



THE FUTURE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: BETWEEN UNITY AND UNCERTAINTY

19 June 2025

The Future of Transatlantic Relations: Between Unity and Uncertainty

On 19th June, the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM representing the Think Visegrad Platform organised a public event entitled 'The Future of Transatlantic Relations: Between Unity and Uncertainty.' The event took place at The Library Europe, Avenue de Broqueville 40, with a participation of 16 experts, researchers and civil society actors. The aim of the discussion was to critically assess the current state and future trajectory of transatlantic relations in light of shifting geopolitical dynamics, with particular focus on trade tensions, NATO's evolving role, ideological divergence between the EU and the US, and external security challenges.

Moderation:

Martin Vokálek, Executive Director and Head of Brussels Office, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

Speakers:

Rebecca Christie, Senior Fellow, Bruegel

Danielle Piatkiewicz, Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Alliance of Democracies Foundation, Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

Botond Feledy, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Development

Łukasz Ogrodnik, Visegrad Group and Austria Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs

Matúš Halás, Senior Researcher, Institute of International Relations Prague

The moderator opened the session by noting the fluid nature of transatlantic relations and the need to reassess them in light of shifting global dynamics. To structure the discussion, four broad themes were proposed: ongoing trade tensions, the evolving role of NATO, the growing ideological divergence between the US and the EU, and the external dimensions of transatlantic engagement, particularly the escalating conflict between Iran and Israel. The session began with a direct question to the panellists, asking them to identify their most pressing concerns in the current state of transatlantic relations.

The first speaker identified the rhetoric associated with the Trump presidency as their primary concern, highlighting its capacity to normalise behaviour that would previously have been deemed unconstitutional. They cited Trump's 2017 threat to withdraw the US from NATO, initially regarded as a potential constitutional crisis, as an example of how such actions have gradually lost their shock value amid a series of similarly unprecedented developments. According to the speaker, the recent meeting of the G7, which Trump exited early, demonstrated an opportunity for NATO members to step into a European leadership role in absence of the US.

Drawing the Hungarian political situation into the conversation, another speaker questioned whether the Hungarian adherents of the far-right Patriots for Europe movement have the capacity to shift the European political landscape further right, and what this would mean for transatlantic relations. Indeed, the following years will be decisive for Central and Eastern European politics as there will soon be elections in Hungary, Czechia and most likely Romania again. In all cases, election interference is a serious risk.

Connecting this to a Czech perspective, another speaker suggested that the most crucial issue for NATO is not the upcoming summit, nor the anticipated 5% defence spending pledge, but the ongoing review process from the Pentagon. Under the Trump administration, the Pentagon is currently reviewing its engagement in Europe, a process that will likely result in fewer American troops on European soil and a new reality for the EU.

This sparked a conversation about key considerations ahead of the NATO summit. A speaker highlighted how the Secretary General of NATO, Mark Rutte, has proposed a division of the 5% defence spending goal into 3.5% for traditional military budgets, and 1.5% for broader security-related infrastructure and capabilities. This reflects a growing consensus among some NATO countries, notably Slovakia, which has long argued for flexibility in how defence expenditure is defined. Furthermore, the speaker underscored a persistent misconception in transatlantic



relations which assumes that Europe is the most important region for the US. In fact, the shift in US strategic focus away from Europe and toward the Indo-Pacific, especially China, is not a new phenomenon, nor is it just about Donald Trump. The 'Asia Pivot' began under Obama, thus JD Vance's declaration at the Munich Security Conference that Europe was not a priority for Washington was not a significant deviation from established policies.

While it is true that US military presence in parts of Europe, such as Poland, increased under the first Trump administration, American forces have since begun to withdraw from key positions such as the strategic logistics hub, Rzeszów-Jasionka, in south-eastern Poland. European troops swiftly replaced them, demonstrating how Europe can build a more independent security framework, but challenges with manpower remain. For example, NATO's new defence plans reportedly require Germany to expand its armed forces by 50,000–80,000 personnel, an almost unattainable goal under its current professional military model.

Linking security to diplomacy, the moderator asked the panel how the EU should navigate its relationship with the unpredictable US administration. A speaker responded that Trump operates through chaos and improvisation, deploying a "protectionist racket" approach to pressure partners into concessions. In this context, the EU should remain steady and resist the impulse to respond with appeasement. As US-China relations show, maintaining a consistent, principled stance is more effective than offering concessions in the hope of a stability that will not come. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has adopted a pragmatic model of engagement, maintaining regular, open lines of communication via informal channels while avoiding overt confrontation. Ultimately, the EU must recognise that no level of concession will ever fully satisfy a transactional US approach so it must instead prioritise internal cohesion among member states.

Expanding upon the reference to China, an audience member questioned this country's role in evolving EU-US relations. The panel agreed that transatlantic uncertainty has created new opportunities in EU-China relations, but also new risks. Namely, a speaker expressed concerns that cheap Chinese goods could flood European markets as a result of trade diversion created by the US tariffs against China. Furthermore, the EU's efforts to gain reciprocal access to the Chinese market remain largely unfulfilled. When it comes to the retrenchment of US aid, China is often one of the first countries to move in and fill the funding gaps with investment. This represents an important trade-off owing to risks associated with high levels of Chinese investment in European business and critical infrastructure. Therefore, even where there are emerging opportunities for the EU and China to find common ground in responding to US trade pressures, the EU continues

to broadly view China as a strategic competitor: economic ties must be balanced with long-term security interests.

Circling back to the question of how the EU should engage with the current or future US administration, a speaker highlighted the importance of a multi-level strategy. Engagement should take place through the European heads of state directly, but also between administrations and through established international platforms such as NATO and the G7. While the latter has had limited success in shaping US positions, such forums still provide essential opportunities for direct interaction. This can be supported by personal diplomacy efforts, showcased by German Chancellor Merz's symbolic gesture of referencing Trump's German ancestry. While this seemed to have little effect in the bilateral meeting, subsequent bipartisan lobbying in the US Congress appeared more impactful. This illustrates the importance of targeting multiple layers of the American political system, beyond simply relying on presidential engagement.

Turning to the external dimension of transatlantic relations, one speaker highlighted the Israel-Iran conflict as a clear example where the EU lacks meaningful leverage due to the absence of consensus among its member states. This observation led to a broader discussion on the persistent lack of unity in EU foreign policy, which continues to undermine the Union's international influence in critical areas such as Gaza, Iran, and China. Diverging national positions have exposed the structural constraints of the unanimity-based decision-making model. It was noted that a cohesive, consensus-based EU stance, such as a unified position on arms imports or military support, would significantly enhance the bloc's credibility and weight on the global stage, compared to the current patchwork of national responses.

This lack of unity is not merely theoretical; it affects practical outcomes, particularly in relation to enlargement policy. The debate around Ukraine's potential accession to the EU has exposed sharp divides, with some member states insisting that institutional reforms (particularly the move away from unanimity in foreign policy) must precede any expansion. Others reject this prerequisite, leading to deadlock. Moreover, growing public polarisation over the past decade has further complicated consensus-building. In this highly fragmented environment, adversaries of the EU are able to exploit the bloc's reliance on unanimity to block or delay decisions.

Moving on to a more positive note, the moderator asked the panellists to consider the areas in which the EU and the US still share common goals. A speaker expressed hope that we are merely living through a difficult period of US history, and not a permanent policy shift. Present challenges should not discount the significant strides forward in European integration, particularly those over the last ten years. The EU has advanced its unity through the expansion of the Schengen Area, a

wider adoption of the euro, and for the first time, the establishment of a substantial common debt mechanism through NextGenerationEU.

Returning to the topic of EU engagement with the US, an audience member raised the question of whether the EU should prioritise presenting a unified voice or rely on individual heads of state to maintain the strength of the transatlantic alliance, particularly in light of Trump's assertion that the EU was "designed to rip off the US." In response, a panellist observed that within Trump's highly transactional approach to foreign policy, individual leaders may be better positioned to influence outcomes. However, they also stressed the importance of maintaining high-level communication that reflects the EU's collective identity and global economic weight.

In this context, concerns were raised regarding the likely future alignment between Polish President-elect Karol Nawrocki and Trump, given Nawrocki's pro-MAGA orientation. Nonetheless, from a trade and economic perspective, the European Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, was viewed as offering a strong collective negotiating presence. As she operates with a mandate from EU member state leaders, her role will be particularly critical in shaping the bloc's response ahead of the impending July 9th deadline for potential 50% US tariffs.

Turning back to security challenges, a participant raised concerns about the effectiveness of NATO's Article 5 in the face of political unpredictability in Washington, limited expeditionary military capabilities in Europe, and the distant prospect of an EU army. Currently, the majority of European militaries are seen as lacking depth and sustainability, fueling calls for European NATO members to contribute 3% GDP on defence spending, and to develop nuclear storage capabilities on NATO's eastern flank. While military capacity is a concern, Europe also retains significant economic strength, which can be leveraged for strategic influence. There is growing recognition that this economic power must be complemented by production capabilities and resilience in emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence and space, where Europe currently lags behind the US and China.

The discussion concluded with a note of cautious optimism that EU-US relations could transition into a phase of reconciliation and recalibrated trust following the conclusion of the second Trump term. However, participants underscored that such a renewal would hinge on Europe's capacity to strengthen its strategic autonomy through greater self-sufficiency, diversification of global partnerships, and a more unified approach to foreign policy. Additionally, there was hope that ongoing geopolitical tensions might serve as a catalyst for the EU to accelerate its progress in critical areas such as artificial intelligence and space, contingent on the effective mobilisation of its industrial and technological resources.

