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Transatlantic cooperation after the US presidential election

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Summary

Europe has a lot at stake in the 2024 United States Presidential Election. Of course, European countries have no say in the winner, but the traditionally solid transatlantic relationship that has existed between Europe and the United States is subject to a lot of change depending on who ends up in the Oval Office next January.

Key points

- Kamala Harris and Donald Trump's drastically different foreign policy agendas could impact Europe in profound ways, but the election remains too close to call.
- Uncertainty regarding future American support for Ukraine and lack of a plan for ending the conflict in the Middle East has left Europe scrambling to determine an individual course of action, while also reckoning with their own internal divisions.
- There are also concerns about future collaboration in trade, cybersecurity, and AI usage, due to Harris' greater willingness to collaborate versus Trump's more isolationist approach.

Introduction

The 2024 United States Presidential Election is set to be one of the closest and most consequential in recent cycles. You would be hard-pressed to find two more polarizing, predominant candidates: current Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris versus former Republican President Donald Trump. One of the areas where their policy agendas differ the most is foreign policy. The candidates have taken opposite stances when it comes to American involvement around the world, mainly with Trump's approach being much more isolationist than the country has seen in the last several decades. It goes without saying that the race to the White House will have an immense on Americans, but there is a lot at stake for Europe in this election as well. The US's relations with the European Union, and Europe as a whole, could look drastically different depending on who ends up in the Oval Office next January.

They also share similar politics and values. Many European countries either are, have transitioned to, or are currently transitioning to democracies. Democratic values such as human rights, equality and popular sovereignty are core principles to the EU and US. The US, and most EU member states, are all active North Atlantic Treaty Organization members, thereby committed to maintaining peace, freedom, and security.

A Transatlantic Trade Partnership

Since the end of the World War II, the United States and European states have maintained very close alliances, building further upon those following the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Economically, "The EU-US economic relationship is the world's largest – the value of traded goods and services is more than €1 trillion per year, and each is the other's largest partner in both trade and investment" (Berg and Meyers, 2024). Despite this close alliance, there is no actual free trade agreement between them. Most recently, negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership began in 2013 but ended without fruition in 2016 and formally ended in 2019. Areas of interest of cooperation included better US market access, regulatory cooperation, and new rules to make trade and investments easier and fairer, but these were deemed "obsolete and no longer relevant," hence its abandonment. There are several agreements that predate the attempted TTIP, mainly geared at promoting healthy competition and mergers and ensuring cohesion among both parties. These include the EU-US Competition Cooperation Agreement (1991), EU-US Positive Comity Agreement (1998), the Administrative Arrangement on Attendance (1999) and EU-US best Practices on Cooperation in Merger Investigations (2011). In 2021, the EU-US Joint Technology Competition Policy Dialogue was launched. Focused on cooperation and competition as well, it is geared strictly towards the technology sector, which is ever-growing and undoubtedly important to both countries. It is also the first of this kind of agreement to be signed in ten years, possibly reigniting this kind of cooperation and paving the way for the future. Furthermore, a Joint Statement from the 2021 EU-US Summit announced "a renewed transatlantic partnership for the post-pandemic era, including on trade" centered "on global health challenges, green growth, strengthening trade relations, and fostering democratic values for a more secure world" (European Commission, n.d.).

The lack of concrete agreement could become an issue following the election, as "the EU has over time become increasingly dependent of the US to soak up its exports. The US has long been the global consumer of last resort, absorbing production from both East Asia and Northern Europe" (Berg and Meyers, 2024). Trade and competition with China are a priority for both candidates, with Trump advisors suggesting the redirection of American resources to compete directly with China, and the likelihood that Harris "would almost certainly push for greater burden sharing with allies

to free up U.S. resources for other priorities, including strategic competition with China” (Ero, 2024). The EU is likely to get caught in this crossfire regardless of who comes out on top, given how much they have invested in the US and vice versa, which absolutely has the potential to cause rifts and deterioration within their transatlantic relations.

Harris vs. Trump: policy changes either way

A key issue for Harris’s campaign has been the at-times vagueness of her policy agenda, which is applicable to foreign policy as well. This lack of clarity has many people around the world wondering how her course of action will be different from current President Biden’s—or if it will even differ at all. Her campaign platform mentions “her travels to 21 countries and meetings with more than 150 world leaders” (Harris for President, 2024), but others worry about the “relative lack of foreign policy experience would likely be tested by China and Russia in other theaters, thus leaving Europe to compete for attention” (Blockmans, 2024). One of the primary concerns for Trump, on the other hand, is the repercussions of his election on democratic principles, both domestically and abroad. Europeans view Trump as an authoritarian and many Europeans worried that a decline of democracy could accompany his election. Additionally, Europe has had similar patterns as the United States when it comes to the rise of far-right organizations and parties. Should Trump be elected to a second term, it is likely that subsequent European elections would have similar outcomes, given that “the far right will be emboldened in the United States and in Europe” (Vinjamuri, 2024) with his victory.

Perhaps the biggest repercussion of this election will be the US’s involvement in NATO, and global affairs in general. Trump’s foreign policy strategy is to “reject globalism and embrace patriotism” (Donald J. Trump for President, 2024), and he has been very vocal about wanting to decrease the US’s stake in NATO. This has become a major concern among European countries specifically, because so many EU endeavors are intertwined with American action. A very important thing to note is that both candidates agree that Europe needs more autonomy when it comes to defense spending. Where they differ is the extent to which that should happen; while “Harris represents continuity” (Ero, 2024) and is unlikely to instate drastic changes from Biden’s transatlantic policies, “a Trump administration could trim U.S. commitments to Europe’s defense, while boosting the morale of far-right European politicians working against a stronger, more integrated Europe” (Ero, 2024). Nevertheless, “the United States will continue to be wary of Europe’s regulatory tendencies. Europe will continue to face pressure from the United States to spend more, do more, and work together regardless of who is next in the White House” (Vinjamuri, 2024).

Global Security Collaboration

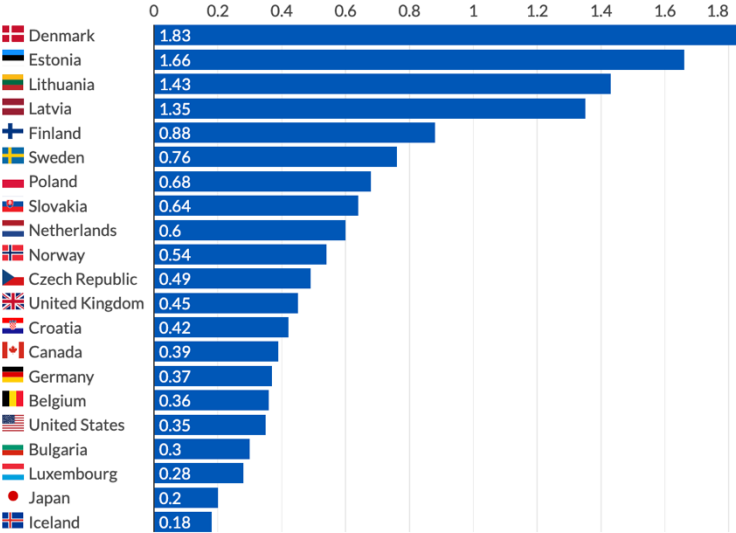
Perhaps the biggest point of contention between the candidates, regarding Europe, at least, is the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. For the past two and a half years, the United States has had to walk a very fine line between supplying aid and ammunition for Ukraine without getting directly involved in an escalated conflict with Russia. The most significant difference in the candidates’ approaches to transatlantic collaboration is that “Trump appears to use Europe to present himself as a strong man. Europe is an arena in which to show off his deal-making skills and forcefulness” whereas “for Harris, a focus on Europe is a proxy for American leadership through coalition-building and opens the door to conversations about values and US identity” (Berzina, 2024). A large part of why Trump’s relationship with Orbán is such a concern is both of their admiration for and close proximity to Russian President Vladimir Putin. This, along with Trump’s claim that he could resolve the conflict within a day, has many in Europe concerned about the possibility of a more US-backed Russia. Not only would it undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty and democratic principles in Europe, but it also opens

the door for the possibility of an expanded sphere of Russian influence in Europe, similar to that of the Cold War and Iron Curtain. Though, it is important to note that a Harris win is not completely guaranteeing of anything regarding Ukraine. Once again, policy vagueness serves as a crucial weak point within her campaign as she “emphasized the continuity of support and US leadership in helping Ukraine, but she did not answer the question about how her approach to dealing with Putin would differ from President Biden’s” (Berzina, 2024). Harris is also likely to face opposition and constraint from the US Congress about the magnitude of aid and support, given the divisions present between parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Graph 1: Aid allocations to Ukraine

Facts & figures

Countries' bilateral aid allocations to Ukraine, % of GDP
 (Aid allocated between Jan. 2022 and June 2024, based on 2021 GDP)



Nordic and Baltic countries have been leaders in providing aid to Ukraine, especially when calculated as a share of GDP. It seems a "bloc of deterrence" is forming among them in the face of Russian aggression against its neighbors.
 Source: Statista.com

Source: Geopolitical Intelligence Services, via statistia.com

To make the situation even more precarious, Europe is also facing its own internal discourse about how to continue support Ukraine during the war. Geopolitics plays much more of a role for EU members than it does US given their proximity to the conflict, which can be seen clearly in aid amounts provided by country. As reflected in the graph above, the Nordic states, Poland and the Czech Republic have been some of the most outspoken supporters, but the EU is far from united, with a growing pro-Russia bloc including Hungary and Slovakia making charting a course of action for the entire organization increasingly difficult. In addition to this division, European security is once again very dependent on American involvement in NATO, as the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have joined with Poland to repeatedly express concerns about establishing a physical defensive line against Russia and Belarus. With Germany majorly cutting aid and the UK doubling theirs, and France and Germany being particularly susceptible to internal pressures to end the conflict as quickly as possible, the outcome of the US election and subsequent course of action is likely to have an immense impact on how Europe continues to go about conflict resolution too.

This lack of clarity and resolution, from both the US and the EU, is has already begun to trickle into the ongoing Middle East conflict, which has continued to escalate despite various ceasefire proposals. The US's lead on these negotiations has been somewhat disastrous, with multiple deals falling through after a brief ceasefire and hostage release last November and almost no end in sight over a year into the war. This has been one of the key areas that Europe has looked to the US for guidance, especially considering the geopolitical impact of Europe's proximity to the Middle East, but the EU has also failed to take initiative in trying to end the conflict. Since "Neither Harris nor Trump has set out ideas for solutions that have eluded the present administration, and both would likely continue Washington's near unconditional support for Israel, though they might differ in approach" (Ero, 2024), it is virtually impossible to see how this would play out given the absence of specificity in both of their policy agendas. One of Harris' biggest criticisms in this election cycle has been the lack of response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, considering her current position in the Biden administration. While she has certainly been more vocal about the need for a ceasefire than others within the US government, indicating a possibility of more pressure on Israel to end its attacks and accept a solution, there has been no clear remark or plan. If elected, "if Harris doesn't change U.S. policies in the Middle East, Europe won't either, which will further weigh down the standing of the collective West" (Sasnal, 2024). Trump, on the other hand, has acted on immense support for Israel and was very active in the Middle East during his presidency, but said that the current war has gone on for too long. Again, it is unclear exactly what his course of action would be if elected, but it could involve authorizing more aggressive Israeli retaliation.

Other challenges to consider are those of cybersecurity and the use of artificial intelligence. There is still a lot of uncertainty surrounding the capabilities and usage of AI. However, Europe is at a disadvantage here, as "on cybersecurity, hybrid threats, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the quest for space domination, Europe is like a child in a forest without a strong partner in the United States" (Sasnal, 2024). That being said, cybersecurity and AI is a sector that both parties seem to be taking seriously, with a formal agreement being signed earlier this year. In addition to the existing EU-US Joint Technology Competition Policy Dialogue, the AI Convention was signed by the US, Britain and several EU members in September. It is the first legally binding international treaty that focuses on AI and "addresses the risks AI may pose, while promoting responsible innovation" (Reuters, 2024). Additionally, "the signatories can choose to adopt or maintain legislative, administrative or other measures to give effect to the provisions" (Reuters, 2024). A tangible agreement such as this one is essential given the unpredictability of future collaboration willingness with the US; not only is it more formal and applicable than the outdated agreements that have been basis of recent transatlantic relations, but should Harris win, "given [her] deep appreciation of alliances, Europe may have the opportunity to innovate and co-create a new round of transatlantic policies to improve European security" (Berzina, 2024). Furthermore, "U.S. leadership is also critical in addressing other global threats that directly impact Europe, such as wars in the Middle East, cyberattacks, and freedom of navigation in international waters. A Harris administration that prioritizes international cooperation in confronting authoritarianism and is willing to engage in joint efforts with European allies would enhance the transatlantic ability to counter these threats. A more erratic, unilateralist, and isolationist approach that would be expected in a second Trump administration would leave Europe more vulnerable, as it relies heavily on U.S. intelligence, military capabilities, and diplomatic influence to manage these challenges" (Blockmans, 2024). This sector in particular would have Europe reap invaluable benefits from a Harris presidency, part of why many leaders are hopeful that she will win.

Conclusion: how Europe can protect itself

Europe often looks to the US for a blueprint of what to do. The close collaboration that exists now is guaranteed to change in at least some capacity, regardless of who wins the election. Polls are almost impossible to interpret given the closeness of the race and unpredictability of American voter turnout, so the EU needs to be prepared for two exceptionally different possible outcomes. Europe needs to begin taking initiative on its own and instituting safeguards to protect itself from a potential change in its most essential alliance. While hopeful for a Harris win given her openness to globalism, Europe needs to prepare for the very real possibility of a second Trump term as well. Right now, “without a clear commitment from the United States, NATO would lack the political leadership and the conventional and nuclear capabilities to defend Europe” (von Daniels, 2024), meaning European countries need to begin ramping up their own defense spending and international agency. Again, this will be an essential step regardless of who wins, but there is absolutely no indication of what the US’s NATO involvement will look like post-November 5th.

Regarding trade and the economy, “the EU should take the offensive and seek. To not only defend existing trade ties, but boot transatlantic co-operation” (Berg and Meyers, 2024). The whole point of transatlantic relations is that they are bilateral, and not a one-way street. The European Union, and other countries in Europe, are powerful actors. They are completely capable of initiating conversations, perhaps even to collaborate with the US on tackling China and continuing to progress with concrete agreements relating to free trade and technology, cybersecurity and AI. This would be even more effective if EU members could come together in a unified front and work on resolving the current fractures that are continuing to grow. Diplomacy is going to be key, regardless of who wins, and can be used to both candidates’ advantages on tackling issues such as China.

There is simply no way to know who will come out on top, even on Election Day. All that Europe can do is hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and continue to bolster their own defense and policy initiatives; “while there are differences between the two presidential candidates, it is increasingly clear that the EU has to take more responsibility for its own security and foreign policy, whoever is in the White House, both for the present and in preparation for a future in which U.S. leaders pursue policies that could leave Europe exposed” (Ero, 2024).

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