

 POST TRANSATLANTIC
POLICY FORUM 2025

TRANSATLANTIC REALITY CHECK: EMBRACING THE NEW NORM

Danielle Piatkiewicz

As 2025 draws to a close, it is worth taking stock of the past year in the transatlantic relationship, one year after President Trump's re-election and the return of many policies he advanced during his first term and in several cases, doubling down on them. At the same time, one could argue that this past year delivered the reality check many around the world, especially Europe's democratic partners, needed. It underscored that United States (U.S.) security guarantees are not automatic, even if they were reaffirmed at the NATO Summit in June, which also came with strong pressure on European member states to step up their defense spending, strengthen their security posture – while maintaining support for Ukraine.

Against a backdrop of mounting global crises — from the ongoing Israel– Hamas conflict to heightened tensions with China — Europe and other democracies are increasingly recognizing that we have entered a new geopolitical norm. Yet this new norm does not mean that the United States must set all the terms. Instead, it presents an opportunity for Europe to assume greater responsibility and leadership across various domains.

It is with this understanding of both the opportunities and challenges that a diverse group of transatlantic experts convened on 6 - 7 November 2025 for the eighth Transatlantic Policy Forum (TAPF). The event was organized by the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in partnership with the Atlantic Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, and supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

The Forum addressed a wide range of issues: how shifting democratic narratives and expanding values gaps are affecting mutual trust; how Europe can reconcile its strategic ambitions with the realities of its current defense capabilities; and how the evolving dynamics of U.S.–EU cooperation on climate and energy policy intertwine competition and partnership in the race toward decarbonization and energy security. It also explored growing economic tensions - driven by tariffs,

industrial policies, and protectionist trends on both sides of the Atlantic - and the widening technological divide fueled by diverging regulatory approaches and competing visions for digital sovereignty.

And for the first time, this year's edition also took a deeper dive into the geopolitical tensions shaping the Arctic and MENA regions - highlighting both the strategic opportunities and mounting challenges they present, as well as the areas where the United States and the European Union are aligned, and where their approaches increasingly diverge.

This policy paper captures the Forum's key insights and discussions, held under the Chatham House Rule to ensure confidentiality. Building on these exchanges, it provided a comprehensive set of takeaways, including actionable recommendations and a strategic "to-do list" for the transatlantic alliance in the years ahead, especially under this new state of reality.

Democracy in (In)Action?

The Forum opened with a candid assessment of the state of democratic resilience across the Atlantic, where participants underscored that the geopolitical landscape has grown more complex just as polarization is intensifying within democratic societies themselves. While the rhetoric surrounding democracy promotion has shifted, particularly under the Trump administration, the underlying debate is not new, instead, patterns of support for democracy abroad has been deprioritized as domestic concerns, fiscal pressures, and political divisions dominate national agendas.

American aversion to supporting democratic initiatives overseas has been shaped by the legacy of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has significantly diminished public appetite for international engagement. This trend aligns with broader research showing long-term declines in public support for foreign aid

among American voters and the growing perception that democracy promotion should not come at the expense of domestic priorities.¹

Across Europe, the conversation revealed a parallel set of challenges - especially in Central and Eastern Europe where public attitudes reflect a nuanced picture of democratic commitment mixed with concerns about resilience. According to the GLOBSEC *Trends 2025* survey, 84 % of respondents across nine CEE countries still believe democracy—defined by equality, human rights, and the rule of law—is good for their country, underscoring that democratic ideals remain broadly supported even amid insecurity.² Nonetheless, satisfaction with how democracy is working and trust in institutions are uneven, and regions with weaker media ecosystems show greater vulnerability to misinformation narratives. The same GLOBSEC data shows that robust media environments correlate with lower susceptibility to disinformation and conspiracy theories, reinforcing the link between information resilience and democratic stability.

Despite these pressures, the discussion emphasized that democracies retain significant structural strengths specifically when where democracies consistently outperform autocracies in long-term growth, innovation, and stability. Yet for democratic renewal to take hold, participants stressed that the impulse must originate domestically: external actors can support, but not substitute for, internal democratic demand. With democratic erosion accelerating in some regions, the transatlantic relationship with vulnerable partners may soon be at heightened risk. This makes it all the more urgent for the U.S. and Europe to reinvigorate their democratic engagement—not through top-down conditionality, but by strengthening resilience, supporting independent media, and addressing the

¹ Pew Research Center, *International Engagement and Support for Foreign Aid*, May 1, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/01/international-engagement-and-support-for-foreign-aid/>

² GLOBSEC, *GLOBSEC Trends 2025: Central and Eastern Europe in a Time of Uncertainty*, May 2025, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202025_1.pdf

socioeconomic conditions that make anti-democratic narratives appealing in the first place.

Collective Security Under Strain

Collective security continued to be a recurring theme at the Forum. While rhetoric coming from Washington has shifted with each administration, the underlying expectation that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own defense has remained remarkably consistent from Presidents Obama to Biden and now Trump. After two decades of U.S. military fatigue following prolonged engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, American reluctance to shoulder additional burdens is unsurprising, and the intensity of Washington's rhetoric reflects this strategic posture rather than a substantive policy reversal. This continuity is evident in NATO burden-sharing debates dating back to the 2014 Wales Summit³ and reaffirmed at subsequent summits, where the United States has pressed allies to meet defense-spending targets and invest in credible capabilities such as advanced weaponry and logistics infrastructure.⁴

The recent release of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS)⁵ further solidifies many of the discussions that took place at the Forum around this evolving transatlantic security dynamic.⁶ The NSS marks a notable reorientation of American foreign policy, framing European security in increasingly transactional

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *Wales Summit Declaration*, September 5, 2014, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/09/05/wales-summit-declaration>

⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *The Hague Summit Declaration*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>

⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

⁶ Note: The 2025 National Security Strategy was released after the Transatlantic Policy Forum had concluded. Accordingly, references to the document are included where relevant, as it reflects and advances themes, discussions, and observations raised during the Forum.

terms and underscoring a “tough-love”⁷ model of burden-sharing that expects Europe to deter and defend largely on its own while the United States prioritizes its own narrowly defined national interests.⁸ Rather than emphasizing traditional multilateral reassurance, the strategy calls for Europe to generate real combat power including air and missile defense, long-range fires, industrial capacity, and resilience and ties U.S. support more directly to concrete allied contributions. While not abandoning NATO, this shift reflects a strategic reorientation that Washington’s political capital and resources are increasingly devoted to domestic security priorities and other theatres, particularly the Indo-Pacific, where competition with China remains central.⁹

Participants at the Forum warned, however, that Europe remains far from achieving the level of strategic autonomy necessary to defend itself independently especially in high-end, long-range, and technologically advanced weapons systems where U.S. capabilities remain indispensable. Experts suggested an estimated 10–15-year gap before Europe could credibly field such capabilities, even under accelerated investment trajectories, highlighting persistent industrial fragmentation, slow procurement cycles, and uneven political will.

The NSS’s reframing of allied expectations underscores these challenges that Europe must take the lead on deterrence, backed by sustained and coherent investments, while the United States recalibrates its role from global guarantor to partner conditioned on shared responsibility.¹⁰ Without concrete commitments, unified planning, and sustained investment, Europe risks remaining dependent at

⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “*The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not-So-Great, and the Alarm Bells*,” CSIS Analysis, December 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), *Implications of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy for Europe*, Briefing, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/779261/EPRS_ATAG%282025%29779261_EN.pdf

¹⁰ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

a time when strategic autonomy is not merely aspirational but essential to deterrence credibility in the face of an adaptive Russia and an evolving threat landscape.

Geopolitical Hotspots – Getting Warmer or Colder?

As global geopolitical tensions intensify, the transatlantic community faces growing challenges in regions undergoing rapid transformation. At this year's Policy Forum, two geostrategic theatres: the Arctic and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with a focus on the Gulf region were examined to understand how the U.S., EU, and regional partners interpret shifting risks and opportunities.

The Arctic was discussed as having moved beyond its status as a remote geostrategic region, emerging instead as a fast-evolving security environment driven by the competing interests of Russia, China, and the United States. Russia's ongoing militarization including expanded basing, air-defense systems, and the modernization of its Northern Fleet has significantly intensified the region's strategic stakes, while China's growing economic footprint under its *Polar Silk Road* initiative signals its long-term ambition to become a central Arctic actor despite having no territorial claims.¹¹ At the same time, experts mentioned that climate change is accelerating the opening of new sea routes and access to critical resources, reshaping local economies and placing Indigenous communities and fragile ecosystems under increasing stress. These dynamics have elevated the Arctic to a priority on NATO's agenda, underscoring that environmental resilience, sustainable development, and hard security can no longer be treated separately -

¹¹ RAND Corporation, "Is the Polar Silk Road a Highway—or Is It at an Impasse?" RAND Commentary, February 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/02/is-the-polar-silk-road-a-highway-or-is-it-at-an-impasse.html>

requiring a coordinated transatlantic approach to safeguard stability in the High North.¹²

However, it is worth noting that the Arctic is not explicitly mentioned as a standalone region in the Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), this omission does not indicate a lack of strategic interest; rather, the region is reframed as part of a broader "Western Hemisphere" defense strategy.¹³

The MENA region was discussed, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which is undergoing fundamental geopolitical and economic shifts that make it increasingly important due to shared concerns over maritime security, regional stability, and the energy transition. However, participants noted gaps in coordination and responsiveness, exemplified by the EU's disjointed response to the Israel-Gaza conflict, where member states have struggled to forge rapid, unified policy positions even as the European Council continues to reiterate its commitment to a comprehensive solution.¹⁴ This inconsistency in crisis response underscores broader challenges in translating strategic vision into timely action, raising questions about the EU's capacity to act cohesively alongside Gulf partners amid evolving geopolitical pressures.

Observers note that while the strategy projects U.S. influence differently than past doctrines, it also implicitly challenges European and Gulf policymakers to clarify their own priorities and invest in greater economic and political cooperation - whether through bilateral agreements such as EU-GCC trade frameworks or novel economic solutions in conflict-affected contexts like Israel and Gaza - to sustain mutual security interests in an era of evolving U.S. engagement.

¹² The Arctic Institute, *NATO and the Arctic: The Arctic Institute's NATO Series 2024–2025*, 2025, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/>

¹³ High North News, "Arctic Receives No Mention in New White House National Security Strategy – U.S. Polar Engagement Remains Unclear," High North News, December 2025, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-receives-no-mention-new-white-house-national-security-strategy-us-polar-engagement-remains>

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, *EU Position on the Situation in the Middle East*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-position-situation-middle-east/>

The recently released NSS also signals a de-emphasis of traditional Middle Eastern engagement in favor of selective partnerships and economic interests, while still affirming enduring U.S. interests in securing freedom of navigation through key maritime chokepoints such as the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz and ensuring that energy supplies remain secure from hostile actors.¹⁵ In this environment, EU-Gulf cooperation is strategically significant not only for regional stability but also as part of broader U.S. efforts to align Indo-Pacific, Gulf, and European interests in a connected security architecture.

The discussions concluded that both regions require policymakers to move beyond traditional security frameworks and adopt a multi-layered approach that integrates human security considerations, environmental pressures, and the evolving strategic interests of global competitors.

Climate, Energy, and the Politics of Constraint

In 2025, we have seen that climate issues were increasingly embedded within broader geopolitical priorities, reshaping expectations of the recent COP30 climate summit in Belém, Brazil. Experts echoed that expectations for COP30 outstripped its capacity to deliver on high-ambition outcomes, particularly on fossil fuel phase-outs and binding targets, resulting in deep divisions and limited consensus on key issues such as adaptation financing and mitigation pathways.¹⁶

Some participants suggested that the lack of a U.S. delegation may have eased negotiations, as the current administration had previously signalled its disengagement from climate and energy agreements. This dynamic placed additional expectations on the European Union, even as internal political

¹⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

¹⁶ European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), “Ambition Deferred: COP30 Keeps Paris Alive but Fails to Deliver the Fossil Fuel Phase-Out the World Needs,” EESC News, 2025, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/ambition-deferred-cop30-keeps-paris-alive-fails-deliver-fossil-fuel-phase-out-world-needs>

headwinds and debates over climate regulation (including rollbacks and weakened corporate sustainability requirements¹⁷) have complicated the EU's ability to project unified leadership. The result was a COP30 outcome that secured incremental progress on adaptation and finance mechanisms but fell short of transformative agreements on mitigation or robust climate finance commitments. Against this backdrop, China has increasingly positioned itself as a significant player on climate issues, underpinned by sustained investments in electrification, renewable energy, and clean-technology deployment.¹⁸ If Beijing chooses to fully assume this role, it could become an influential force in shaping climate diplomacy beyond 2025.

In parallel, participants emphasized that effective climate communication between the U.S. and EU, requires a business-driven framing, as climate change continues to be contested political issue. Meanwhile, the outlook for increased U.S. and EU climate finance remains constrained by limited political appetite and sustained pressure on public finances.

Trade, Security, and the Limits of Globalization

The past year proved difficult for U.S.–EU trade relations, shaped by geopolitical pressure, rising protectionism, and sustained efforts by China to exploit transatlantic divisions. While assessments of recent EU–U.S. trade arrangements varied - ranging from “necessary but flawed” to outright poor trade policy - the prevailing consensus from the forum was that such deals were ultimately driven by geopolitical necessity rather than economic optimization.

¹⁷ Euractiv, “EU Strikes Deal to Scale Back Corporate Sustainability Rules,” Euractiv, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-strikes-deal-to-scale-back-corporate-sustainability-rules/>

¹⁸ S&P Global Ratings, “Sustainability Insights: China’s Energy Transition—New Forces Are Shifting Power Demand,” S&P Global Ratings, 2025, <https://www.spglobal.com/ratings/en/regulatory/article/sustainability-insights-chinas-energy-transition-new-forces-are-shifting-power-demand-s101645731>

This outcome was not unexpected; rather, it reflected long-building structural tensions and the growing interdependence between trade and security policy. The renewed push toward higher NATO spending, including the proposed 5% benchmark, was also seen as opening new avenues for transatlantic industrial and defense-related trade, reinforcing the link between security commitments and economic cooperation.

At the same time, 2025 marked a shift from tariff preparedness and reactive trade responses toward “proactive industrial policies”, including joint investments, subsidy alignment, and shared supply-chain strategies aimed at avoiding damaging transatlantic protectionism.¹⁹

Participants highlighted that supply chains are becoming more vulnerable as a backlash against globalization accelerates, driving shorter, more localized production networks and straining multilateral investment frameworks. In this environment, the EU faces growing pressure to strengthen its economic autonomy - bolstering trade resilience through expanded free trade agreements with democratic partners while also addressing persistent asymmetries with the United States, particularly in access to and export of critical minerals.

Ultimately, the discussion underscored that trade and security will continue to converge: as allies in security, the U.S. and EU cannot decouple their economic relationship, making long-term investment, clear supply-chain frameworks, and strategic coordination essential for stability in an increasingly fragmented global system.

¹⁹ Bruegel, *From Strategy to Doctrine: Next Steps for European Economic Security*, Policy Brief, 2025, <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/strategy-doctrine-next-steps-european-economic-security>

Transatlantic To-Do list

The Forum concluded by outlining its annual transatlantic to-do list, identifying the most pressing priorities for the partnership in the year ahead. Across security, trade, technology, climate, and democracy, a clear message emerged: short-term crisis management is no longer sufficient in a rapidly fragmenting global order.

Looking toward 2026, the transatlantic agenda must pivot toward sustained strategic alignment.

- This will require rebuilding mutual trust, strengthen institutional cooperation, and articulate a clearer and more coherent transatlantic narrative - one that balances shared values with hard-nosed realism and equips the partnership to act decisively in an era defined by geopolitical competition and systemic uncertainty.
- Adopt a sustained strategy for democratic resilience that moves beyond short-term election safeguarding toward rebuilding long-term civic trust. This requires strengthening counter-FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) mechanisms, supporting independent and credible media, and investing in shared democratic narratives.
- Expand deterrence beyond military spending to a comprehensive security posture through integrating economic, energy, technological, and infrastructure resilience while accelerating Europe's shift from a peacetime mindset to wartime readiness, with NATO remaining the bedrock of transatlantic security.
- Adopt a multi-level transatlantic approach to the Arctic and MENA that integrates hard security, economic engagement, climate resilience, and human security - strengthening coordination with U.S. and Gulf partners, safeguarding freedom of navigation, and advancing pragmatic economic cooperation even where political consensus remains elusive.

- Reframe climate policy as an economic and competitiveness agenda by prioritizing implementation over ambition, business-driven communication, and operational cooperation while recognizing China's growing influence and the structural limits on near-term public climate finance in the U.S. and EU.
- Shift decisively from reactive tariff management to proactive transatlantic industrial coordination through joint investments, aligned subsidies, and clear supply-chain frameworks, strengthening economic resilience at multiple levels and reducing exposure to fragmentation and protectionist escalation.
- Redefine digital sovereignty in practical terms by prioritizing competitiveness by scaling European tech firms, investing early in AI and semiconductor capabilities, and aligning EU-U.S. innovation ecosystems while accepting that regulatory ambition must be matched by industrial capacity in an accelerated global tech race.

Bibliography

Bruegel. *From Strategy to Doctrine: Next Steps for European Economic Security*.

Policy Brief, 2025. <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/strategy-doctrine-next-steps-european-economic-security>.

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). *"The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not-So-Great, and the Alarm Bells."* CSIS Analysis, December 2025.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells>.

Council of the European Union. *EU Position on the Situation in the Middle East*.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-position-situation-middle-east/>.

Euractiv. *"EU Strikes Deal to Scale Back Corporate Sustainability Rules."* Euractiv, 2025.



<https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-strikes-deal-to-scale-back-corporate-sustainability-rules/>.

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). *"Ambition Deferred: COP30 Keeps Paris Alive but Fails to Deliver the Fossil Fuel Phase-Out the World Needs."* EESC News, 2025. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/ambition-deferred-cop30-keeps-paris-alive-fails-deliver-fossil-fuel-phase-out-world-needs>.

European Parliament Research Service (EPRS). *Implications of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy for Europe*. Briefing, 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/779261/EPRS_ATA%282025%29779261_EN.pdf.

GLOBSEC. *GLOBSEC Trends 2025: Central and Eastern Europe in a Time of Uncertainty*. May 2025. https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202025_1.pdf.

High North News. *"Arctic Receives No Mention in New White House National Security Strategy – U.S. Polar Engagement Remains Unclear."* December 2025. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-receives-no-mention-new-white-house-national-security-strategy-us-polar-engagement-remains>.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). *Wales Summit Declaration*. September 5, 2014. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/09/05/wales-summit-declaration>.

The Hague Summit Declaration. June 25, 2025. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>.

Pew Research Center. *International Engagement and Support for Foreign Aid*. May 1, 2025.



<https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/01/international-engagement-and-support-for-foreign-aid/>.

RAND Corporation. *"Is the Polar Silk Road a Highway—or Is It at an Impasse?"* RAND Commentary, February 2025.

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/02/is-the-polar-silk-road-a-highway-or-is-it-at-an-impasse.html>.

S&P Global Ratings. *"Sustainability Insights: China's Energy Transition—New Forces Are Shifting Power Demand."* 2025.

<https://www.spglobal.com/ratings/en/regulatory/article/sustainability-insights-chinas-energy-transition-new-forces-are-shifting-power-demand-s101645731>.

The Arctic Institute. *NATO and the Arctic: The Arctic Institute's NATO Series 2024–2025*. 2025. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/>.

The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. December 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.



**Transatlantic
Policy Forum**

