

# Geopolitical Shifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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The full version of the paper - including graphics - is attached.

- Paper adapted by Alexander Christiani

**The 21st century has witnessed a significant epochal shift in the geopolitical and economic prominence of global regions.**

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the new global center of gravity. This realignment carries **significant implications for Europe**. Consequently, Europe faces novel strategic challenges in adapting to a geopolitical environment increasingly shaped by actors and dynamics situated far beyond its traditional spheres of influence. Europe's second-most critical maritime route extends through the Suez Canal, traverses the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, continues around the Indian subcontinent, and passes through the strategically crucial Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea.

## The Rise and Decline of Global Powers

The first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed significant transformations within global power dynamics, characterized particularly by the remarkable ascent of China.

- China's rise from a developing nation to a formidable global power across economic, political, technological, and military dimensions has reshaped international relations profoundly. Today, China ranks as the world's second-largest power, with an explicit strategic ambition to assume global primacy by mid-century.
- **U.S. Decline as the Absolute Global Leader:** The United States has ceased to be the unequivocally dominant global leader it became after the end of the Cold War. This relative decline can primarily be attributed to factors such as political, financial, and military overstretch, coupled with a significant reduction in traditional industrial productivity. Furthermore, the persistent **imbalance in U.S.-China trade relations** underscores this weakened position, with U.S. imports from China exceeding its exports by a factor of approximately 3.5.

- **Europe**, considering its economic scale, highly developed human capital, and elevated living standards—even post Brexit—retains substantial potential to rank among the top three global powers. This potential, however, hinges on Europe's capacity to formulate and execute cohesive foreign, security, and defense policies akin to those of a sovereign nation-state.

### New American Politics Led by President Trump

The geopolitical doctrine advanced by President Trump revolves around several strategic objectives designed to reinforce the United States' global primacy:

- Ensuring that the United States maintains sufficient power to preserve its status as the global **hegemon**.
- Prioritizing **containment of China**, identified as the primary geopolitical challenger, by deliberately impeding China's economic growth and technological advancement.
- Preventing the formation of a permanent strategic alliance between China—the world's second-largest power—and Russia, currently the third largest, thereby denying China access to Russia's abundant energy and mineral resources, as well as its vast territorial expanse, which could mitigate China's strategic maritime vulnerabilities.
- **Trump's foreign and security strategy** explicitly emphasizes national interests over ideological or normative considerations, consistently aligned with the principle of “America First.” However, this strategy transcends his rhetorical slogan of “Make America Great Again,” manifesting instead through a policy approach characterized by assertive demonstrations of military and economic strength and marked by a clear disregard for international institutions and established norms.

### Special Case: Israel and the Middle East

Trump's foreign policy demonstrates a distinctive interest in the Middle East, extending beyond the traditional U.S. alliance with Israel. Building upon initiatives begun during his first presidential term, Trump has pursued deeper engagement with the energy-rich and financially influential Gulf states, notably through diplomatic efforts aimed at normalizing Israeli-Arab relations, exemplified by the Abraham Accords.

### U.S.-Russia Relations

Trump's relationship with Russia, on the other hand, has been driven primarily by the strategic imperative of **preventing a durable Sino-Russian alliance**.

In practice, this has manifested through Trump's partial adoption of Russia's narrative regarding the war in Ukraine, diverging significantly from traditional U.S. policy. Consequently, this stance has risked profound diplomatic estrangement from Ukraine and substantially deteriorated relations with European allies.

For Europe specifically, it is crucial to recognize that without active U.S. involvement, normalizing relations with Russia would prove exceedingly difficult. Given Russia's geographic proximity, size, and economic potential, Russia represents not only a **critical security challenge** but also an indispensable economic neighbouring partner for the European Union.

### Trump's Approach to U.S. Foreign Policy

President Trump's approach to foreign policy has been characterized by a distinctly unilateral projection of American power, marked by a deliberate disregard for traditional diplomatic norms and obligations deriving from membership in international institutions and alliances—many of which were originally established under U.S. leadership.

In clear contrast, President Trump has consistently demonstrated an **overt disregard**—and at times personal contempt—for **consensus building** among traditional allies, as well as obligations arising from membership in international organizations and intergovernmental agreements. His administration has displayed minimal respect for democratic institutions and processes, engaged directly and aggressively in markets by imposing tariffs on neighbouring countries, strategic allies, and geopolitical rivals alike, and embraced state interventions at a scale unprecedented in modern American history.

Under his presidency, the United States has notably **distanced itself from multilateral institutions** and agreements: it has disregarded decisions by the United Nations, undermined the authority of the World Trade Organization (partly continuing trends begun by predecessors), withdrawn from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, drastically reduced foreign aid programs, and seriously challenged the coherence and functionality of NATO, historically the world's strongest military alliance

### A Turning Point in US-EU Relations

Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference, from which many Europeans had anticipated reassuring signals or at least a moderation of President Trump's confrontational stance, instead revealed the **profound divide between the United States and European nations**. This divergences especially significant regarding the **critical issue of European security**, notably how to resolve the **Ukrainian conflict** positively and sustain the vital transatlantic partnership on equitable terms rather than as a hierarchical relationship in which Europe remains merely a junior partner.

Dependency on an increasingly unpredictable partner: Europe must emerge as an **independent geopolitical actor**, possessing autonomous capabilities and instruments. Europe must be **capable of self-defense** and develop sufficient **deterrent capabilities**. Currently, **Europe's political landscape is notably fragmented and vulnerable**:

- The **United Kingdom**, having exited the European Union, has yet to establish a coherent or effective post-Brexit policy approach. Although it remains active within NATO, the UK possesses diminished military capabilities.
- **France** maintains Europe's strongest military forces, but suffers from chronic economic stagnation and severe budgetary constraints.
- **Germany**, Europe's largest economy, has endured three consecutive years of recession, exacerbated by structural crises within its pivotal automotive industry.
- By contrast, political developments in **Italy** and particularly **Poland** have been comparatively positive. Under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Poland has emerged as a European leader in defence spending, allocating approximately 4.7% of its GDP to military expenditures and adopting an unequivocal stance against Russian aggression.

### **An European Security Initiative**

It must develop in parallel, complementing existing transatlantic structures. Europe must also recognize that, ultimately, it will bear primary responsibility for its continental security and defence.

Overcoming the **Challenges of the Trump Administration** necessitates that Europe develops a robust, long-term strategic approach to its transatlantic relations, rather than merely relying on short-term tactical adjustments. This strategic imperative motivates his explicit encouragement of increased **European defence capabilities**, primarily to enable the United States to concentrate its military resources on countering China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region. **Europe's response** must therefore aim at genuine strategic autonomy, recognizing both the constraints imposed by continued reliance on the U.S. and the opportunities provided by an increasingly multipolar international order.

The emergence of a **stronger European presence on the global stage**—one comparable in strategic stature to the United States, China, Russia, and prospectively India—has become an absolute necessity in an era increasingly dominated by great power competition and clearly delineated spheres of influence. Realistically, the development of substantial European power capabilities and the political determination necessary to achieve genuine global-actor status can only be realized through a **coalition of willing** and capable European nations, centred around the established political format of the "Weimar Triangle" (Germany, France, and Poland).

**Europe thus stands at a pivotal juncture:** it must make a strategic choice either to ascend decisively as a global actor or to accept a subordinate position, becoming merely an appendage or passive subject within the strategic designs of other major global powers. Proposals for

### European Security and Economic Perspectives :

To effectively navigate the geopolitical uncertainties resulting from shifts in U.S. policy under President Trump, the European Union and its member states must take proactive and coordinated steps to safeguard their strategic interests and autonomy:

- **The most immediate priority is establishing a coalition of willing European states** committed to providing sustained political, economic, and military **support to Ukraine**, thereby facilitating conditions for a stable and sustainable ceasefire.
- Strategically essential is the establishment of a core group tasked with planning, developing, and implementing an autonomous European military capability capable of effectively **countering conventional aggression**, particularly from Russia. This coalition should initially include the “Weimar Triangle” (France, Germany, Poland), supplemented by the European Commission, potentially the United Kingdom, and approximately five additional EU member states with sufficient political will and resources.
- By the end of 2025, this **strategic planning group** should establish a clear catalogue of measures along with a detailed implementation timeline aimed at creating unified European armed forces. These measures should specifically include: The formation of a **European Security Council** as a central coordinating body for EU security policy. The establishment of an EU **operational headquarters for command and control** of joint military operations.
- The establishment of a **unified and integrated European armament market** to ensure strategic autonomy and efficiency in procurement. The planning of substantial European **maritime capabilities** capable of securing Europe’s vital trade and communication routes, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Enhancing **interoperability and strategic coherence** of European military capabilities in close coordination with NATO.
- Examining and developing proposals regarding the feasibility and implications of a European **nuclear deterrent**.
- Actively supporting the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian nations to prevent excessive Chinese or Russian influence in that region.
- Establishing a **European Contact Group** responsible for shaping future relations between the European Union, the United States, and Russia, fostering dialogue and preventing further geopolitical fragmentation.

- Initiating a permanent **European-Turkish security forum**, tasked with addressing common security concerns and identifying areas of cooperation despite existing political divergences.
- **Strengthening Europe's global credibility** as a representative of core Western values such as democracy, market economies, free trade, and the rule-based international order, while avoiding perceptions of moralizing or imposing ideological values.
- Formulating **a coherent strategy to fill the institutional gaps** left by recent U.S. withdrawals, particularly within global institutions where U.S. participation has been curtailed or terminated.
- Reforming **European foreign aid**, shifting its emphasis from predominantly humanitarian relief toward strategic investments in infrastructure and education across the Global South, thereby enhancing Europe's ability to compete effectively with China's global initiatives. This shift would visibly position Europe as a primary contributor to global development and stability.
- **Increasing diplomatic and intellectual exchanges with U.S.** think tanks, particularly conservative institutions and legislators, to maintain a resilient transatlantic partnership founded upon enduring common interests and shared strategic visions.
- Finally, **fostering a robust European political consensus** and sustained political will to act is essential to ensure Europe's effective transformation into a coherent and influential global geopolitical actor capable of successfully navigating the multipolar international order of the 21st century.



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## AIES COMMENT



## Geopolitical Shifts in the 21st Century



Map 1 - Centre of Maritime Importance: ("Mare Nostrum"); Ancient World: Mediterranean, Modern Era: Atlantic, 21st century: Indo-Pacific

### Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a significant epochal shift in the geopolitical and economic prominence of global regions. Historically, during ancient and medieval times, the Mediterranean Sea served as the maritime epicenter of the world. Its waters were contested and shaped by influential civilizations such as the Egyptians, Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Venetians, Genoese, and Ottomans. However, following the European discovery of the Americas in 1492, maritime dominance progressively transitioned to the Atlantic Ocean, a process which continued until the close of the 20th century. During this period, the Atlantic sphere was predominantly influenced by European naval powers, and notably, from World War I onward, under the strategic leadership of the United States.

In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the new global center of gravity. The term "Indo-Pacific" itself is a relatively recent geopolitical construct, commonly understood to encompass the entirety of the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean, extending geographically from the Bering Strait to New Zealand. This geographic shift reflects the substantial demographic, economic, and political rise of the region, alongside its critical significance for global trade and transportation routes, as well as energy, raw materials, and the movement of goods. Indeed, approximately 80 percent of international trade is conducted via maritime routes, underscoring the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific.

This realignment carries significant implications for Europe. For the first time in history, Europe's geographical position is no longer adjacent to the primary

global center of power and commerce but is situated externally, distant from the central axis of global influence. Consequently, Europe faces novel strategic challenges in adapting to a geopolitical environment increasingly shaped by actors and dynamics situated far beyond its traditional spheres of influence.

Europe's second-most critical maritime route extends through the Suez Canal, traverses the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, continues around the Indian subcontinent, and passes through the strategically crucial Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea.

### The Rise and Decline of Global Powers

The first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed significant transformations within global power dynamics, characterized particularly by the remarkable ascent of China. China's rise



from a developing nation to a formidable global power across economic, political, technological, and military dimensions has reshaped international relations profoundly. Today, China ranks as the world's second-largest power, with an explicit strategic ambition to assume global primacy by mid-century. In practical terms, China has already established dominance across Africa and considerable portions of Asia and Latin America, regions where it is increasingly recognized as the preeminent external actor. Central to this global strategy is China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the largest and most ambitious infrastructure and investment project ever undertaken, designed to enhance connectivity, bolster economic influence, and solidify China's geopolitical leadership worldwide.

### U.S. Decline as the Absolute Global Leader

The United States has ceased to be the unequivocally dominant global leader it became after the end of the Cold War. This relative decline can primarily be attributed to factors such as political, financial, and military overstretch, coupled with a significant reduction in traditional industrial productivity. Furthermore, the persistent imbalance in U.S.-China trade relations underscores this weakened position, with U.S. imports from China exceeding its exports by a factor of approximately 3.5. This chronic trade imbalance highlights structural vulnerabilities within the American economy, exacerbating broader strategic challenges and weakening U.S.



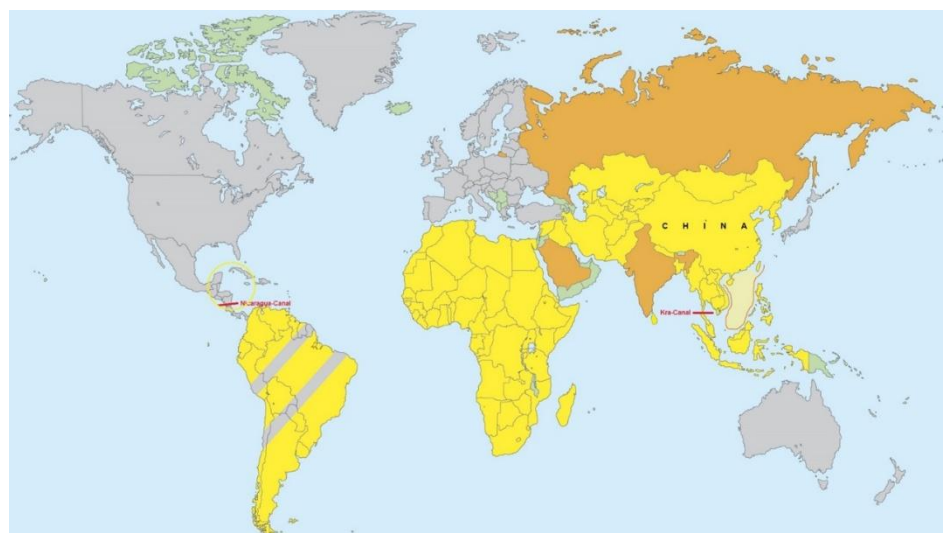
Map 2 – Maritime Lifelines

geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis China and other emerging global actors.

Out of the group of additional potential global actors—India, Russia, and the European Union—only India appears poised to emerge as a significant global actor, owing to its strategic geographic positioning at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region and its

unparalleled demographic potential as the world's most populous nation. However, this potential is contingent upon India's ability to overcome substantial domestic structural challenges.

China's strategic activities surrounding India further amplify India's geopolitical importance. China's territorial claims against India in the north, the strategic

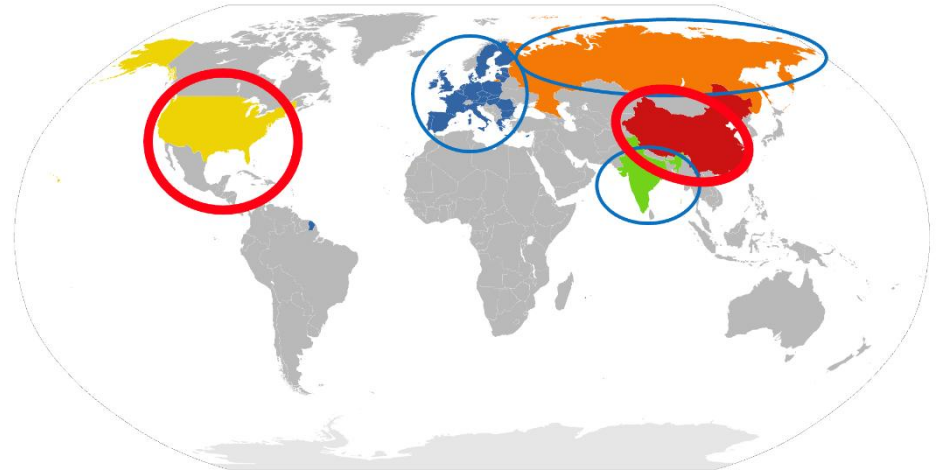


Map 3 – China's Global Strategy

corridors developed through Pakistan and Myanmar to India's west and east, respectively, and the expansive Belt and Road Initiative to the south collectively constitute a de facto encirclement of India. Consequently, these developments position India as a natural strategic partner for the United States, as both nations share a vested interest in counterbalancing China's regional and global aspirations.

Europe, considering its economic scale, highly developed human capital, and elevated living standards—even post-Brexit—retains substantial potential to rank among the top three global powers. This potential, however, hinges on Europe's capacity to formulate and execute cohesive foreign, security, and defense policies akin to those of a sovereign nation-state. Absent such unity, Europe's geopolitical influence, even within its immediate vicinity, has proven notably less effective compared to that of substantially smaller regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, or Saudi Arabia.

Simultaneously, major global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO), and similar bodies have experienced significant erosion in their roles as central coordinating mechanisms, primarily due to persistent rivalry among major global powers and deepening divisions between developed and developing nations. The United States' attempt to establish informal global leadership structures, exemplified by the Group



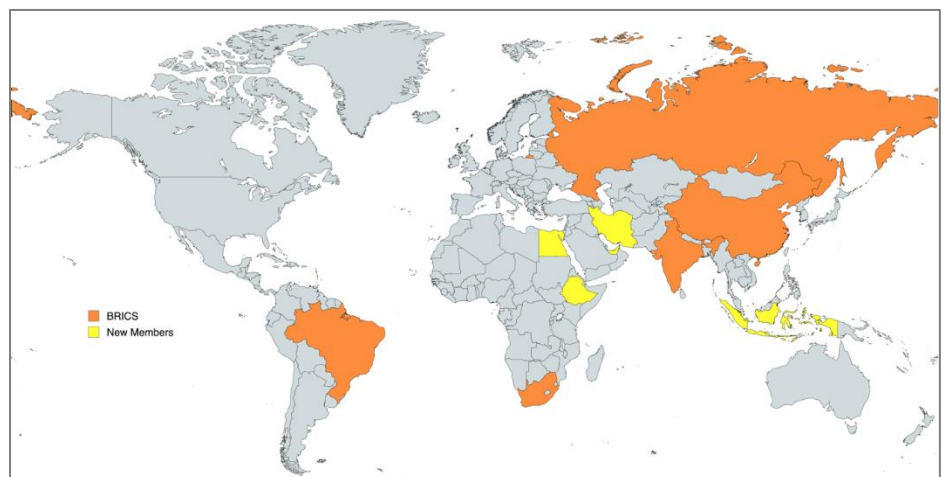
Map 4 – Potential Great- and Superpowers

of Twenty (G20), has likewise fallen short of evolving into a robust coordinating instrument, primarily due to the pronounced disparities in development levels, strategic priorities, and interests among its members.

The former Group of Eight (G8), following Russia's exclusion due to its illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas in 2014, reverted to the Group of Seven (G7), serving as an informal intergovernmental forum predominantly for advanced Western economies. In parallel, the formation and subsequent expansion of BRICS—alongside the newer BRICS+ under the joint leadership of Russia

and China—have attained substantial political influence. In recent years, BRICS+ expanded into a forum encompassing eleven countries, collectively representing approximately half of the world's population, one-third of global GDP, and nearly half of global oil production, underscoring its considerable geopolitical and economic significance.

At the Johannesburg Summit, BRICS+ articulated its strategic objective of reshaping global leadership structures and promoting international trade conducted in national currencies, a policy frequently described as "de-dollarization." Its broader



Map 5 – New BRICS+



ambition is to foster economic development across the Global South independently from Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This vision is operationalized primarily through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), headquartered in Beijing. Moreover, through its strategic inclusion of significant parts of the Islamic world, BRICS+ has effectively harnessed substantial anti-Western sentiment prevalent in many Muslim-majority countries. At present, approximately 40 additional states, including NATO member Turkey, have expressed their interest in joining this expanding coalition.

In the long term, BRICS+ is advancing toward a global geo-strategic vision that could grant it considerable control over critical maritime trade routes linking the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Key strategic choke-points in this scenario include the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandab Strait, the Cape of Good Hope, the South China Sea, and the Strait of Malacca. Such control would also afford BRICS+ considerable leverage over essential global infrastructure, notably submarine cable networks, thus enhancing its capacity to influence global information and communications systems.

However, substantial internal challenges to BRICS+ cohesion persist, particularly stemming from complex bilateral relationships, most notably the enduring tensions between China and India, as well as nuanced strategic dynamics between Russia and

China. Despite these internal constraints, the emergence and growth of BRICS+ pose a significant and credible challenge to the established Western-led international order.

### **New American Politics Led by President Trump**

The geopolitical doctrine advanced by President Trump revolves around several strategic objectives designed to reinforce the United States' global primacy:

- Ensuring that the United States maintains sufficient power to preserve its status as the global hegemon.
- Prioritizing containment of China, identified as the primary geopolitical challenger, by deliberately impeding China's economic growth and technological advancement.
- Preventing the formation of a permanent strategic alliance between China—the world's second-largest power—and Russia, currently the third-largest, thereby denying China access to Russia's abundant energy and mineral resources, as well as its vast territorial expanse, which could mitigate China's strategic maritime vulnerabilities.
- Strengthening and leveraging China's natural geopolitical competitors, notably India and Japan, to counterbalance Chinese influence in Asia.

Trump's foreign and security strategy explicitly emphasizes

national interests over ideological or normative considerations, consistently aligned with the principle of “America First.” However, this strategy transcends his rhetorical slogan of “Make America Great Again,” manifesting instead through a policy approach characterized by assertive demonstrations of military and economic strength, and marked by a clear disregard for international institutions and established norms. The underlying logic of this American power-politics framework seeks simultaneously to consolidate national power and reduce strategic overstretch.

### **Trump's U.S. Super State Vision**

Central to Trump's long-term geopolitical vision, termed the “U.S. Superstate Vision,” is the strategic enlargement of American territory, explicitly encompassing the acquisition or integration of regions such as Greenland and Canada to secure additional strategically critical territories, resources, and energy reserves. Additionally, this vision includes securing complete U.S. control over crucial maritime choke points, exemplified by initiatives targeting Panama, thereby strengthening America's command over vital global maritime routes.

### **Trump's “New Monroe Doctrine”**

President Trump's geopolitical strategy includes a renewal of the Monroe Doctrine, aligned closely with the strategic reasoning of prominent political theorists such as John

Mearsheimer. Central to this theory is the argument that establishing regional hegemony is a fundamental precondition for achieving and maintaining global dominance. Under Trump's renewed interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, the United States seeks to consolidate dominant influence over the Western Hemisphere by actively counter-ing and rolling back China's expanding presence in Latin Amer-ica.

Concrete policy successes in-clude Argentina under President Milei, a declared admirer of Trump, refraining from formaliz-ing Argentina's previously an-nounced membership in BRICS+. Furthermore, Brazil de-cided to withdraw from partici-pation in China's Belt and Road Initiative, and Panama intro-duced restrictions on China's strategic and economic activi-ties within its territory. Symboli-cally reinforcing this policy shift, the appointment of a U.S. Secre-tary of State with Latin American

roots—whose inaugural interna-tional visit, notably the first such choice in American diplomatic history, was directed toward Latin America—further under-scores the strategic prioritiza-tion of the region within Trump's foreign policy doctrine.

### Special Case: Israel and the Middle East

Trump's foreign policy demon-strates a distinctive interest in the Middle East, extending be-yond the traditional U.S. alliance with Israel. Building upon initia-tives begun during his first presi-dential term, Trump has pursued deeper engagement with the en-ergy-rich and financially influen-tial Gulf states, notably through diplomatic efforts aimed at nor-malizing Israeli-Arab relations, exemplified by the Abraham Ac-cords. His direct involvement in shaping the political and eco-nomic future of the Gaza Strip, envisioning its transformation into a prosperous "Mediterra-nean Riviera," likely draws from his professional background as a

real estate developer. However, this ambitious regional project does not align clearly with core U.S. strategic interests, particu-larly at a time when America seeks to mitigate the conse-quences of geopolitical over-stretch.

### U.S.-Russia Relations

Trump's relationship with Rus-sia, on the other hand, has been driven primarily by the strategic imperative of preventing a dura-ble Sino-Russian alliance. In practice, this has manifested through Trump's partial adop-tion of Russia's narrative regard-ing the war in Ukraine, diverging significantly from traditional U.S. policy. Consequently, this stance has risked profound dip-lomatic estrangement from Ukraine and substantially deteri-olated relations with European allies. Such developments carry potentially decisive implications for global power dynamics. Should Trump succeed in neu-tralizing Russia, China would find itself without a major great-



Map 6 – US Counter Rim Strategy



power ally. In such a scenario, Europe—due to historical and cultural affinities—and India, as a regional competitor to China, would naturally align more closely with the United States.

However, if Russia continues to side decisively with China, it would be challenging for the West to counteract China's increasing influence and dominance, particularly in resource-rich Central Asia and across significant parts of the Global South.

For Europe specifically, it is crucial to recognize that without active U.S. involvement, normalizing relations with Russia would prove exceedingly difficult. Given Russia's geographic proximity, size, and economic potential, Russia represents not only a critical security challenge but also an indispensable economic neighbouring partner for the European Union.

### **The Changing U.S.-Europe Relationship**

Following World War II, which for the United States commenced with the traumatic experience of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. strategically adopted a classic counter-rim approach to secure its territory. Geographically bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, the United States sought to create a buffer zone along the opposite shores of these oceans. Through the establishment of alliances and military partnerships along these distant coastlines, the U.S. aimed to prevent hostile powers from advancing close enough to

threaten American security directly.

In this strategic framework, the establishment of NATO was motivated less by a direct concern for Europe's security than by a broader geopolitical imperative to shield the Atlantic coast against Soviet influence. NATO thus functioned primarily as a territorial defense perimeter extending from Europe's northernmost point at the North Cape down to Sicily, effectively restricting Soviet expansion toward the Atlantic and maintaining a safe distance between the then highest-potential adversary and U.S. territory.

On the Pacific flank, however, establishing a territorial shield analogous to NATO proved impossible, as the coastline primarily belonged to Russia (extending from the Bering Strait to Vladivostok) and China. Consequently, the United States constructed its western defensive perimeter by forming strategic alliances along a chain of islands and peninsulas stretching from Japan through Korea and Taiwan to the Philippines. Throughout the Cold War period, the U.S. engaged in extensive military conflicts—most notably in Korea and Vietnam—to secure this Pacific Rim. Nevertheless, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, American strategic priority remained firmly oriented toward the Atlantic front due to the massive concentration of Soviet military power in Eastern Europe and the Warsaw Pact states.

Following the dissolution of the communist bloc in Europe and

the subsequent geopolitical integration of Central and Eastern European nations into the Western security architecture of NATO and the European Union, the global strategic context underwent fundamental change. Further eastward expansion toward countries such as Ukraine or Belarus no longer substantially enhanced American security. Instead, with the rise of China as a formidable global actor after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, strategic focus shifted decisively toward the Pacific. Control of the first island chain—with Taiwan at its strategic core—has now become paramount to U.S. national security interests and must therefore be treated accordingly.

This strategic reorientation, first articulated explicitly through President Obama's "Pivot to Asia," has since emerged as the top priority for American foreign and security policy.

When compared to the imperative of neutralizing Russia and preventing its alignment with China, the strategic calculus for the United States regarding the security of Ukrainian territory reveals a clear preference toward accommodating Russian interests. From Washington's perspective, ending the war in Ukraine and reintegrating Russia into Western-led institutions such as the G8 aligns more closely with broader strategic priorities than maintaining Ukraine's territorial integrity at all costs.

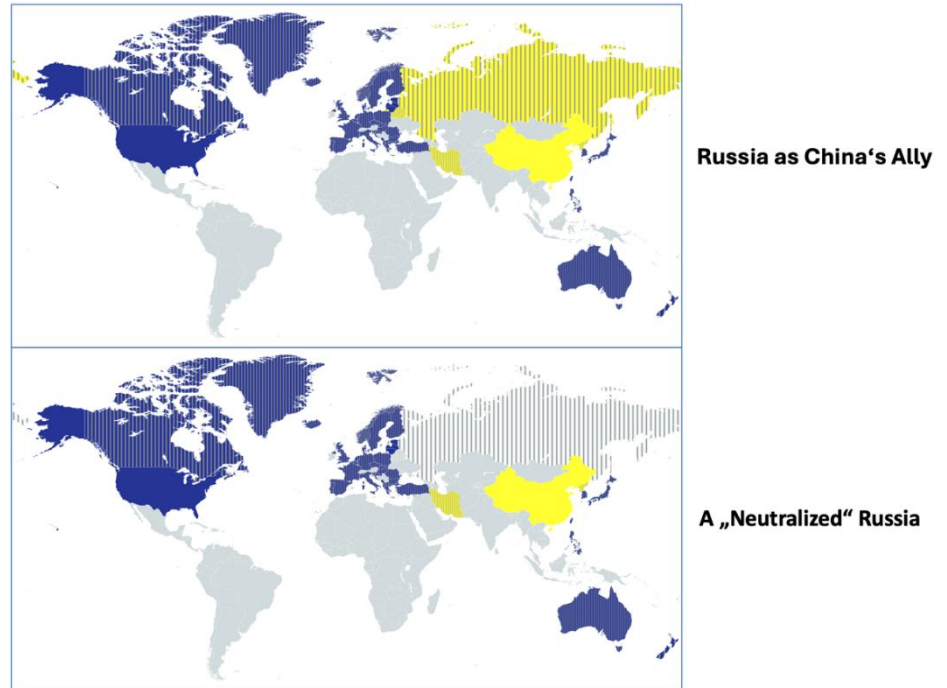
However, the strategic situation from a European standpoint is

fundamentally different. For Europe, Ukrainian security is directly intertwined with the continent's overall security and stability. A Russian takeover of Ukraine would imply a geopolitical advance through the Carpathian Mountains into the strategically crucial Pannonian Basin, and allow Moscow direct access to the strategically vital Danube Delta region. This could open pathways for potential Russian military and political influence into Central and Southeastern Europe.

While U.S. and European security interests were closely aligned throughout both the Cold War and the subsequent post-Cold War era, the divergence regarding the Ukraine question marks a significant shift. Today, Europe's immediate security concerns regarding Ukraine contrast sharply with the broader global strategic objectives pursued by the United States, highlighting a substantial and widening gap in transatlantic priorities.

### Trump's Approach to U.S. Foreign Policy

President Trump's approach to foreign policy has been characterized by a distinctly unilateral projection of American power, marked by a deliberate disregard for traditional diplomatic norms and obligations deriving from membership in international institutions and alliances—many of which were originally established under U.S. leadership. This style of presidential behavior is unprecedented since at least the mid-20th century. Through his rhetoric and actions,



Map 7 – Russia's Potential Geostrategic Role

Trump has actively undermined foundational pillars of the Western-led global order.

The classical Western-led international system was constructed upon three core elements: democratic governance, market economy and free trade, and a rules-based international order. In clear contrast, President Trump has consistently demonstrated an overt disregard—and at times personal contempt—for consensus-building among traditional allies, as well as obligations arising from membership in international organizations and inter-governmental agreements. His administration has displayed minimal respect for democratic institutions and processes, engaged directly and aggressively in markets by imposing tariffs on neighboring countries, strategic allies, and geopolitical rivals alike, and embraced state interventions at a scale unprece-

dent in modern American history. Furthermore, President Trump has increasingly substituted predictable, rules-based governance with erratic, unilateral decisions, frequently accompanied by explicit threats of military force—even directed toward longtime allies—in pursuit of immediate policy objectives.

Under his presidency, the United States has notably distanced itself from multilateral institutions and agreements: it has disregarded decisions by the United Nations, undermined the authority of the World Trade Organization (partly continuing trends begun by predecessors), withdrawn from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, drastically reduced foreign aid programs, and seriously challenged the coherence and functionality of NATO, historically the world's strongest military alliance.

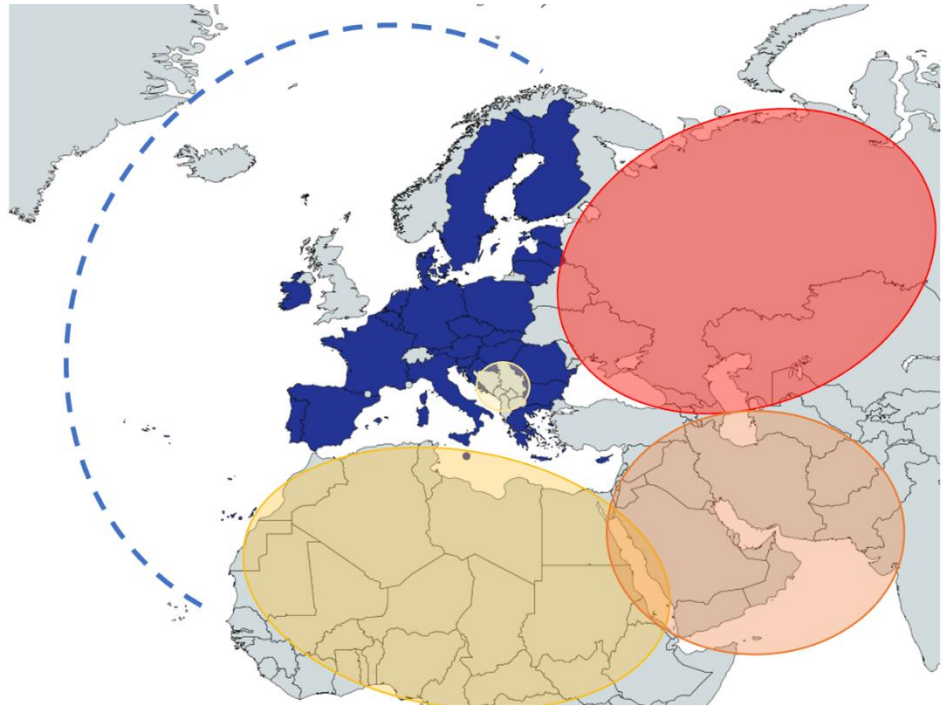
As a consequence, trust in the United States and the credibility of Western values more broadly have reached an unprecedented low, reinforcing critiques from segments of international politics that highlight perceived Western hypocrisy or double standards. The erosion of credibility risks significantly diminishing the soft power traditionally associated with the West, potentially weakening the attractiveness of its political and economic model globally.

The geopolitical outcome of these shifts was succinctly articulated by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, describing the evolving global divide as one between "the West and the Rest."

### A New "Imperial Age"

Russia's invasions of Ukraine and its aggressive geopolitical posture under President Vladimir Putin, China's assertive expansionism and shifting power dynamics under President Xi Jinping, as well as President Trump's power politics, globally indicate the onset of a new era resembling an "Imperial Age," characterized by intensified strategic competition and the resurgence of power politics. In this increasingly contested international environment, Europe's ability to safeguard its sovereignty, stability, and strategic interests will depend fundamentally on its capacity to act as a genuine geopolitical actor.

To meet these challenges, Europe must develop credible hard power capabilities, enabling it to



Map 8 – Europe's Geostrategic Environment

defend its territory effectively, export security to its neighbouring regions, and secure critical maritime supply routes and communication lines – particularly those extending through the Indo-Pacific region – while contributing actively to the preservation of free global navigation. Furthermore, Europe must enhance its global diplomatic credibility to ensure it is recognized and respected as a strategically autonomous partner in the broader international community. Only by achieving this status can Europe secure its position within the emerging global order and safeguard its long-term interests in an era reminiscent of imperial geopolitical rivalry.

### A Turning Point in US-EU Relations

Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference, from which many Europeans had anticipated reassuring signals or at least a moderation

of President Trump's confrontational stance, instead revealed the profound divide between the United States and European nations. The event proved emotionally charged and underscored fundamental differences between American and European perspectives, priorities, objectives, and approaches toward global politics. This divergence is especially significant regarding the critical issue of European security, notably how to resolve the Ukrainian conflict positively and sustain the vital transatlantic partnership on equitable terms rather than as a hierarchical relationship in which Europe remains merely a junior partner.

The Munich Conference vividly illustrated that Europe faces only one viable alternative to continued dependency on an increasingly unpredictable partner: it must emerge as an independent geopolitical actor, possessing autonomous capabilities and in-



struments. Europe must be capable of self-defense and develop sufficient deterrent capabilities to withstand potential aggression from Russia. This realization occurs at a decisive juncture for Europe's political future, raising urgent questions about how to establish a stable and effective political order within Europe itself, at a moment characterized by notable political fragility.

Currently, Europe's political landscape is notably fragmented and vulnerable:

- The United Kingdom, having exited the European Union, has yet to establish a coherent or effective post-Brexit policy approach. Although it remains active within NATO, the UK possesses diminished military capabilities.
- France maintains Europe's strongest military forces, but suffers from chronic economic stagnation and severe budgetary constraints. Politically, President Macron's minority government faces continuous parliamentary obstruction dominated by extreme left and right factions, with no realistic prospects for a stable centrist coalition emerging in the foreseeable future.
- Germany, Europe's largest economy, has endured three consecutive years of recession, exacerbated by structural crises within its pivotal automotive industry. The newly elected Chancellor Friedrich Merz, heading a challenging grand coalition

between Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), carries substantial expectations regarding European leadership, yet his political mandate remains complicated by domestic economic and political divisions.

By contrast, political developments in Italy and particularly Poland have been comparatively positive. Under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Poland has emerged as a European leader in defense spending, allocating approximately 4.7% of its GDP to military expenditures and adopting an unequivocal stance against Russian aggression.

Given the constraints imposed by the existing European treaties, substantial progress toward a genuinely integrated European foreign, security, and defense policy can realistically only originate from a coalition of major European states capable of ensuring collective security and enhancing Europe's global competitiveness. Undoubtedly, this development will unfold gradually, requiring years to reach fruition. In the interim, close and constructive cooperation with Washington will remain indispensable. Rather than presenting itself as a competitor to NATO, a European security initiative must develop in parallel, complementing existing transatlantic structures. Europe must also recognize that, ultimately, it will bear primary responsibility for its continental security and defense. Furthermore, Europe must cultivate the strategic awareness necessary to safeguard critical maritime lifelines,

particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, contributing actively to the maintenance of global freedom of navigation.

## Overcoming the Challenges of the Trump Administration

Considering the deep political polarization within the United States, coupled with the significant weakening of the Democratic Party following its electoral defeat, it will prove challenging to cultivate, promote, and establish compelling new political leaders capable of effectively challenging Trump's legacy. Consequently, the political trajectory initiated under Trump's administration may extend beyond his second term, potentially shaping American policy for one or more successive presidential terms. This scenario necessitates that Europe develops a robust, long-term strategic approach to its transatlantic relations, rather than merely relying on short-term tactical adjustments.

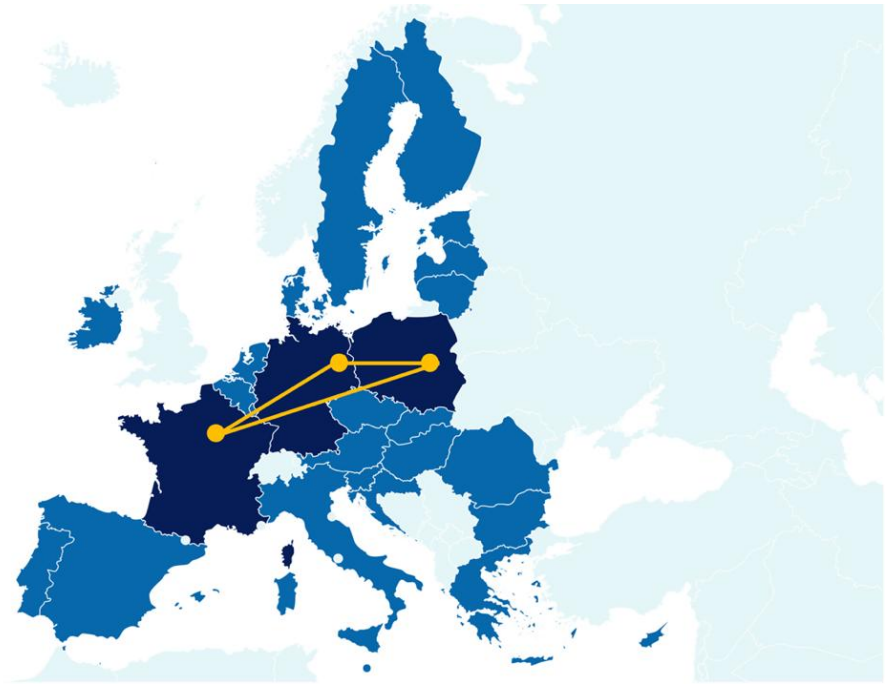
President Trump has a clear and persistent interest in preserving American military dominance globally. This strategic imperative motivates his explicit encouragement of increased European defense capabilities, primarily to enable the United States to concentrate its military resources on countering China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region. Simultaneously, Trump actively promotes greater European procurement of American military equipment, which directly undermines efforts to establish a unified European defense market.



Moreover, Trump's strategic calculus involves a degree of European strategic independence, albeit within limits controlled by Washington. He is therefore unlikely to fully abandon NATO; rather, he leverages ambiguity surrounding NATO's Article 5 collective-defense commitments as a political instrument designed to reinforce U.S. leverage over European allies, ensuring their alignment with American strategic objectives. Europe's response must therefore aim at genuine strategic autonomy, recognizing both the constraints imposed by continued reliance on the U.S. and the opportunities provided by an increasingly multipolar international order.

The emergence of a stronger European presence on the global stage—one comparable in strategic stature to the United States, China, Russia, and prospectively India—has become an absolute necessity in an era increasingly dominated by great-power competition and clearly delineated spheres of influence. Should Europe fail to decisively assert itself, it risks losing strategic relevance and becoming marginalized within the international system. Immediate and decisive action is therefore indispensable.

Realistically, the development of substantial European power capabilities and the political determination necessary to achieve genuine global-actor status can only be realized through a coalition of willing and capable European nations, centered around the established political format of the "Weimar Triangle" (Germany, France, and Poland). This



Map 9 – Weimar Triangle: Paris-Berlin-Warsaw

grouping could form the foundation for a meaningful European pillar within NATO, strengthening the transatlantic alliance while simultaneously enabling Europe to assert greater autonomy and influence in global affairs.

Europe must recognize explicitly that in the event of a major geopolitical crisis in the western Pacific—whether concerning Taiwan, South Korea, the Senkaku Islands, or territorial disputes in the South China Sea—U.S. strategic priorities will unquestionably shift towards the Pacific theater. In such scenarios, the West would require equally robust and strategically coherent actors capable of sustaining Western interests elsewhere. Europe thus stands at a pivotal juncture: it must make a strategic choice either to ascend decisively as a global actor or to accept a subordinate position, becoming merely an appendage or passive

subject within the strategic designs of other major global powers.

### Proposals for European Security and Economic Perspectives

To effectively navigate the geopolitical uncertainties resulting from shifts in U.S. policy under President Trump, the European Union and its member states must take proactive and coordinated steps to safeguard their strategic interests and autonomy:

- **The most immediate priority** is establishing a coalition of willing European states committed to providing sustained political, economic, and military support to Ukraine, thereby facilitating conditions for a stable and sustainable ceasefire.
- **Strategically essential** is the establishment of a core group tasked with planning,

developing, and implementing an autonomous European military capability capable of effectively countering conventional aggression, particularly from Russia. This coalition should initially include the “Weimar Triangle” (France, Germany, Poland), supplemented by the European Commission, potentially the United Kingdom, and approximately five additional EU member states with sufficient political will and resources.

- **By the end of 2025**, this strategic planning group should establish a clear catalogue of measures along with a detailed implementation timeline aimed at creating unified European armed forces. These measures should specifically include:
  - The formation of a **European Security Council** as a central coordinating body for EU security policy.
  - The establishment of an **EU operational headquarters** for command and control of joint military operations.
  - The establishment of a unified and integrated European armament market to ensure strategic autonomy and efficiency in procurement.
  - The planning of substantial European maritime capabilities capable of securing Europe’s vital trade and communication routes, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

- Enhancing interoperability and strategic coherence of European military capabilities in close coordination with NATO.
- Examining and developing proposals regarding the feasibility and implications of a European nuclear deterrent.
- Actively supporting the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian nations to prevent excessive Chinese or Russian influence in that region.
- **Establishing a European Contact Group** responsible for shaping future relations between the European Union, the United States, and Russia, fostering dialogue and preventing further geopolitical fragmentation.
- **Initiating a permanent European-Turkish security forum**, tasked with addressing common security concerns and identifying areas of cooperation despite existing political divergences.
- **Strengthening Europe’s global credibility as a representative of core Western values** such as democracy, market economies, free trade, and the rule-based international order, while avoiding perceptions of moralizing or imposing ideological values.
- **Formulating a coherent strategy to fill the institutional gaps left by recent U.S. withdrawals**, particularly within global institutions where U.S. participation has

been curtailed or terminated.

- **Reforming European foreign aid**, shifting its emphasis from predominantly humanitarian relief toward strategic investments in infrastructure and education across the Global South, thereby enhancing Europe’s ability to compete effectively with China’s global initiatives. This shift would visibly position Europe as a primary contributor to global development and stability.
- **Increasing diplomatic and intellectual exchanges with U.S. think tanks**, particularly conservative institutions and legislators, to maintain a resilient transatlantic partnership founded upon enduring common interests and shared strategic visions.
- **Finally, fostering a robust European political consensus and sustained political will to act** is essential to ensure Europe’s effective transformation into a coherent and influential global geopolitical actor capable of successfully navigating the multipolar international order of the 21st century.

### About the Author

Dr. Werner Fasslabend is President of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES). Previously, he was Minister for National Defence of the Republic of Austria (1990-2000), Third President of the National Council (2000-2002) and a long-standing member of the National Council. He initiated the first meeting of EU defence ministers in 1998.

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