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THE EROSION OF BIPARTISAN ATLANTICISM IN THE UNITED STATES: DOMESTIC SOURCES OF CHANGE IN TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: For much of the postwar period, transatlantic relations were based not only on a shared external threat but also on a relatively stable political consensus within the United States. Democrats and Republicans disagreed on specific wars, trade issues, and diplomatic tactics, but generally accepted NATO, US involvement in Europe, and American leadership in the Western order. This article examines why this domestic foundation has become less stable. Drawing on foreign policy analysis, Robert Putnam's two-level game model, and the literature on liberal internationalism, it argues that the erosion of bipartisan Atlanticism is the result of several interrelated changes: partisan polarization, dissatisfaction with globalization, increased reliance on executive power, and the weakening of liberal internationalism as a common political language. Donald Trump is seen not as the sole cause of this shift, but as a product and accelerator of long-term domestic changes. The result is not the end of the transatlantic alliance, but a less predictable political basis for US commitments and greater concern in Europe about whether those commitments can survive a change of administration.

Keywords: United States; transatlantic relations; NATO; political polarization; bipartisan consensus; liberal internationalism.

Introduction

Transatlantic relations are commonly explained by international structure. The Soviet threat prompted the creation of NATO, instability in Eastern Europe reintroduced collective defense to the forefront, and China's rise encouraged closer coordination among advanced democracies. These explanations remain important, but they fail to explain why US policy can shift dramatically even when the external environment remains unchanged.

This problem has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. The first Trump administration challenged a number of assumptions associated with postwar Atlanticism, including the value of alliances, open trade, and multilateral institutions. The Biden administration has restored a more familiar alliance-oriented approach and led a broad transatlantic response to the war in Ukraine. However, Donald Trump's return to power in January 2025 demonstrated that the previous shift was not simply a temporary interruption. The second Trump administration again placed "America First" at the centre of trade, climate and foreign policy.[1]

[1] The White House, "America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-policy-directive-to-the-secretary-of-state/; The White House, "America First Trade Policy," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-trade-policy/.

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The central question of this article, therefore, is this: Why has the domestic political foundation of American Atlanticism become less stable? The argument is that these changes cannot be pinned down to a single president. They reflect a broader weakening of the coalition that once linked American international leadership to domestic political consensus. Partisan polarization has widened disagreements over alliances and international institutions; economic discontent has made protectionism more attractive; executive policies have made it easier to renege on commitments; and liberal internationalism is no longer an uncontested definition of the national interest.

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

Realist and neorealist approaches emphasize international anarchy, relative power and external threats. From this perspective, alliances are mainly responses to insecurity, as states balance against threats and adjust to changes in the distribution of power.[2] This helps explain why the United States became deeply engaged in Europe after 1945, but it is less effective in explaining why the same country responds differently to similar external pressures under different administrations.

Foreign policy analysis addresses this problem by examining presidents, legislatures, parties, bureaucracies, interest groups and public opinion. Helen Milner and Dustin Tingley show that U.S. foreign policy instruments are shaped by the interaction of the executive, Congress and domestic constituencies.[3] In other words, American power is filtered through domestic institutions and political coalitions.

Robert Putnam's theory of two-level games is especially useful here. Putnam argues that leaders negotiate at the international and domestic levels at the same time. An agreement acceptable to foreign partners must also fall within a domestic "win-set" that relevant political actors will tolerate.[4] Applied to U.S.-European relations, this means that a president may support a climate agreement, a trade compromise or military assistance to an ally, but the durability of that policy depends on the domestic coalition behind it.

Andrew Moravcsik makes a related point in liberal theory: state preferences are shaped by the interests and identities of domestic social groups rather than being dictated automatically by the international system.[5] This is particularly relevant to trade. Even where economic interdependence remains deep, policies can shift toward protectionism when influential groups associate globalization with job losses, regional decline, or unfair competition.

The key lesson is that the reliability of alliances depends not only on military capabilities or treaty language. It also depends on political continuity. In a democracy, policy change is normal. The problem arises when allies begin to view core commitments as potentially reversible after each presidential election.

The Rise of Bipartisan Atlanticism

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[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 79–128; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[3] Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tingley, *Sailing the Water's Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), https://hvmilner.scholar.princeton.edu/publications/sailing-water%E2%80%99s-edge-domestic-politics-american-foreign-policy.

[4] Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–460, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027697.

[5] Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–553, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550447.

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The transatlantic order after 1945 emerged from the mutual reinforcement of international necessity and domestic politics. The United States possessed unrivaled military and economic power, but continued engagement in European affairs still required long-term military, economic, and institutional commitments at home..[6]

The Soviet threat represented the most compelling strategic rationale. The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO were presented not as charity toward Europe, but as investments in American security. A stable and prosperous Western Europe would limit communist influence, support markets for American goods, and prevent a hostile power from dominating the continent. Thus, the Marshall Plan directly linked economic reconstruction to strategic stability..[7]

NATO institutionalized this commitment. It deterred the Soviet Union, reassured its European partners, and strengthened US influence in Western Europe. J. John Ikenberry argued that the postwar order was durable in part because the United States limited its power through institutions and made its leadership more predictable to its allies.[8] This is central to understanding Atlanticism: European trust was based not only on US capabilities but also on the expectation that American commitments would persist after a change of government.

The consensus was never complete. The Suez Crisis, the Vietnam War, nuclear strategy, détente, trade, and burden sharing all generated significant friction. However, these disputes took place within a broader context that remained stable. Both major American parties generally accepted NATO and remained involved in European affairs.[9] Thus, bipartisan Atlanticism didn't mean agreement on every policy point. It meant that differences had a political basis: European governments could count on the fact that a change in administration wouldn't fundamentally alter America's commitment to the alliance itself.

From Post-Cold War Confidence to Domestic Fracture

The end of the Cold War removed the external threat that had helped sustain this consensus. NATO survived and expanded, and the 1990s became a period of liberal internationalist confidence. The United States was the sole superpower, the European Union was deepening its integration, and NATO expansion was presented as part of a broader expansion of the liberal order.[10]

At the same time, the internal foundations of this order were becoming increasingly fragile. Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz argued back in 2007 that the domestic political center supporting liberal internationalism had weakened.[11] The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to

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[6] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 163–214, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t1s5.

[7] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The Marshall Plan, 1948," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/marshall-plan.

[8] Ikenberry, *After Victory*; G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

[9] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "A Short History of NATO," https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/nato-history/a-short-history-of-nato.

[10] G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241.

[11] Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2007): 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.32.2.7.

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intervention fatigue and distrust of foreign policy elites. The 2008 financial crisis intensified criticism of globalization and the economic model, which many Americans believed distributed benefits unequally.

Trade became one of the most obvious channels through which domestic economic changes influenced foreign policy. Research by David Autor and his co-authors shows that regions more exposed to import competition experienced greater political polarization and a shift away from moderate candidates.[12] The point isn't that trade per se gave rise to populism, but rather that deindustrialization and uneven adjustment gave protectionist and nationalist arguments a much larger domestic audience.

By the Obama years, bipartisan consensus on foreign policy had already weakened significantly. Republicans resolutely opposed the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement, while Democrats grew increasingly skeptical of free trade and military intervention. The gap widened further after 2016, as foreign policy became more closely tied to partisanship.[13]

During Trump's first presidency, this weakening of relations became an explicit political project. He criticized NATO allies for their defense spending, imposed tariffs on European goods, withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, and frequently portrayed alliances in pragmatic terms. The significance wasn't that every disagreement between the US and Europe was new. What mattered was that European governments increasingly began to question whether the United States still viewed the alliance in the same way.

The New Domestic Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy

The current transformation is best understood through the prism of three interrelated processes. The first is political polarization. Foreign policy is increasingly tied to partisan identity, making continuity difficult. Data from the Pew Research Center illustrates this divide. In 2025, 77 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents expressed a favorable opinion of NATO, compared to 45 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning voters.[14] By 2026, Republican assessments of the benefits of NATO membership had become still more sceptical.[15]

The second trend is the growing use of executive power. Presidents can often quickly change foreign policy through executive orders, memoranda, and administrative actions. This makes policy flexible, but also more reversible. Climate policy is the most striking example: the United States joined the Paris Agreement under Obama, withdrew under Trump, rejoined under Biden, and began withdrawing again under Trump in 2025. Therefore, for European governments, the question is not

[12] David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson and Kaveh Majlesi, "Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure," *American Economic Review* 110, no. 10 (2020): 3139–3183, https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20170011.

[13] Gordon M. Friedrichs and Jordan Tama, "Polarization and US Foreign Policy: Key Debates and New Findings," *International Politics* 59 (2022): 767–785, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00381-0.

[14] Moira Fagan, Jacob Poushter and Sneha Gubbala, "How Americans View NATO and U.S. NATO Membership," Pew Research Center, April 17, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/04/17/how-americans-view-nato-and-u-s-nato-membership/.

[15] Moira Fagan and Sneha Gubbala, "Republicans Have Become Less Likely to Say NATO Membership Benefits the U.S.," Pew Research Center, April 6, 2026, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/06/republicans-have-become-less-likely-to-say-nato-membership-benefits-the-us/.

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only what Washington promises, but also how deeply this promise is rooted in US domestic institutions.

The third trend is economic nationalism. Trump's January 2025 memorandum, "America First Trade Policy," explicitly linked trade policy to national security, industrial advantage, American workers, and the persistent trade deficit.[16] However, economic nationalism is not limited to Trump. The Biden administration's industrial policy has also shown that support for domestic manufacturing, sustainable supply chains, and strategic sectors has become more important across all parties. This suggests that the old assumption that economic openness naturally underpins transatlantic political relations is no longer sufficient.

The associated change is ideological. Liberal internationalism once provided a common language through which American leaders could argue that alliances, institutions, and an open international order served American interests. This language has lost some of its credibility. The second Trump administration's Foreign Policy Directive directed the State Department to align policy with an "America First" approach focused on core US interests. This is not simple isolationism. Rather, it reflects a more contingent view of international commitments, in which alliances are expected to demonstrate measurable value.

Donald Trump, therefore, should be seen as both a symptom and an accelerator of domestic change. It didn't create political polarization, deindustrialization, war weariness, or a critique of liberal internationalism. But it did integrate these trends into a coherent political message and make them central elements of foreign policy. A more profound change is that an equally strong consensus in favor of a replacement has never emerged. American policy now consists of competing approaches: traditional alliance leadership, nationalist consolidation, strategic competition with China, selective internationalism, and various versions of economic nationalism.

Implications for Transatlantic Relations

The main consequence of this domestic fragmentation is uncertainty. Europe still depends heavily on U.S. military capabilities, intelligence, nuclear deterrence and NATO command structures. At the same time, European governments increasingly monitor American elections, congressional disputes and partisan opinion as indicators of future policy.

This helps explain why European defence spending can rise while confidence in U.S. reliability falls. At the 2025 Hague Summit, NATO allies reaffirmed Article 5 and agreed to invest 5 percent of GDP annually in core defence and broader defence- and security-related spending by 2035.[17] This decision strengthened NATO's material foundation, but also reflected more stringent burden-sharing requirements, with European allies expected to shoulder greater responsibility.

Public opinion points in the same direction. A Pew survey conducted in 2026 across 36 countries found declining trust in the United States as a reliable partner in many long-standing allied states. This doesn't mean the transatlantic alliance is crumbling. Rather, it suggests that strategic dependence and political trust no longer move hand in hand.

The key question for Europe, therefore, is not simply whether the United States remains committed today. It is whether American commitments are backed by a domestic coalition capable of sustaining them over the long term. The Treaty may remain intact, while the perception of its political

[16] The White House, "America First Trade Policy," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-trade-policy/.

[17] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The Hague Summit Declaration," June 25, 2025, paras. 1–3, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration.

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sustainability weakens.

Conclusion

The postwar transatlantic relationship rested on an unusual combination of power, institutions, and domestic political consensus. The United States possessed leadership capabilities, NATO institutionalized this leadership, and a broad bipartisan consensus created the appearance of a strong US commitment.

This domestic foundation has gradually weakened. The end of the Cold War diminished the unifying effect of a common threat; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan undermined confidence in interventionist foreign policy; globalization and the financial crisis exacerbated economic discontent; and partisan polarization made foreign policy more closely tied to electoral competition. Trump did not create these events, but he linked them into a powerful political narrative and accelerated their international consequences.

The United States, therefore, is not simply turning away from Europe. A more accurate description would be that the domestic foundation of American Atlanticism has become fragmented. For Europe, this creates a complex combination: American power remains indispensable, but American policy has become more difficult to predict. The future of transatlantic relations will depend not only on external threats such as Russia or China, but also on whether the United States can rebuild a politically stable domestic base for alliance building and international leadership.

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