

The European Union and Trump 2.0: Principled Pragmatism and Strategic Patience

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Confronted with President Trump's new expansionist ambitions, the urgent need for strategic consensus to protect the sovereignty and interests of the EU and its members must go hand in hand with patience in approaching a US administration operating from a position of strength, and pragmatism regarding potential trade-offs on strategic issues, including China.

In 2020, Joe Biden was elected against Donald Trump notably as a rejection of the latter's catastrophic management of the Covid-19 crisis, but not necessarily in retaliation against either his political-judicial entanglements or his approach to world politics. In 2024, Donald Trump won a landslide re-election, simultaneously gaining unprecedented control over all US federal powers. There will be no questioning of his approach to world affairs, and Europeans are among the first targets. However, both the world and Donald Trump himself have changed since he last occupied the Oval Office, prompting concerns but also offering opportunities for the EU to adapt pragmatically.

At the start of 2025, the international context appears favourable to President Trump's leadership. In the West, while social-democratic and liberal leaders from Emmanuel Macron to Justin Trudeau to Olaf Scholz are facing significant challenges or being forced out, nationalists have never been so powerful. In the Middle East, Israel's destruction of Hezbollah and the fall of Bashar al-Assad have exposed the weaknesses of Iran's regional policy and the limits of Russia's power, bogged down in its war of aggression against Ukraine. The alternative offered by China to many in the so-called 'Global South' is increasingly viewed by its partners – including in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – as imperialistic. Trump, for his part, was elected with broad support, a political apparatus and institutions aligned with his vision, in an America whose economy is recovering. At the G20, which the US will preside over in 2026, Trump is

preparing to step onto the international stage in a position of unprecedented strength.

As he himself criticised President Biden over the American withdrawal failure in Afghanistan, President Trump will refuse to 'lose' or appear to concede any ground on the international stage. On Ukraine, his administration is likely to prioritise a negotiated solution that demonstrates he has not backed down but has instead risen above the fray. President Macron's diplomatic move of staging a first meeting between President-elect Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky in Paris set the stage for potential Euro-Atlantic negotiations. It remains to be seen which strategy the US will adopt and whether the terms of future negotiations will be as favourable to Ukraine as they will be to Trump.

With Trump's confidence at its peak, Europeans are unlikely to have much influence on his administration's strategies and policies. It would be a mistake for EU and member states leaders to rush to Washington, DC or Mar-a-Lago to shape his agenda. They will be welcomed but not heard. This includes leaders who may be more inclined to receive his favour, such as Giorgia Meloni or Viktor Orban, who might not prove to be as effective interlocutors as some might assume. As a target, the EU should wait for Trump to strike the first blows before taking any initiative. Solidarity is essential to being audible, and strategic patience is essential to remaining relevant.

Breaking away from the isolationism associated with his first term, the new expansionist stance championed by

President Trump and his advisers is pushing Europeans to the limits of their willingness and ability to engage in direct confrontation with the US. Elon Musk's intervention via 'X' in the internal politics of European states, and President Trump's assertions of claims over the Panama Canal, Canada, Greenland, and now the Gaza Strip, are no longer mere rhetorical flourishes but tangible challenges to the sovereignty of US allies. European solidarity should prevail, but concrete measures against interference have yet to materialise, and meaningful guarantees for Greenland remain absent. Trump's 'maximum pressure' approach could escalate into a scenario of confrontation. Only time will tell how far the US is willing to go, but the EU and its members are ill-prepared to counter the threat. In the meantime, the US is preparing an aggressive trade policy against the EU, triggering unanimous European condemnation and promise of retaliation, which should prompt member states to strengthen their industrial and technological sovereignty, and the EU to reinforce and diversify its trade partnerships.

While certain issues are severely straining transatlantic relations to an unprecedented degree, some of Trump's pet causes may, on the contrary, enable Brussels and European capitals to find common ground with Washington. This is the case with the Sino-American rivalry, where President Trump will seek to rally partners to contain and counter China, offering trade-off opportunities for transatlantic relations.

During his first term, President Trump's fixation on China and embrace of systemic competition emerged as a cornerstone of his 'America First' foreign policy. As a primary target of US tariffs, the EU initially sought to shoulder-up with China to mitigate the impact. However, the EU and its member states never viewed China as an ally or a viable substitute for the US, choosing instead to maintain engagement with both. For the EU, the priority was always to safeguard its own interests while simultaneously signalling its refusal to be drawn into a binary choice between the US and China.

Following the concept of 'principled pragmatism' at the heart of its Global Strategy, the EU has sought to engage with China in areas where this would advance its interests. However, disagreements resurfaced on multiple fronts, raising concerns over its growing power and the resulting asymmetries in the relationship. Since 2019, the EU has labelled China as "simultaneously [...] a cooperation partner [...] a negotiating partner [...] an economic competitor [...] and a systemic rival". The Biden administration's continuation of Trump's confrontational stance towards China while softening its approach towards Europe, reinforced the EU's recognition of its closer alignment with the US. While still refusing a binary choice, the

extent of the EU's pragmatism will depend on the intensity of Sino-American confrontation.

While refusing open confrontation, the EU and its members have progressively positioned themselves more clearly in the US-China rivalry. The failure to finalise the EU-China Agreement on Investment following Joe Biden's election signalled a shift in the EU's approach to China. As the Indo-Pacific became the main theatre of US-China confrontation, the development of an EU Indo-Pacific strategy, after France, Germany and the Netherlands led the way, followed by Italian and Czech contributions, reflected the EU's implicit alignment with a concept largely promoted by the US. This *de facto* positioning vis-à-vis China is also evident in the EU's condemnation of China's positions in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and decision to de-risk from China. While the EU maintains a compartmentalised approach, distinct from the US's more systemic stance, the Commission's 2024-2029 Policy Guidelines, introduced in summer 2024, confirm a strengthened EU posture towards China.

Shifts in the international landscape and in EU positions towards China create an opening for a more coordinated approach to China as a key area of engagement with the US. The Biden administration, while attempting to unite 'democracies' against 'authoritarianisms', heavily lobbied Europeans to align with US objectives. Within the G7, as well as NATO, the US sought to bridge the gap between the Atlantic and Pacific theatres. Although efforts to establish a NATO liaison office in Tokyo failed due to France's resistance, the US successfully integrated China and the perceived threats it poses into NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept. Determined to further align the Alliance with Washington's priorities, NATO's new Secretary General, Mark Rutte, has amplified concerns over China, highlighting its growing significance in transatlantic security discussions.

As the 50th anniversary of PRC-CE/EU relations is marked in 2025, Beijing will also seek to court European partners on areas of mutual interest, presenting them with potential leverage to counter US coercive policies. It seems the European Commission heard the call, without acting concretely yet. Instead of finding themselves caught between a rock and a hard place, Europeans can attempt to turn this triangular dynamic to their advantage. By capitalising on their role as arbiters between the US and China, they may yet retain a bargaining chip with both. ■

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