

# TRANSATLANTIC TENSIONS: THE IMPACT OF THE 2024 ELECTION ON US-EU RELATIONS



RESEARCH PAPER

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# Transatlantic Tensions: The impact of the 2024 election on US-EU relations

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## Summary

- The 2024 US election, featuring Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, is poised to significantly impact US-EU relations and global security dynamics, especially in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and rising geopolitical tensions.
- Trump's selection of JD Vance as VP and the influence of Eurosceptic advisors could lead to reduced US military engagement in Europe, heightening concerns among EU leaders about security commitments. While Kamala Harris is likely to maintain the path charted by the Biden Administration.
- European nations must increase their defence spending and demonstrate a commitment to NATO to counteract any potential decline in US support, regardless of the election outcome.

## Introduction

The 2024 United States election is once again shaping up to be one of the most pivotal in American history, with many in the US considering this election to be the most important and consequential in modern American history for the third time running. The sharply divided political landscape is largely due to the continued influence of Donald Trump, who remains the central figure in the Republican Party. His 2016 victory and sustained popularity have signalled a significant shift in right-wing American politics, characterised by deep suspicion of the ruling establishment. Many conservatives now view the Democratic Party as defenders of this establishment, adhering to a neoliberal approach that Republicans argue has failed the country (Azerrad, 2017). While conversely, Democrats view Trump as dangerous, reckless and a threat to democracy.

While domestic issues, particularly social and immigration policies, dominate this divide, the gap between the two parties extends to international engagement, especially in matters of conflict, geo-politics and environmental policy. The contrast between Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Kamala Harris is stark, with both candidates outlining different visions for America's role on the global stage. Unlike domestic policies, however, US international policy has important consequences for other parts of the world, particularly Europe. The European Union, closely tied to the United States through its relationship with NATO, faces significant implications depending on the outcome of the US election. With the largest conflict in Europe since the Second World War ongoing in Ukraine and growing awareness of climate issues, leaders in Brussels will be watching the US elections closely in November.

## Donald Trump

For the American left, the prospect of a Trump re-election has stoked fears that he could undo the progress they believe was made under the Biden administration in countering Russia and renewing the US commitment to NATO. A re-elected Trump might be less inclined to conduct foreign policy through the traditional 'rules-based' order that neoliberal policy makers advocate. Instead, his administration could favour an approach that treats allies as temporary if they are not deemed essential to American security.

As a politician, Trump has consistently promoted neo-isolationist policies outwardly, including calls to reduce the US military presence in Europe and the Middle East. Throughout his first term and the years since, he has maintained a Eurosceptic stance on foreign policy and security. For instance, Trump's major issue with NATO has centred on his belief that certain European nations are not contributing their fair share. As of 2023 only 11 countries have allocated more than 2% of their GDP to defence spending, although that number is expected to rise (Abovyan, 2024). As a transactional leader, Trump argues that if Europeans won't invest in their own security, there is no justification for the United States to subsidise European defence budgets. Additionally, a prevailing belief in Republican circles is that China poses a greater threat to American interests than Russia, which could diminish the importance of US involvement in European security. This belief, coupled with recent comments from Trump suggesting he might not intervene in a Russian invasion of certain NATO states, has heightened fears in Europe that a potential Trump return to the White House could have serious repercussions for European security.

These fears were further intensified when Trump selected J.D. Vance as his running mate. As a Senator, Vance has been a vocal critic of NATO and its involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war, attempting to block funding and advocating for Ukraine to make concessions to Russia in exchange for peace. Reflecting Trump's shift away from Europe, Vance has called for increased support for US allies in Asia, even at the expense of European allies and Ukraine. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference, Vance argued that American weapons destined for Ukraine should instead be redirected to protect Taiwan from China. "There are a lot of bad guys all over the world, and I'm much more interested in some of the problems in East Asia right now than I am in Europe," Vance proclaimed (Sampson, 2024).

Vance was widely seen as Trump's most diehard supporter among the potential vice-presidential contenders, aligning closely with Trump's domestic and international agenda. Therefore, given Vance's Euroscepticism and loyalty to Trump, it's likely that the former President's views on EU security and NATO are reflected through Vance. Further, Vance is viewed as a competent politician who is likely to take a more hands-on approach to governing than most vice presidents typically do. Following the attempt on Trump's life and his subsequent surge in the polls, the former president chose a running mate with whom he could govern, rather than someone selected to satisfy specific electoral demographics. As a result, Vance is in a uniquely elevated position to influence policy in ways that previous vice presidents have not. His elevation is a significant victory for the Eurosceptics within the Republican Party, particularly those who advocate for a stronger pivot towards Asia and will seek to align themselves with both Trump and his VP pick.

Besides Vance there are a number of other advisors who will look to influence the former President if he is to win back the White House. Some of the leading Eurosceptics who are reported favourites for influential positions in a Trump Administration include Robert O'Brien and Richard Grenell. Both men previously served in the first Trump Administration as his national security advisor and ambassador to Germany respectively.

O'Brien who is looking to reprise his role as Trump's National Security Advisor recently released an essay in *Foreign Affairs* in which he stated that the Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed a 'shameful truth' about the European members and of NATO. The invasion, O'Brien believes, showed European unpreparedness and their over reliance on the United States. The type of Euroscepticism that O'Brien holds is not in total disengagement from the continent but rather a Europe that can become self-sufficient. "Washington should make sure that its European allies understand that the continued American defence of Europe is contingent on Europe doing its part" (O'Brien, 2024). This fits with Trump's transactional nature and places the ball firmly in Europe's court on whether they want continued US support or not. While O'Brien believes China is America's clear rival, he believes the US can stay engaged with the EU and NATO, so long as Europe plays its part.

Richard Grenell represents the other side of the Eurosceptic coin. Grenell, the former US ambassador to Germany under Trump, is much more pessimistic about Europeans playing their role in the defence of the continent. Due to this belief, Grenell has called out NATO members including Germany several times in an attempt to bend European defence policy to Washington's liking. Because of this, Grenell faced serious backlash in Germany with some politicians urging the German government to declare him *persona non grata* during his tenure as ambassador (Gehrke, 2019). Grenell represents the 'America first' wing of the Trump administration. An aggressive approach



which makes few friends in diplomatic circles due to its coercive rhetoric and dominance of American policy direction. In this respect, Grenell believes that America should take the lead in decision making with the EU and NATO paying its commitments, notably by enforcing the 2% GDP threshold and expanding the US nuclear umbrella to previously untouched EU states. This approach could potentially backfire on Grenell and further sour US-EU-NATO relations, an outcome many in Europe feel is inevitable with a Trump presidency (Sehan, 2024).

Yet, perhaps fears in Europe and among the democratic party are inflated. During his first term, President Trump did little to reduce the United States' military presence and actually increased the military's annual budget throughout his four years in office. Trump at times took an aggressive posture with Russia by continuing to supply Ukraine with military assistance. Moreover, elevation of US establishment figures like John Bolton to his National Security Advisor and Mike Pompeo to Secretary of State showed that Trump still has room to be moved towards an 'America Everywhere' approach championed by John Bolton. Although most of the mainstream neo-conservatives and traditional hawkish foreign policy advisors have left Trump, some influential voices remain, including Mike Pompeo.

### **Kamala Harris**

Looking forward to a potential Harris Administration, the outlook for EU leaders looks more stable than that of a Trump re-election. Under the Biden administration, in which Harris has served as Vice President, security engagement with the EU has been strong as Biden touted his ability to form a lasting coalition of EU and NATO states against the Russian invasion of its



neighbour Ukraine. Guiding Harris through her foreign policy agenda is longtime American diplomat, Philip Gordon. Gordon, who has been a mainstay in the Democratic diplomatic corps, has deep connections to Europe. He has served the Director of European Affairs under the Clinton Administration, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs for Obama and most recently has been Kamala Harris' National Security Director throughout her time as VP. Gordon who was characterised by the Financial Times early this year as a 'transatlantic true believer' will likely chart the same path as current Biden foreign policy and of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who is rumoured to be on his way out regardless of who takes the White House next (Schwartz, 2024).

Another important factor that will have leaders in the EU more supportive of a Democratic President is the institutional support that NATO and support for Ukraine has within the US State and Defence departments. Currently, mid to high level positions in these departments are filled with mostly appointed bureaucrats who are more committed to the 'rules-based' world order that is driving continued support for Europe and Ukraine. In contrast to a Trump Administration which could seek to shakeup many agencies and departments through the much-debated Project 2025, President Harris would most likely keep many of these same decision makers in place, thus keeping the same path charted by President Biden. Because of this, we can expect that a Harris administration wouldn't stray far from the current approach under Biden. During the Democratic National Convention, several speakers mentioned the importance of NATO and honouring commitments to continue to support and supply Ukraine with what it needs to defend against the Russian invasion.

However, Europe must remain vigilant even with a potential ally coming into the White House. While Harris has said her commitment to the Atlantic

alliance is 'ironclad' those close to Harris, notably Gordon, have called for Europe to take a more active role in enhancing its own security (Stephens, 2024). Also, like any successful diplomat, Gordon has moved with the times and is amenable to the priorities of the country he serves. Currently the United States' biggest foreign policy priority is China and deterrence in Southeast Asia regardless of which party.

### **What each candidate represents to the EU**

For EU leaders, the candidates running for President present paths of clarity and uncertainty. A Harris Administration looks likely to continue with President Biden's policy of full support of NATO and Ukraine, which is vital for EU security policy. Further, the likely elevation of Philip Gordon to National Security Advisor will put a firm supporter of trans-Atlantic cooperation at the heart of American foreign policy decision making, as well as empowering lower-level bureaucrats to continue their work which thus far has been vital in revamping systemic support for EU security throughout the United States security establishment. While a Harris administration presents a relatively clear continuation of current US-EU relations, a second Trump administration introduces a degree of uncertainty for European leaders.

Trump's approach to Europe is likely to be more transactional, with a strong emphasis on burden-sharing and a possible reduction of US military commitments unless European nations increase their own defence spending. The potential influence of Eurosceptics like Vance, O'Brien, and Grenell within a Trump administration could signal a shift away from traditional US leadership in NATO. Trump's administration may focus more on bilateral relationships with individual European countries that align

closely with US strategic interests, while exerting pressure on others to meet their NATO commitments or face reduced American support. This could lead to strained relations with key EU members, especially if Trump perceives them as not pulling their weight in the alliance.

Additionally, Trump's prioritisation of confronting China could further drop Europe in US foreign policy. A Trump administration might seek to redirect resources and attention from Europe to the Indo-Pacific even more than a Harris Administration would, viewing the region as more critical to American security interests; a move favoured by JD Vance. This pivot could lead to reduced American engagement in European security affairs, potentially leaving the EU more vulnerable to external threats and forcing European nations to take greater responsibility for their own defence.

Ultimately, while a Harris administration would likely maintain and even strengthen transatlantic ties, a Trump administration could challenge the foundations of US-EU cooperation, leaving European leaders with a more unpredictable and transactional relationship with Washington. However, Trump has been notoriously malleable during his time in office and could be influenced by those like Mike Pompeo to recommit fully to the EU and Ukraine.

### **What Europe can do**

Given the stakes of the 2024 US election, EU leaders need to be strategic to keep the US engaged in Europe and NATO, no matter who wins, whether it's Trump or Harris. It's essential for European nations to step up their defence spending and take on a bigger role in NATO. If EU countries show they're

serious about their own defence, it tackles one of the main issues Trump and his Eurosceptic advisors have with NATO. This would make it tougher for any future Trump administration to argue for pulling back US support. For the EU's part, since the Russian invasion, many Europeans have woken up to this fact and have increased defence spending, a move that will ease uncertainty in Washington (Finkbeiner & Van Noorden, 2022).

On a broader scale, the EU needs to make it clear how they can support US strategic interests. Whether it's countering Russia, tackling climate change, or navigating the rise of China, a strong and united Europe is crucial to achieving shared goals. If European leaders can align with what's important to the US, it can make a compelling case that the transatlantic relationship is worth continuing. Finally, EU leaders should focus on building strong relationships with policymakers across the political spectrum in the US. Whether through regular diplomatic exchanges or in key international events, having allies in both parties will be critical to keeping US-EU relations steady, even if the political landscape shifts in Washington.

By taking these steps, the EU can cement itself as an essential partner to the US, ensuring that the bond across the Atlantic remains strong and that NATO continues to be the bedrock of European security, regardless of who ends up in the White House.

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