

NEW FEATURES AND NEW CHALLENGES OF U.S.-EUROPE RELATIONS UNDER TRUMP 2.0

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During Donald Trump's first term, the "Trump Shock" brought world politics into an era of uncertainties and pulled the transatlantic alliance down to its lowest point in history. The Trump 2.0 tsunami brewed by the 2024 presidential election of the United States has plunged the U.S.-Europe relations into more gloomy waters, ushering in a more complex and turbulent period of adjustment.

LEGACY OF THE U.S.-EUROPE RELATIONS INHERITED FROM THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

During his first term, Donald Trump adopted an oppressive, transactional policy towards Europe and frequently "withdrew from international treaties and organizations". Such moves seriously intensified the conflicts between the United States and Europe in areas such as security, economy, trade and global governance, dragging the alliance to a historically lowest point and even entering a "non allies" state.

The U.S.-Europe relations embraced a turning point after Biden took office in the White House in 2021. Different from Trump's disregard of allies and transactional approach towards the Atlantic alliance-related affairs, Biden valued diplomacy and was equipped with relatively mature ideas on handling relations with allies. Biden criticized that Trump's systematic "withdrawal from international treaties and organizations" eroded the global economic and security institutional framework that backed the U.S. leadership and alienated its democratic allies that

the U.S. needed the most. Hoping to "ensure America's leadership through international cooperation", Biden emphasized at the inception of his term that "America is back" and pledged to repair the relations with allies. The Biden administration reaffirmed the United States' commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, sought to improve economic and trade relations with Europe and rejoined the Paris Agreement on climate change, all of which have been well received by Europe. It is worth mentioning that some key cabinet members appointed by Biden, who were proficient in diplomatic affairs and developed profound relations with Europe, had frequently engaged with European dignitaries in the past few years, further tightening the bond between the United States and Europe.

While the Ukraine crisis that broke out in 2022 intensified the geopolitical crisis in Europe, it also provided an important lever for Biden to revitalize the transatlantic alliance. The Biden administration played a leading role in strengthening deterrence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Russia, working with Europe to jointly impose sanctions on Russia and providing aid to Ukraine. The European Union (EU) proposed to establish the EU-U.S. Security and Defense Dialogue, strengthen concerted efforts with the United States on Russia-related issues, and jointly advance agendas on international arms control and disarmament. The EU also strengthened its relationship with NATO. With increasing emphasis on the consistency and synergy in defense planning and capacity building, the EU and NATO expe-

rienced a trend of “alliance-oriented” cooperation.

Against the backdrop of “bloc confrontation” deliberately instigated by the United States and some in the West, both the United States and the EU view China as a competitor in areas of economy, technology, and strategy and strengthen policy coordination towards China. The United States and Europe restarted the U.S.-EU Dialogue on China and launched the “EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council” (TTC) with strong elements of competing with China. The U.S.-EU coordination in China-related affairs was further intensified after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. In the Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation released in 2023, they recognized that the Ukraine crisis posed “the gravest threat” to Euro-Atlantic security in decades, falsely accused China’s resolute policies of presenting “challenges” that both the EU and NATO “need to address”, and declared that “the two sides would upgrade their partnership to a new level on the basis of their long-standing cooperation and further strengthen, expand and deepen cooperation”.

The Biden administration adopted a relatively proactive and flexible policy towards Europe, pulling the U.S.-Europe relations out of the trough and strengthening cooperation. “Working with Europe to aid Ukraine and against Russia” as well as U.S.-Europe coordination on China-related affairs have become its major diplomatic legacies. But the Biden administration’s policy towards Europe also had certain negative impacts on U.S.-Europe relations. Biden largely inherited the trade protectionism from the previous administration. Negotiations helped ease the steel and aluminum tariff dispute with the



On March 27, 2025, the Meeting on Peace and Security for Ukraine chaired by French President Emmanuel Macron was held in Paris, France.

United States, but failed to resolve this issue left by the previous administration once and for all. Even worse, Biden signed into law the discriminatory and protectionist Inflation Reduction Act, which was strongly questioned and opposed by the EU. In the field of security, the Biden administration continued to shift the defense burden to Europe, demanding that Europe make greater contributions to NATO military spending. In addition, the Biden administration abruptly withdrew troops from Afghanistan without communicating with its European allies and established the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership. These moves shocked Europe and forced it to reflect on its relationship with the United States. Such negative legacies limit the space for repairing the U.S.-Europe relations and also indicate more uncertainties facing the U.S.-Europe relations under the Trump 2.0.

NEW FEATURES OF U.S.-EUROPE RELATIONS AFTER TRUMP’S RETURN

Amid the tsunami brought by Trump 2.0, the reinforced version of “America First” reshapes the U.S. diplomacy and “a gray rhino bursts into the U.S. foreign policy”. The U.S.-Europe relationship, which is already under considerable pressure, shows some new features.

I. Power Imbalance Exacerbates the Risk of Subordination in U.S.-Europe Relations

The balance of power is the fundamental factor pushing the transformation of U.S.-Europe relations. We have witnessed an increasingly evident power imbalance between Europe and the United States since the international financial crisis in 2008, in which year the GDP of the EU was slightly above that of the United States. However, in 2022, the GDP of the United States reached USD 25 trillion, outweighing the combined GDP of the EU and the United Kingdom, which stood at only USD 19.8 trillion. The gap in technology and military strength between the United States and Europe has also further widened. Such power imbalance uplifted the United States to a more dominant position in the transatlantic alliance, which is more obvious to see in the Ukraine crisis. Josep Borrell, the then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, pointed out that Europe did not truly engage in addressing the Ukraine crisis. On the contrary, it began a process of subordination.

The power imbalance has equipped Trump 2.0 with

more “power leverage” in his European policy, further exacerbating the risk of subordination in the U.S.-Europe relations. On the one hand, Trump has shrunk the U.S. intervention in the Ukraine crisis, aid to Ukraine and input in NATO and the EU, while continuing to pressure the EU with tariffs to gain more benefits. On the other hand, Trump’s return has spurred the far-right forces in Europe, who are accelerating their pace of “seizing power” in countries across Europe, resulting in a more fragmented landscape of political parties in Europe. Some EU member states choose to establish closer relations with the Trump administration, while the Trump administration hopes to build close ties with these countries in exchange for their support for policies favorable to the United States within the EU. In Europe, the Trump administration sees far-right forces as its true allies, calling for political parties such as the Alternative for Germany to enter government. On the eve of the 2025 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice President Vance directly called for Europe to become a larger version of Hungary.

In short, Trump’s political instinct to reshape the U.S.-Europe relations, combined with the polarization effect incurred by Trump’s return on Europe, has led to a resurgence of the risk of subordination in the U.S.-Europe relations. Although these dynamics do not indicate the long-term development trend of the U.S.-Europe relations, they will be the main mode of interaction between the two sides in the short term, which also indicates that Europe still faces an arduous journey ahead to truly achieve its goal of “strategic autonomy”.

II. U.S.-Europe Relations Dominated by “Transactionalism 2.0”

Trump has faith in mercantilism and realism, and adopts transaction and exchange as his ways of handling diplomatic issues. Blatant transactionalism is the essence of the Trump administration’s foreign policy, which remains unchanged after its return to power.

Trump employs tariffs as a tool for pressure and transaction. On February 13, 2025, Trump announced “reciprocal tariffs” on all countries exporting goods to the United States. Trump complained that the EU had adopted multiple restrictive measures on American tech companies and maintained a large trade surplus with the United States. Trump threatened the EU with tariff hikes, unless it pledged “massive” purchases of oil and gas from the United States. Faced with the threat of tariff hikes, the EU

sought negotiations to alleviate the pressure. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that on the one hand, the EU would be prepared to engage in difficult negotiations with the United States if necessary and would firmly uphold its own interests; on the other hand, if negotiations failed, the EU would be prepared to use “all trade defense measures” to cope with the impacts of U.S. tariffs.

In addition to imposing extra tariffs, the Trump administration also attempts to achieve economic and diplomatic goals by exerting pressure on security. During his first term, Donald Trump threatened on many occasions to reduce U.S. support for NATO in order to pressure Europe into increasing defense spending. Recent years have witnessed the inflow of military spending from European allies to the United States, but still-unsatisfied Trump demands that NATO members further raise their defense spending to 5% of their GDP. Trump also wants a “thorough repositioning” of NATO, in which scenario his European allies assume the main NATO combat power while the United States takes a back seat and provides support only in times of crisis. Trump’s negative attitude towards NATO poses the risk of diluting the United States’ security commitments to Europe, further dragging the transatlantic alliance into turbulence and instability.

III. The United States and Europe Enter a New Stage of Competition on China-Related Issues for the Exchange of Interests

The Trump 2.0 continues the U.S. containment strategy against China and prioritizes economic and technological competition with China. To enhance its capacity to contain and suppress China, Trump has exerted more pressure on the EU, requesting the union to coordinate with the United States its economic and trade policies towards China and follow the United States in restricting or blocking economic and technological exchanges with China.

Under pressure from the United States, the EU is in an awkward position in the trilateral China-U.S.-EU relationship. The EU’s coordination with the United States on issues relating to China is evidently double-sided. On the one hand, the EU is willing to coordinate with the United States in formulating its China policy, because of its own pursuit of “de-risking” and “reducing dependence” on the Chinese economy, as well as its dependence on the U.S. security guarantee in the context of the Ukraine crisis. On February 20, 2025, European Commissioner for Trade and

Economic Security Maros Sefcovic and U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick held a discussion on how to jointly address China’s “non-market economy behavior” and “overcapacity”. On the other hand, the EU cannot turn a blind eye to the risks of fully leaning towards the U.S. on issues relating to China, as such a position can hardly exchange for the elimination of Trump’s hostility and could even inflict damage on its own interests by deteriorating relations with China.

In short, the basic position of containing and suppressing China by the U.S. will remain unchanged in Trump’s second term, and the EU’s strategic perception of China will be further influenced or even reshaped by the U.S. The EU’s recent friendly gestures towards China may show its consideration of pressuring and bargaining with the United States. There exists the possibility of exchange of interests in the recent U.S.-EU interaction on issues relating to China. But the EU should also realize that any possible transaction-based cooperation with the U.S. on issues relating to China will only deepen its dependence on the U.S., and damaging the interests of China will do itself no good.

NEW CHALLENGES FACING THE U.S.-EUROPE RELATIONS

Since the inception of the Trump 2.0, the United States and Europe have been witnessing widening rifts in terms of security, economy and ideology. The transatlantic partnership is heading towards a split.

I. “Peace Enforcement” and “Security Peace”: The Challenge of the Ukraine Crisis to the U.S.-Europe Relations

Donald Trump and the American establishment obviously differ in geopolitical strategy towards Europe and policy towards Russia. Trump sought to end the Ukraine crisis since the beginning of his new term. On the one hand, taking the U.S.-Russia talks as leverage and a breakthrough, he attempted to gain control over the Russia-Ukraine peace talks. On February 12, 2025, without coordinating with his European allies, Trump spoke with Putin on the phone and the two sides agreed to “closely cooperate” to end the Ukraine crisis. On the other hand, the Trump administration has pressured Ukraine and Europe, attempting to coerce them into accepting a ceasefire by significantly reducing and suspending the U.S. aid to Ukraine, while pushing its European allies to shoulder

the responsibility of guaranteeing Ukraine’s security and defending against Russia. On the eve of the 2025 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said that a return to Ukraine’s pre-war borders was unrealistic and that Ukraine would not be allowed to join NATO. If European troops are to be deployed to Ukraine, they should not be covered by the collective defense provisions of NATO’s treaty and would not be part of a NATO mission. It is not hard to see that the United States wants to end the Ukraine crisis by means of “peace enforcement”, but does not want to shoulder the joint responsibility for the “Russia-Ukraine peace”, believing it is a responsibility for Europe to take.

The Trump administration’s sharp turn in its stance on the Ukraine crisis has deeply unsettled Europe and forced the latter to respond accordingly. After the phone call between the U.S. and Russian leaders, Europe was so concerned about being excluded from the Russia-Ukraine peace talks process that they urgently discussed countermeasures. Then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed his unwillingness to “conduct peace enforcement operations in Ukraine”. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas condemned Trump’s phone call with Putin as an act of “appeasement” and emphasized that any peace agreement regarding Ukraine must involve Europeans and Ukrainians to be effective. After the failed talk between the United States and Ukraine in the White House, leaders from multiple European countries, Ukraine and Canada held the London Summit to discuss the Ukraine crisis and European defense issues. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced a plan to support Ukraine after the summit, including continuing the flow of aid to Ukraine, guaran-



(Photo/IC Photo)

teeing Ukraine's sovereignty and security, and engaging Ukraine in the peace process. All these actions indicate that Europeans do not want to be marginalized in the Russia-Ukraine peace talks and hope to defend Ukraine's independence and Europe's long-term security interests while maintaining the Europe-U.S. alliance.

The "Ukraine crisis" in the U.S.-Europe relations reflects a harsh reality, that is, the two sides' differences in security interests have become increasingly irreconcilable due to Trump's "America First" policy. With a greater focus on containing and suppressing China, the Trump administration aspires to reduce its military spending in Europe and prioritize the deployment of its resources to the "Indo-Pacific" region. In Trump's view, the Ukraine crisis does not pose a direct threat to the U.S. security, but rather, a certain degree of confrontation between Europe and Russia has provided the U.S. with space for maneuvering, with which the U.S. could manipulate and benefit from the situation in Europe. However, in EU's view, the Ukraine crisis poses an existential challenge to the EU and Trump's shift in attitude towards Russia further exacerbates Europeans' sense of insecurity. The EU is pessimistic about the prospects of Europe-Russia relations and views Russia as the main challenge to Europe's security in the foreseeable future. The EU also believes in the importance of the Europe-U.S. alliance and has the sober realization that it is not only extremely dangerous but also increasingly unreliable to fully depend on an increasingly inward-looking U.S. to protect Europe's security. The transatlantic alliance and NATO will continue to exist after the end of the Ukraine crisis, but Europe will have to assume more responsibility to handle its own defense issues. In March 2025, the EU launched an 800 billion euro "ReArm Europe" plan aimed at building "a secure and resilient Europe". However, due to multiple constraints, the EU is unable to completely break free from its dependence on the U.S. in the short to medium term. The United States, with its strength, will continue to dominate the increasingly loose transatlantic alliance and seek more geopolitical benefits by controlling Europe.

II. Intensified Rivalry in Multiple Fields Challenges the Resilience of the U.S.-Europe Relations

Firstly, the rivalry between the United States and Europe in the fields of economy, trade and technology has intensified. American large-scale high-tech companies dominate the European digital market and take up monopoly positions in the field of digital technology in

Europe. The EU has introduced the Digital Services Act to strengthen its dominance in the digital market and restrict the very large online platforms from outside the EU (mainly U.S. tech companies) from generating excessive profits. Trump criticized the EU's imposition of a digital service tax as an act of trade protectionism and accused that the "technological sovereignty" and restrictive measures pursued by the EU have weakened U.S. competitive advantage in the global tech field. During his address at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance criticized Europe's regulatory measures against large technology companies; the United States also refused to sign the Declaration of the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris. These moves have resulted in more friction between the United States and Europe in the fields of digital technology and governance. Some EU officials have accused the United States of using freedom of speech as an argument to pressure the EU into relaxing its regulation of technology platforms.

Secondly, the United States and Europe have diverging values, which is obvious to see in the political field. The Munich Security Conference, since its launch in 1963, has been serving as a critical platform for Europe and the U.S. to discuss global security affairs. However, on this very platform, J.D. Vance publicly lambasted Europe's democracy and immigration policies, claimed the biggest threat facing Europe is from inside, accused Europe of deviating from its basic values and questioned whether the European values were worth defending by the U.S. Vance's remarks sparked a strong backlash from European countries and were seen as "an attack on European ideology". However, Trump praised Vance's speech as brilliant. The Guardian of the UK commented on this and pointed out



On February 10, 2025, the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit was held at the Grand Palais in Paris, France. The summit concluded with an AI declaration, with the U.S. and the UK missing among the first signatories.

(Photo/IC Photo)

that the United States and Europe not only held different views on Russia, but also had significant differences on more profound issues such as values and democracy.

Lastly, in the field of global governance and multilateral affairs, Trump 2.0 once again staged a drama of “withdrawing from international treaties and organizations” and lessened support for such multilateral institutions as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. On his very first day in office, Trump announced the U.S.’ withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Later, he also announced the withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and permanent cessation of the funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In addition, Trump also announced plans to claw back the “Green New Deal” and abandoned the efforts to promote clean energy investment in emerging and developing countries. The EU is deeply dissatisfied with the unilateral and selfish practices of the Trump administration. As he opened the 2025 Munich Security Conference, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that the new Trump administration acted recklessly and had no regard for the long established international rules. As the U.S. and Europe held opposing positions on many issues of the conference, the differences between the two sides in the fields of global governance and multilateral affairs were exacerbated and imposed serious impacts on the bilateral relations. European public opinion generally believes that the current differences between Europe and the U.S. are not only reflected in their policy positions, but also deeply rooted in their different understandings of the international order and global governance models.

III. The Rising “Trust Deficit” Erodes the Foundation of U.S.-Europe Relations

The changes in the post-Cold War international environment and the growing unilateralism in the U.S. have resulted in the emerging and ever expanding “trust deficit” in the U.S.-Europe relations. Since Trump’s first term, Europeans have developed a growing sense of distrust of the United States, believing that the driving force behind “Trumpism” is the declining credibility of the U.S. government and institutions. Therefore, the United States, the country as a whole, is no longer trustworthy.

The Trump 2.0 tsunami has further aggravated Europe’s distrust of the U.S. The “election dictatorship led by

Trump” was believed to have undermined the American democracy and frustrated believers in “liberal democracy”. What worries Europeans even more is that, given the core position of the United States in European security and economic affairs, Trump’s “dictatorship rule” may also harm the governance of Europe and the future of the continent as a democratic entity. The Munich Security Report 2025 publicly stated that Europe does not perceive Washington as “an anchor of stability”, but rather as a risk to be hedged against. The Financial Times of the UK published an article on its website on February 26, 2025, stating that the United States has now become an “enemy” of the West. In summary, the accelerating rise of the “trust deficit” will inevitably undermine the foundation of the U.S.-Europe relations.

CONCLUSION

The dramatic transformation is a salient feature of the contemporary world political development. The intensified rivalry between the U.S. and the EU amid the Ukraine crisis is a microcosm of the rift in transatlantic relations. Europe, swept up by the Trump 2.0 tsunami, is standing at a historical crossroads and in a state of painstaking adaptation. The continent has to make earnest endeavors to explore and adapt to a new model of transatlantic security cooperation characterized by growing self-protection and diminishing U.S. protection, while constantly adapting to the complex situation of increasing friction and competition with the U.S. in multiple fields. The EU also faces more intense pressure to navigate through China, the U.S. and Russia to well handle its relationship with major countries. The rift in the U.S.-Europe relations is both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe. It forces Europe to face its own security predicament, accelerate its pace in pursuit of “strategic autonomy” and reduce its dependence on the U.S. In an era full of uncertainties, how Europe maintains its autonomy in the major-country rivalry has become a focus of attention and its strategic choices will profoundly affect the direction of the evolution of the world order. For China, it should stabilize the overall situation of China-Europe relations on the basis of grasping the trends of changes and features of the U.S.-Europe relations, while exploring to create a new model of trilateral interaction among China, the U.S. and Europe, and steering the trilateral relations towards relative balance and overall stability. 