

# A world order in dissolution. What now?

by Bo Stråth | Jul 7, 2025

## 1. The meeting of empires in Europe and Europe's response

### Transatlantic Relations: A Brief History Since 1945

In 1945, the United States emerged as the dominant world power. Unlike after World War I, the president and Congress concluded that the country was a world power and acted accordingly. The Soviet Union soon emerged as a challenger to that position, and the United States took up the challenge. With the European empires having self-destructed, the two remaining empires divided Europe between them. The Marshall Plan of 1947 ushered in a new phase in transatlantic relations, more intense than before and with much stronger American leadership, all against the backdrop of the Cold War. The NATO military alliance, with West Germany joining from 1955, underscored the military importance of the relationship. The Korean War of 1950-53 strengthened them during the nuclear crisis of the 1950s.

However, after the Congo, Berlin, and Cuban crises of 1960–62, which in retrospect appear to be the culmination of the nuclear threat, relations were never harmonious for any significant period. Charles de Gaulle openly distrusted the dollar as a global currency and the United States as a global power. France left NATO's military arm. The abandonment of the dollar's gold standard in 1971–73 further strained relations. The euphoria following the fall of the Soviet Union changed the conditions for transatlantic cooperation. The global perspective came to the fore. This did not fundamentally change when September 11, 2001, put an end to the dream of the end of history and a single liberal world, as envisioned by Francis Fukuyama (1992). Samuel Huntington (1996) had already rejected Fukuyama's worldview a few years earlier, when he described the future as a clash of civilizations. The attack on the Twin Towers seemed to confirm Huntington's thesis and led to a neoconservative wave of moralism, with a worldwide struggle for democracy and Western values. The 2003 Iraq War was the culmination of the campaign that fractured European cooperation. As is well known, it was a war justified with lies. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld imperiously divided Europe between the old, which refused to participate in the war, and the new, which joined the hunt for Hussein in the "coalition of the willing." Robert Kagan's book, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (2003), which spoke of the United States as Mars and Europe as Venus, gave expression to the strong transatlantic tensions spreading within Europe. Formally, NATO was not involved. However, during this turbulent period of transatlantic tensions, a détente occurred between Russia and the West that seemed to merge into a single whole. The new Russia was linked to NATO through the Partnership for Peace of 1994 and the NATO-Russia Council of 2002. During the period of mutual understanding in relations with Russia, NATO increasingly became

an international force for robust police/military intervention in local conflicts at the global level and less and less a defense force against invasion. In the spirit of mutual understanding, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary became NATO members in 1999. The Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia followed in 2004, the same year that most Eastern European countries joined the EU. The spirit of consensus that accompanied NATO expansion, however, was short-lived. Russia had had a complicated relationship with Georgia since the collapse of the Soviet Empire. A movement to bring the country closer to the West, the EU, and NATO was strong in Georgia. With President Saakashvili, who was clearly Western-oriented, this movement gained a face. The president's increasingly vocal ambitions negatively impacted relations between NATO and Russia, which deteriorated significantly starting in 2006. In February 2007, Putin gave a widely attended speech at the annual security conference in Munich, in which he clearly distanced himself from the new world order, which he characterized as monopolistic. It was clear who was targeted by his accusations of monopolistic ambitions. In May 2007, the United States began talks with the governments of Warsaw and Prague regarding the installation of missiles in Poland and related radar facilities in the Czech Republic. Georgia's plans to join NATO led to the 2008 war in Georgia. The Euromaidan protests in Ukraine from November 2013 to February 2014 protested the pro-Russian government's decision not to sign an association agreement with the EU. The protests ended with the president fleeing and Russia's response, with military infiltration into Donbas and the annexation of Crimea.

Growing tensions between Russia and NATO over power in the Caucasus and Ukraine temporarily strengthened transatlantic relations after 2014. But with Donald Trump in the White House from 2017 to 2021, tensions escalated again, especially over the financing of military cooperation, where the United States was initially the most vocal financial supporter. Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 strengthened the spirit of cooperation, but with Trump's return to power in January 2025, the Atlantic divide deepened as Trump moved closer to Russia.

The post-1945 Western order centered on the United States is dead. Since 1949, the cornerstone of that order has been NATO, which is more central than the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF, and the World Bank. The essence of NATO is Article 5, which concerns mutual assistance. In an emergency, this article cannot be legally challenged, but it is moral and based on mutual trust. Trump has undermined that trust by making the article a matter for the Trump regime to assess whether European members have paid enough for their own self-defense. It has been clear since 2014, and emphatically emphasized since February 2022, that the threat to NATO is Russia. This is stated without addressing the much-debated question of whether NATO, from Russia's perspective after 1990, was a threat to Russia, but with the observation that the debate does not in any case provide a basis for Russia's attack on Ukraine. After the full-scale war of aggression in February 2022, NATO has been increasingly reactivated in strategic thinking and planning as a

defense against invasion, the role it initially played. Trump's rapprochement with Russia behind Europe's back has underscored, even more than the financial controversy over defense spending, the disintegration of what used to be called the West. NATO formally continues, but the United States does not share its assessment of the threat from Europe.

## The situation in spring 2025

Since Trump's second inauguration, a profusion of commentaries has critiqued the disintegration of the world order and sought explanations both within and outside Trump himself, both long-term and short-term. The goal here is not to summarize the debate, but to identify some lines of argument as a basis for a discussion of what is happening and why. It is an irony of history that the community revolving around the concept of the West, created by an American president nearly 80 years ago, is now being torn apart by another American president. A transatlantic world order that is nearly eighty years old—no more, but no less—a history stretching from Truman to Trump, is being destroyed, deliberately, momentarily, and with a hammer. Ruling with presidential decrees and public statements, often brief and drastic on social media, Trump is shaping public opinion and creating facts that bypass Congress and provocatively challenge court decisions. Politics is accelerating and simplifying complex contexts. It arouses strong emotions and becomes polemical. It's about regaining America's lost greatness (MAGA, *Make America Great Again*). China and Europe/the EU are portrayed as the main causes. While China is treated with a certain rhetorical respect, criticism of Europe is more unrestrained. Vice President J.D. Vance's opening remarks at the annual Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2025 (White House, February 14, 2025) sparked astonishment, shock, and anger in Europe. In a confrontational style, Vance argued that Europe is not sufficiently democratic. Two things in particular distinguish Europe from the United States as a model to follow, and he called for improvements in these areas. Europe treats right-wing populist parties poorly. They must be clearly and unequivocally involved in parliamentary politics. The second point concerned restrictions on the freedom of digital platforms. These restrictions are an expression of anti-democratic shortcomings in freedom of expression that must be corrected. Trump's repeated territorial claims to Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal, along with threats of annexation, have constituted an open challenge to international law and reinforced the impression of a desired break with the world order established since 1945. In two cases, the claims were directed against countries that have been members of NATO since its founding in 1949.

In a speech on April 7, 2025, Trump's economic advisor, Stephen Miran, clarified the meaning of the MAGA fight. The United States provides two global public goods: a security umbrella controlled by the US military and the dollar, with US government bonds at its core, around which the international financial system revolves. Both are

costly for the United States, and the president wanted to make it clear that the United States is no longer willing to pay for other nations' free rides (White House statement, April 7, 2025). The security policy aspect was expressed in the assertion that European NATO members are not paying their fair share of defense costs, which Trump claims is 5% of GDP. This is sometimes phrased as if this refers to NATO members' contributions to the alliance's budget, when in reality the figure refers to their defense spending as a percentage of GDP, where the consensus has been 2%. He has made it clear that members who don't pay enough cannot expect active US support in the event of war. With his ostentatious rapprochement with Russia under the guise of a self-proclaimed mediator (in the war in Ukraine), Trump has undermined trust in the alliance even more than the doubts he has sown about Article 5. Trump has shaken the entire alliance. The divide on security policy is exacerbated by the divide on trade policy that Trump is creating with grotesque tariffs. The rules no longer apply. International politics based on the rules of international law and trade law is giving way to the arbitrariness of power politics. The new tariffs are a demonstrative break with the neoliberal world order built since the 1980s around the ideas of free global trade with production at the lowest cost in global supply chains, where precise timing replaces expensive warehouses, and where wages and social standards are pushed downward.

Protectionism is returning as a program for the first time since the 1930s, and the Trump administration's arguments are reminiscent of mercantilism. In his April 7 speech, President Trump's advisor, Miran, was clear about the purpose of the tariffs: to force other countries to pay tribute to maintain the American empire. The financial commitments force the United States to unfairly tax American workers, a claim that suggests that revenue from tariffs creates room for tax cuts. But the idea is also to force industrial companies to relocate production to the United States. The dollar as the world's standard currency has led to exchange rate distortions, which in turn have created unfair trade barriers and, in the long run, unsustainable trade surpluses with the United States. This argument applies to trade in goods, while ignoring the large US trade surpluses in services created by digital technology giants.

Both issue areas, security and trade policy, are polarized by a shameless image of Europe painted by the Trump regime, in which Europeans are free riders and parasites of the United States. They are free riders. China is the subject of the same caricature, but emotions seem stronger when it comes to Europe. European integration, culminating in the EU, was created to harm the United States. The president provides no evidence to support this thesis. In NATO, Europeans fail to do their fair share financially, and in trade, they unfairly exploit the United States. Europe appears not only as a caricature, but also as a declared enemy.

The conclusion is clear: the West as it emerged after 1945 no longer exists. The Trump regime is developing an enemy image in which the root of all evil lies in Europe. In an essay, Fintan O'Toole elaborates on Trump's Europhobia (O'Toole 2025). Although Trump's perception of reality is unstable and constantly evolving, he

has fixed ideas and immutable instincts. It is precisely these obsessions and instincts that are now redefining relations between the United States and Europe more dramatically than at any time since 1945. Trump is not abandoning Europe, he is trampling on it. His regime has not lost interest in Europe. It has developed a malicious interest in destroying the EU, writes O'Toole. Trump's hostility toward the EU first manifested itself in his enthusiastic support for Brexit. During his first presidential term, his belief that the EU is an "enemy" on par with China surfaced occasionally, but for the most part remained dormant. Now, the focus is no longer on abandoning Europe to its fate, but on undermining and reshaping the EU from within through open support for right-wing populist and extremist parties, as expressed by Musk, Vance, Rubio, and others. Not only can the EU no longer take the United States' benevolence for granted, but it must assume that active hostility could develop in concert or collaboration with Russia.

The major problem is that the Trump regime is not only intervening in specific policy areas, but is attacking the very system of norms that govern concepts like territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Trump is following Putin. This has tangible consequences, especially in international relations, where there is no Leviathan, a protective power that upholds norms and rules through police and military force. Trump attacks the norm of freedom of research and issues detailed instructions to threatened universities. He shows contempt for scientific knowledge.

The language that began with fake news and false or alternative truth during the first term is accelerating its departure from what was once considered the basis of reason. The scientific pursuit of objective knowledge, combined with the awareness that objectivity can be viewed from multiple perspectives and that ideological biases can cloud research, is being undermined, and we are witnessing a resurgence of witch hunts. Kant's critical reason as an academic principle of action is being rejected. The intention is perhaps to create a basis for replacing the philosopher's ideas with artificial intelligence produced by tech giants.

Language is radicalizing not only in the Orwellian sense, where war is called peace and peace is called war, but also by becoming more polarized and emotional. Immigration is called invasion. Emigration becomes remigration and deportation. It should be noted that this linguistic development is similar in Europe, where the immigration issue on both sides of the Atlantic is becoming a catalyst, a surrogate issue for a host of other social problems, which can be briefly summarized in two: the socioeconomic problems caused by the ravages of neoliberalism and its collapse in the speculative bubble of 2008, and climate change. Language is becoming more exaggerated. We lack a language that describes the new world as different from the democracy that was the standard. Its concepts utilize the democratic standard, but they are not adequate ( **Stråth & Trüper 2025** ). Europe clings to the ideals it believed in and continues to use the expressions that shaped those ideals instead of describing change. Europe wants to believe it's still in the heyday of democracy, when it was forever taken for granted. Europe sees itself as a contrast to the

fanaticism and cult of leadership that governs the United States, driven by powerful interests in alliance with algorithms. It is crucial for Europe to recognize the risks to democracy that the digital revolution has brought to Europe and to create a language that describes these risks. What kind of public sphere do social media constitute, compared to the public spheres that underpinned democracies in the 1950s and 1960s? The distinction between public and private, which Thomas Hobbes proposed to rulers nearly 400 years ago as a means to end decades of religious wars in Europe, is disintegrating as the private becomes public on social media. This voluntary renunciation of privacy is changing the conditions for social criticism and government control. Simmering emotions and simplifications that destroy complex values are infantilizing and brutalizing public debate. It's crucial for Europe to take control of algorithms and regulate them to save democracy. And quickly.

While the conflict between the United States and Europe is the main issue, it's important to remember that Europe is dangerously close to the United States in the development that is causing so much upheaval: the emotionalism and infantilization of public debate. The differences between the United States and Europe in terms of the intensity of social media should not be overstated. One could speak of a European turning point where everything is moving in the American direction. Europe would like to be, but it is not, a bastion of values. We must begin with this awareness.

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Signs of change in the United States emerged as early as the Iraq War, and the turnaround occurred with Trump's election to the presidency in 2016. European leaders had been reluctant to see him, hoping instead that his term would be temporary and that he would be open to dialogue during his term. In 2020, with Biden's election, they saw Trump as a footnote to history. Today, we know that Biden was a mere interlude. In the European debate ahead of the fall 2024 presidential elections, everyone professed to be preparing for Trump's return, but preparation largely consisted of convincing themselves, without thorough analysis, that Trump would be the same as last time and that the solution lay in finding a deal by flattering him. During the fall, preparations for Trump shifted more toward the hopes placed in Harris. None of the planners had imagined the Trump who returned, much less his actions on the Ukrainian issue. Everyone was taken by surprise by his determination, supported by the tech oligarchs, with or without chainsaws.

With intellectual authority, Jürgen Habermas described the rupture in stark terms in a March 2025 newspaper article (Habermas 2025). He speaks of an epochal rupture with profound consequences for Europe. If the EU fails to find a convincing response, Europe will be dragged into the vortex caused by the collapse of the superpower, he argues. Because it is, in effect, a power in decline, not on the rise. Habermas condemns the inability or lack of interest of European leaders, their

incomprehensible shortsightedness in considering the United States as a leading power. German Chancellor Scholz's unshakeable faith in the West's unity under Biden's US leadership in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has led other European leaders in the wrong direction, instead of pushing Europe to assume responsibility in Ukraine to defend its own security and European values. This failure proved disastrous when Trump began negotiating with Putin, bypassing the EU, which was forced to stand by, Habermas argues. With Trump II, the question of Ukraine's fate became a question of the EU's existential self-defense in a situation where it could not count on the protection of the United States.

Scholz certainly bears some responsibility for Europe's fixation on the United States after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, perhaps more than anyone else. In his defense, however, it can be said that Germany's ties with the West had been firmly rooted since the Adenauer era and were further strengthened after the abrupt end, in February 2022, of close relations with Russia under the motto "Change *through* Trade." These were ties that Willy Brandt had forged in the early 1970s in a completely different historical context, under the motto "Change *through* Rapprochement." When that motto took on a neoliberal formulation after 1990, the fateful idea arose that the market automatically governed the order. As finance minister in Angela Merkel's grand coalition, Scholz lost touch with Brandt's ideas, but he was by no means alone. In Germany, trust in the United States was as unshakeable as it was in Russia before February 2022, after people were able to dismiss Trump 1 with a sigh of relief as a mere parenthesis. Finally, Finland and Sweden's requests for NATO membership after Russia's attack on Ukraine demonstrate that Scholz's Germany was not alone in its trust in the United States.

If Scholz is now the most obvious candidate to be described as the Chamberlain of our time, the question is: who is Churchill? Here, one cannot but think of Ukrainian President Zelensky. Without delving into the details of their similarities, a crucial difference can be identified. Churchill had the support of the United States and, after the summer of 1941, also of the Soviet Union. The longer the war drags on, the more Zelensky seems to be left alone. Europe's impotence grows as Trump and Putin negotiate over Ukraine. Europe is faced with the task of assuming the United States' role in supporting Ukraine, but it seems there is no place for Europe in the dynamic that is emerging. The difficulties are great, but the refusal to acknowledge this and draw the consequences makes them even greater.

Unpredictability is stark against the backdrop of what Habermas describes as Trump's "bizarre behavior and confused speech" at his inauguration in January 2025, with "the fantastical evocation of a golden age now upon us." Trump's narcissistic affectation gave the unprepared television viewer who attended the ceremony the impression of a "clinical demonstration of a psychopathological case," but the thunderous applause in the room and "the expected agreement of Musk and other Silicon Valley luminaries" left no doubt about the determination of Trump's inner circle. The roadmap bears the signature of the Heritage Foundation and has

been known for some time (Heritage Foundation 2024). It involves an institutional restructuring of the state. European examples along similar lines, involving figures like Orbán and the Kaczynski regime, are limited to state restrictions on the legal system and the media. The reform in the United States is much more radical. The chainsaw-wielding Commissioner Musk has more ambitious goals than simply cutting public administration. The long-term goal is to replace the state apparatus and its rules with a digitally controlled technocracy, Habermas argues. Politics within the framework of the historical state must be replaced by digitally controlled corporate management within a significantly downsized state administration (Habermas 2025). The technocrats' plans to transform government into a corporate board of directors, if realized, would have consequences that are difficult to predict.

Habermas is unclear as to how these expansionist ideas can be reconciled with Trump's style of action, a "policy of astonishingly arbitrary decisions, free from existing norms." The negotiator and real estate agent's obscene fantasy of rebuilding the now-deserted Gaza Strip suggests the irrationality of a deliberately unpredictable individual, which could clash with the vice president's long-term, religiously inspired plans for a right-wing populist or autocratic definition of democracy, where complete digital freedom for tech giants is the guiding principle. Habermas observes that the authoritarian type of digitalization has little to do with historical fascism. Once destroyed, institutions cannot easily be recreated. Habermas's conclusion can be added that the champions, sycophants, and jesters who comprise the American president's immediate entourage are nothing new. History offers many examples. What is new is their technological power, which raises questions about who really holds the upper hand.

Unpredictability as a political tool of power doesn't mean Trump doesn't have a plan or a goal. It must be assumed that he is serious and has a plan to make America great and strong again, even if surprisingly little discussion exists about what that plan might look like. It's difficult to discern a long-term vision in a halting approach in which objectives are specified and the call to attack is issued as quickly as the call to retreat: peace in Ukraine, tariffs to protect the United States from foreign exploitation, etc. He calls for an attack and promises great things and decisive breakthroughs, but when he encounters strong resistance, the attack is halted and new energy is invested in a new goal, and so on. The transition from "peace mediation" in Ukraine to an unrestricted tariff campaign, and then back to Ukraine, follows a very precise pattern.

Trump wants to destroy the institutions, rules, and models of cooperation of the existing world order. He wants to create a (dis)order in which the strong rule. Small states don't matter. A handful of superpowers decide the fate of the world among themselves. Their agreements are often unwritten, secret, and/or implicit, and not necessarily lasting.



It is a myth that imperialism disappeared with decolonization after 1945. During the Cold War, it continued in the Third World in the form of proxy wars between superpowers and competition with conventional weapons (Westad 2005; **Stråth & Trüper 2025** ). But, surprisingly, it became as strong as it is today.

If you look at a globe from above and follow the Canadian landmass from the Labrador Channel westward, you'll reach Alaska, then through the Bering Strait to Siberia and finally to Murmansk. From there, it's just a short hop to Greenland. Looking in the opposite direction, eastward from Labrador, you quickly reach Greenland, and from there, you can reach Murmansk on the other side. If Greenland and Canada belonged to the United States, the United States and Russia would hug the globe beneath the North Pole and control both the Northwest and Northeast Passages. They would also control unknown quantities of rare minerals. It should be emphasized that this is hypothetical reasoning, and if it were true, what Trump wants would be one thing and what he would achieve would be another. But it must be assumed that Trump has a plan and a vision of the world. Putin's Russia is unlikely to fall flat on its face when faced with Trump's invitations, and he must also consider his relations with China. Imperialist relations between superpowers are not necessarily harmonious. They are power-driven and opportunistic, volatile rather than enduring friendships.

Against the backdrop of this hypothetical but not unrealistic reasoning, it's striking how isolated and insignificant Europe appears in the peace game in Ukraine and the rapprochement between the United States and Russia. One can only conclude that if peace means Putin can keep what Russia has won, and Trump forces a torn and war-weary Ukraine to accept American mineral extraction in what remains of Ukraine, then yes, American mining and drilling will guarantee the integrity of the rest of Ukraine from Russian aggression. At what cost, one might ask, but European peacekeeping troops will not be necessary.

In a short article, Nils Gilman sees an emerging oil and gas coalition against renewable energy between the United States and Russia based on ongoing air pollution (Gilman 2025). In this context, it's worth noting the stated interest of both Russia and the United States in the Middle East. Such a coalition, controlling the Arctic with the Northwest and Northeast Passages, would hardly avoid a clash with China, which more than any other power has emerged as a champion of green energy. The United States and Russia cannot, and do not, exclude China, but they are seeking an accommodation with what was once called the Middle Kingdom and now seems eager to reclaim that name. Instead of a triumvirate, a triangular drama could emerge. Where does the EU fit in such a situation? And what about India? Is the idea, if there is one, to appease Trump, or should the EU hope that everything will work out? Like the mouse staring in shock at the snake, euphemistically trying to hide its paralysis by claiming to remain calm.

## How could this have happened? Two American interpretations

A wealth of publications attempts to understand and interpret developments in the United States. We will highlight two, which certainly aren't intended to exhaust the possible interpretations.

Robert Kagan, who compared the United States to Mars and Europe to Venus (Kagan 2003), has abandoned his Iraq War-era neoconservative beliefs and reflects in a new book on how American developments could have turned out the way they did (Kagan 2024). His starting point is that the 1787 United States Constitution was flawed from the outset. It proclaimed the equality and rights of all people, but its authors knew that black slaves were not included. Both Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. The Founding Fathers consoled themselves with the hope that, at some point in the development of the American people, reason would prevail and an agreement would be reached on the abolition of slavery. In the 1830s, tensions arose when new states were to be admitted to the Union and their status on the issue of slavery had to be determined. These tensions sparked the Civil War of 1861–65. The conflict was not just about slavery, but also about divisions between town and country and different levels of industrialization, with illiberal forces continually challenging the liberal constitution.

After the Civil War, immigration and industrialization intensified, and new tensions arose between new ethnic groups: Anglo-Saxons/Northern Europeans versus Southern Europeans versus Eastern Europeans versus Chinese versus Japanese. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924 expressed these tensions. The melting pot was far from harmonious. Racial debate intensified. The 1920s were the Jazz Age, but also the Ku Klux Klan, and illiberal tendencies were evident during the crisis of the 1930s. Universalist, cosmopolitan, internationalist, progressive, and enlightened liberal currents were ever-present, but constantly challenged, even though the 1930s and 1950s were fundamentally liberal decades. But there were also the Ku Klux Klan, McCarthy and the racial issue with busing, Little Rock, and Martin Luther King. And John F. Kennedy, who sent the National Guard to stop racial discrimination on campus. It was as if American society had never stabilized, but was constantly challenged. September 11th fits this pattern of instability well. As mentioned, Huntington had already written in 1996 (Huntington 1996) about the clash of civilizations as a challenge for the future. This primarily concerned Christian and Muslim civilizations, which would culminate in 2001 in the form of religious fanaticism, terrorism, and war. But Huntington also expressed concerns about the composition of the American population. In 1965, whites of European descent constituted 84% of the US population. Hispanics represented less than 4%, and Asians less than 1%. By the early 2000s, the percentage of whites of European descent had fallen to 62%, with a downward trend, while Hispanics represented 18% and Asians 6%, with a rising trend. Huntington (2004) expressed

concern about the Anglo-Protestant culture that found its political expression in the Constitution of 1787.

It's important to remember that the liberal Enlightenment movement has always been present. George W. Bush was a true multiculturalist and cosmopolitan. But he was constantly challenged by anti-liberal fundamentalists, religious fanatics, and cultural warriors. In important respects, the conflict over social distribution was obscured by cultural debate, and this obscurity became a problem that Trump successfully channeled. According to Kagan, the long anti-liberal tradition is expressed in Trump's movement. Kagan sees Trump as part of a long American anti-liberal tradition. Kagan doesn't hesitate to directly compare Trump to Hitler as a type of charismatic leader, playing on emotions and inciting fear, terror, and anxiety. Trump creates obedience through fear rather than loyalty through trust. The question Kagan doesn't delve into is whether we can continue to count on a return to the equally long liberal continuity that has characterized the country since its founding, with both continuities constantly in conflict.

Political scientists Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein take a broader international perspective on American developments. They see a pattern emerging in recent decades, which they link to what Max Weber called paternalism, a subcategory of traditional government in his typology of government (Hansson & Kopstein 2024, Weber 1980 [1922]: 122–176). It is the arbitrary rule of leaders who proclaim themselves fathers of the nation, promising greatness and security in a period perceived as uncertain and declining. They surround themselves with a court of relatives, favorites, and hate experts in government administrations and international organizations. The rulers and their close associates do not hesitate to enrich themselves at the expense of the population. Corruption is an important part of the system, a lubricant. Historical examples cited by Hanson and Kopstein are the Russian tsars. When necessary, they resorted to coercive measures and mobilized the support of economic elites and intellectuals. What they have in common is the violation of the rule of law and legal principles, and the introduction of arbitrariness into the system. Concepts such as autocracy, dictatorship, authoritarianism, and populism describe the phenomenon, but they do not capture its full breadth and complexity. In Europe, thoughts turn to Putin and Orbán, and in the United States, of course, to Trump. But there are many other names, such as Johnson, Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Milai, and Modi, all different from each other with their own profiles. The phenomenon is global. Trump is therefore not unique, but follows an emerging model, even if he seems to be the most ostentatious and the one who most seeks the spotlight within his circle.

This development represents a full-scale, global attack on the modern rules-based state, the decline of democracy, and the transition to personal rule. Hansson and Kopstein see Putin as perhaps the most important link in this transformation and readily point to him as a source of inspiration for Trump. At the same time, they emphasize that Putin's success as a leader is due to the fact that the groundwork

was well prepared. Neoliberal ideology transformed many social liberals into libertarians. It depicted the state apparatus as a suffocating straitjacket, supposed to keep its hands off the economy except for the task of ensuring market freedom. The message was powerful and successful. Hansson and Kopstein point to the collapse of the financial markets in 2008 as the trigger for this paternalistic development, but in the Russian case, there was a prelude: the hordes of Western consultants who invaded the crumbling Soviet empire and told the bankruptcy trustees what to do. Fossilized state property needed to be privatized, which would revitalize the entire economy. Democracy would take time, but it would automatically follow a booming economy. The internal sell-off of failing assets, initiated and encouraged by the West, fueled Putin's bitterness, as he increasingly viewed the collapse of the Soviet empire as a historical catastrophe. Ultimately, his goal became to try to recreate it. It was not NATO as an external threat, but the internal disintegration of what had been promised as a flourishing landscape, that pushed Putin to act and abandon the fragile democracy that sought to replace dictatorship. The years 2006–2008 saw a change of direction, with Georgia's Western ambitions—where Putin naturally saw NATO as a threat—and the Munich speech as milestones, and the 2008 financial market crash confirming just how decadent and rotten the capitalist West was and how right the shift was.

## The dark background of the stage, the actor and the producers of the drama

In *Cue the Sun! – The Invention of Reality TV*, Emily Nussbaum (2024) describes how actor Donald Trump portrayed himself in a television series as a richer, more successful version of the semi-failed real estate agent whose banks had begun to doubt him. He staged himself as the super-rich tycoon that millions of Americans who watched the series later believed him to be. He played a caricatured version of himself, and the audience mistook the caricature for reality. The actor, too, mistook the caricature for his true self. It worked so well, writes Nussbaum, because Trump mastered one particular skill: the art of creating unexpected plot twists. In this regard, Trump often behaved so impulsively and deviated from the script to such an extent that the editors responsible despaired. They had to re-edit episodes or even provide entire dialogues with a modified voiceover after the fact. But as frustrated as the producers were, they also noticed that Trump's erratic impulses, sudden turns of events, and surprising tantrums kept audiences on the edge of their seats, reflecting the motto: in Trump's world, something always happens. This is how you should imagine the real President Trump when he plays President Trump.

In reality, his scriptwriters and editors are also behind the scenes, ready to correct any deviation from the script. It would be a grave mistake to ignore his circle of advisors and those who write the script and produce the drama. Trump is certainly not a puppet, but he didn't write the script himself.

Among the producers is the vice president, the deeply devout J.D. Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019 and appears more confident and independent than any vice president before him. And more ideological. The Catholicism that motivates him is not traditional Catholicism, but an ultraconservative movement that exudes counter-revolution in the spirit of de Maistre, the counter-Enlightenment thinker who heralded Romanticism. For Vance, politics is less a competition for the majority than an existential struggle between good and evil.

In his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), J.D. Vance recounts his childhood with a drug-addicted mother in the coal mines of Appalachia, feeling inferior because the American establishment looked down on them. These feelings gave rise to a need for self-affirmation. In his story, he writes that it wasn't he who became radicalized, but the left. It was the left that transformed universities into an intellectual monoculture. It was the left that transformed the United States into a façade of democracy under a state run by a bureaucracy of experts—the deep state, as Vance calls the regime, which movement ideologue Curtis Yarvin calls the Cathedral and Peter Thiel, the philosopher among tech billionaires, calls the Ministry of Truth. All were calling for a revolution from above under the slogan RAGE, Retire All Government Employees. Yarvin, born in 1973, a blogger and software developer, was already, along with Nick Lane, perhaps the most prominent figure in an antidemocratic and antiegalitarian community, rather than a movement, a digital community with slogans like alt-right, alt-right, neo-reactionary, and dark enlightenment (Lane 2022, Yarvin 2024). Their media appearances were forward-looking, but they drew their visions of the future in a distinctive way from the past. Curtis Yarvin was inspired by Thomas Carlyle, the 19th-century social idealist who saw history as the creation of heroes. They advocated a return to monarchy in new forms, in which a corporation replaced the state under responsible monarchical management. The main enemy was anything that had to do with democracy, liberal ideas, the Enlightenment, and the idea of progress. What suddenly became a political reality with Trump II, shocking and surprising everyone, developed over a long period of fermentation beneath the surface of democracy, which Western public debate had taken for granted. Under Trump I, the ferment resurfaced somewhat, but it has subsided again under Biden. When spokespeople for the new order spoke of neoreactionary politics, they weren't referring to the conservatism of their grandparents or Edmund Burke, but to the combination of modern engineering principles with classical antidemocratic ideas in the age of Internet 2.0. The Enlightenment and the idea of progress that followed were a mistake. Democratic liberalism, based on the ideals of liberty and equality, must be seen through Darwin's eyes.

Vance aligns himself with these ideas when he collaborates with Steve Bannon, Trump's advisor during his first term, to build an international right-wing nationalist movement. They want to transform European populists and right-wing extremists into a MAGA tool, a subversive instrument with an anti-liberal, authoritarian, and

paternalistic agenda to redefine people power and destroy liberal democracy and its greatest achievement: the welfare state. Putin expresses his goal in a similar way, especially since Trump has added imperialist expansion to the agenda. Two overlapping political agendas are emerging, the American and the Russian. On the one hand, they seek conflict with Europe to implement them. On the other, they seek partners in Europe with the same goal.

Donald Trump's driving force and goal is to make America great again. He intends to achieve this by revitalizing the Rust Belt. The focus is on manufacturing, particularly the automotive industry. The tariffs, whose amount appears to have been randomly determined, are intended to exclude competitors and/or force them to establish factories in the United States. Behind this goal lies a mercantilist and static mindset. There's a contradiction. Factories that produce cars and other products not only generate jobs, but in today's globalized world they also import components whose costs are skyrocketing due to the tariffs. And these costs are reflected in higher prices. It's no coincidence that the US auto industry began laying off workers when Trump raised the tariffs. The greatness Trump is striving for is a thing of the past. If the underlying idea is to destroy the existing world order and the US political system, then the contradictions between Trump and the oligarchs are evident. However, this isn't becoming a problem; on the contrary, the contradictions and internal conflicts are contributing to the general confusion and creating chaos. The producers of Trump's drama are rubbing their hands with glee.

Destroying European democracy is a key objective in the tech oligarchs' campaign for a new world order. Vice President Vance, a protégé of Peter Thiel, is the most vocal and the tech oligarchs' liaison to Trump. His statement at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 was no coincidence. When Germany's domestic intelligence agency delivered a 1,100-page report to the federal government in May 2025, concluding that the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party was unconstitutional and extremist, Vance spoke as emphatically as he had in Munich, arguing that the wall that the United States and West Germany had torn down in 1989 was now being rebuilt by the German government alone. Marco Rubio added that Germany was a tyranny. The Vice President and the Secretary of State ignored the fact that the report was an official document that had not been politically formulated when, like Vance in Munich, they declared that a democratic Germany must fully integrate the AfD into parliamentary debate. Anything else would be anti-democratic. Vance promotes the myth of a true democratic majority that includes right-wing extremists and the false majority created in the middle, and he does so using Germany as an example.

The vice president's redefinition of democracy follows the *völkisch* movement of the 1930s. Right-wing populists, now right-wing extremists in Germany, are pushing in the same direction, where populism and the rule of the people are united in the myths of the past. This is as dangerous a vision today as it was in Germany in the 1930s. Vance is advancing Steve Bannon's campaign under Trump 1 for an

authoritarian and paternalistic international of right-wing nationalists and anti-liberals, with the influential support of Elon Musk and Secretary of State Rubio. The goal is cooperation in this international with European right-wing nationalists, trained in the European Parliament. They represent what the Trump regime calls Europe's democratic future. They will guarantee tech platforms complete freedom from regulation in Europe. Their great hope in Europe is Georgia Meloni, who appears to be trying to maintain a balance between the EU's concept of democracy and tech companies' disdain for democracy.

Trump's policies are in stark contrast to the tech oligarchs' agenda on crucial issues. Their future isn't in the Rust Belt and oil fields. They dream of colonizing Mars, traveling to space, and achieving eternal life through artificial intelligence (Peter Thiel). They say nothing about employment, but they think about how AI could replace jobs. They are clear in their contempt for the deep state and its expert government. They want to destroy it and replace it with a fully digitalized enterprise with tech oligarchs at the helm. Surveillance through the massive use of AI will likely be part of the government's arsenal. Trump appears to be fully on board with the tech oligarchs' agenda, and he's demonstrating it by hiring Elon Musk to do the work of destruction. But it's unclear whether he understands the implications and scope of the program or his own role in it. His background is that of a real estate speculator and television actor. Musk's dismissal as the chief destroyer of the state after less than six months also demonstrates tensions among the oligarchs and between them and Trump. As an automaker, Musk opposed the tariff policy.

Trump and the tech oligarchs are united in their efforts to transform the United States into a new global tax haven and introduce lawless zones in the offshore world, as described by Slobodian in *Crack-Up Capitalism* (2023). The Trump administration is promoting cryptocurrency trading and supporting online casinos and gambling platforms. With his plans for a strategic cryptocurrency reserve, Trump is unintentionally undermining the dollar. The driving force behind cryptocurrencies is the desire to hide money through money laundering and tax evasion. All of this is aimed at strengthening the global illegal economy. The United States is abandoning international negotiations on tax cooperation and many other forms of international cooperation. Joseph Stiglitz (2025) sees only one glimmer of hope: the United States' exit will make it easier for the rest of the world to continue its work on the international taxation of multinationals within the G20, the UN, and the OECD without the United States, which had previously been the main obstacle to progress.

Alongside his work on this lawless, digitalized, low-tax society, where chaos and the law of the jungle reign without government intervention, Trump is trying to create order by recreating the industrial society whose heyday is now past. However, growth is no longer generated there, but in the production of services, particularly financial ones. There, Trump wants to leave everything unregulated, free for personal enrichment without any pretense of authority. This order also applies to workers in the Rust Belt, who are clamoring for security and moral and economic

recognition. They are the ones who support populism as a source of discontent. For them, Trump wants to bring industrial production back to the United States.

Since 2008, two key words have been on the agenda: social and nation. Liberal democracy after 1945 brought them together in the Social State. In the ongoing struggle for a redefinition, the challengers invoke a historically proven and far more radical model of National Socialism. The experiment ended in a gigantic catastrophe. It is on the ruins of that catastrophe that democratic welfare states were built. All forces must be mobilized to prevent them from becoming the new ruins. Everyone must realize that powerful forces are working to transform them into precisely that. These are not just a few spin doctors and celebrities seeking notoriety. These are the dark, profound forces of destruction seeking the apocalypse before the transition to the world of artificial intelligence, with the romanticism of counterrevolution as their ideology and cutting-edge digital technology as their weapon. This is not, as the men of darkness claim, the deep state and its experts. That is simply an obstacle to be overcome.

Behind the ideologues and their political spokesman, Vice President Vance, are the tech oligarchs. To call them wealthy is an understatement. The leading thinkers are the eminences grise, venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, and the enigmatic Peter Thiel, also a venture capitalist with a background in philosophy (Chafkin 2022, Thiel 2014). Thiel's philosophy has a theological dimension, developed under the guidance of religious anthropologist René Girard, who mentored him on the profound questions of the cross and resurrection, revelation, apocalypse, and transcendence. Disruption is the watchword. Destroy and transcend borders. Transcendence is artificial intelligence replacing humans and, in its perfection, achieving eternal life. Thiel does not believe in liberal competition, but rather in illiberal monopoly. He has no problem with centralized state power and police violence. Move fast and break things, as Mark Zuckerberg puts it. One can sense the philosopher of will and superhumanity, Friedrich Nietzsche, behind this new certainty of faith. The same Nietzsche who, in his cyclical vision of time, also warned that humanity would endlessly repeat its mistakes without learning from them: "*O Mensch, Gib acht*" (Nietzsche, 1891), which Gustav Mahler so movingly set to music in his **Third Symphony**. Nietzsche can be read selectively, with the intention of denying his ambivalence between the cyclical and the transcendent. The potential for failure exists in both versions, the triumphant and the cautious. Nietzsche's superman emerges clearly when Peter Thiel sees AI as the tool that makes eternal life possible. But the tech oligarchs, with their immense potential for power, aren't just philosophical fantasies of making the impossible possible, but also Elon Musk with his chainsaw, and the more down-to-earth Zuckerberg, Bezos, and many others. To dismiss all this as irrelevant to Trump would be a grave mistake. They are the ones who write the script and produce Trump's drama.

MAGA shouldn't be seen as a coherent ideology, but rather as a discourse rife with contradictions, with some advocating a tougher stance on China, while others



advocate a softer approach. Europe isn't particularly relevant, except as a right-wing, extremist populist Europe under the digital power of the United States.

## And now, Europe?

The geopolitical situation has changed radically. Or, to put it better: the disintegrating order once called the West has transformed into global geopolitics. For Europe, the Cold War has returned, with the fundamental exception that Europe no longer has the United States at its back and that Western Europe has become a Europe with greater responsibilities in security policy, but also with greater internal tensions. Russian imperial policy goes beyond that of the Cold War, when the balance of nuclear terror required a certain restraint. Now it is a conventional war with the threat of nuclear weapons looming in the background. There are fears that the Baltic states, Georgia, and Moldova will become new pawns in Putin's ambitions to restore the borders of the Soviet Empire. Beyond Ukraine, of course.

It is this situation that led Habermas to begin thinking in geopolitical terms, an uncharted field for him, which suggests how dramatic the shift is. He argues that Europe must deepen its cooperation in response to the situation and accuses Olaf Scholz of negligence in this regard as Chancellor. Habermas does not dispute the arguments in favor of military rearmament, but warns, given the strength of the AfD, of the risk of a militarized Germany, and it is on this point that Habermas brings Europe into the picture. In an article following Habermas's manifesto, Jena historian Norbert Frei clarifies Habermas's general arguments in favor of intensified European defense cooperation. Against the backdrop of rising right-wing populism, which is causing unrest in the surrounding world, this must involve a European defense community of the type discussed in 1952–1954, in order to simultaneously utilize and constrain West Germany's military might. The Europeanization of defense would be a response to European concerns about German rearmament (Frei 2025).

It is therefore a matter of translating Robert Schuman's Coal and Steel Union into a military context. For European leaders and the public, it is a matter of understanding and identifying with the enormity of Robert Schuman's task in 1950: convincing Europe of the need to rearm Germany five years after the world war and realizing the intellectual courage this task required. And realizing that the task is just as incredible today. But, like Schuman, being convinced that the incredible is possible, but requires action.

The transatlantic crisis is fundamentally a crisis of confidence triggered by the US president's lack of clarity regarding his commitment to NATO and his plans for Russia. Lost trust in the face of external threats cannot be easily restored. The damage will be lasting for the foreseeable future. The situation requires independent European action through enhanced cooperation. This does not mean that Europe should turn against the United States or leave NATO, but rather that it must think

beyond the United States in its planning and preparation. This is largely a mental process that requires a new language. The goal of the breakup must be as similar as possible to a consensual divorce and as quietly and discreetly as possible, so as to leave Putin at least somewhat uncertain about what is happening. But it must be clear and deliberate.

The break must be based on the belief in a sovereign Europe, capable of acting confidently, relying on its own strength. The opposite image that must be dispelled is the one spread around the world of the four musketeers—Macron, Starmer, Merz, and Tusk—in Kiev to assure Zelensky of their full support, while they called Trump on a cell phone lying on the table and convinced him to pledge full support for their ceasefire request. The promise was broken the next day, and the four were discredited. The musketeers were actors of impotence, promoting contempt for politicians. The task ahead requires intellectual and moral courage, which must translate into concrete plans for digital sovereignty with alternatives to GPS, today's cloud services, internet regulation, and much more. At the same time, political independence must be combined as much as possible with deeper support for transatlantic cooperation within civil society, voluntary organizations, and the research community to counter the Trump administration's attacks on universities and on family and friendship ties. Europe, as a civil society, must support democratic forces in the United States.

Frei's reference to the European defense plans of the 1950s does not necessarily imply a repetition of the lengthy and detailed negotiations of that time and the deliberations on the renunciation of national sovereignty. There is not enough time for that, nor is there sufficient European will. Rather, it is a coalition of the willing to deepen defense cooperation. The coalition of the willing was, after all, the term used by the Bush administration to refer to the European states that had joined the war in Iraq. The task is to redefine its meaning in a discursive struggle for a new policy. Germany, France, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the Nordic and Baltic countries could form a core group in this deepening, where greater commitment is conceivable and where deepening outside the core group need not necessarily be so great.

Limiting the issues surrounding Europe's future to the military sphere would be a grave mistake. In the international turmoil evolving as a result of the breakdown of rules, which is part of Trump's policy and the tech oligarchs' campaign for disruption, there is a growing need for a Europe capable of assuming responsibility for itself and the world around it in a new way. The crisis must be used to restore rules and order and to enable a coordinated global policy against climate change, an alternative to war that destroys the environment and the climate. Europe must find common ground with China, a leading global power in climate technology and a champion of a rules-based international order. In any case, China does not advocate the systematic destruction of rules. Differences in opinion on democracy are significant, but they cannot constitute an obstacle to deeper cooperation on climate and international rules in the short term. Europe is embroiled in an arms race that is difficult to avoid,

but it is important to find alternatives with a different focus on global politics than the one currently developing, and this is perhaps also in China's interest. And in any case, it is in the planet's interest. It would be fatal to be dragged into the downward spiral of the United States that Habermas warns about.

In a powerful speech in Brussels on May 8, 2025, Etienne Balibar addressed the question **"What now for Europe?"** Balibar and Habermas are the continent's unsynchronized Franco-German philosophical tandem, one more neo/post-Marxist and Green, the other more liberal-Enlightenment, in their relentless argument for a different Europe. The date of the speech was symbolic, the 80th anniversary of the capitulation of Reims and the eve of the 75th anniversary of Robert Schuman's European address. Balibar (2025) lamented the wave of right-wing populism that has swept Europe over the past decade. Many of those who are part of this wave are openly nostalgic for the fascism and Nazism that plagued the continent in the 1920s and 1930s, as if the time had come to forget after two or three generations. They wield considerable parliamentary and discursive power. In European cooperation, they possess dangerous potential. Xenophobic and with narrow-minded nationalist/imperialist plans for the future, they are both rivals and kindred spirits. Given the era from which they draw inspiration, attempts to "civilize" or "tame" them are futile. All populist parties invoke national greatness and reject the idea of defining sovereignty at the European level. Instead, they seek a European model of geopolitical alliances and conflicts between nation states, with xenophobia as a key driving force.

In Europe, the war in Ukraine is shaping a new divide, a Yalta II. Europe must contend with an expansionist Russia built on Putin's ideology of a greater Russia. Although Putin, unlike Napoleon and Hitler, lacks the capacity to occupy all of Europe, his plans encompass as much of the former Soviet empire as possible, including not only Ukraine but also the Baltic states. Furthermore, Europe must contend with the United States accepting Russia's ambitions in exchange for Russia's acceptance of American ambitions in the Arctic. Although ideologically completely different, Russian-American cooperation is foreseeable. In a short time, the United States has transformed from a global center of neoliberalism to a nationalist/imperialist and neo-mercantilist power. Relations between the Russian and American empires pose a completely different challenge to Europe than the capitalist competition between the United States and China, both characterized by strong statism. This raises the question of what will happen to American statism, but that question does not alter Balibar's overall picture.

However, Balibar argues that his description of the situation has a serious flaw. It ignores digitalization and the development of artificial intelligence. Algorithms are radically changing public discourse. Algorithms are colonizing social relations. The description also ignores climate change and environmental disasters and the related question of how economic growth should be organized in the North and the South, Balibar notes.

After briefly dismissing Timothy Garton Ash, who argued for a European empire as a response to Trump and Putin, Balibar then makes a surprising turn toward Alan Milward, who, at the time of the Maastricht Treaty, launched the much-discussed thesis that European integration was not about a European superstate, but about saving the nation-state, in *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* (Milward 1992). In Milward's book, Balibar finds "the unlikely possibility of a federal Europe." In that Europe that saved the nation-state, without which the nation-state would not have survived. Contrary to the interpretation of the contemporary debate on the distinction between Europe and nation-states, in which the rescue of nation-states was the main issue, Balibar emphasizes Europe as the savior, thus providing impetus for a new debate on the topic. Balibar makes Europe the agent. In the debate over Milward's thesis, nation-states were the agents, while Europe faded into the background after saving them. Regarding the definition of a federation, Balibar sees no fundamental difference between a federal state and a confederation. The two categories overlap, and the exact mix is more a matter of historical perspective than something teleologically pre-planned, more a matter of empiricism than theory.

Balibar emphasizes that the main problem with the EU in its current form is that it is a market EU, but not in a way that was envisioned in the Maastricht negotiations on the internal market, and certainly not in a way that Milward had in mind. The problem with the Maastricht Treaty is that it does not provide for social integration as a counterpart to economic integration. Delors wanted this, but Thatcher successfully opposed it. The idea of harmonizing norms and standards has been translated into the language of benchmarking, best practices, and the open method of coordination, which has led EU member states to focus on mutual competition while pushing for social standards—a development Mario Draghi criticizes in his report on EU competitiveness, presented to the Commission in 2024. Through internal competition, the EU has neglected to unite for common external competition, he writes (Draghi 2024). This neglect could prove costly in the age of empires.

With his observation that it is precisely social issues that drive European populists and nationalists today, Balibar, in his rereading of Milward and his reference to Draghi, makes a significant contribution to the debate on Europe's future. He adds an important point to Habermas's call: a social Europe against the nationalists' social agenda. With a Europe internally strong on social issues, where the degree of supranationality does not undermine debate, Europe can open itself in a new way to the Global South with an alternative strategy to the competition between empires that is also taking place there. It is hoped that Balibar's ideas will stimulate debate and action in a Europe that is groping its way in search of itself. History is not without alternatives. Disintegration is also an option, if nothing is done to prevent it.

*Translation by DeepL and Bo Stråth from Swedish of the article Bo Stråth, «En världsordning i upplösning. Are you going now? 1. Imperiernas möte i Europa och Europas svar.» Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift Vol 127 Nr 2 June 2025.*

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