonomous defense mechanisms, or hybrid models balancing dependence with sovereignty, Europe's strategic realignment will be central to defining its role within the emerging post-hegemonic global order.

Literature Review

The transatlantic alliance has historically functioned as the cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic security system, founded upon shared liberal democratic ideals and institutionalized frameworks for military cooperation. Academic interpretations of this alliance are firmly grounded in alliance theory, notably articulated by realist scholars such as Stephen Walt (1987) and Kenneth Waltz (1979), who viewed alliances as mechanisms for balancing power and countering external threats. In *The Origins of Alliances*, Walt (1987) contended that the United States' postwar commitments to Western Europe were not merely ideological but strategically motivated—intended primarily to contain Soviet influence and preserve regional stability. Similarly, Glenn Snyder (1997) described alliances as “fluid contracts,” shaped by changing perceptions of threat, credibility, and the distribution of burdens among members.

This theoretical framework helps explain the origins and endurance of the U.S.–Europe partnership following the creation of NATO in 1949, which institutionalized a collective defense commitment under Article 5. John Lewis Gaddis (2005) and Melvyn Leffler (1992) maintained that NATO's primary goal was to deter Soviet expansionism through a mix of deterrence, forward deployment, and integrated planning, while simultaneously embedding Western Europe within the broader liberal order. The combination of the Marshall Plan and NATO embodied what Ikenberry (2001) termed “institutional hegemony,” a system in which American power was both exercised and constrained through multilateral institutions, fostering European confidence in U.S. leadership and the stability of the Western alliance.

However, this equilibrium began to shift in the aftermath of the Cold War. Scholars such as Robert Keohane (2002) and Charles Kupchan (2012) observed that NATO's survival after the Soviet Union's collapse challenged realist expectations that alliances dissolve once their primary adversary disappears. Instead, the organization evolved into what liberal institutionalists identify as a “security community,” a concept first articulated by Karl Deutsch (1957) to describe cooperative systems built on shared norms and the mutual expectation of peaceful conflict resolution. According to Michael Smith (2017), NATO's post-1991 evolution expanded its agenda from territorial defense to include crisis management, stabilization efforts, and counterterrorism missions, thereby redefining its strategic purpose and operational scope.

Nonetheless, this post-Cold War transformation also revealed persistent asymmetries within the transatlantic relationship. The United States continued to dominate militarily, accounting for over 70% of NATO's defense expenditures (NATO, 2023), while Europe remained dependent on Washington's strategic capabilities. Scholars such as Christopher Hill (2019) and Jolyon Howorth (2019) have highlighted that this dependence produced a “structural hierarchy” within the alliance in which the U.S. operates as the strategic core, and Europe functions as a subordinate partner. From

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a neorealist perspective, this imbalance reinforces American influence and control, whereas from a critical lens, it undermines Europe's pursuit of strategic sovereignty and the development of an independent defense identity (Biscop, 2023).

Strategic Autonomy and the European Quest for Sovereignty

The notion of European strategic autonomy defined as the European Union's capacity to act independently in matters of defense and foreign policy has gained significant attention since the release of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2016). This concept reflects a persistent dilemma in European integration: balancing dependence on the United States with the aspiration for genuine continental sovereignty.

Historically, the intellectual roots of this idea trace back to Charles de Gaulle's advocacy for an independent "Europe européenne" during the 1960s. Yet, the rigid bipolar order of the Cold War constrained Europe's capacity to realize such autonomy. Progress toward independence became more tangible following the Maastricht Treaty (1992), which established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and later through the St. Malo Declaration (1998), where France and the United Kingdom committed to building Europe's own defense capabilities (Howorth, 2019). These milestones marked the gradual institutionalization of Europe's collective defense identity and a growing recognition of the need for self-reliance in security matters.

Recent scholarship debates whether this ambition represents a feasible strategic goal or remains largely rhetorical. Analysts such as Sven Biscop (2020, 2023) and Daniel Fiott (2023) argue that achieving true autonomy demands credible defense capabilities, resilient industrial capacity, and strong political consensus elements that remain incomplete. Although initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) have improved coordination, Europe's defense architecture continues to suffer from fragmentation and capability gaps (Bruegel Institute, 2025).

From a liberal institutionalist standpoint, scholars like Ikenberry (2011) emphasize that transatlantic cooperation continues to serve both sides' interests, grounded in democratic values, mutual trust, and collective security arrangements. Realist theorists, including Mearsheimer (2018) and Walt (2019), present a contrasting view, asserting that U.S. retrenchment is inevitable and that Europe must increasingly shoulder its own defense responsibilities. The emergence of Trump's "America First" approach further validated this argument, reframing NATO as a transactional alliance rather than a partnership rooted in shared principles (Kitchen, 2023).

Constructivist scholars, meanwhile, provide a more ideational interpretation. Thinkers such as Manners (2002) and Risse (2022) describe the EU as a "normative power," asserting that Europe's pursuit of autonomy extends beyond strategic pragmatism to encompass its broader identity as a promoter of diplomacy, human rights, and global governance. However, the ongoing war in Ukraine (2022–present) has reignited debates over the limits of normative influence in a geopolitical environment increasingly dominated by hard power considerations (Toje, 2023).

In sum, the discourse on European strategic autonomy reveals an enduring tension between dependence and independence between Europe's institutional ideals and its

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strategic realities.

The Shifting World Order: From Unipolar to Multipolar Competition

The erosion of U.S. unipolar dominance and the emergence of a multipolar international system provide the structural context for Europe's current strategic reassessment. Scholars such as Fareed Zakaria (2008) and Richard Haass (2017) describe the 21st century as a "post-American world," where rising powers most notably China, Russia, and new regional coalitions are challenging the long-standing U.S.-led global order.

Amitav Acharya (2014) conceptualizes this transformation as a "multiplex world," one in which authority and governance are increasingly dispersed among diverse regional institutions rather than concentrated in Western-led structures. Organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and ASEAN+ frameworks exemplify this diffusion of power. The 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, during which China and Russia reaffirmed principles of multipolar cooperation and non-interference, symbolized a deepening shift toward post-Western institutionalism (Borrell, 2025; Valdai Discussion Club, 2025).

From a European perspective, these geopolitical shifts present both strategic challenges and new opportunities. The strengthening of Eurasian coalitions has curtailed Europe's normative influence in regions where it once held significant sway, while also compelling it to redefine its global role. At the same time, multi-polarity offers Europe a pathway to diversify its partnerships beyond traditional transatlantic dependencies. As Nye (2021) and Allison (2020) emphasize, Europe must learn to balance autonomy and interdependence preserving transatlantic cooperation while building pragmatic relationships with emerging powers through economic, diplomatic, and security dialogues.

The evolving U.S. strategic posture has further complicated this landscape. Analysts such as Walt (2019) and Nye (2021) note that the Trump administrations (2017–2021 and again in 2025) reshaped global perceptions of American reliability. Washington's retreat from multilateral engagement and its renewed insistence on European burden-sharing exposed the transactional foundations of the alliance. Trump's 2025 "Security Realignment Doctrine" reaffirmed national sovereignty and selective engagement, signaling a reduction in unconditional U.S. security commitments (Reuters, 2025). This recalibration of American strategy has, in turn, reinforced Europe's resolve to accelerate the development of autonomous defense structures within NATO's European pillar (NATO, 2025).

In essence, the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world has compelled Europe to confront a dual imperative: to adapt to a less predictable American partnership and to assert a more independent role within an increasingly decentralized global order.

Emerging Scholarly Consensus and Gaps

Europe currently grapples with a strategic identity crisis in balancing dependence and autonomy. Its reliance on the United States continues to provide security guarantees but simultaneously constrains independent strategic agency. Steinbach (2023) and Fiott (2023) contend that without a unified defense culture and coherent strategic vision, European autonomy risks remaining rhetorical rather than actionable. In contrast,

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Biscop (2023) and Howorth (2019) maintain that transatlantic cooperation and European autonomy are not inherently contradictory but mutually reinforcing autonomy within alliance rather than outside it.

However, the literature still lacks sufficient exploration of how evolving geopolitical dynamics such as the ascendancy of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the recalibration of U.S. foreign policy under Trump's renewed doctrines, and Europe's shifting energy dependencies reshape European perceptions of alliance sustainability. Recent scholarship calls for redefining autonomy not as detachment from the U.S. but as a means to strengthen Europe's role within a more balanced transatlantic framework (Risse, 2022; Kilic, 2024).

Accordingly, this study advances existing debates by integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical developments after 2020, examining whether Europe's pursuit of balanced autonomy can coexist with its enduring commitment to NATO amid the transition to a multipolar global order.

Theoretical Framework

The transformation of the global security environment demands a multidimensional theoretical framework to systematically evaluate Europe's alliance behavior with the United States. This paper employs an integrated lens grounded in Neorealism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism to capture the interplay of material, institutional, and ideational dynamics shaping Europe's strategic orientation. The rationale behind this triangulated approach lies in the inherent complexity of the transatlantic relationship, where asymmetries of power coexist with institutional interdependence and enduring normative commitments to shared identity. As the global order transitions toward multi-polarity, these three paradigms collectively explain not only why Europe continues to align with the United States but also how shifting strategic pressures may recalibrate that attachment.

Neorealism: Security Dependence and Strategic Autonomy

From a neorealist standpoint, the transatlantic alliance reflects Europe's structural dependence on American military primacy. Neorealism emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, in which states pursue survival and security through the accumulation of power and the formation of alliances (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). For decades, Europe's defense orientation has epitomized what Walt (1987) terms "external balancing," relying on U.S. deterrence rather than building independent military capacity. The NATO framework institutionalized this dependency by embedding American leadership within Europe's collective defense architecture (Risse, 2019).

However, shifting structural conditions are altering this equilibrium. The U.S. strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific (Mead, 2020; Campbell & Ratner, 2021) and intermittent skepticism toward NATO's relevance exemplified by Donald Trump's 2017–2025 "burden-sharing or withdrawal" rhetoric signal potential erosion of transatlantic reliability (Walt, 2025). Neorealist scholars argue that when the credibility of a patron's security guarantee weakens, allies pursue internal balancing to offset abandonment risks (Posen, 2014; Schweller, 2018). In Europe's case, this dynamic has intensified

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calls for strategic autonomy, rooted in the perception that U.S. commitments have become conditional and transactional (Howorth, 2022).

Empirical trends in defense spending and industrial collaboration within the European Union illustrate a measured response to this neorealist logic. Initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) represent incremental efforts to mitigate intra-alliance asymmetry (Fiott, 2023). Yet, the balance of capabilities remains decisively tilted toward the United States, constraining Europe's ability to achieve autonomy without risking deterrence vulnerabilities. From a neorealist lens, Europe's evolving posture thus embodies a dual-balancing strategy maintaining transatlantic alignment while cautiously strengthening indigenous defense capacity to hedge against strategic uncertainty (Mearsheimer, 2018).

Liberal Institutionalism: Path Dependence and Alliance Entrenchment

While neorealism emphasizes the primacy of power and threat, liberal institutionalism highlights the enduring capacity of cooperative frameworks to mitigate anarchy through rules, norms, and mutual expectations (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011). From this perspective, the transatlantic alliance is not solely a product of strategic necessity but also a manifestation of institutional path dependence, shaped by decades of legal commitments and multilateral interdependence. Institutions such as NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) embody what Keohane and Nye (1977) term "complex interdependence," wherein states become enmeshed in dense networks of coordination, information exchange, and shared responsibility that constrain unilateral defection and reinforce cooperative behavior.

NATO's historical adaptability has allowed it to persist through successive systemic transformations from the Cold War and post-9/11 counterterrorism to the contemporary Russia-Ukraine conflict (Haass, 2022). Its institutional elasticity enables recalibration of collective purpose while preserving structural continuity. As Ikenberry (2018) notes, the liberal order's resilience stems from its capacity to absorb change without fragmentation. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, reaffirmed at the 2024 Washington Summit, exemplifies this institutional agility, expanding its mission to encompass emerging domains such as cyber defense, hybrid warfare, and space security (Stoltenberg, 2024).

Accordingly, liberal institutionalists contend that even amid American unpredictability, the transatlantic system endures through institutional inertia and mutual benefit. The intricate web of intergovernmental bodies, command hierarchies, and shared strategic norms acts as a stabilizing force that binds Europe to the alliance. Europe's capacity to "reconsider" its security dependence is thus limited by the very institutions that have guaranteed its stability. Instead of rupture, reform emerges as the most viable course where Europe seeks enhanced burden-sharing and decision-making parity within NATO while simultaneously strengthening intra-European defense cooperation through initiatives such as PESCO and the EDF (Biscop, 2021). Ultimately, institutional frameworks function as shock absorbers, preserving alliance cohesion and moderating the disruptive impact of systemic transitions.

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Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and the Politics of Autonomy

While material capabilities and institutional structures explain much of Europe's strategic dependence, they do not fully account for the normative and ideational dimensions shaping its foreign policy choices. Constructivism, as advanced by Wendt (1999) and Checkel (1999), posits that state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by socially constructed identities, norms, and shared meanings. Europe's foreign policy orientation what Manners (2002) defines as "normative power Europe" rests on principles of diplomacy, multilateralism, and civilian conflict management. This normative identity constrains Europe's willingness to pursue autonomy through militarization, setting it apart from realist paradigms centered on power accumulation.

European debates over strategic autonomy therefore reflect a constructivist paradox: autonomy is both a strategic necessity and a normative challenge. As Tocci (2023) notes, Europe seeks greater independence but within the parameters of its self-conception as a cooperative and peace-oriented actor. The discourse, as framed by Borrell (2025), emphasizes strengthening the EU's "capacity to act" rather than disengagement from the United States. Empirical evidence from elite narratives and public opinion indicates that autonomy is conceived complementarily, not competitively, with the transatlantic partnership (Fiott, 2023). This ideational framing distinguishes European strategic thought from the power-centric approaches of actors such as China or Russia.

Constructivism also illuminates the internal identity cleavages shaping Europe's security posture. While France and increasingly Germany advocate for greater strategic independence, Central and Eastern European states, historically anchored to U.S. security guarantees, continue to regard NATO as the ultimate bulwark against Russian aggression (Kurowska, 2023). These divergent identity constructions translate into asymmetric policy preferences, constraining collective consensus on defense sovereignty. Hence, from a constructivist perspective, Europe's pursuit of autonomy evolves not through abrupt realignment but through rhetorical adaptation and normative recalibration, reflecting an enduring tension between strategic ambition and identity continuity.

Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

The interplay among the three paradigms Neorealism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism offers a comprehensive lens for interpreting Europe's contemporary strategic dilemma. Neorealism highlights the structural imperatives compelling Europe to hedge against potential U.S. disengagement and to strengthen its defense capacity. Liberal Institutionalism explains the enduring nature of transatlantic cooperation, emphasizing how institutional interdependence and shared governance norms sustain the alliance even amid tensions. Constructivism, meanwhile, elucidates why Europe's quest for autonomy remains normatively bounded by its collective identity as a civilian and cooperative actor. Together, these perspectives generate what this paper terms "bounded autonomy" a condition in which Europe seeks enhanced strategic agency within, rather than outside, its alliance with the United States.

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This integrated theoretical framework also facilitates process tracing across key contemporary developments. The SCO Tianjin Summit 2025 exemplifies the institutional consolidation of Eurasian alternatives that challenge Western dominance. Trump's 2025 strategic signaling, marked by renewed skepticism toward multilateral defense commitments, reignited European doubts about the permanence of American security guarantees. Similarly, Europe's collective response to the Russia–Ukraine war exposed enduring capability shortfalls despite unprecedented political unity and solidarity. These empirical touch points allow the theoretical propositions derived from this framework to be critically assessed against real-world dynamics.

Ultimately, this synthesis underscores that Europe's reconsideration of its alliance with the United States is not a binary choice between alliance and autonomy, but rather a continuum of recalibration driven by the interplay of material power asymmetries, institutional resilience, and normative identity. Europe's strategic trajectory will thus depend less on abandoning the transatlantic bond and more on redefining the terms of interdependence within an evolving multipolar order where alliances must continually adapt or risk strategic obsolescence.

Historical Context and Evolution of the Transatlantic Partnership

The transatlantic partnership between Europe and the United States stands as one of the most enduring and transformative alliances in modern international politics. Its origins lie in the geopolitical reordering that followed the devastation of the Second World War. Emerging from the ruins of a divided and war-torn continent, the transatlantic relationship represented far more than an arrangement of mutual defense it was a comprehensive political, economic, and ideological project aimed at reconstructing Europe under American leadership, institutionalizing liberal democracy, and containing the expansion of Soviet communism (Gaddis, 1997; Ikenberry, 2018). The evolution of this partnership unfolded through distinct phases that reflected the broader shifts in global order from the Cold War containment system to the post–Cold War liberal expansion and, ultimately, the post-unipolar uncertainty defining the 21st century.

The Post–World War II Genesis: Containment and Reconstruction (1945–1960s)

In the immediate aftermath of 1945, Europe's economic collapse and military weakness rendered it incapable of autonomous recovery or defense. The United States assumed a dual role security guarantor and economic benefactor through initiatives such as the Marshall Plan (1948) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949 (Lundestad, 2003). These initiatives were designed not only to deter Soviet expansion but also to institutionalize American leadership within a cooperative framework that anchored Western Europe to the U.S.-led liberal order (Kindleberger, 1973).

The early Cold War years witnessed the construction of what John G. Ruggie (1982) termed the “embedded liberal order”, a system balancing open markets with social stability and collective security. NATO's Article 5, which enshrined the principle of collective defense, became the cornerstone of transatlantic solidarity, while the sustained U.S. military presence particularly in West Germany symbolized Washington's enduring strategic commitment to Europe (Kaplan, 2004). The U.S.

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nuclear umbrella, coupled with the Bretton Woods economic framework, firmly integrated Western Europe into a liberal international order centered on American power and institutions (Ikenberry, 2011).

Strategic Divergence and Internal Rebalancing (1960s–1989)

As the Cold War matured, the alliance began to experience strategic frictions. France's Charles de Gaulle, asserting the vision of a more sovereign "Europe européenne," withdrew from NATO's integrated military command in 1966, emphasizing the need for European strategic independence (Bozo, 2009). This assertion reflected a growing recognition of asymmetry within the alliance: while the United States shaped global security priorities, Europe remained a dependent pillar in the transatlantic structure.

Despite such tensions, NATO demonstrated remarkable adaptability in response to evolving geopolitical realities. The Helsinki Accords (1975) introduced human rights and political dialogue into East–West relations, marking a partial shift from militarized deterrence to diplomatic engagement. Concurrently, West Germany's Ostpolitik, advanced by Chancellor Willy Brandt, sought rapprochement with Eastern Europe, signaling a distinctly European approach to détente that did not always align with Washington's containment policy (Schmidt, 2019). However, renewed confrontations the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) and the Euro-missile crisis of the early 1980s reinvigorated NATO's military focus and reaffirmed transatlantic cohesion. Under the Reagan administration's assertive policies, the alliance consolidated once again, entering the final phase of the Cold War with restored unity and strategic purpose (Cox, 2018).

Post–Cold War Transformation: From Uni-polarity to Expansion (1990s–2000s)

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a paradigmatic shift in global geopolitics. With the disappearance of its existential adversary, the transatlantic alliance redefined its *raison d'être* as the custodian of a liberal international order. The 1990s witnessed NATO's eastward expansion, incorporating former Warsaw Pact members and reorienting its mission toward crisis management, peacekeeping, and humanitarian intervention (Risse, 2019; Menon & Ruger, 2020).

During the Yugoslav Wars, NATO conducted its first out-of-area military operation, signaling the alliance's transformation from a purely territorial defense mechanism to a global security actor (Daalder & O'Hanlon, 2000). This period epitomized what Krauthammer (1990) termed the unipolar moment, where U.S. power and influence reached unprecedented global predominance. Yet, beneath the surface of cooperation, structural asymmetries endured. The European Union's nascent Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration between the U.K. and France revealed Europe's growing aspiration for autonomous defense capabilities (Howorth, 2014).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, reinvigorated transatlantic solidarity under the banner of the "War on Terror," leading NATO to invoke Article 5 for the first time in its history. However, the 2003 Iraq War produced a profound rift within the alliance. Britain aligned with Washington, while France and Germany opposed the invasion, invoking international law and the primacy of multilateral legitimacy (Kupchan, 2002).

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This episode underscored Europe's normative divergence from the U.S., particularly regarding unilateralism and the use of force as a policy instrument (Habermas & Derrida, 2003).

iv- Strategic Fatigue and Reassessment in the 21st Century (2010–2020s)

The 2010s marked the gradual erosion of post-Cold War consensus and the onset of strategic fatigue within the transatlantic community. The global financial crisis, Brexit, and the rise of populist movements strained Western cohesion and eroded the liberal order's normative appeal. The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" signaled a relative de-prioritization of Europe in U.S. grand strategy (Mead, 2020). The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his return in 2025 exposed the fragility of transatlantic trust. His rhetoric that NATO allies must "pay their fair share" directly questioned the foundational premise of collective defense (Walt, 2025).

Simultaneously, Europe's internal divisions, exemplified by Hungary and Poland's illiberal turn, undermined its credibility as a coherent strategic actor (Tocci, 2024). The war in Ukraine (2022) temporarily revitalized transatlantic unity, yet it also reaffirmed Europe's enduring dependence on U.S. military and intelligence capabilities (Kagan, 2023). As Washington reorients toward strategic competition with China, Europe confronts a defining dilemma whether to remain reliant on U.S. leadership or to pursue genuine strategic autonomy within an increasingly multipolar order (Biscop, 2021).

Contemporary Reconfigurations: The 2025 SCO Summit and the New Global Architecture

The accelerating shift toward multipolarity has profoundly redefined the contours of transatlantic relations. The 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin marked a pivotal moment in Eurasian consolidation. China, Russia, and the Central Asian states underscored their commitment to economic integration, security cooperation, and technological sovereignty (Zhao, 2025). The participation of observer states from the Middle East and Africa reflected the expansion of a non-Western institutional ecosystem increasingly independent of U.S. or European frameworks.

For Europe, this transformation constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity. While Washington perceives the SCO as a rival geopolitical bloc, the European Union has begun to recognize the necessity of engaging rather than isolating these emerging structures (Borrell, 2025). This recalibration aligns with France and Germany's advocacy of strategic pragmatism a policy posture that neither fully decouples from the U.S. nor ignores the realities of Eurasian multipolarity. The debate therefore centers on whether Europe's enduring reliance on the United States remains compatible with the emerging polycentric order (Howorth, 2022; Nye, 2024).

The transatlantic partnership has thus evolved from a U.S.-led hegemonic structure into a more contested and negotiated alliance, shaped by the interplay of dependence, adaptation, and identity. While the alliance has repeatedly demonstrated resilience weathering de Gaulle's defiance, the Iraq War divisions, and Trump's provocations the post-2020s context introduces unprecedented structural shifts. The resurgence of great-power rivalry, the proliferation of institutional pluralism, and the advent of digital-era geopolitics have transformed the strategic environment in which this partnership operates. Whether Europe ultimately reaffirms, redefines, or rebalances its security

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alliance with the United States will depend not only on military necessity but also on its capacity to reimagine itself as an autonomous yet interdependent global actor.

Europe's Strategic Dilemma Amid the Changing World Order

Europe stands at a decisive crossroads in the early twenty-first century. The liberal international order that once guaranteed its security, prosperity, and normative influence is now under severe strain. The concurrent re-emergence of great-power competition, the diffusion of economic and technological power, and the erosion of transatlantic trust have produced a strategic paradox for Europe: it remains militarily dependent on the United States while simultaneously aspiring for strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world (Biscop, 2021; Howorth, 2022). This dilemma between dependency and autonomy, values and interests, tradition and transformation defines Europe's contemporary geopolitical posture.

The following analysis examines the multidimensional nature of this dilemma through three interrelated lenses:

The erosion of American hegemony and its implications for Europe's security calculus,
The quest for European strategic autonomy amid internal fragmentation, and
The challenge of engaging with a transforming global order shaped by China, Russia, and the Global South

The Erosion of American Hegemony and Its Impact on Europe's Strategic Dependence

The foundations of the postwar transatlantic partnership were built upon U.S. primacy. For nearly seven decades, Washington's military, economic, and ideological leadership provided the structural stability upon which European integration and prosperity thrived (Ikenberry, 2011). However, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a gradual erosion of U.S. hegemony, driven by the rise of new centers of power, domestic polarization, and global strategic overstretch (Haass, 2022).

The retrenchment of American commitments has become increasingly evident through Washington's shifting strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific and its intensifying rivalry with China (Mead, 2020). Under both the Biden and Trump administrations, U.S. foreign policy has prioritized technological competition, economic security, and the containment of Chinese influence often at the expense of sustained engagement with Europe (Allison, 2024; Walt, 2025). Trump's re-election in 2025 has amplified European anxiety: his renewed insistence on "burden sharing" and transactional diplomacy underscores the fragility of NATO's collective defense principle (Applebaum, 2025).

Realist scholars argue that this recalibration exposes the structural asymmetry of the transatlantic relationship (Mearsheimer, 2019; Posen, 2015). Europe's inability to project credible power without American backing leaves it vulnerable to both external aggression and internal uncertainty. The war in Ukraine has reinforced these fears: while NATO's response was swift, its operational and logistical backbone intelligence, airlift, and precision munitions—remained overwhelmingly American (Kagan, 2023). Simultaneously, the political reliability of the United States has come under growing scrutiny. Congressional polarization and fluctuating presidential doctrines have

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introduced deep unpredictability into U.S. foreign policy. As Walt (2025) observes, “the United States no longer offers consistent leadership but episodic engagement,” leaving allies uncertain about Washington’s long-term strategic vision. This uncertainty fuels Europe’s realization that strategic dependency equates to strategic vulnerability a recognition that lies at the core of the contemporary European dilemma.

2- Europe’s Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy: Between Vision and Reality

In response to mounting insecurity and waning confidence in U.S. reliability, the European Union has sought to strengthen its defense and foreign policy capacity under the banner of strategic autonomy. Popularized in EU discourse following the 2016 Global Strategy and championed by France’s Emmanuel Macron, the concept envisions Europe as an actor capable of acting independently when necessary yet cooperatively when possible (Macron, 2023; Fiott, 2023).

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Strategic Compass (2022) represent institutional attempts to translate this vision into policy. These initiatives aim to enhance defense industrial integration, capability development, and operational readiness within the EU framework (Borrell, 2025). However, their implementation has been hindered by internal divisions, budgetary disparities, and divergent threat perceptions among member states (Howorth, 2022). Eastern European countries still wary of Russian aggression remain firmly attached to NATO’s U.S.-led deterrence umbrella, whereas Western states, particularly France, advocate a more sovereign European defense posture (Tocci, 2024).

Yet Europe’s strategic culture remains fragmented. As Biscop (2021) notes, “the EU’s defense ambitions suffer from political heterogeneity, industrial competition, and a persistent lack of strategic will.” Germany’s cautious approach to military engagement, Britain’s post-Brexit detachment, and Europe’s enduring dependence on U.S. security technology collectively constrain the depth of autonomy. Despite rhetorical commitments, Europe’s defense spending though rising since the Ukraine war still lags behind NATO’s 2% target in several member states (Stoltenberg, 2024).

The Ukraine conflict paradoxically both revitalized and exposed NATO. While it reaffirmed the alliance’s centrality, it also illuminated Europe’s deficiencies in logistics, munitions, and command coordination. The European Defence Agency’s 2024 report acknowledged that Europe lacks sufficient stockpiles and integrated command structures for prolonged high-intensity warfare. This shortfall has reignited the debate over whether strategic autonomy should complement or replace U.S. leadership. Macron (2023) has called for Europe to become a “third pole” between Washington and Beijing, yet critics warn that premature decoupling could undermine Europe’s deterrence credibility (Haass, 2022).

Thus, Europe’s pursuit of autonomy remains constrained by paradox: it recognizes the necessity of independence but remains institutionally and technologically tethered to the United States. The dilemma is not whether to abandon the alliance, but how to recalibrate it to safeguard Europe’s long-term interests without compromising its immediate security.

Engaging the Transforming Global Order: Between Atlanticism and Multipolar Pragmatism

Europe’s strategic dilemma extends beyond its transatlantic ties to encompass its

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evolving role within a rapidly transforming global order. The rise of China, the institutional consolidation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the resurgence of Russia have reconfigured the geopolitical architecture that once underpinned Western dominance (Allison, 2024; Zhao, 2025).

The 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin illustrated this transformation vividly. China's deepening coordination with Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states signals the emergence of a Eurasian security and economic bloc grounded in principles of non-interference, sovereign equality, and multipolar cooperation (Zhao, 2025). For Europe, this evolution poses a dual challenge: it contests the universality of Europe's normative foreign policy rooted in liberal interventionism and human rights conditionality (Tocci, 2024) while simultaneously presenting new avenues for selective engagement, particularly in domains such as climate governance, trade diversification, and energy security.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), once perceived as a threat to Western economic primacy, has been gradually normalized in European strategic discourse. Italy's withdrawal from the BRI in 2024 symbolized a cautious recalibration rather than wholesale disengagement. Meanwhile, Germany and France have promoted a doctrine of "managed interdependence" with China, seeking to mitigate vulnerabilities without abandoning economic cooperation (Borrell, 2025). This pragmatic adjustment underscores Europe's recognition that economic security in a multipolar system cannot be sustained through isolationist postures.

At the same time, the growing assertiveness of the Global South in multilateral platforms such as BRICS+ and the expanded G20+ has further diluted Western agenda-setting power. Many emerging economies interpret Europe's strategic uncertainty not as a phase of renewal but as evidence of Western systemic decline (Nye, 2024). In response, European policymakers are increasingly articulating a post-Atlantic identity one that reconciles normative continuity with strategic adaptability. The European Council's 2025 Strategic Outlook explicitly emphasizes the need to "adapt to polycentric realities while preserving the transatlantic bond." This rhetorical balancing act encapsulates Europe's central challenge: navigating multipolarity without forfeiting coherence, and engaging pragmatically with emerging powers while safeguarding the principles that define its international identity.

Internal Fragmentation: Political, Economic, and Ideational Constraints

Europe's strategic predicament is compounded by pronounced internal divisions. Politically, the EU remains split between Atlanticists, who prioritize the U.S. alliance, and autonomists, who advocate for a more independent defense posture. Economically, disparities persist between industrial powerhouses and debt-laden peripheral states. Ideationally, tensions exist between liberal democratic traditions and the resurgence of illiberal populist movements. The electoral successes of right-wing parties in Italy, the Netherlands, and parts of Eastern Europe have undermined consensus on defense integration, Russia policy, and engagement with China (Tocci, 2024).

Economic limitations further restrict Europe's strategic maneuverability. Deindustrialization, energy dependency, and fiscal constraints hinder the development of a robust defense-industrial base. The weaponization of energy by Russia post-2022

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and the vulnerabilities exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the costs of interdependence absent resilience (Fiott, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and other protectionist measures have exacerbated transatlantic economic tensions, as European industries view these policies as undermining fair competition (Haass, 2022).

Ideationally, Europe confronts a profound identity dilemma. As Habermas (2023) observes, “Europe’s unity has been defined by negation, by what it opposes, rather than what it affirms.” The lack of a coherent grand strategy reflects this ideological ambiguity. Whether Europe envisions itself primarily as a normative power, a strategic actor, or a regional stabilizer remains contested. This uncertainty amplifies its security dilemma: without a unified strategic identity, Europe struggles to project credible autonomy or negotiate partnerships on equal terms.

The Emerging Dilemma: Between Adaptation and Dependence

Collectively, these internal divisions crystallize a structural tension between adapting to a multipolar world and maintaining dependence on transatlantic security guarantees. The liberal order that underpinned European security is increasingly contested, yet alternatives remain institutionally underdeveloped. The central question is therefore not whether Europe should abandon the alliance with the United States, but how to redefine it within a pluralistic global architecture.

Europe’s strategic future may lie in a hybrid model: a recalibrated alliance combining NATO-based collective defense with autonomous operational capabilities under the EU. Such a framework would enable Europe to engage pragmatically with non-Western powers, assert economic sovereignty, and respond independently to regional crises, while retaining transatlantic deterrence against systemic threats.

Realizing this vision, however, demands political cohesion, fiscal commitment, and strategic imagination resources that remain unevenly distributed across the continent. As Borrell (2025) cautions, “Europe must learn the language of power or risk becoming an object in a world of subjects.” Europe’s ability to rise to this challenge will shape not only the future of the transatlantic alliance but also the trajectory of the 21st-century international order.

The SCO 2025 Summit, Trump’s Strategic Realignments, and Emerging European Responses

The year 2025 has proven to be a defining juncture in the post-liberal international order. A convergence of three pivotal developments—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin, the second Trump administration’s foreign policy realignments, and Europe’s recalibrating strategic posture—has reshaped global power configurations. Collectively, these events signify a decisive turn toward multipolar institutionalism, selective decoupling, and strategic pragmatism, compelling Europe to reconsider its role in a world no longer centered exclusively on transatlantic dominance.

This section critically examines these dynamics, assessing their implications for Europe’s external behavior, alliance structures, and long-term strategic orientation.

1- The SCO 2025 Summit: Consolidating Eurasian Multipolarity

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, convened in Tianjin in July 2025, marked the consolidation of Eurasia's evolving political and economic architecture. Unlike its earlier iterations, the 2025 summit represented a qualitative transformation in the SCO's institutional depth and geopolitical scope. Under China's stewardship, the SCO expanded its agenda from regional security cooperation to include technological innovation, digital connectivity, energy security, and monetary coordination (Zhao, 2025; Allison, 2025).

The summit's joint declaration introduced the notion of a "Shared Eurasian Future," promoting multipolar cooperation free from "hegemonic interference." The establishment of the SCO Energy Exchange Mechanism (SEEM), aimed at coordinating oil and gas trade in non-dollar currencies, illustrated a concrete step toward de-dollarization within Eurasia. Russia, China, and Iran spearheaded this initiative, signaling an intent to institutionalize financial sovereignty in the face of Western sanctions regimes (Karaganov, 2025).

Furthermore, the inclusion of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as observer states, alongside dialogue partnerships with ASEAN members, reflected the SCO's expanding reach beyond Central Asia. This institutional widening signaled the emergence of Eurasia as a strategic counterweight to Western-led forums such as NATO, the G7, and the EU (Zhao, 2025).

For Europe, the SCO's consolidation represents a structural recalibration of the global order. Its normative emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference contrasts sharply with the EU's liberal-institutionalist agenda of conditionality and rule-based governance (Tocci, 2024). As Eurasian connectivity deepens through initiatives such as the China–Central Asia–Middle East Economic Corridor (CAMEC), Europe risks marginalization unless it adapts to the pluralistic logic of governance emerging from the East (Borrell, 2025).

Strategically, the SCO 2025 summit demonstrated that Eurasia's cohesion is no longer a theoretical possibility but an institutional reality. Its growing coordination in energy, logistics, and financial systems diminishes Western leverage, particularly regarding sanction enforcement and global commodity pricing. For European policymakers, the SCO's maturation presents a dilemma: to engage pragmatically with Eurasia to secure access and stability, or to isolate it in alignment with Washington's containment strategy. Both paths entail potential costs to Europe's autonomy, influence, and long-term strategic positioning.

Trump's Strategic Realignments: Transatlantic Friction and the Return of Transnationalism

The return of Donald J. Trump to the White House in January 2025 has fundamentally altered the transatlantic landscape. His foreign policy, articulated under the slogan "America's Interest First, Again", reintroduced a transactional logic into U.S. alliances, disrupting the fragile trust restored during the Biden administration (Applebaum, 2025; Walt, 2025).

At the core of Trump's second-term strategy lies a dual realignment: retrenchment from multilateral commitments and strategic recalibration toward the Indo-Pacific. In practice, this has manifested through:

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Reassessment of U.S. contributions to NATO, including renewed threats to condition defense guarantees on European burden-sharing.

Suspension of certain Ukraine aid tranches, pending “accountability assurances,” signaling a reduced appetite for long-term European security commitments (Kagan, 2025)

Intensified tariffs and trade conditionalities targeting European industrial exports under the guise of promoting “fair competition” in green technologies

Selective diplomatic engagement with Russia and China, aimed at exploring “transactional de-escalation.”

These policies underscore Trump’s preference for bilateralism over alliance multilateralism. For Europe, this revived unsettling memories of the 2017–2021 period, when NATO solidarity was questioned, and U.S. leadership appeared conditional rather than principled (Haass, 2022).

Trump’s re-engagement with Moscow, symbolized by his May 2025 Helsinki Dialogue with President Putin, further unsettled European capitals. Though framed as an arms control initiative, the meeting was widely interpreted as an attempt to normalize Russia’s post-Ukraine status, undermining Europe’s sanctions policy and strategic coherence (Tocci, 2024).

Economically, Trump’s tariff diplomacy has widened the transatlantic rift. The reinstatement of tariffs on European steel and automotive exports prompted retaliatory measures by the EU Commission. Simultaneously, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act’s continuation drew European criticism for distorting clean-tech competition. This has catalyzed a trend toward geo-economic decoupling, as Europe explores independent trade frameworks with ASEAN, India, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to diversify strategic dependencies (Fiott, 2023).

Politically, the second Trump presidency has reignited the European debate over strategic autonomy. Macron’s 2025 address at Sorbonne University reiterated that “Europe must prepare for a world where the transatlantic umbrella is optional, not guaranteed.” Germany, however, remains cautious, emphasizing continuity within NATO structures (Biscop, 2021). This divergence highlights a persistent North–South cleavage within Europe: southern and western states favor autonomy and diversification, whereas eastern members remain deeply reliant on U.S. deterrence.

In sum, Trump’s foreign policy realignments expose the fragility of Europe’s transatlantic dependency. While the United States remains indispensable for defense, it is increasingly unreliable as a constant partner, compelling Europe to reconsider whether its security and economic futures can remain anchored to an inward-looking Washington.

Emerging European Responses: Pragmatic Adaptation and Strategic Diversification

In response to these global disruptions, Europe has begun charting a pragmatic middle course, characterized by selective engagement, strategic diversification, and normative flexibility. The European Council’s 2025 Strategic Outlook on Global Partnerships encapsulates this recalibration, emphasizing three core priorities:

Preserving transatlantic deterrence while advancing defense integration,

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Expanding partnerships with non-Western powers, and
Redefining economic sovereignty in technology, energy, and finance (Borrell, 2025)

Defense and Security Adjustments

The war in Ukraine, coupled with the volatility of U.S. policy, has accelerated intra-European defense coordination. Initiatives such as PESCO Phase II (2025–2030) and the European Rapid Deployment Capacity (ERDC) reflect growing operational ambition. France, Germany, and Poland have jointly announced a European Security Compact, aimed at streamlining procurement, logistics, and command interoperability (Fiott, 2023).

Additionally, the EU's Defense Industrial Reinforcement Act (DIRA, 2025) seeks to localize production chains for critical technologies including drones, munitions, and AI-enabled defense systems reducing reliance on U.S. contractors. Yet, as Howorth (2022) observes, these efforts remain unevenly implemented, constrained by divergent threat perceptions and fiscal capacities across member states.

Economic and Technological Sovereignty

Europe's economic strategy in response to the shifting order is anchored in strategic sovereignty. The European Commission's Open Strategic Autonomy 2.0 framework promotes industrial reshoring, energy diversification, and digital independence. Cooperation with Japan, South Korea, and India on semiconductor supply chains signals a shift from normative trade policy toward resilient geo-economics (Tocci, 2024).

Energy diversification remains a central pillar. The Southern Gas Corridor Expansion Project, alongside renewed partnerships with Algeria, Azerbaijan, and Qatar, reflects a pragmatic turn from idealism to energy realism. Simultaneously, Europe has deepened dialogue with Gulf states, recognizing their pivotal role in the post-petroleum transition (Borrell, 2025).

Diplomatic Engagement Beyond the Atlantic

Europe's diplomatic posture in 2025 has become increasingly polycentric. The EU's participation as an observer in the SCO Energy Dialogue, alongside its proposal for an Eurasia–Europe Connectivity Council, demonstrates cautious openness toward Eastern-led initiatives (Zhao, 2025). Similarly, engagement with ASEAN through the Comprehensive Connectivity Partnership (CCP 2025) indicates Europe's broader outreach in Asia, beyond the U.S.–China binary.

Nevertheless, this diversification is carefully calibrated rather than revolutionary. Europe's normative commitments human rights, democracy, and rule of law continue to guide its diplomacy, albeit with contextual pragmatism. As Habermas (2023) observes, "Europe's challenge is not to abandon its values but to translate them into a pluralist world vocabulary."

Strategic Implications and Future Trajectories

Strategic Implications: Between Multipolar Adaptation and Transatlantic Continuity

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Recent developments indicate that Europe's strategic evolution is entering a hybrid phase neither fully autonomous nor entirely dependent. The continent is increasingly operating across gradients of alignment: preserving the transatlantic core for deterrence, while simultaneously cultivating Eurasian and Indo-Pacific linkages to diversify strategic options.

The SCO's institutional strengthening and Trump's transactional foreign policy serve as external catalysts, accelerating Europe's internal debates about power, identity, and purpose. The emerging European consensus acknowledges that strategic autonomy is no longer a discretionary choice but an imperative arising from necessity.

Europe's success in navigating this transformation hinges on its ability to reconcile three central contradictions:

Unity vs. Diversity: forging a common strategic will despite divergent national interests.

Values vs. Pragmatism: balancing liberal ideals with geopolitical realism.

Dependence vs. Adaptation: maintaining deterrence under NATO while developing resilient autonomous capabilities.

If Europe can transform these contradictions into drivers of renewal, it may emerge as a balancing pole between Atlanticism and Eurasian multipolarity, rather than as a subordinate actor.

Future Trajectories of the Transatlantic Alliance: Strategic Forecast and Policy Implications

The ongoing transformation of the global order marked by the decline of U.S. unipolarity, the rise of China-led Eurasian multipolarity, and the emergence of autonomous regional actors places the transatlantic alliance under its most complex strategic redefinition since 1949. Europe's historical reliance on U.S. deterrence, economic support, and ideological leadership is being recalibrated amid uncertainty, fragmentation, and diversification.

This analysis examines the alliance's potential evolution through three interrelated lenses (1) Systemic Restructuring of Power (2) Intra-European Strategic Realignment (3) Evolution of Institutional Mechanisms

Each scenario carries implications for the stability of the international system, the coherence of European strategic identity, and the durability of U.S. global leadership. Europe's ability to navigate this transformation will determine not only the trajectory of the transatlantic alliance but also the broader configuration of power in the twenty-first century

Systemic Shifts and the Reconfiguration of Power The Decline of Uni-polarity

The 21st century has witnessed a gradual erosion of the U.S.-centric unipolar order that emerged after the Cold War. Scholars such as Ikenberry (2018), Mearsheimer (2019), and Allison (2025) note that the diffusion of power across Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Global South signals a transition toward multipolarity. China's institutional activism, exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), together with Russia's assertive regional posture, has

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increasingly challenged U.S. dominance both materially and normatively (Zhao, 2025; Karaganov, 2025).

For Europe, these systemic shifts constitute not only a structural transformation but also a normative displacement. The foundational principles of the liberal order open markets, democracy promotion, and rule-based governance face growing competition from alternative models that prioritize sovereignty and non-interference (Tocci, 2024). This ideological pluralism complicates the coherence of transatlantic strategic alignment, compelling European states to balance moral commitments with pragmatic engagement across Eurasia and the Global South.

Within this evolving landscape, U.S. leadership no longer guarantees global order, and Europe's agency assumes a central role in either preserving or reinventing liberal multilateralism. Whether Europe chooses alignment with Washington's containment stance toward China or pursues a hedging strategy will significantly influence the normative trajectory of the emerging post-Western international system (Biscop, 2021; Borrell, 2025).

The Rise of Regionalism and Multi-Polarity

A defining trend in the contemporary international system is the resurgence of regionalism as a counterbalance to global hegemonism. Institutions such as the SCO, BRICS+, and ASEAN+ illustrate a shift toward decentralized governance, emphasizing economic pragmatism and security pluralism. Europe, historically the center of multilateral liberalism, now functions as one among several regional clusters rather than the focal point of global governance (Haass, 2022).

European engagement with ASEAN, the African Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reflects an acknowledgment of this multipolar reality. Yet, in the absence of a coherent strategic doctrine, Europe risks peripheralization within the emerging concert of powers. To retain influence, Europe must translate its normative capital into tangible capabilities, leveraging technological leadership, market strength, and regulatory frameworks to assert relevance in shaping global standards (Fiott, 2023; Habermas, 2023).

Intra-European Realignment: Strategic Autonomy or Transatlantic Dependence? Diverging Strategic Cultures within Europe

Europe's internal dynamics complicate the formation of a unified foreign policy. Western European states, led by France and increasingly supported by Italy and Spain, champion strategic autonomy, a principle rooted in Gaullist tradition and reinforced by contemporary doubts regarding U.S. reliability (Howorth, 2022). In contrast, Eastern and Nordic Europe continue to prioritize NATO-backed security guarantees, reflecting both geographic proximity to Russia and historical dependence (Kagan, 2025).

This divergence produces a dual-layered European identity: Atlanticist and autonomist. The challenge for EU diplomacy is to reconcile these visions into a coherent grand strategy. Macron's "European Sovereignty" doctrine (Sorbonne Address, 2025) envisions a defense architecture capable of acting independently "when the U.S. cannot or will not." Germany, while supportive of enhanced defense integration, maintains that NATO remains the "primary pillar of European deterrence" (Borrell, 2025). Without

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consensus, Europe's pursuit of autonomy risks stagnation, exemplifying what Biscop (2021) calls "strategic rhetoric without strategic capability."

Economic Interdependence and Technological Sovereignty

Europe's reliance on the U.S. extends beyond defense into economic and technological domains. The transatlantic technological ecosystem spanning digital infrastructure, defense supply chains, and AI innovation creates deep interdependence (Fiott, 2023). While beneficial, this dependency constrains European policy flexibility. For example, U.S. export controls on semiconductors and dual-use technologies restrict European firms' access to global markets.

The EU's "Open Strategic Autonomy 2.0" framework seeks to address these vulnerabilities through technological decoupling and domestic innovation. Partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and India reflect a diversification strategy; however, Europe's innovation gap in defense AI and quantum computing remains significant compared to both the U.S. and China (Tocci, 2024).

Without sustained investment in industrial sovereignty, Europe's autonomy risks remaining largely rhetorical rather than material.

Future Scenarios for the Transatlantic Alliance

Scenario 1: Renewed Integration | The Reinvigorated Transatlantic Compact

In this optimistic trajectory, Europe and the United States successfully redefine their alliance to achieve a more balanced and symmetrical partnership. Within this model, the U.S. maintains its leadership role while recognizing Europe's strategic maturity. The outcome would be a Transatlantic Security and Economic Charter, institutionalizing burden-sharing across defense, energy, and technology sectors (Ikenberry, 2018).

The alliance would adapt to multipolar realities by coordinating issue-specific coalitions, such as climate diplomacy, counterterrorism, and AI regulation, without reverting to Cold War bipolarity. This scenario reinforces global stability and preserves liberal institutionalism, contingent upon mutual trust and consistent U.S. engagement.

Scenario 2: Strategic Bifurcation | Europe's Gradual Decoupling

In this more cautious trajectory, transatlantic fragmentation intensifies under prolonged U.S. unilateralism and growing European frustration with policy unpredictability. Should Trump's "America First" doctrine persist, Europe could pursue de facto strategic decoupling, constructing independent defense and financial frameworks while deepening engagement with Eurasian powers, including China, India, and the Gulf (Walt, 2025).

This bifurcation would generate a dual-order system: a U.S.-led Atlantic bloc and a Eurasian-led cooperative axis. Europe would occupy an intermediary role, balancing normative values with strategic interests. While this may increase diplomatic flexibility, it risks undermining NATO cohesion and weakening collective deterrence against Russia.

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Scenario 3: Adaptive Autonomy | Europe as a Balancing Pole

The most plausible trajectory is adaptive autonomy, a flexible equilibrium in which Europe maintains transatlantic cooperation while cultivating independent capabilities to act autonomously when required. This hybrid model resembles the “multi-alignment” strategies employed by India and ASEAN states (Haass, 2022).

Under adaptive autonomy, the EU would remain a NATO member while developing parallel structures, including a European Defense Council, integrated intelligence networks, and collective financing for crisis interventions. Economically, Europe would diversify trade and infrastructure links with non-Western powers while preserving its normative framework through conditional engagement.

This approach positions Europe as a civilizational bridge, connecting Atlantic and Eurasian systems, mediating conflicts, and sustaining multilateral order amid systemic fragmentation. As Habermas (2023) notes, Europe’s institutional sophistication and normative authority allow it to function as the “ethical custodian of pluralistic modernity.”

Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The preceding analysis highlights several policy imperatives for Europe and the United States:

Institutional Reform of NATO: Europe should advocate for a dual command structure granting the EU greater operational control within NATO missions. This adjustment would improve burden-sharing and reduce dependency asymmetry (Howorth, 2022).

European Defense Industrialization: Expanding the European Defence Fund and promoting joint production under PESCO could establish a self-sufficient defense industrial base, mitigating vulnerabilities in supply chains

Revised Transatlantic Economic Framework: Negotiating a Transatlantic Green-Tech Compact could harmonize industrial policies and prevent retaliatory tariffs, preserving economic interdependence while avoiding protectionist pitfalls.

Strategic Engagement with Eurasia: The EU should institutionalize structured dialogues with SCO and BRICS+ on trade, climate, and digital governance. Proactive engagement, rather than exclusion, enhances Europe’s leverage in the evolving multipolar order.

Normative Flexibility in Foreign Policy: Europe must adopt a contextual approach to global governance, moving beyond moral absolutism and balancing liberal ideals with geopolitical realism (Tocci, 2024).

Crisis-Resilient Leadership Mechanisms: Establishing a European Security Council under Article 42(7) TEU could ensure rapid, collective responses to crises, reducing reliance on ad hoc support from Washington.

Conclusion

The future of the transatlantic alliance will hinge on Europe’s political will and the United States’ strategic consistency. If both partners move toward more equitable cooperation, the alliance can remain a stabilizing axis within an increasingly pluralist world order. Conversely, if alignment falters, Europe’s gradual pursuit of strategic autonomy may transform the Atlantic community from a hierarchical structure into a

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network of overlapping partnerships less cohesive, yet more flexible and adaptive. Ultimately, the ongoing transformation of the global order is not a zero-sum contest between the West and the Rest, but a test of institutional resilience and shared strategic vision. Europe's central challenge lies in ensuring that autonomy does not become isolation, and that multipolarity serves as a vehicle for stability rather than fragmentation.

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