

# EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 394

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## Diplomatic Pursuits

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**Trump and Putin in Budapest: it is this meeting that eventually did not happen last October that perhaps most highlights Europe's current weak international position. The fact alone that it was being considered – on EU territory but without any EU involvement – was a humiliation. Similarly, the 28-point peace plan for Ukraine that the US unveiled last week contains obligations for Europe without involving it at all in the negotiations. Fortunately, Europeans did state their position forcefully, already when Trump first took to the initiative in early 2025: Europe will continue with the EU accession process, will continue to arm Ukraine, and will continue sanctions against Russia. But it remains reactive, and not just on Ukraine.**

Overall, European strategy (of the EU, the European Allies in NATO, the Coalition of the Willing) is not proactive enough, hence European diplomacy is often running after the others. It is continually in pursuit.

### Written out of script

The main reason is that too many European decision-makers do not seem to realise that the part they are used to playing on the international scene, has been deleted from the script. Europe remains wedded to its decades-old role of most loyal ally of the US. In that logic, Europe does have to make concessions, but then a new stable relationship can be achieved with the second Trump administration. But it should be clear by now, from the way Trump treats Europe, that what he really wants is not allies but vassals.

Trump and his ilk do not care about NATO, which they see as a scheme by free-riding Europeans to make the US pay

for their defence. And if Trump manages to normalise relations with Putin's Russia, as he seems itching to do, NATO becomes of lesser importance. The traditional American defence establishment still cares very much, of course – but Trump makes the decisions, not the generals and admirals. Trump does care very much about the EU, though: because he is opposed to its very existence. He is not seeking a new relationship with the EU – he wants to get rid of it.

Making concessions (the 5% norm in NATO, the 15% tariff against the EU) will only trigger demands for more concessions. Because Trump's approach is not transactional, as everyone constantly repeats: a transaction implies give and take; Trump just wants to take. Trump's way is a power play. That works much better if the US can deal with each European state separately, so for Trump the EU is an obstacle.

If Europe does not urgently assume another strategic role, not only will it never get anywhere with the US, and remain forever reactive – it will also undermine its position vis-à-vis all other actors. Because inherent in the role of loyal ally is that one does not make any major move without US consent. Even more problematic is the psychological effect this continues to have on much of Europe's leadership: the habit of never acting without active US support has made many entirely risk-averse. But this precisely creates a major risk: of Europe becoming *quantité négligeable* in the eyes of the other powers.

### American Roadshow

This risk is particularly high with regard to China. On 30 October, Trump met Xi in South Korea. The agreement

they reached might herald a broader and more lasting accord, or could just as easily be derailed. But it does show that Trump responds to strength, not subservience (and that he likely prefers to emerge as the great deal-maker with China as well, instead of seeking confrontation). It also demonstrates that whichever way this goes, Europe risks being squeezed in between, and exercises but limited leverage over its own fate.

Odd though it may seem, the EU does not in fact have a China strategy: it does not know how it wants to reach which economic equilibrium. For lack of a clear strategy, the EU failed to achieve an economic accord with China first, at the summit last summer, when China arguably was in a weaker position than today. Now the US-China deal may mean that Beijing sees even fewer reasons to settle its outstanding economic differences with the EU. Whereas if it goes wrong after all, a US-China trade war would obviously have disastrous consequences for Europe as well.

But US diplomacy is not just eclipsing Europe with regard to China. On 8 August, Trump hosted the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Though the White House rather overstates his role in their peace agreement (to use an understatement), the intention to step up America's role on the Caucasus is clear. On 25 September, Trump received Turkish President Erdogan in the Oval Office, signalling a pragmatic turn towards more cooperation. On 7 November, Trump welcomed the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, forging deals focusing on rare earths. And Trump is, of course, very much shaping the deals that will determine the politics of the Middle East. (Kazakhstan, incidentally, announced it will join the Abraham Accords). On 10 November, Trump also met Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa in the White House.

Furthermore, on 20 November a 28-point American peace plan for Ukraine was announced, once again negotiated over the heads of Ukraine and the rest of Europe. A plan that puts strong emphasis on the economic benefits for the US. Ever since he took office again, Trump has been attempting to negotiate with Putin. That he was going to

continue trying, was very plausible. It is baffling, therefore, that Europe did not even prepare its own negotiating position, let alone try to take the initiative itself. Once again, Europe is now forced to scramble in reaction to a US initiative.

What all of this shows is that the Trump Administration may be less willing to share in the responsibility for the defence of Europe, but is definitely not disengaging from Europe's neighbourhood. Indeed, it is fast re-shaping that neighbourhood in pursuit of the American interest, with little or no thought for the implications for Europe, let alone for the need to coordinate with Europe. American and European interests often coincide, of course, but Europe cannot just passively wait and see – it must make sure that its interests are taken into account.

### European Geopolitics

Has Europe really understood its own geopolitical situation? Europe does not pursue an exclusive sphere of influence, but it does have a sphere of interest: the area around Europe that Europe must seek to keep stable, and where it must therefore also have a presence: because of its markets and natural resources; because of the lines of communication to markets and resources further beyond that pass through it; and because any instability there may spill over to Europe itself. This area includes the North Atlantic and the Arctic; the entire European continent; the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Gulf; and North Africa including the Horn and the Sahel.

Europe must decide which relationship it is willing to offer to which states in this area, in the full knowledge that great power competition and rivalry mean that other powers, allies included, will make counter-offers, and that hostile powers will punish those that take up Europe's offer. That requires a proactive diplomacy, to avoid the states in Europe's sphere of interest from turning away from, or even against, Europe. In some parts, notably the Sahel, this has already happened, and turning this around is extremely difficult. In other areas, notably the Caucasus and Central Asia, there remains an active interest in European involvement. But Europe must also

have the will and the capacity to actively support those that are targeted, through hybrid attacks or even military action, because they decide to work with it. If Europe does not have the courage to stand up for its partners, partnership should not be offered. These challenges and opportunities all require focused action.

### European Initiative

European diplomacy has been active. On 9-10 October, the EU convened the second Global Gateway Forum, bringing together leaders from more than eighty partner countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where several important investment agreements were announced. The Forum ought to become a fixture of the international agenda. On 22 October, Brussels also saw the first ever EU-Egypt summit. Another example of a bilateral relationship that has been stepped up is that with Azerbaijan, with a focus on energy.

But how do these in and of themselves important initiatives fit into an overall strategy? Do Europe's leaders know which objective they are trying to achieve? (Apart from curbing migration, the one objective that the EU is never shy of stating explicitly).

"Global Gateway is a new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world", says the website of the European Commission. But what is the strategic rationale? The objective ought to be to prevent other powers from establishing exclusive spheres of influence, by putting a European offer on the table, so that key countries also work with Europe and not only with China, Russia, and others. The Global Gateway should focus, therefore, on the countries in Europe's own sphere of interest, and in those countries beyond it that control key resources or lines of communication. The Gateway should lead to a network, of states that subscribe to a 21st century "open door policy", allowing all states to interact freely with all other states according to their own preferences. Such a truly geopolitical and geoeconomic orientation might also give a sense of purpose to the European Political

Community – which if it is not given a clear purpose might just as well be quietly shelved. Seen through that lens, it becomes evident that there are gaping holes in Europe's diplomatic engagement. The most obvious is Turkey: as the US is becoming less engaged in the defence of Europe and Turkey has greatly widened its scope as a regional power, while the EU remains its most important trade partner by far, a clear-eyed alignment of foreign policy would definitely be in Brussels' and Ankara's mutual interest. Equally glaring is Europe's near-total absence as a strategic player from the Middle East and the Gulf. Beyond Europe's neighbourhood, the focus on an Indo-Pacific strategy that is mostly empty rhetoric hides the absence of a real China strategy, as stated above.

In some corners, agreements with states such as Azerbaijan and Egypt immediately lead to self-recrimination, as these are authoritarian states. Indeed they are – if Europe would only be allowed to cooperate with democratic states, it would have to abandon most or all of its neighbours. In the pursuit of interests, the role of values should be clear: one may cooperate with anyone, as long as one never violates one's values oneself, nor becomes complicit in the violations that others commit.

What tends to be forgotten, on the other hand, is that power is indivisible. Just like any other (aspiring) great power, Europe will not be able to exercise its political and economic power to full effect if it does not have military power as well. Ultimately, one of the main reasons why in the Middle East, for example, the US' word carries weight, is because the US (and only the US) can deploy a carrier strike force. Vital as the survival of an independent Ukraine has become to the security of Europe, therefore, Europeans should be careful of not looking only to the East. Europe must have the capacity to project military power on all of its flanks. A long-standing, but still illusory aim of the Common Security and Defence Policy.

### Conclusion: Power

One gets the (rather scary) impression that Europe's top leaders feel that they are doing quite well on the international scene. Whereas if one travels outside

Europe, one immediately feels that many have just stopped caring about what Europe says – unless words are followed by actions. Treating Europe as *quantité négligeable* is a conscious tactic, of course, but all too often, it works. The assumption is that European trade, investment, and aid will continue to flow anyway, or that Europe will always fall in line with the US. Why bother then to sincerely negotiate with a player that never quite acts as a real power? Why, indeed.

**Sven Biscop, acting Director-General of Egmont and Professor at Ghent University, is too well aware of the history of great power politics not to be worried for Europe. He warmly thanks Rik Coolsaet, Bernard Siman, and Johan Verbeke for their comments on the first draft of this policy brief, and, more broadly, for inspiring him to write it.**



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