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The European Union's 'foreign policy' since the return of Donald Trump: between urgency and strategy in Central Asia and the South Caucasus

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NOVEMBER 2025

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Key takeaways:

- The European Union (EU) is continuing its push for strategic actorness, a process still underway despite years of investment, both discursive and material.
- The return of Donald Trump to the White House and his policy of pressuring allies for 'underperforming' on issues of common interest served as a decisive turning point, with the EU urgently initiating a deep reset of its approach to its external relations.
- This reset primarily concerns the Eastern Neighbourhood, with the newly announced Connectivity Agenda expected to strengthen the EU's presence in neighbouring regions and outline specific goals as opposed to holistic rhetoric.
- The South Caucasus and Central Asian regions are at the heart of this momentum, having already received renewed attention from the EU since it began diversifying export routes to reduce dependence on Russia following the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.
- In addition to external pressure, however, the EU is also dealing with internal challenges in the face of the rise of far-right parties. This must be taken into consideration given the inevitable interlinkage between internal EU politics and the bloc's foreign affairs.
- The EU is making positive steps, signalling renewed ambition and is determined to correct past mistakes. However, the extent of its success will be determined by its ability to mitigate existing challenges.

Introduction

The 'foreign policy' of the European Union remains under close scrutiny. Since being established in its current form by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the EU has attempted to develop a foreign policy personality backed up by legitimate means of implementation. However, in actual practice, the bloc's 'Achilles heel' and underlying issue for decades has repeatedly been exposed. This concerns the lack of unity among leading member states, resulting in the lack of a grand strategy. Despite rhetorical convergence in moments of crisis, such as at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, European nations have, more often than not, appeared fragmented rather than united. This is partly the logical consequence of having to manage the interests and positions of 27 member states, each with their own foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, considerable strategic thought and resources have been dedicated by

leadership in Brussels to tackling this limitation. Numerous security strategies, strategic compasses, 'performance reviews' and deeper institutionalization of the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy have been just some of the initiatives aimed at consolidating the EU's position in the international system.

Despite this, for many years, the nature of 'EU' actorness remained unclear. The war in Ukraine undoubtedly served as a wake-up call, demonstrating the fragility of European security and, most importantly, the EU's unreadiness to mitigate external threats on its continent without the United States. The period subsequent to the start of the war reinforced the EU's difficulties in influencing armed conflict. Although material support was substantial per se, it was clear that American involvement held the keys to Ukraine's defence. The re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, however, served as an important turning point. As the American president began to swiftly implement his new foreign policy agenda, strictly prioritizing American interests, his unease with the extent of Europe's contribution to the transatlantic alliance quickly became apparent. European leaders were quickly made aware of Washington's unwillingness to continue bearing the cost of European defence. Moreover, alignment between the White House and Brussels on matters of vital strategic importance was now far from a given.

This paper will propose that the pressure imposed on the EU by the second Trump administration led to a quick but highly consequential 'reset' of the EU's approach to its foreign relations. On this occasion, the steps taken in its 'Eastern Neighbourhood' will be focused on, an area which has received considerable attention in recent months. This will help demonstrate that the EU's foreign policy apparatus, coming under intense pressure, both external and internal, has already led to an urgent reset of the overarching approach, aimed at leveraging the EU's strengths in its relationships and driven by a vision focused on economic growth, prosperity and resilience. Having already initiated a complex process of diversifying export routes and reducing dependence on Russia, this latest impetus promises to fully revitalize the EU's relationship with both the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Trump "shock"

External shocks such as the war in Ukraine reinforced the reality that "European defence and security" remains inseparable from American security. In fact, the current situation in the ongoing negotiations between the sides further stresses this point. For weaponry and support considered as decisive and course-altering, it is in

Washington that President Zelensky is most hopeful. This does not mean that “Europe’s” role is rendered useless – the significant degree of support (military, economic and diplomatic) coordinated by the EU has helped Ukraine withstand on the battlefield. The sum of the support from EU nations comprises [45.6%](#) of all government support provided to Ukraine, which exceeds the 37% provided by the US. However, from January 2022 to June 2025, it is the United States that has been the leading individual aid donor to Ukraine, with [\\$130.6 billion](#) provided. Despite the EU’s highly active role, the superiority of the United States in the military domain underscored a considerable power gap. This has been regularly voiced to the public by President Trump, who has not hesitated to point out Washington’s superiority over Europe in both tangible and non-tangible terms and urging that this be corrected. With regards to the war between Russia and Ukraine, his insistence on face-to-face meetings with both leaders and his recurring pointing out the deficiencies of Europe’s defence contributions have provoked a much-needed but equally long-delayed period of strategic reflection and subsequent recalibration. With the second Trump administration making the pursuit of global peace its firm foreign policy priority, a strategy of maximum pressure on ‘underperforming’ allies was implemented from the start.

The pragmatism that characterizes Donald Trump’s foreign policy decisions has directly affected the EU and the ongoing conversations about its foreign policy. In addition to criticizing the EU’s approach to defence spending, his leadership has diminished the authority and presence of European leaders. This, in many ways, has pushed European leaders into recognizing the inconsistency between their vision for the EU and its actual role in shaping global outcomes. In his first presidency, Donald Trump was equally vocal about his disillusionment with the transatlantic alliance. On this occasion, however, the international system is fundamentally different – the use of force is no longer a rarity, conflict is widespread and with escalatory potential, and diplomatic success increasingly relies on efforts of specific individuals. In this intense, unpredictable and often uncompromising global environment, an actor’s (in)ability to act cohesively often leads to its strategic ‘sidelining’. In this particular case, the [image](#) of European leaders, sitting alongside President Zelensky, observing as President Trump addresses the room, is as symbolic as it is consequential. The same applies to the picture taken at the Summit for Peace in Egypt in October 2025, a process which European leaders have similarly failed to influence directly. Crucially, however, President Trump has in a short period of time demonstrated an ability to influence traditional partners into making considerable commitments which are in line with his vision. The agreement reached at the NATO summit in The Hague in June

2025 to elevate defence spending to [5%](#) of GDP by 2035 best resembles this and represents a long awaited but decisive shift in policy.

Trump's challenging relationship with Europe extends considerably beyond just military affairs. In recent months, the sides have 'clashed' over the terms of their economic relationship. An intense negotiation period began when, at the start of his second tenure, the American president implemented worldwide tariffs, unprecedented in volume. Initially, they extended to EU member states. After several months of back-and-forth announcements, which included the EU's retaliatory measures against US goods but suspending them to allow space for negotiations, the sides agreed on a [deal](#) which saw the initially planned 30% US tariffs on EU goods reduced to 15%. On the EU side, this received mixed coverage, with many leaders, including France and Italy, expressing considerable scepticism. [Some leaders](#) pointed out the EU's inability to negotiate terms which affected member states proportionally, with some losing out more than others due to the nature of their bilateral economic relationship with the EU. Others were even more critical, suggesting that the EU had "submitted" to American demands. First, many believe that the agreed rate of 15% remains excessive, especially as the previous figure for tariffs on EU exports was an average rate of [4.8%](#). Moreover, there are 'US specific' concessions, with the EU agreeing to [eliminate tariffs](#) on the imports of all 'US industrial goods', extending [preferential access](#) to several US products such as seafood and in the agriculture sphere. Washington also highlighted that the EU had 'promised' to make significant investments by purchasing American weapons, a considerable commitment given that around [80%](#) of EU defence investment is already directed at the American defence industry. Boosting this figure further will present a major challenge, especially given the emphasis the European Commission continues to place on investing into local European markets and modernizing the EU's collective defence industry.

The Trump experience emphasizes the EU's ongoing challenges with asserting itself on the international stage. On the outside, especially given its status as a unique model of regional economic integration, the EU appears as a values-driven and progressive actor capable of advancing mutual goals. However, as shown by frequent indecisiveness over international crises and internal disagreement over the relationship with the US, the EU still lacks the necessary mechanisms to coordinate between its member states and, crucially, ensure that disagreement on specific matters does not paralyze the bloc's position on critical issues. This, in turn, limits its ability to assert itself to a degree where its contributions *decisively* shape outcomes.

EU foreign policy: a vital recap

The EU has never hidden its intentions to become a ‘global actor’. The 2007 [Lisbon Treaty](#), which entered into force in 2009, served as an important turning point in the EU’s present-day foreign policy structure. First, the treaty created the role of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, aimed at adding clarity and vision to the EU’s foreign policy role. Moreover, the European External Action Service was created to more effectively coordinate global EU delegations. Along with several other institutional changes, these changes were aimed at clarifying the EU’s foreign policy personality. Crucially, the treaty [recognized](#) the Union’s Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP) as an integral part of the broader EU framework and introduced the legal basis for the later establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and boosted the role of the European Defence Agency (EDA). This sent a clear message – the EU wanted to take the lead and act as the primary security guarantor of its own continent.

A series of initiatives were unveiled to make what was clearly a significant challenge seem more achievable. Among this was the consolidation of this objective into the EU’s official rhetoric, which was to resonate throughout the EU’s internal but also external communications. Labelled as [‘strategic autonomy’](#), the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy aimed to create a clear synergy between its hard and soft power capabilities, helping it establish itself as an autonomous player that is not reliant on other actors. There was concrete hope that the EU’s decisions and actions would follow an overarching strategy, the aim of which was to consolidate the Union’s status as a ‘centre of power’ in its own right. To achieve this, member states’ positions needed to be coordinated in one way or another, allowing the Union to act as ‘one’ on the most pressing matters even if issue-specific divergence remained. Through documents such as the 2016 Global Strategy, the 2021 Global Gateway Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass directed at clarifying the EU’s approach to global infrastructure and connectivity, the Commission sought to sharpen official rhetoric, make it more representative of renewed ambitions and broaden the range of areas in which the EU was to have tangible influence.

However, since this ‘strategic turn’ in official rhetoric, foreign policy ‘challenges’, usually in the face of armed conflict, have shown that the EU’s status on the global stage remains largely ambiguous. In one respect, the EU is present in regions where it aspires to be acknowledged as a leading force. In Ukraine, it is one of the leading supporting forces, with the High Representative [Kaja Kallas](#) taking an increasingly assertive stance on sanctions packages against Russia and also responses to air space incursions. In neighbouring regions like the South Caucasus and Central Asia, it also

has both short-term and long-term interests that directly serve the European and regional economies. Its relationship with China consists of a delicate balance between strategic engagement on issues of mutual interest but also cautious restraint given the inevitability of overlapping objectives.

Nevertheless, a common denominator unites these cases – EU efforts and engagements have, in recent times, rarely led to meaningful change, are often inconsistent due to member states divergences and tend to be overshadowed by more powerful regional actors. This is made apparent by briefly tracing the EU's recent record in regions which are considered to be in its 'neighbourhood'. In the South Caucasus, EU attempts at mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia were inconsistent. Although in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War the now-former President of the European Council Charles Michel managed to bring the two leaders together, the broader process was [jeopardized](#) by biased intervention from President Macron of France. Eventually, it was the Trump administration that succeeded in bridging gaps between the sides in ways which other foreign actors failed to, with the Washington summit of August 2025 permanently changing the security landscape of the region. In Central Asia, despite the hosting of the 1st EU-Central Asia summit and the announcement of ambitious investment plans, the EU is yet to leverage its economic power in a way which would allow it to establish itself as a decisive external regional power. This often results in having to play 'catch up' with other powers. As the traditionally dominant figures in the region, Russia and China have well-established strategies. Moreover, the United States hosting Central Asian leaders for the second US-Central Asia summit on November 6th, 2025, points at an even further increase of competition for regional influence. With this in mind, the EU must ensure that it is not once again sidelined from regional processes. This reality has, in one way or another, been recognized in Brussels. The pursuit of 'strategic actorness', despite being classified as a foreign policy objective, was not pursued with the necessary urgency to allow "Europe" to 'catch up' to the other centres of power in the international system. Essentially, member state division was too powerful for it to be mitigated through ambitious policy frameworks, the implementation of which often proved inconsistent.

The missing factor?

To put an end to what turned into a repetitive cycle of being unable to meet ambition with sufficient impact, EU institutions, in addition to shocks like armed conflict, required a stimulus 'from within' which essentially turned the pursuit of actorness

into a matter of guaranteeing geopolitical relevance on an increasingly volatile international stage. This moment came in the face of Donald Trump's return as president of the United States. The political elite in Brussels was, abruptly, left face to face with an unignorable and highly powerful **combination** – Washington's highly demanding and critical rhetoric of its performance in matters of common importance, along with the realization that if left without American backing, European actorness is simply insufficient to protect the continent and its security, both now and in the long-term.

Nonetheless, in the same way that the contemporary international environment can force an actor into a state of existential pressure, it can also unveil new directions and opportunities for strategic rectification. Donald Trump's return to the White House and the urgency of his foreign policy portfolio forced the EU to revisit some of its stagnating relationships. Accompanied by fresh leadership in the face of Kaja Kallas replacing Josep Borrell in the position of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the EU has since taken concrete steps in its latest push for strategic relevance. In particular, this concerns the Eastern Neighbourhood, where a new mechanism has been established to shed more clarity on the EU's plans.

The 'Eastern' portfolio

The pursuit of global actorness inevitably leads to the establishment of a diverse range of engagement and partnerships. However, as any actor striving for assertiveness and decisiveness, the EU's foreign policy must continue to deliver 'small' but tangible wins which confirm that the 'change of tone' is more than just an ambition. On this occasion, the EU's 'Eastern' flank will be considered as an example of an area where the EU has a unique opportunity to finally assert itself as a strategic actor with a capacity to *directly* influence outcomes.

Prior to Donald Trump's return to the White House, the EU had already been pursuing a policy of diversifying its export routes to reduce dependence on Russia, following the unfolding of the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, this objective received new momentum after the second Trump administration initiated the implementation of its foreign policy portfolio. Since then, the EU has pursued a very clear and pronounced effort to revitalize its relationship with its Eastern neighbours. Although some of the countries belonging to this category benefited from more targeted attention under the 'Eastern Neighbourhood', there was consensus that this foreign policy mechanism had run its course. For this reason, the Black Sea, South Caucasus and, **as an important extension of previous engagement, the Central Asian region,**

currently serve as the most important litmus tests for the durability and feasibility of the EU's renewed push for regional leadership. A key element of this process remains the development of the EU's security and defence policy to a standard which at least enables Brussels to have some degree of military actorness.

However, as regional actors take more ownership of regional processes through minilateral and multilateral frameworks, there is more than just military procurement that the EU needs to address. The development of multimodal trade routes such as the Middle Corridor is particularly significant in this regard, with many of the regions through which the Corridor links Europe and China carrying increasing weight in the EU's strategic calculations. The regions in question are also undergoing their own fundamental reconfigurations, forcing external actors that previously engaged with them to revisit and modernize their approach to present-day realities. Hence, if the EU wishes to maximize the benefits of rising interconnectivity, it must address a lingering issue – the inability to connect vision and rhetoric with effective and timely action, preventing it from being outcompeted by other regional and international powers.

The “Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda” – uniting the EU's approach to Central Asia and the South Caucasus

The above-mentioned **combination** of factors influencing the EU in recent months cannot exclude the highly competitive nature of the current international climate. Even if the emphasis on mutually beneficial cooperation continues to resonate, geopolitical calculations still play a highly influential role in shaping outcomes in international relations. The EU's approach to its Eastern neighbours is a clear reflection of this, as both Russia and China have well-established strategies in Central Asia whereas the United States has wasted little time since Donald Trump's call for Washington to pursue new partnerships that attract consistent foreign direct investment. This has undoubtedly pushed the EU to intensify its engagement. The key question, however, is whether, on this occasion, the EU will finally succeed in ensuring that its influence leaves a lasting impact on its neighbourhood, advancing thereby both the interests of its member states and European security.

In many respects, the highly active foreign policy portfolio of the current Trump administration, which focuses heavily on the pursuit of peace and international security, has provided the EU with an additional impetus to revitalize many of its stagnating relationships. The most notable example of this is the EU's newly announced [“Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda”](#), which is essentially targeted at

linking the EU to Central Asia via Türkiye and the South Caucasus. On October 20, 2025, [the EU gathered](#) foreign ministry representatives from its member states, the South Caucasus and Central Asian countries, Türkiye and the Republic of Moldova. This was a continuation of a series of efforts by Brussels to refresh its strategic approach to individual regions but also establish an effective coordination mechanism which will foster four key priority areas: transport, digital, energy and trade. It was announced that the Commission will intensify work on preparing a 'coordination' framework which will not only build on existing practices but also extend opportunities to [‘international financial institutions, private investors and third parties’](#).

This meeting came shortly after the EU's [second Global Gateway Forum](#), held on October 9-10, 2025. The Global Gateway strategy, initially launched in 2021, is a platform through which the EU mobilizes investments for its partners, targeted at boosting economic growth, sustainable development, and “narrowing the global investment gap”. The strategy operates on a [regional basis](#), with an investment package for Africa (worth €150 billion) already provided and similar arrangements for Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean currently in the works. The EU has also been gradually directing the focus on Central Asia. In addition to the high-level, political EU-Central Asia Summit, held for the first time in April 2025, the sides also engage through the EU-Central Asia [Economic Forum](#). It is at the next and third meeting of this platform (the *Investors and Connectivity Forum* in [Tashkent](#)) that the sides are expected to present the above-mentioned coordination framework. At the high-level political summit in April 2025, the EU already announced an investment package of [12 billion euros](#), to be directed at the focus areas highlighted above.

Can rhetoric generate outcomes?

The EU's approach has often been criticized for being excessively reactionary, failing to anticipate strategic changes and regularly ending up sidelined from regional agendas. However, this year has differed considerably, with Brussels consistently showcasing political will to either reinvigorate relationships or come up with new platforms to adapt to new challenges. This Connectivity Agenda, for example, represents the EU's determination to come up with a new approach – one which allows Brussels to unite its different relationships over a common objective, which in this case is the strengthening of resilience, the pursuit of economic opportunity and sustainable development whilst strengthening inter-regional connectivity. The

successful realization of this vision has several benefits: the demonstration of the EU's ability to lead in bridging gaps between regions, its determination to use its economic might to drive geopolitical processes without the United States and its readiness to battle for influence with highly influential regional powers which, a priori, have an advantage due to either historical ties or geographical proximity.

For instance, China's influence in Central Asia is considerable, with Beijing benefiting from both geographical proximity and economic opportunity given the critical role of Central Asian economies in the Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, in the first part of 2025, 'China-Central Asia' trade figures hit a record high, rising by 10% on-year and reaching a new record of [39.8 billion US dollars](#). From a bilateral perspective, China is the leading trading partner for most Central Asian states and carries particular significance for a large range of their individual sectors. As the region's largest economy, trade with China is particularly significant for [Kazakhstan](#), with the export of minerals and metals forming a considerable proportion of the country's total trade turnover. Most notably, as Kazakhstan works towards its foreign direct investment goal of [\\$150 billion by 2029](#), Chinese participation is only expected to continue rising. The region has also earned a key place in the foreign policy calculations of the Trump administration. Although dialogue and cooperation in the C5+1 format including Washington is not a novel concept, substantial progress since the first meeting in 2023 had been limited. However, with the second summit held in this format in Washington on November 6, 2025, more targeted and tangible American involvement has kick-started. Central Asia's critical minerals are bound to play a key role in this process, with mining partnerships and aviation deals worth more than \$130 billion agreed and a [Joint Statement on Economic Cooperation](#) providing a roadmap for further deepening of ties.

Central Asia and the South Caucasus currently serve as the perfect embodiments of changing geopolitical realities. Regions previously affected either by conflict and occupation, as in the South Caucasus, or the excessive domination of one major power, as in Central Asia, are emerging on the international stage as independent but also highly influential actors. Most consequentially, the relationship between both regions recently took another historic step as Azerbaijan officially became a [full participant](#) of the Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State. This essentially means that there is now a group of six (C6), bolstering the potential of the greater region given Azerbaijan's undeniable role in key logistics and infrastructure projects connecting Central Asia with Western markets. This reinforces the view that if the EU hopes to play an active role in the development of its neighbouring regions, it must ensure its actions are able to drive change as swiftly as possible.

Engaging with the United States and China in direct competition for influence is overly ambitious, with Brussels so far unable to prove that it can act as a united bloc seeking to make change. Therefore, it would be reasonable to begin by focusing on specific areas, leveraging some of the EU's expertise. Some experts are pointing out [agricultural development](#), for example, with most Central Asian countries still suffering from inadequate investment into their agriculture industries. Similarly, the EU should look to play a leading role in advancing the Middle Corridor Project. As Brussels seeks to reduce reliance on Russia-dependent transport routes, the EU should maximize already existing support to Central Asian countries hoping to boost exports of critical raw minerals to Europe via the Middle Corridor. The extensive experience of some of its member states with green energy technology is one example of an area in which the EU can differentiate its approach to the region from those of its 'competitors'. By focusing on the "quality" of the investment as opposed to its quantity, the EU can leave a lasting mark on Central Asia's development, re-boost its now well-established connectivity vision for its Eastern neighbourhood and prove itself as a high-impact regional actor.

A limitation from within?

In addition to external factors, the role of internal ones cannot be overshadowed when assessing the EU's various attempts at formulating a coherent foreign policy strategy. The above sections proposed that Donald Trump's return to office and his firmness with European allies pushed the EU to take concrete steps to adapt its foreign policy. This includes giving its relationship with its Eastern neighbours new momentum and exploring new cooperation avenues which would grant the EU's role new relevance and overshadow the challenges that have been limiting its actorness in recent times.

However, looking ahead, this process of finally narrowing the gap between rhetoric and policy may potentially face another challenge, but this time 'from within'. As the electorate of different EU member states takes different trajectories, this process is almost certainly going to impact EU-level decisions on the bloc's external relations.

In several European states, including the E3 group (Germany, France and the United Kingdom), parties from the right wing of the political spectrum have been making considerable inroads into the domestic political agenda. Whether the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Reform UK or France's National Rally, this process has gained sufficient momentum to now be categorized as a new reality. [Opinion polls](#) mapping voting preferences ahead of upcoming elections are consistently pointing to the

victories of these parties, which are considerably more 'right leaning' on the political spectrum than current governments. The source of this phenomenon appears to be widespread discontent of the electorate with current governance, citing poor economic performance, excessive migration and also pushback, in some cases, against the comprehensive support provided to Ukraine. Should this process materialize, its likely influence on the direction of the EU's foreign policy deserves careful attention.

Political unity among member states has been the EU's Achilles heel for some time, with countries like Hungary and Slovakia regularly expressing their disapproval of how Brussels conducts affairs. This particularly concerns the uncomfortable relationship between the priorities and objectives of the EU as an institution and those of the member states concerned. Crucially, the above list of parties, which extends to multiple other countries, including the Czech Republic (ANO party) and the Netherlands (PVV), share either the same or similar concerns about the EU's role. For instance, on the issue of enlargement, the parties listed here are strictly against pursuing this policy. This stems from their inherent Euroscepticism, which revolves around their concerns of Brussels infringing excessively on their national sovereignty. Moreover, they advocate for tighter migration restrictions for both security and economic purposes. Interestingly, however, a significant number of parties in what is an increasingly large group are [pro-NATO but are 'anti-EU'](#) and have taken a stance against European rearmament. This points to a shared view that the 'Brussels' way is excessively infringing on national sovereignty and 'rearmament' in the face of the Russia-Ukraine war is unnecessary. Nevertheless, membership of NATO, given its status as an intergovernmental military alliance where decisions rely exclusively on member states, is favoured to the EU's supranational model where EU law has authority in several different, albeit not all, spheres. This is reinforced by more general scepticism of the concept of international cooperation, as evidenced by the [dismissal of cooperation on climate regulation](#) as ineffective and unreflective of the interests of ordinary people.

The mentioned parties are now influential enough to shape national discourse, and even, in some cases, national agendas. On the European (EU) level, a similar process can be observed. The Brussels system is designed to be based on the concept of ['consensus democracy'](#), which is designed to achieve plurality and include as many different political voices as possible. Currently, the vast majority of high-ranking officials represent groups from the centre of the political spectrum, most notably the European People's Party. However, 'EU-level' decisions are still determined either through qualified majority voting or the unanimity of the heads of state, of which the

European Council is composed. Therefore, should the political leadership of the continent look radically different by the time the next cycle of election concludes, decisions on the supranational level will certainly be affected.

It must, however, be underlined that due to both the current composition of EU institutions and the frequency of electoral fluctuations, this remains strictly a *possibility*. That said, the process of the integration of ‘far-right’ parties into European level processes is underway. First, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) represent a [significant](#) political grouping in the European Parliament. This already gives it considerable space to influence the shaping of legislation and resolutions and co-deciding the budget, of which foreign missions, for example, are an integral part. Moreover, in several member states, parties which belong to the ECR are operating as coalition or [junior](#) coalition partners. This includes parties like Croatia’s ‘Homeland Movement’, Slovakia’s Slovak National Party (SNS) and Sweden’s Sweden Democrats which provide considerable support to the ruling coalition. Another useful example is the Finns Party in Finland, which despite not being a part of the government, won the second most seats in the latest Finnish elections. The gradual but decisive consolidation of parties which are, by definition, “anti-federalist”, is therefore a reality. This, among other things, has resulted in the gradual easing of the [‘cordon sanitaire’](#) imposed on such parties, a term which refers to the deliberate refusal of collaboration with one or a group of specific parties. So far, this mostly concerns the European People’s Party, which has been finding more common ground with ECR on issues of mutual importance. This points to a clear reality – parties with inherently Eurosceptic views are already firmly integrated into ‘European’ politics. Looking ahead, as the EU attempts to lift itself to the status of an *alternative* ‘centre of power’, the extent of internal (dis)unity will be just as crucial as the external factors focused on throughout this paper.

Impact on present-day EU policy

The clash between the federalist and anti-federalist interpretation of the EU’s role in foreign affairs is arguably as relevant as ever before. Nevertheless, despite the political dynamics described above, the European Union’s official track appears to be following an entirely different trajectory. In fact, the first ever [Enlargement Forum](#), held on 18 November 2025, confirms that politicians in Brussels have no intention of abandoning key foreign policy ideas which have, to date, shaped our understanding of the EU’s vision – gradual enlargement, an emphasis on multilateralism via common solutions to common issues and boosting its stake in rising global interconnectivity.

Since Donald Trump's re-election and his thorough appraisal of the transatlantic alliance, it became apparent that the EU's 'foreign affairs' required new momentum. Its institutional objective of developing and then consolidating strategic actorness was directly under threat, especially given the challenges this process had already been experiencing. The Trump factor, combined with the broader realization of the changing nature of international affairs, pushed the EU to rethink its approach to its Eastern neighbourhood. The EU is reengaging, on new terms, with regions where it previously had unsuccessful experiences. This includes the South Caucasus, where the EU has a lot to offer as the region continues to unblock its communications following the end of Armenia's thirty-year long occupation of Azerbaijani territory, and Central Asia, where new alliances and frameworks are being drawn up.

As the international system continues to be defined by fragmentation and the persistent shift towards new alliances and cooperation frameworks, it quickly became clear that the time for geopolitical apathy and cautiousness is over. Competition between great powers continues to be a feature of international relations, urging actors in power categories below to constantly evolve to ensure their capacity to act in accordance with their own interests survives. In the words of [President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev](#), "power" is still the most decisive factor in international affairs. International institutions simply do not have the decision-making authority which they were designed to possess, with 'winners' and 'losers' increasingly determined by the ability to withstand external pressure and protect national interests.

In this context, the EU's recent steps indicate, as an important minimum, the realization of this reality. Brussels appears determined to avoid approaching regions superficially and pursuing one-sided policies not reflective of regional realities. Moreover, clear steps are being taken to correct existing gaps. One example is the Black Sea region, where for decades the EU lacked any kind of defined approach. The new Black Sea Strategy, however, announced in late May 2025, is a promising sign, encompassing the creation of a [security base](#) (the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub). Along the expected functions of the base are information exchange, broadened coastguard cooperation and investment into critical maritime infrastructure. Taking into consideration the current global security climate, the EU is showing highly encouraging signs that it is finally willing to match its highly ambitious aspirations with coherent and structured policies which solve rather than merely identify an existing problem. The same conclusion can be drawn from the EU's recent attempts to finally establish a coherent military strategy. In March 2025, the newly launched "ReArm Europe" initiative was targeted at not only boosting defence spending by

mobilising [800 billion euros](#) for defence investments but also establishing a mechanism, the Security Action for Europe (SAFE), to ensure this increase in spending is faster and better coordinated. By providing direct loans to member states with the support of the EU budget, there is genuine hope that member states will synchronize their investments, resulting in the [interoperability](#) of their defence systems. This, if successful, would lead to an interconnected defence system and minimize the EU's lacking military might.

Conclusion

The extent to which the EU's reassessment of its relationships with its 'Eastern neighbours' proceeds, will serve as a key litmus test for the institution. For years, a United States more deeply oriented toward transatlantic cooperation meant independent agency was a *highly desirable* objective, towards which Brussels allocated considerable time and resources, but not a matter of absolute urgency. Now, however, and as argued throughout this paper, the essence of the international system has changed to such an extent that possessing power and the agency to drive change is becoming the key if one wishes to fulfil its national, or in this case, institutional interests.

For a considerable period of time, the EU has made it clear that progress on its defence, security and prosperity should be a matter exclusively for its member states. This showcases the realization that if the bloc is to meet its increasingly ambitious aspirations, it needs to, at last, find a way to bridge the gap between ambition and policy. Given the competition EU's global aspirations face, this should come in the form of anticipating changes and acting swiftly in the implementation phase. The discussed Connectivity Agenda is a step in this direction, with the next logical move being the establishment of a specific area where the EU can act as a leading investor. This may concern a transregional project like the Middle Corridor, or more concrete investment projects focusing on an individual region or a group of states. As the South Caucasus and Central Asia continue their integration into global connectivity chains and the EU's relationship with the United States changes, the surrounding conditions to turn this into a reality could not be more appropriate. With its historically most reliable safety cushion in Washington unavailable, the EU's future as an actor is in its own hands. Urgency and assertiveness, however, will be crucial as an internal identity battle in the European continent intensifies.

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