

EU TALKS

Dialoghi sul futuro dell'Europa

ValEUs Edition

Transformation of Transatlantic Relations
Student Position Paper

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16 April 2026

Executive Summary

This paper combines the results of three structured discussion sessions on the future of transatlantic relations — covering trade, security, and NATO — with the on-site group debate held during the International Week in Florence. Across all sessions, our group of EU and non-EU participants returned to the same diagnosis: there is a persistent gap between the European Union’s self-image as a value-based global actor and the structural realities of its trade dependencies, energy choices, and security architecture.

Building on this shared observation, the paper argues that the EU should treat the current crisis of transatlantic reliability as a turning point. We make the case for moving from declarative values toward strategic autonomy: investing in a genuinely European defence industrial base rather than topping up NATO contributions through off-the-shelf U.S. purchases, reducing technological and energy dependencies through coherent — not protectionist — policy, and strengthening the EU’s capacity to act when its values become materially costly to defend.

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Introduction

The gap between the European Union's normative self-description and its structural reality has become especially visible in the transatlantic relationship. In our discussion sessions — held in a group of international EU and non-EU citizens — we tried to grasp this gap concretely, working through it across the fields of economy, energy, trade, security, and NATO. In each of these fields, the same question kept returning: is the EU actually acting like a mature global player while remaining consistent with its own stated values?

This paper is not a single-author analysis but a synthesis. It draws together different sources of input: (1) the minutes and notes of our three thematic discussion sessions on trade, security, and NATO; (2) the discussions during the on-site group work at the EU Talks in Florence in April 2026; and (3) the integrative discussion in which we tried to identify the patterns running through all three sessions and our positions on them. The structure of the paper reflects this layered process: we first present our consolidated position, and then document the discussions themselves.

Two observations from our group work in Florence shaped the argument that follows. First, the issues of energy, trade, and security are not separate policy fields but expressions of the same underlying dependency structure. Second, the EU's difficulty in closing the gap between narrative and action is not primarily a problem of insufficient values, but of insufficient capacity and political will — and capacity is something that can be built, if member states are willing to bear the costs.

Position

Where the EU's self-image meets material reality

Energy is a useful place to start — not only because it is one of the most dramatic issues on the table, but because the gap between what the EU says and what the EU does is particularly visible there, and particularly hard to explain away.

After 2022, the EU changed its story about energy. Dependency was recognized as a strategic vulnerability. Moreover, the green transition became a security question, not just a climate one. For a moment, it seemed as though something had shifted structurally. But four years later, the picture looks more modest. Dependencies have moved rather than shrunk — different suppliers, different geographies, the same basic logic. The investments identified as necessary were not made at the scale required (see, for example, the Draghi Report). The coordination among member states that would have been needed to actually change the energy mix did not materialize in any binding form. When the next crisis arrived through external shocks in 2026, it still hit harder than the shift in narratives since 2022 would have suggested.

The pattern here is one our group kept coming back to across all three sessions: the EU responds to crises on a discursive level without following up with corresponding action. The impression of a gap between building a narrative and not fulfilling its promises appears to be structural rather than episodic. The polycrisis framework, which our group found analytically useful, helps explain why cascading effects are so severe — but it also raises a harder question. If the EU understood the polycrisis concept well enough to use it as a framework, why does its policy response still look

more reactive than proactive? One possible answer — uncomfortable but worth sitting with — is that the EU remains primarily a free trade zone with normative aspirations, rather than a community capable of acting on those aspirations when it becomes materially costly to do so.

Another example of this gap can be found in the EU's technological dependency. European companies running on U.S. software infrastructure face questions about data location, legal jurisdiction, and who ultimately governs the conditions under which they operate. This is framed as an economic risk, and it is — but it is also a question about accountability and self-determination, which the EU's own value commitments should make it take seriously regardless of the economic calculus.

The EU is dependent on the United States not only in trade, but also in security terms. NATO is currently under significant pressure due to shifting geopolitical dynamics and internal strains among its members. Russia's continued aggression following the invasion of Ukraine has reinforced NATO's importance, but it has also exposed vulnerabilities in European defense capabilities and a deep dependence on the United States. At the same time, growing uncertainty about long-term U.S. commitment to European security — particularly in light of domestic political shifts — has raised concerns about the alliance's reliability. Internally, disagreements over defense spending, burden-sharing, and strategic priorities persist, with some member states failing to meet agreed targets. NATO additionally faces challenges from an increasingly multipolar world, including rising tensions with China and instability in neighboring regions. These pressures highlight the need for Europe to strengthen its own defense capacity while remaining engaged within the alliance.

The invasion of Ukraine has served as a pivotal geopolitical event, fundamentally reshaping the European security landscape. The crisis has underscored the inadequacy of relying solely on soft power to deter conventional aggression on the continent. For the European Union, the situation in Ukraine represents a “*Zeitenwende*” (turning point), necessitating a transition from a regulatory framework to a proactive security actor. The conflict has exposed critical vulnerabilities in European stockpiles, logistical capabilities, and rapid response mechanisms, demonstrating the unsustainability of the existing status quo. To uphold European values of peace and territorial integrity, the EU must use this crisis as an impetus for deeper integration, moving beyond emergency assistance towards a permanent, synchronised European defense posture capable of independent action when required.

From reliance on the US to strategic autonomy

For decades, European security has relied on a liberal framework of transatlantic cooperation, with the United States as its central guarantor. However, growing uncertainty in U.S. foreign policy has exposed the risk of such dependence. The war in Ukraine marked a shift toward a more realist perspective, emphasizing power, capabilities, and self-reliance. In line with European values such as responsibility, unity, and resilience, the EU must strengthen its own defense capacity. Strategic autonomy should not mean distancing from allies but ensuring that Europe can act independently when necessary — protecting its democratic institutions, territorial integrity, and long-term security interests.

Europe is increasingly seeking to strengthen its strategic autonomy by reducing its reliance on NATO and positioning itself as a more independent global actor. While NATO remains central to European

security, recent geopolitical shifts — such as changing U.S. priorities and global multipolarity — have highlighted the need for the EU to develop its own defense and foreign policy capabilities. At the same time, the EU is expanding its global influence through trade. Agreements such as the EU–Japan Economic Partnership, the EU–Canada agreement (CETA), and ongoing negotiations with MERCOSUR demonstrate a strategic shift toward diversified partnerships. These agreements not only reduce economic dependency but also allow the EU to project regulatory power globally. Strengthening such trade networks, alongside greater defense coordination, enables the EU to emerge as a more autonomous and influential world player.

Sovereignty and the reassertion of European control

The increasing focus on sovereignty within the EU reflects a broader effort to regain control over key security domains, including airspace and defense infrastructure. Member states such as Spain have advocated for stronger European capabilities, particularly in areas like air force development, to reduce reliance on external actors. This shift aligns with the European value of self-determination while remaining compatible with multilateral cooperation. Strengthening sovereignty does not imply abandoning NATO but rather creating a more balanced partnership. By enhancing its own capacities, the EU reinforces its credibility, reduces vulnerabilities, and ensures more autonomous decision-making in an increasingly uncertain global security environment.

Although the 2% GDP spending target is a key part of NATO’s commitments, the current system — in which each country buys its own equipment — often leads to a fragmented and inefficient defense landscape. Simply increasing budgets is not enough if the money mostly goes towards purchasing non-European equipment. This deepens reliance on outside suppliers and weakens Europe’s own industrial base. Instead of treating defense spending merely as a way to meet NATO requirements, member states should focus on investments that strengthen the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). By directing a significant share of defense budgets into EU-led joint procurement and collaborative research and development, the EU can ensure that every euro spent helps build a strong European pillar within the alliance. This reduces overlap and ensures that NATO spending genuinely strengthens Europe.

The conclusion follows from this argument: given the unreliability of the United States and the multiplicity of current threats — and in order to strengthen, rather than weaken, transatlantic cooperation in the long run — Europe should invest in European, not exclusively NATO, defense. The political question of how to disentangle without antagonising the United States may be less acute than it appears: if Washington is likely to react sharply regardless, the lever of disciplined diplomacy can be used to manage the relationship rather than to escalate it.

Background: Discussion Sessions

The following sections document the three thematic sessions whose conclusions inform the position above. They are presented in their original sequence — Trade, Security, NATO — and preserve the exploratory character of the discussions, including the open questions that did not lead to a consolidated position.

First Session — Trade

The first session's main topic was trade. As a warm-up, we discussed initial reactions to the EPRS Study "The Near-term Future of the Transatlantic Relationship" by Mark Nils Strand, published in February 2026. Building on this paper, the discussion first turned to the question of energy and the apparent double standards in the EU's approach.

Energy and double standards

We discussed the relative positions of climate policies and the realities of their enactment, both in the EU and in the United States. As one example, we addressed the apparent German double standard of banning nuclear energy (initially on safety grounds following Fukushima) without reinstating it on environmental grounds, while at the same time continuing to mine coal. In connection with this, we also looked at the contrasting approaches of France, Poland, and Romania to nuclear energy and energy self-sufficiency.

We also raised the argument that renewable energy produced in economies whose standards do not align with those of the EU represents a structural paradox. Later in the discussion, the Mercosur trade agreement and the agreement with India were brought up, raising the question of whether they had been concluded too quickly and lacked sufficient environmental safeguards.

All of this pointed to internal tensions within the EU concerning a coherent climate policy for the green transformation. These tensions left the group with the impression of EU double standards regarding the consistency between what it signals through policy and public communication and what it does in practice. Another recurring theme was Donald Trump as a focal point in our attempt to make sense of U.S. foreign policy.

Trump and sense-making of American foreign policy

The recurring difficulty with Donald Trump is that his actions allow for several interpretations that often appear to contradict one another. One reading sees Trump as an actor strategising on the basis of a realist perspective — hence his transactional, hard-power-driven style of dealing with allies and rivals alike. Along these lines, the administration's actions can be read through — and as a simultaneous appropriation of — the Monroe Doctrine (the so-called "Donroe Doctrine"). A contrasting view held that there is no coherent sense-making of Trump as a predictable actor with a stable set of conditions and ideologies. A third view, partly opposed to the second, was that MAGA (Make America Great Again) signals to the population — and possibly to businesses — a certain expectation of stability and continuity.

Questions about Trump and his direct and indirect impact on U.S. foreign policy repeatedly led to follow-up questions about the EU and how it can and should act in the face of such uncertainty. From there, our focus shifted to trade policy and the global role of the EU.

What can the EU do? Trade and the EU's global role

After identifying the pressures Trump's policies place on the U.S.–EU partnership, we discussed which responses the EU can offer and which levers it actually has. We tried to identify who is acting during the “polycrisis”: businesses and corporations play an important role through industry, but there is little assurance that they can continue to operate on U.S. software stacks; Parliament and Commission can also act, setting an appropriate budget and investing in key sectors — though with the risk of leaning into protectionism. Both sides are entangled with the question of data — its security, its location, and the resources required to sustain it.

Who is acting? EU agency in times of polycrisis

The discussion eventually turned to the question of which actors are actually capable of acting in times of polycrisis, and what levers the EU has at its disposal. Two actor levels were addressed: businesses and institutions.

On the business side, dependency on U.S. software infrastructure was raised as a concrete risk — the question of whether European companies can and should continue to run on U.S. software stacks was left open. Closely tied to this is the broader data question: where data is stored, who has access to it, and how data security can be localised within European jurisdiction.

On the institutional side, Parliament and Commission were discussed as potential actors. The reference point here was the Draghi Report, which called for roughly 800 billion euros in annual investments. Whether this can be achieved was viewed with scepticism. Behind this stood the question of whether further investment in Europe and an attempt to achieve a degree of economic autonomy carries the risk of tipping into protectionism.

Finally, the group touched on resource dependencies and the so-called Brussels Effect — raising the question of how much regulatory reach the EU still commands, and whether a protectionist turn would ultimately undermine the EU's ability to find cooperation in the world.

Second Session — Security

We kept this session relatively short, dedicating our focus to the future of security and transatlantic relations.

Ukraine's integration and NATO's experience gap

We opened the discussion by establishing the Ukrainian context, highlighting the country's long-standing desire to join the EU and NATO — a trajectory that accelerated sharply following the Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent full-scale invasion. We drew a critical contrast regarding military readiness: while NATO absorbs massive financial resources, it lacks recent, practical combat experience. Conversely, Ukraine has developed advanced, hands-on tactical expertise, particularly in modern drone warfare, positioning it as a highly experienced potential partner for the alliance.

Spain's NATO dilemma and the domino effect

We then shifted the conversation to internal vulnerabilities within NATO, looking specifically at Spain. Certain Spanish political parties have openly discussed holding a referendum to exit NATO. This sentiment is largely a reaction to transactional pressures from Donald Trump, who has threatened trade restrictions if Spain does not increase its financial contributions to the alliance. This dynamic raised a broader, critical question: if Spain were to actually leave NATO, would it trigger a domino effect, and could the EU remain united in the aftermath?

US reliability, EU fragility, and structural spending

The overarching concern of whether we can truly rely on the United States permeated the discussion, and we leaned toward the consensus that the EU remains fragile without American security guarantees. We analysed the efficiency of European military spending, noting a paradox: funnelling all European military resources into a single NATO structure prevents the EU from developing independent, self-sufficient military capabilities. At the same time, individual member states like Germany are taking unilateral steps to rebuild their national military reserves, often buying equipment off-the-shelf from the United States rather than structurally improving the EU's collective defense industry.

The “post-verità” era and alternative partners

Finally, we contextualised these geopolitical shifts as part of a broader “post-verità” (post-truth) era. For decades, the foundational structures of NATO and the EU were deeply entwined, providing a predictable security environment. However, those historical ties are currently rupturing under new political pressures. This realisation led us to a concluding, open question: if the United States is no longer a steadfast guarantor of security, can — and should — Europe begin looking for other strategic partners on the global stage?

Third Session — NATO

Origins of transatlantic relations

The discussion began with an overview of the historical evolution of transatlantic relations and the broader trajectory of European integration. A key milestone highlighted was 4 April 1949, in Washington, D.C., marking the establishment of NATO. The alliance was originally built on a shared liberal institutional framework, with an underlying narrative that differs significantly from today's geopolitical context. Starting with 12 founding members, NATO has expanded to 32 member states, reflecting its enduring relevance.

NATO was presented as both a political and military alliance, grounded in the principle of collective defense under Article 5. European countries have long operated under the umbrella of U.S. nuclear protection, which has shaped the security architecture of the region.

Points of contention in the alliance

Despite strong cooperation, the transatlantic relationship has faced significant tensions, particularly around issues of power and strategic decision-making. Key historical moments discussed included the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the Kosovo conflict, and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. These events revealed differences in priorities and approaches between European allies and the United States.

The EU integration project

The European Union was described as a complex, multi-actor system involving institutions such as the European Commission, the European Council, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This institutional structure reflects the EU's unique nature as both a political and economic union, with evolving ambitions in foreign and security policy.

Contemporary security challenges

The discussion addressed whether current global dynamics resemble a new Cold War. We emphasised that modern security policy is highly complex and cannot be reduced to simple bipolar frameworks. Current conflicts, including those in Gaza and involving Iran, illustrate the limitations of the EU as a unified geopolitical actor, particularly in situations where member states lack consensus.

The EU's role in global conflicts

The EU's role in the war in Ukraine was highlighted as a significant test of its capacity as an international actor. Its actions are shaped by a combination of historical, political, and economic interests. While the EU has demonstrated increasing engagement, questions remain about the extent of its strategic autonomy and effectiveness.

Internal challenges within the EU

An important issue raised during the discussion was the ability of individual member states, such as Hungary, to block common decisions. This highlights ongoing challenges related to unanimity and coherence in EU foreign policy, which can limit the Union's effectiveness on the global stage.

Is the EU a mature global actor?

The final part of the discussion focused on whether the EU can be considered a fully mature international actor. The conclusion suggested that, while the EU is still evolving, it can increasingly be understood as a maturing regional power, gradually developing its role and identity in global affairs.

Recommendations

Pulling these three sessions and our discussions in Florence together, three suggestions emerge. This is not a finished programme, but these are the points where the gap between what the EU says and what the EU does seemed to us most worth addressing first.

1. Defence spending is not the same as defence policy

The 2% target gets treated as if reaching it were the policy itself. But if most of that money keeps going into off-the-shelf purchases from the U.S., then higher spending mostly means deeper dependency — and the European industry that strategic autonomy would actually rest on stays underdeveloped. A meaningful share of new defence spending should be committed to EU-level joint procurement and to the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. This will not solve the problem on its own, but without it the rest of the strategic autonomy debate stays largely rhetorical.

2. The software question is not just an economic one

European companies and public administrations running on U.S. software stacks is usually framed as a competitiveness issue. But it is also, more uncomfortably, a question about who governs the conditions under which European institutions actually operate — data location, applicable law, and whether contracts can be exited at all. If the EU's value commitments are taken seriously, voluntary frameworks are probably not enough. Binding sovereignty requirements for public-sector digital procurement would be a modest first step, and the fact that it still feels ambitious tells you something about where we currently are.

3. Energy policy needs to actually be common, not just coordinated

After 2022 the EU told a new story about energy — dependency as a strategic problem, the green transition as a security question. Four years later, dependencies have mostly moved rather than shrunk, because coordination among member states never became binding. If energy is genuinely a security issue, it probably cannot keep being handled as 27 mostly national strategies sitting next to each other. Binding common rules on the energy mix and on the infrastructure investments the Draghi Report identified as missing would be a first step.