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The End of the Atlantic Era?

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A Historical Perspective

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Summary

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With transatlantic relations having entered a period of profound crisis since early 2025, this paper argues that disagreement has long been an intrinsic feature of the Atlantic partnership. From the fraught inter-war years to the institutionalisation of cooperation under NATO in 1949, the relationship has repeatedly been tested. Major episodes demonstrate that discord has been the rule rather than the exception. These include the Suez Crisis, disputes over nuclear strategy between Adenauer and Kennedy, divisions over the Vietnam War, the oil shocks of the 1970s and, especially, the Iraq War of 2003. Yet these crises unfolded within a shared strategic and civilisational framework that ultimately preserved alliance cohesion.

The current rupture differs in kind. While cooperation endured throughout and after various crises, the 2025–6 crisis reflects a deeper divergence of worldview. Under altered global power conditions marked by China's rise and Russia's revisionism, US engagement in Europe no longer resembles the post-1949 model. The US has adopted a more transactional posture, questioning long-standing assumptions about sovereignty, territorial integrity and even the political value of European integration.

This shift is unfolding amid high-intensity war in Europe, an eroding shared historical memory, demographic change and growing uncertainty over deterrence. The paper concludes that preserving the transatlantic bond requires strategic adaptation. Europe must strengthen its credible hard power, reaffirm the Alliance's normative foundations, reinvest in the shared political culture and assume greater responsibility as a co-equal partner in order to sustain institutional pillars such as NATO in the more fragmented international order.

Keywords Europe – US – Transatlantic relations – Cold War – Iraq War



Introduction

The debate on the state of transatlantic relations is polarised: some argue that the second Trump term marks the Alliance's definitive collapse.¹ Conversely, a more reassuring perspective holds that current tensions are cyclical, pointing to past crises that ultimately did not destroy the Alliance.² Each reading has its shortcomings, though for different reasons.

It is not 'the end', because international politics is allergic to linear conclusions. A sudden 180-degree turn is always possible; black swans have a habit of appearing precisely when policy analysts begin speaking in definitive terms.³ Strategic shocks, leadership changes or shared external threats can compress time and reset trajectories overnight. But it is also not 'business as usual'. The crises of the past, each dramatic, each unique, were disputes that took place within a shared strategic structure. What distinguishes the present moment is not the existence of disagreement, but its nature. Previous crises tested the Alliance's resilience; this one is testing its underlying premises.

To assess the current moment, we must situate it within the history of past transatlantic crises and then define an appropriate European response. This paper adopts a *longue durée* perspective on the history of transatlantic relations, avoiding already extensively covered ground. It proceeds as follows: it traces the historical evolution of transatlantic relations, from a brief reflection on the inter-war period to the Iraq War of 2003. Key episodes—including Suez, Vietnam, the crises of the 1970s and Iraq—are examined, highlighting recurring patterns of strain and adaptation. These developments were not linear; rather, they formed a dynamic, non-linear system of mutual influence, marked by fluctuations, reversals and interdependence rather than sequential causality. In the final section, the paper identifies what distinguishes the current rupture from earlier historical ones, before concluding with policy-oriented reflections on Europe's strategic response.

On the conceptual level, one central challenge lies in defining what is meant by transatlantic relations. The term may refer to institutions, shared norms and common patterns of strategic thinking, or encompass all of these elements collectively. It is inherently fluid: in one sense, it may refer to bilateral relations

¹ *Economist*, 'Europe's Five Stages of Grief for the Transatlantic Alliance', 22 January 2026; N. Witney, 'The Death of the West', ECFR, 12 December 2025.

² J. Janes and M. Rühle, 'Transatlantische Beziehungen: Ende der Geschichte?', *Die Zeit*, 29 January 2026; D. Hale, 'The Transatlantic Alliance Will Survive Just Fine', Middle East Institute, 28 January 2026.

³ N. N. Taleb, *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2010), xxii.



between the US and individual European states or to the EU only, as ‘Brussels’; in another, it may denote the dynamics within the NATO alliance as the principal institutional framework of the partnership. This analysis does not seek to draw rigid distinctions among these categories. Instead, it approaches transatlantic relations as an integrated whole, recognising the interconnected nature of their institutional, political and strategic dimensions.

From Versailles to NATO

The first serious attempt to establish a stable transatlantic bond emerged in the aftermath of the Great War. Yet this effort largely faltered. The reasons behind America’s withdrawal from Europe after the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 were complex and extended beyond the commonly cited ‘isolationism’ of Congress.

The US was confronted with, as it perceived them, the entrenched practices of old European diplomacy, and concluded that non-involvement was preferable to partial engagement, which could only compromise its principles and diminish its standing. Financial disparities also played a crucial role: Europe was deeply dependent on American capital, and US policymakers recognised the political difficulties of such a relationship.⁴ A perfect example of this dependency was the Weimar Republic, which sought to position itself as ‘too big to fail’ by borrowing heavily from the US.⁵ Any meaningful European reconstruction would require the US to provide not only financial backing but also political, military and strategic leadership—a commitment it was unwilling to make. The direct experience of industrialised warfare and the trauma of the Great War further reinforced American caution, leaving the society wary of entanglement in European conflicts.⁶ All of this resulted in deliberately limited engagement in European affairs. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression effectively silenced the voices of those in Washington, in both parties, who might have entertained a more active transatlantic role.

Meanwhile, early European Atlanticists emerged, including Austen Chamberlain, Ramsay MacDonald, Gustav Stresemann and Aristide Briand. They saw cooperation with the US as key to securing peace and rebuilding Europe after the Great War.⁷

⁴ A. Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 65–7.

⁵ Z. Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 241–3.

⁶ M. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷ Tooze, *The Deluge*, 23.



The Second World War fundamentally transformed transatlantic relations. Going against the orthodox view, it was not the attack on Pearl Harbour but the French collapse in June 1940 that prompted the colossal US armament programme.⁸ Engagement in Europe continued with the Marshall Plan, which sought to stabilise European economies and counter the Soviet ideological influence, despite facing significant domestic political challenges in the US. This engagement was then decisively consolidated during the Berlin Blockade, which triggered the full American political, military and institutional commitment to Europe. The establishment of NATO in 1949 marked a further shift. The Alliance's creation, particularly the formulation of Article 5, introduced a collective security structure unseen since the Congress of Vienna and the Quadruple Alliance.⁹ Even more historically significant was the fact that this new structure was, in effect, led by the US, marking the clear assertion of an American presence in Europe.

Suez

The first, and, according to prominent Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, most serious post-war crisis between the allies occurred far beyond the formal structures of NATO.¹⁰ In 1956 Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in breach of an agreement with the US, accepted arms from the Soviet Union, prompting Washington to suspend financial support for the Aswan Dam project. As a result, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal—an artery vital to international trade—from which British troops had only recently withdrawn under a formal agreement. London and Paris perceived Nasser's actions as both a threat and an opportunity. Anthony Eden, who had just succeeded Winston Churchill, saw in the crisis a chance to step out of Churchill's shadow; a decisive and successful operation would demonstrate his leadership credentials. In Paris, the socialist government of Prime Minister Guy Mollet regarded Nasser's pan-Arabism as an existential threat to France's waning influence in the Maghreb. The American journalist Janet Flanner wrote at the time that the British and French, gripped by a 'Munich complex', viewed Nasser as an 'Arab Hitler' and were therefore prepared to risk war.¹¹

⁸ A. Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 402–7.

⁹ M. Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy After Napoleon* (London: Tauris & Co, 2013), 375–7.

¹⁰ J. L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 173.

¹¹ I. Kershaw, *Roller-Coaster: Europe, 1950–2017* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 73–4.



Perceiving the absence of a firm American response, Britain took the initiative, secretly coordinating a military operation with France and Israel, without informing Washington. Israel, directly interested in removing Nasser, was to attack the Sinai Peninsula, after which Britain and France would ostensibly intervene as neutral parties to restore order and assume control of the canal. Israel's operation began on the 29 October 1956, and within days, Nasser had closed the Suez Canal to international shipping. On the 5 November, British and French paratroopers began landing near the canal.

The White House reacted with categorical outrage to the clandestine operation and the lack of consultation with Washington. The Soviet Union threatened Britain and France with missile strikes, and international pressure mounted dramatically. The US explicitly warned London that the US Treasury would take severe measures against the pound unless Britain halted the operation. The UN condemned the intervention, while the US and the Soviet Union—at the very moment that Soviet tanks were suppressing protesters in Hungary—both denounced Britain and France, as well as Israel. Britain, this time without consulting France, reached an agreement with the US and suspended the operation. A UN peacekeeping mission was deployed to oversee the Suez Canal, and British and French forces had withdrawn by the end of 1956.

The Suez Crisis is sometimes interpreted as one of the final, unsuccessful attempts by the former colonial empires to maintain control over their dominions. While this interpretation is valid, an even more significant dimension concerns agency in post-war international relations. For Britain, the crisis signalled that no major international decision or action could be undertaken without consultation with the US. Anthony Eden's political career effectively ended in the aftermath of Suez, and his successor, Harold Macmillan, was tasked with restoring the virtually collapsed Anglo-American 'special relationship'.¹² For France, the crisis led to the conclusion, central to Gaullism, that the US could not be relied upon to guarantee Europe's security, which therefore had to be built by Europeans themselves, and also that the UK would ultimately always side with the US.

For the US, however, the outcome was more complex. Not only did Washington temporarily undermine trust among its key NATO allies, but Nasser's diplomatic victory—consolidating his rule and advancing a pro-Soviet agenda—also led to a temporary loss of American influence in this strategic region.

¹² D. Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain From Suez to the Beatles* (Little Brown Book Group, 2005), 22–5.



Considered alongside earlier disputes over Indochina and European defence, the crisis was the first clear sign that, despite a shared stance towards the Soviet Union, the US, on the one hand, and France and Britain, on the other, diverged on wider questions of international politics. With Suez, those differences became unmistakably public.

Flexible response and the tragedy of Vietnam

At the beginning of the 1960s, the arrival of John F. Kennedy in the White House marked the start of a new political era. Young, dynamic and emblematic of a new generation, Kennedy symbolised a break with the past.

He assembled a largely unfamiliar national security team, composed of figures who had not been central to the Second World War or the early Cold War years. They came into office convinced that mutual nuclear deterrence was a *fait accompli* and a stabilising factor in Europe. In their view, the central arena of East–West competition was shifting towards what would soon be called the ‘Third World’, with Vietnam emerging as a critical test case and strategic fulcrum.¹³ These newcomers saw little value in consulting those who had earned their reputations during the Second World War and the early Cold War, a stance that generated unease among the US’s European allies.

Quite soon, this approach began to cause concern in the Federal Republic of Germany. The rapid expansion of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal—and its attainment of nuclear parity with the US—prompted serious deliberations within Adenauer’s Chancellery over whether Bonn itself might ultimately require nuclear weapons. The Kennedy administration adhered to a categorical position of nuclear non-proliferation. Moreover, the Pentagon under Robert McNamara began developing the strategy of flexible response, replacing the doctrine of massive retaliation, by emphasising a range of non-nuclear responses to a potential Soviet invasion of West Germany.

Adenauer interpreted this shift as the end of the American nuclear guarantee and as an implicit US stance that it would not risk nuclear war over West Germany. In Bonn’s view, the changed American position became evident in August 1961, when, in the context of the construction of the Berlin Wall, Washington failed to offer a firm response. Yet Kennedy’s handling of the

¹³ These insights are drawn from the author’s private correspondence with James Sherr OBE, non-resident fellow at Chatham House and honorary fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security, to whom the author extends his sincere gratitude.



Berlin Crisis was cautious rather than weak: he reinforced the US troop presence in Berlin and signalled resolve, even if he avoided direct military confrontation. Adenauer perceived this restraint as insufficient, reflecting not only a policy disagreement but also a clash between two different generations.¹⁴ The 80-year-old Adenauer, shaped by the catastrophes that had ravaged Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, was facing the young Kennedy, who was determined to reshape the dynamics of the Cold War. The tension between them was palpable, yet events continued to unfold.

The Vietnam War, at its most intense stage, after Kennedy's assassination and under the direction of Lyndon B. Johnson, highlighted far deeper, structural strains in transatlantic relations. The US saw Vietnam as one front in the global struggle against Communism. Europe, at best, viewed it as a regional conflict; at worst, on the left, as an expression of American imperialism. European governments also relied on a legalistic argument. The Washington Treaty contained no mutual defence obligations outside the North Atlantic Treaty area, and Vietnam clearly lay beyond it. Washington nonetheless asked all major European capitals to contribute troops and issue explicit diplomatic statements of support. No major Western European NATO power contributed combat forces during the decade-long conflict.

Britain's position was particularly complicated. From 1964 onward, London faced severe balance-of-payments and currency crises. The Labour government of Harold Wilson sought US financial assistance, while the Johnson administration pressed for British military participation in Vietnam. Wilson attempted to balance the relationship through diplomatic support that stopped short of troop deployment. One of the more colourful episodes involved Princess Margaret, the Countess of Snowdon, whose visit to Washington reportedly helped smooth relations at a delicate moment.¹⁵

Even deeper fissures appeared in Paris, however. President Charles de Gaulle called the US war in Vietnam 'unwinnable' and 'immoral', describing US actions as 'colonialist'. Since the end of the Second World War, US financial assistance had helped rebuild France's devastated economy, and Washington had initially viewed de Gaulle's return to power favourably, hoping for political stability and a resolution of the Algerian conflict. However, although de Gaulle ended the war in Algeria, early diplomatic encounters revealed sharp divergences.

¹⁴ D. Junker (ed.), *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1990, vol. 2, A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ S. Haynes, 'The True Story Behind Princess Margaret's Storyline on The Crown Season 3', *Time*, 15 November 2019.



De Gaulle sought to challenge the bipolar structure of the Cold War and distrusted the 'Anglo-Saxons' from the outset.¹⁶ He envisaged France as an independent pole, equal to the US and the Soviet Union, and distinct from both. Yet it would be misleading to portray him as simply anti-American: he was equally determined to preserve France's independence from Moscow. He remained firmly anti-Soviet and committed to Western defence, even as he resisted American dominance.

It was in this context that NATO experienced one of its most serious institutional crises. After vocal disagreements over US actions in Vietnam, de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's integrated military structures, prompting the relocation of NATO headquarters from Paris to Mons and the redeployment of American troops from French territory.

By the late 1960s, with Richard Nixon in the White House, the sentiment was increasingly circulating in parts of Western Europe that not only the Soviet Union but also the US was responsible for perpetuating Cold War tensions. A discourse on the moral equivalence of Washington and Moscow emerged among wide segments of Western European intellectual and political society.¹⁷ This was particularly true in the wake of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the student revolution of the same year and the ongoing war in Vietnam. Though such views did not become dominant at the governmental level, as most European governments remained Atlanticist, there was a shift in the intellectual climate during this period.

Ostpolitik is an often overlooked element of transatlantic relations. West Germany engaged with Eastern Bloc states to reinforce containment by showcasing its economic success and exposing the weaknesses of the German Democratic Republic. Initially met with scepticism by the Nixon administration, this policy later gained US support, particularly as it aligned with the Helsinki process, which recognised the territorial status quo of the Soviet bloc (!) while clearly leaving room for political change.

The global oil crisis that began in 1973 served as yet another illustration of diverging strategic visions. In response to US support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War, the member states of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries drastically reduced oil production and exports. As a result, Western countries faced acute oil shortages. European states responded with measures directed against the US. Belgium temporarily prohibited the US from using its air bases for refuelling purposes. West Germany openly objected to the transportation of American military assistance to Israel through German ports,

¹⁶ J. L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 138.

¹⁷ H. Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 57.



and all European states, except Portugal and the Netherlands, denied base access rights to US transport aircraft on their way to resupply the Israelis, forcing them to fly an extra 1,000 to 2,000 miles.¹⁸ The government of Harold Wilson effectively imposed a temporary ban on the US use of British military infrastructure in Cyprus. Essentially, several European states distanced themselves from US Middle East policy and pursued more independent Arab diplomacy. Henry Kissinger, then serving as Secretary of State in the administration of Gerald Ford, reacted to the response of European allies by stating, 'I don't care what happens to NATO. I am appalled.'¹⁹

The end of the century

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, transatlantic relations entered one of their most cohesive yet transformative phases. The parallel tenures of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl created strong political alignment across the Atlantic during the final years of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union was driven by internal economic weakness and the global economic conditions of the late 1980s, compounded by Western advances in military technology that intensified external pressure and forced the USSR into an arms race that it could no longer afford. But it was the personal trust among the Western leaders that facilitated a coordinated response and helped them to manage the rapid change.²⁰

Despite occasional disagreements—most notably over Pershing missile deployments in West Germany and energy cooperation with the Soviet Union—further deep crises, like those that had marked earlier decades, did not develop. Even the Socialist government of François Mitterrand ultimately operated within a shared Western strategic framework.

German reunification in 1989–90 became the central test for the Alliance. While Paris and London initially viewed the prospect with scepticism, Washington strongly supported rapid unification in coordination with the Kohl government. The successful conclusion of the Two Plus Four process demonstrated both American influence and the Alliance's ability to adapt to the end of bipolarity. The 1991 Gulf War marked a high point of transatlantic unity. The US-led coalition enjoyed broad backing from NATO allies, even if contributions varied. At the same time, the Alliance was redefining its purpose, as reflected

¹⁸ P. Gordon and J. Shapiro, *Allies At War: America, Europe and the Crisis Over Iraq* (Ohio: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 30.

¹⁹ *Foreign Affairs*, 'The Year of Europe?', 1 (1974).

²⁰ S. Kotkin, *Uncivil Society* (New York: Modern Library, 2009).



in NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept. Moving beyond the Cold War paradigm that had placed deterrence at the core of its mission, NATO adopted a broader understanding of security in the Euro-Atlantic area. This shift emphasised deep political cooperation with Russia and the countries that had regained their independence following the collapse of the USSR, while also prioritising crisis management and addressing emerging sources of instability.²¹ These adjustments took place amid influential voices in Western political and academic circles arguing that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO had lost its original rationale and was becoming strategically obsolete.²²

The early post-Cold War years exposed some limits. The wars in the former Yugoslavia revealed the absence of a coherent proactive Western strategy and highlighted capability gaps between the US and the European allies. Only after NATO's 1995 intervention in Bosnia and the 1999 air campaign against Yugoslavia did the Alliance reassert its relevance in crisis management. The late 1980s and 1990s thus marked a transition in transatlantic relations: strategic convergence at the end of the Cold War, followed by adjustment to the post-bipolar order. Unity persisted, but it no longer rested on the clarity of having the clear antagonist that was the Soviet Union.

Allies at war

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 initially appeared to reaffirm the vitality of the Atlantic alliance. For the first and only time in its history, NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Notably, this was done institutionally and without an explicit request from Washington. Allied solidarity was immediate and comprehensive. At France's initiative, on 12 September, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution offering the US any assistance necessary. In Afghanistan, all major European powers—Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and others—joined the US-led operation. In its initial phase, America's war on terror seemed to be a genuinely collective undertaking of the transatlantic community and a broader international coalition.

Yet the initial military success in Afghanistan redirected the strategic gaze of the administration of George W. Bush towards Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime, alongside those of Iran and North Korea, was branded part of the 'axis of evil'. Washington argued that Baghdad supported terrorism and, through its regional ambitions, contributed to chronic instability in the Middle East. Cen-

²¹ NATO, *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept* (8 November 1991).

²² J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War', *International Security* 15/1 (1990).



tral to the case for war was the alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction. In retrospect, the American and British political leaderships committed a fundamental error: intelligence services were tasked with finding evidence that Iraq was developing such weapons, and evidence was duly produced.²³

As Washington sought diplomatic cover for military action, it turned to the UN for a mandate. That authorisation was not forthcoming, primarily because of the opposition and threatened vetoes of France, Russia and China in the Security Council. In Europe, American intentions were most forcefully criticised by France and Germany. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder won re-election in September 2002 with a clear message of distancing Berlin from Washington. As Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad observed, for the first time since the Second World War, a German party had won elections using openly critical rhetoric with regard to America.²⁴ After Schröder's victory, Bush declined to congratulate him, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice described US–German relations as 'poisoned'.²⁵ Germany's justice minister went so far as to compare Bush's political tactics on Iraq to those of Hitler, an episode that further embittered relations.²⁶

France articulated its opposition in a little more measured tone. President Jacques Chirac emphasised the necessity of a UN mandate and the primacy of international law. Nevertheless, on the eve of the invasion in March 2003, France, Germany and Russia issued a joint declaration at the UN opposing military intervention.

The crisis extended into NATO itself. In preparing for the invasion, Washington sought Alliance support for defensive deployments to Türkiye in case Iraq retaliated against a NATO member. Because of de Gaulle's earlier withdrawal of France from NATO's integrated military structure, formal consent from Paris was not required. Berlin was eventually persuaded, but Belgium, under Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, resisted most strongly. The US warned that, for the first time in NATO's history, the Alliance might be forced to act without consensus. Britain under Tony Blair argued that a failure to show solidarity with Türkiye would mark the end of NATO as an effective alliance. Belgium ultimately relented at the last moment, but the episode underscored how fragile intra-alliance unity had become.²⁷

²³ B. Macintyre, *The Spy and the Traitor: The Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 133–5.

²⁴ G. Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945: From 'Empire' by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 277.

²⁵ J. Hooper, 'US–German Relations Strained Over Iraq', *Guardian*, 24 September 2002.

²⁶ M. R. Gordon and B. E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129–30.



If Afghanistan had demonstrated cohesion, Iraq revealed fragmentation. Britain emerged as Washington's closest diplomatic and military partner. Italy and Spain, led respectively by Silvio Berlusconi and conservative José María Aznar, also aligned themselves with the US. Even more emphatically, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe voiced support. In January 2003 US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed Germany and France as 'problems' and introduced a distinction: 'You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe.' The 'new Europe', he argued, consisted of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and the Baltic states—countries that had not 'turned their backs' on the US.²⁸ Public letters from 8 European leaders in support of the US and, separately, from the 'Vilnius 10' reinforced this cleavage, provoking fury in Paris and Berlin. Chirac warned that EU candidate countries that supported Washington should be careful, implying that there could be consequences for their European integration ambitions. The message circulating in Washington, however, was that it was Germany and France—not the US—that were isolated.

In November 2002, the Bush administration, anticipating opposition, announced the formation of a 'coalition of the willing'—states prepared to support US action even without a UN mandate or NATO consensus. This move effectively sidestepped multilateral constraints and institutionalised the emerging rift. The US, buoyed by overwhelming military superiority since the Gulf War and its relative rise in power during the late 1990s and early 2000s, possessed both the confidence and the capability to pursue regime change in a regional power such as Iraq. Many European leaders, by contrast, besides other legitimate concerns, were constrained by large Muslim populations—approximately five million in France and three million in Germany—and feared domestic radicalisation. Moreover, Europe's historical experience with terrorism—from Northern Ireland to the Basque conflict, and from the Italian Red Brigades and the German Red Army Faction to Islamist networks—had led many Europeans to internalise terrorism as a long-lasting danger rather than an existential threat demanding preventive war.

Public opinion further strained transatlantic ties. February 2003 witnessed some of the largest anti-war demonstrations in European history: around one million people marched in London and a similar number in Rome. By spring 2003 Washington and the European capitals were trading threats. US congressmen spoke of boycotting French and German goods; voices in Paris and Berlin floated the idea of reciprocal measures. Even moderate commentators such as Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* suggested that the French

²⁸ BBC News, 'Outrage at "Old Europe" Remarks', 23 January 2003.



were becoming ‘an enemy’ of the US.²⁹ Donald Rumsfeld compared Germany’s policy to that of traditional US adversaries such as Cuba and Libya.³⁰

Well-respected analysts, from Francis Fukuyama to Henry Kissinger, argued that the frictions were systemic rather than transitional. Kissinger warned that if prevailing trends persisted, the international system would be fundamentally altered; the historian Tony Judt spoke of witnessing the dissolution of the post-war order. According to American international security experts Philip Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, the Iraq crisis constituted the gravest transatlantic rupture since Suez.³¹

What made the crisis particularly consequential was that it revealed divergent attitudes towards power, military force, sovereignty and the role of international law. It also introduced a new element into transatlantic relations: the enlargement of NATO in 1999–2004 and the resulting American discourse that contrasted an allegedly anti-American ‘old Europe’ with a pro-American ‘new Europe’.

The Iraq War did not end the Atlantic alliance. But in the months leading up to the 2003 invasion, it resembled a dysfunctional family bound by history and institutions, but divided over fundamental principles. The episode exposed not a policy disagreement, but a widening Atlantic drift, the consequences of which would reverberate beyond Baghdad.

Conclusions and political considerations

The US withdrew from Iraq in 2011 under the presidency of Barack Obama, who famously launched the reset with Russia after its war against Georgia, and separately made a conscious effort to repair relations with Germany and France. At the macro level, the latter effort largely succeeded. The joint operation in Libya with France and the UK seemed to confirm that the Alliance could still act together. In 2014 Russia’s annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine once again placed the US and Europe unequivocally on the same side. However cautiously calibrated the Western response may appear in retrospect, there was no ambiguity about the aggressor or about the need for coordinated sanctions.

²⁹ Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies At War*, 3.

³⁰ *Independent*, ‘Rumsfeld “Mends Fences” by Lumping Germany With Cuba and Libya in an Axis of Bad Boys’, 8 February 2003.

³¹ Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies At War*, 5.



Even the first presidency of Donald Trump did not fundamentally dismantle the transatlantic framework. After his inauguration in 2017, his administration ultimately functioned within its established mechanisms. One week after taking office, he expressed a 'commitment' to NATO.³² His rhetoric was disruptive, but the institutional architecture endured. Crises remained a feature of the relationship, yet they resembled earlier disputes—sharp, emotional, but ultimately contained within a shared strategic language.

The crisis of 2025–6, however, is qualitatively different. The present situation is unfolding under fundamentally altered strategic conditions. Europe is once again the theatre of high-intensity war. The EU and NATO are financially and militarily supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. But since the beginning of the second Trump presidency, Washington's posture has undergone a radical shift. The US has refused to state clearly how this war began. The legal reality of the aggression, what in international criminal law would constitute a 'crime against peace', has faded from American diplomatic language. The origins of the war no longer shape how Washington projects its diplomacy towards Kyiv, Moscow or the European capitals. The US rejects the principle that borders should not be changed by force.

Furthermore, US pressure on Europe over defence spending is broadly justified, but it falls somewhat outside the traditional transatlantic framework. US policy towards Europe reflects a strategic worldview that goes beyond defence budgets.

This marks a profound departure. Previous crises were disputes over tactics, burden-sharing or methods. Suez concerned hierarchy and consultation. Vietnam concerned scope and legitimacy outside the NATO treaty area. Iraq concerned preventive war and multilateral authorisation. But in none of these cases did either side doubt that Americans and Europeans were fundamentally on the same side of history. Today, these assumptions can no longer be taken for granted.

The divergence is one of worldview. Recent US strategic documents express open dissatisfaction with the EU as a political project—an extraordinary reversal of decades of cautious but consistent US support for European integration. What was once seen as a stabilising pillar of the Atlantic order is now treated with suspicion. This symbolic shift signals not merely policy disagreement but misalignment.

Equally significant is the erosion of shared historical memory. The lived experience of the joint struggle against fascism and Communism is receding. Demo-

³² BBC News, 'Theresa May Visit: UK and US "Committed" to NATO', 27 January 2017.



graphic change on both sides of the Atlantic is reshaping political expectations.³³ In the US, growing segments of society possess deeper cultural ties to Latin America than to Europe. Europe itself has become more diverse (not necessarily for the good) and internally pluralistic. The Atlantic bond, once embedded in collective memory, can no longer be assumed to be the default orientation.

There has also been a transformation in political style and leadership. Earlier transatlantic leaders—even when they clashed—operated within broadly similar cultural and intellectual frameworks. Today, political norms have shifted. The second Trump presidency embodies a mercantilist and even Darwinian approach to international politics; it defines US interests in starkly unilateral terms. Alliances are treated as abstractions; mutual interests are subordinated to unilateral conceptions of gain. Values play little discernible role. The notion that Denmark or Canada is not merely ‘some country’ but a treaty ally appears to be of no significance. This signals a departure from the very language and actions through which the Alliance has historically understood itself.

At the structural level, additional pressures compound the divergence. There is no unified transatlantic strategy towards China. A future crisis in the Taiwan Strait would constitute a severe stress test for alliance cohesion. Nuclear deterrence has also entered a grey zone, with Russia employing calibrated nuclear signalling in ways that exploit Western caution. The Alliance lacks the doctrinal clarity that characterised much of the Cold War.

Moreover, the US is no longer as singularly dominant as it was in the 1990s. China’s rise, Russia’s revisionism and the diffusion of power are complicating the global environment. In such a context, strategic recalibration may appear rational from a US domestic perspective. Yet from the European vantage point—particularly amid war on the continent—such shifts generate existential anxiety.

The present crisis is distinct because its underlying premises are shifting across multiple dimensions—strategic, normative, demographic and psychological. Crises have always punctuated transatlantic relations, but the current one differs in kind: it is unfolding amid a fundamental divergence of worldview. That is why this moment feels unprecedented—and why the response must be strategic, not merely reactive.

In practical terms, this implies that Europe can no longer rely exclusively on assumptions of automatic alignment. Strengthening credible European hard power becomes not a gesture of separation, but a condition for preserving the Alliance itself. Accelerating defence integration, expanding the production of criti-

³³ K. Welle, ‘Donald Trump, the Revolt of the Lower Middle Class and the Next Phase of European Integration’, *European View* 24/1 (2025).



cal munitions and advanced capabilities, and enhancing Europe's deterrence capacity will make the transatlantic partnership more resilient to political volatility. Strategic maturity requires Europe to act as a security provider in its own right.

At the same time, the normative foundations of the Alliance must be reaffirmed. Principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and the prohibition of aggression are not rhetorical additions to NATO; they constitute its moral and legal core. Their consistent articulation remains essential, especially when geopolitical language becomes more transactional. Preserving this normative language safeguards the identity of the Alliance.

Equally important is cultivation of the shared memory and institutional ties that have historically underpinned transatlantic cooperation. Investments in strategic education, elite networks and public diplomacy could help to sustain the intellectual and cultural infrastructure of the Atlantic bond. Alliances endure not only through treaties, but through habits of cooperation and mutual understanding.

Finally, Europe must avoid strategic infantilisation and must act as a co-equal pole within the Alliance. Rather than framing its policies solely in reaction to Washington, Europe should develop self-sufficient yet complementary strategies, grounded in responsibility for its own security. A stable transatlantic relationship depends on partnership rather than dependence, on mutual respect rather than hierarchy. Only under such conditions can the Alliance adapt to structural change without losing its core purpose.

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