



Examining US Grand Strategy and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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Figure 1: NATO chief Mark Rutte with US President Trump in the Oval Office

Introduction

The twenty-first century could be defined by a multitude of traditional but more importantly, non-traditional security challenges, fostering an unstable global power dynamic that many deem to be multipolar, and at the heart of this volatile environment being the Indo-Pacific which has

rapidly emerged as the world's new geopolitical and geoeconomic epicenter due to the magnitude of economic growth of nations like China, causing a persistence of significant tensions. As such, there is no other region that encapsulates the multifaceted challenges of the modern era, quite like the Indo-Pacific. In particular, Europe, broadly understood as the European Union and its member states, has been a latecomer to these crucial debates, with their pivot rapidly gaining momentum in recent years, driven by the need to secure influence in a shifting international order, address economic diversification imperatives, and respond to increasing pressure from the United States for greater burden-sharing (Abbondanza & Grgić, 2025). This renewed Euro-Atlantic focus is rooted in three mutually reinforcing pillars of economic interaction, normative influence, and security cooperation, yet, the overall coherence and success of this engagement are increasingly tested by US grand strategy, particularly under the second Trump administration, which signals a fundamental shift in transatlantic dynamics. This collision of a transactional, unilateral US approach with Europe's multilateral ambitions creates deep structural fissures that require examination to not only understand the dynamics at play but also detail the priorities and inherent challenges faced by Washington and Brussels, primarily assessing the possibility of a unique European "Third Way" as future strategic outlook (Bergmann, 2025).

Trump 2.0 and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation

Understanding the US approach requires defining grand strategy itself, which is generally characterized as "the vision thing" guiding national security and foreign policy with scholars categorizing the concept into five major types, including primacy, deep engagement, sponsorship, isolationism, and restraint and isolationism with any single administration often using a *mixture* of these types, rather than a single pure calibrated strategy (Dombrowski and Reich, 2025). This multifaceted and not unanimously agreed upon definition of the grand strategy phenomenon makes understanding the implemented vision by the US under Donald Trump difficult to characterize simply, as it has thus far exhibited key elements of isolationism and restraint, coupled with occasional primacist outbursts, therefore painting Trump's approach as fundamentally transactional and sometimes driven emotionally with his primary focus tending toward economic concerns, seeing economic insecurity and issues like fentanyl as greater threats than military challenges like China. As such, his policy is centered clearly on bilateral relations and is largely tariff-based (*Examining U.S. Grand Strategy and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 2025).

Before taking office, the mere prospect of a second Trump administration had already signaled a fundamental alteration of the transatlantic relationship, with the administration adopting an apathetic stance toward Europe, due to the contention over security matters where Europe viewed the US as the foundation of its security, whereas Washington argued for a more independent relationship where European countries took to managing their own defense. While the Trump administration was not the first to urge for such a shift, with

almost every US president since 1958 having a similar agenda, it has been the most open, vocal and active in the threats of leaving the burden of European security entirely to them in recent memory, while using the existing US security guarantee as a tool to extract concessions from Europeans on matters of economy, trade, and technology. This unilateral and protectionist posture has, unsurprisingly, not only created friction across multiple domains, but has made the ambitions of a comprehensive transatlantic "grand bargain", where the US offers continued security commitment in exchange for European concessions on issues like trade or technology, highly unlikely. Instead, the US administration is predicted to likely insist on Europe making major policy concessions while consistently shifting the defense burden to Europe, a unilateralist approach that inherently undermines the cohesive, multilateral framework that prior administrations, such as Biden's, sought to establish by emphasizing alliance renewal and integrating security strategies across regions (Bergmann, 2025).

Priorities for Washington and Brussels

This existing tension has thus led to diverging policy priorities from US and European powers regarding the Indo-Pacific with Washington's primary focus being directed toward China, generally recognized across political lines as the greatest military and existential threat to the US, that has gained bipartisan consensus, despite the Trump administration's tactical priorities remaining focused on transactional bilateralism and tariffs, often utilizing coercive

instruments that mirror the failed “wolf warrior” strategy China pioneered against them (*Examining U.S. Grand Strategy and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 2025). Washington, in particular, seeks a geographical "division of labor," preferring that the Europeans concentrate on Euro-Atlantic security and avoid deep military involvement in the Indo-Pacific, given the perception that European contributions to an Indo-Pacific NATO, or similar multilateral initiative, would be marginal. However, the US has also institutionalized cross-regional security cooperation, notably through the NATO-IP4 format, engaging Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, a framework that ironically acknowledges that developments in the Indo-Pacific region directly affect Euro-Atlantic security (Schreer, 2025).

Brussels’ priorities for the Indo-Pacific are generally broader and more nuanced, centered on three core pillars of economy, norms, and security. Starting with the economy, Europe seeks sustainable and inclusive prosperity and robust trade diversification being that it’s the largest investor in the region and seeks to strengthen trade relations through agreements with countries like with Japan, South Korea, as well as with India and Australia. Summed up, the EU strategies for an economic engagement that will create resilient global supply chains, particularly concerning critical materials and semiconductors. In matters of global norms, Europe positions itself as a bastion of the rules-based international order, multilateralism, and democratic values with its 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizing connectivity, digital governance, and human security, thus positioning Europe as a reliable, non-coercive partner, an

emphasis on values intended to resonate with like-minded Indo-Pacific democracies. Lastly, Europe's security engagement varies substantially among its actors. Resident powers like France and the UK have historically maintained a presence and are capable of projecting power while other major powers like Germany and Italy are increasing their deployments and naval operations, and even smaller nations recognize that security in the Indo-Pacific affects European security, especially regarding freedom of navigation through critical points (Abbondanza & Grgić, 2025).

Challenges for Europe

Europe's ambition to become a strategic actor in the Indo-Pacific creates significant internal and external challenges, particularly given the seismic shift in US policy, with transatlantic fragmentation and dependence posing the immediate threat as the Trump administration's protectionism, through its reciprocal tariffs and disputes over technology regulations, risks major back-blows on European economies, exacerbating existing internal tensions. Europe's economy, already plagued by "fragility and stagnation" due to its inconsistent approaches to policies as both a Union and sovereign nation states, creates internal divisions that, as aforementioned, struggles to present a unified front (*Examining U.S. Grand Strategy and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 2025). Moreover, regional strategic distraction and resource allocation have posed paramount challenges, chiefly Russia's aggression against Ukraine and instability in the Middle East and North Africa, that could

derail long-term Indo-Pacific efforts, given Europe's current military contributions to the Indo-Pacific being more "modest" and "symbolic" rather than foundational, restricted to low-frequency, jointly-planned naval deployments, making their military capabilities, even for the most engaged non-resident powers like Germany, constrained. Even French and UK naval capabilities, which are deemed world-class, could risk strategic overstretch if deployed, given Europe's established lack of political unity (supranational body versus sovereignty) and material capacity to fully secure itself unilaterally until minimally 2030 (Schreer, 2025), however it would be a disservice to ignore the symbolic importance of European Freedom of Navigation Operations through member states like France, Germany, and the UK in actively deploying naval assets for patrols, exercises, and capacity building, focusing on upholding UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea). Still, a premeditated deployment of forces beyond the accepted activity for regional stability could create further challenges to Europe's normative credibility. While many Indo-Pacific countries welcome European engagement, Europe still risks being perceived as hypocritical or selective in its application of values, particularly when regional actors contrast the difference in European responses to crises in Palestine and Ukraine, with the necessity of maintaining market access forcing Europe to constantly navigate the tension between values (human rights) and pragmatic cooperation, especially concerning China (Abbondanza & Grgić, 2025).

Possibility of "Third Way" OR Way Out

Given the volatile environment created by US unpredictability and Chinese assertiveness, the possibility of Europe establishing a strategic "Third Way", understood as a path distinct from alignment with either superpower, is heavily debated. Many Indo-Pacific states have thus far generally welcomed Europe's presence as a stable, non-coercive, "third partner" that offers diversification beyond the US-China rivalry. As such, Europe's greatest leverage lies in soft power and regulatory prowess, giving the opportunity for engagement that distinguishes itself by focusing on issues that advance the local nations' needs, such as climate resilience and sustainable development, particularly in the South Pacific, and regulatory dominance in areas like digitalization to establish a distinct "ecology" compared to the US and China. However, the geopolitical and rather more pragmatic approach Europe tried to adopt may put an end to the age of its normative power, with the efficacy of the "Third Way" remaining highly contingent upon the policy domain, and how Europe may choose, for example, to link trade to human rights, as it did with China, undermining its bargaining position (*Examining U.S. Grand Strategy and Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 2025). Yet, the most likely outcome is neither complete success nor total collapse, but the rather "messy middle" scenario where Europe remains engaged, but its efforts are inconsistent, fragmented, and strategically limited while key states like the Big Four (France, UK, Germany, Italy) and middle powers like the Netherlands may pursue

robust bilateral relations, making Europe maintain its role as a force multiplier, therefore being an important but supplementary actor, that lacks the cohesive influence to dictate regional developments beyond its economic power, regulatory standards, diplomatic weight, and smaller-scale military presence leverage to support the rules-based order and counter China's influence (Abbondanza & Grgić, 2025).

Conclusion

Europe's Indo-Pacific pivot represents a critical response to a shifting global order, with its success hinging on Europe's ability to navigate three fundamental crossroads: avoiding strategic distraction by managing instability closer to home, achieving policy coherence by producing mutually reinforcing strategies across the EU and member states, and fostering greater strategic autonomy rather than reverting to structural dependence on the US. The last crossroad comes as a direct reaction to the US grand strategy under Trump's second administration that has fundamentally altered the landscape, moving away from multilateral cooperation toward transactional burden-shifting, necessitating Europe to pursue its own Indo-Pacific goals autonomously. Europe's core strengths, its economic might and normative influence, are the true and tested best assets for establishing a functional "Third Way" particularly in areas like climate action and digital regulation, where it can provide a principled alternative to the dominant powers, with failure to harmonize its advanced but fragmented defense industry and internal political

disunity risking a "messy middle" where its efforts could change from norm creating to being perceived as unreliable and secondary. Ultimately, Europe must transform internal constraints into external strength to secure its place as a necessary stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging the regional demand for diversified partnerships. Given the importance of the region, Europe's success will not just determine its role in Asia, but its long-term global relevance.

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