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# BRIDGE, HEDGE AND CHOOSE

British Foreign Policy,  
the Transatlantic Alliance,  
and the Rise of Civilisational  
Thinking

Written by:

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# **Bridge, Hedge and Choose:**

**British Foreign Policy, the Transatlantic Alliance,  
and the Rise of Civilisational Thinking**

By Sophia Gaston

## Executive Summary

Britain's geopolitical landscape is becoming increasingly fraught, and its instruments more constrained, at a time in which its choices are becoming more consequential. The central nexus of this challenging landscape is Britain's special relationship with the United States, and its special role and partnerships in its European region. The discordance within the Western alliance as a result of America's evolving conception of its global role and its posture towards its alliances places particular strains on the United Kingdom, its closest historical ally, with a deeply vested role in European security and an ambition to repair and strengthen its cooperation with its neighbourly powers. Within several major European capitals, it is clear that there is an emerging will to detach more completely from the US alliance and invest solely in the development of a sovereign European security marketplace. London, by contrast, continues to see practical utility and value in its relationship with Washington, and remains cautiously optimistic about prospects for productive alignment.

As the tensions inherent in these divergent assessments of allied strategy pull and tighten, Britain must seek to cement its Transatlantic bridging role, and deftly navigate the hedging required between Europe and America, or risk buckling under the applied pressure. Its success in this mission will be defined by its capacity to play a mediation and reinforcing role between its two fickle, and most important, economic and security partners, and also to make hard choices to hedge between them. This requires both a forensic understanding of the Trump administration's novel approach towards its alliances and its international priorities, and a realistic plan for enhanced cooperation with European and other Western partners.

This paper explores the conceptual realities of the 'civilisational alliances' construct, and the wider demands of the Trump administration for strengthened European strength and competence, and considers the strategic costs and opportunities this poses for the United Kingdom. It argues that:

- The civilisational approach of the Trump administration presents considerable risk of greater diplomatic fragility in Transatlantic alliances, but also presents opportunities for nations like Britain willing to lean into its relationship with the United States.
- Britain is motivated to continue to invest in its partnership with Washington out of a clear strategic calculus about its national requirements, as well as its geopolitical aims, and the evidence it continues to perceive of the capacity to influence decision-making due to its civilisational status with the US administration.
- In addition to demanding greater cultural proximity with the United States, the Trump administration is seeking for its allies to demonstrate their capabilities in the vital instruments of national power – particularly economic strength, hard power defensive capabilities, energy sovereignty, and technological innovation.
- Investments and achievements in these areas are the building blocks of national competitiveness and resilience, and should be pursued by Britain as a matter of sovereign intent rather than simply a responsive project to Washington's demands.
- Tensions within the Transatlantic alliance will continue throughout President Trump's second term, and while Britain will continue to find opportunities to act in a bridging role, it will also be forced to hedge between the United States and the European Union, and take hard choices in its alignment goals.
- It is prudent and desirable for Britain and the European Union to cooperate more deeply on defence, security, and trade, and both EU-level and bilateral partnerships should be pursued with confidence, given the strength of Britain's attributes in significant domains.
- However, in an unstable geopolitical climate, the same incentives that drive allied cooperation are also fuelling allied competition, and Britain must anticipate areas of resistance within the EU that will take time to resolve.

- Britain should therefore also invest strategically in a third pillar of allied cooperation, through driving delivery-focused multilateralism in Europe, and with key Indo-Pacific allies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea.

## Introduction

One year into the second Trump administration, it is clear that the ambiguities of its international strategic framework are a feature by design, and that internal debates and the President's own interventions will continue to inject a degree of unpredictability into any specific decision. At the same time, the broad contours of the United States' evolving global posture are becoming more apparent, and allies need no longer to second-guess the basic tenets of its world view.

The National Security Strategy (NSS), published in December 2025,<sup>i</sup> made an immediate, seismic impact in presenting the clearest distillation of the second Trump Presidency's global doctrine. It has subsequently been further reinforced by the publication of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) in January 2026,<sup>ii</sup> which sets forth the practical implications of its new posture. These two documents may have provoked alarm amongst America's traditional partners, but they have certainly provided emerging clarity about what the Trump administration will and will not be prioritising in its international activities, while also elucidating the contextual uncertainties that the White House wishes to retain.

What we can deduce is that the United States expects allied relationships to be balanced by tangible contributions more than strategic alignment; that it will be increasingly focused on its interests in the Western Hemisphere and domestic resilience; and that it is more willing to use economic leverage and targeted expressions of hard power to shape outcomes. Perhaps the most striking revelation of the NSS, however, was the codification of the Trump administration's approach to its most established alliances, which it frames in civilisational terms. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the lens has turned inward, and the criteria of allyship demands more than simply the designation of being an advanced democracy. The value of these partnerships will now be determined not by what could be achieved together, but rather the degree to which these nations could be determined to be culturally proximate with the domestic vision the President holds for the United States.

As the United States' closest ally, and the only other power with the legitimacy – albeit under considerable pressure – of legacy assets, instruments, and purview to consider itself to be a global power, is difficult to assess Britain's strategic outlook without acknowledging the reality of the shifts taking place in Washington's calculus. Every decision taken by the Trump administration regarding America's global posture directly shapes the relative power and weight of Britain's own choices, and confers a new areas of responsibility where vacuums of governance and diplomacy emerge. Britain is also the primary beneficiary of the 'civilisational alliances' concept, as the nation for which the President holds the deepest personal affection, and as a result, also the most highly scrutinised for its domestic culture.

Britain had initially hoped to pursue a bridging strategy between Washington and Europe, and it has certainly played an indispensable role in as the European powers have navigated the crises around the defence of Ukraine and the President's intentions for Greenland.<sup>iii</sup> As the Trump administration has become more confident in the pursuit of its interests, and some European leaders have become disillusioned with the Transatlantic relationship,<sup>iv</sup> Britain is increasingly being forced into a more ruthless hedging strategy, facing hard choices rather than brokering mutually amenable outcomes for all sides. Britain's best possible strategy in this environment is to pursue a dual-track posture, anchoring deterrence, technological and warfighting credibility through the US relationship, while simultaneously building a NATO-centric European security compact around practical cooperation and forging new minilateral groupings within the West.

## Civilisational Alliances

The concept of 'civilisational alliances' captures a distinct ideological framing, largely introduced in the speech given by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025,<sup>v</sup> advanced in President Trump's address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2025,<sup>vi</sup> and codified in the National Security Strategy at the end of the year.

The NSS frames global competition as a struggle between competing civilisational identities, and posits that the international sphere is the space in which this contest between distinct domestic cultures will be won and lost. In some respects, it reflects the language of Samuel P. Huntington's 1996 'clash of civilisations' framework, which argued against the universality of Western culture and that its nations must invest more in its defence than its dissemination.<sup>vii</sup> The Trump administration believes that Europe is the birthplace and epicentre of Western culture, but that modern America is becoming the last remaining bastion of this inheritance, as European nations cede their robust liberal identities to fixations on pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalism, in an act of 'civilisational erasure'. The rhetoric tends to define Western culture in conservative, patriotic, and nationalistic terms, while depicting the high points of America's alliances as grounded in the experiences of the Second World War and the Cold War.

It is self-evident that the language employed in the two speeches and the NSS reflects a departure from previous US administrations, with alliances having typically been framed as institutional and values-based, and supporting the rules-based order. It is certainly true that ideological and quasi-civilisational language has been used by former American Presidents to refer to their allies, however this has generally been an exercise in rhetoric rather than a strategic doctrine. Woodrow Wilson, for example, cast liberal democracy as a universal civilisational advancement into which allies were expected to conform politically but not culturally.<sup>viii</sup> The Cold War contest was framed in ideological terms as a battle between democracy and communism, not civilisational in the ethnic, cultural, or demographic sense.<sup>ix</sup>

While President Reagan presents the closest historical comparison, his civilisational-sounding language was targeted at an external enemy promoting ideological colonialism, and sought to legitimate other democracies through political solidarity. Reagan did not frame social justice movements such as feminism, nor secularism, nor immigration as threats to alliance cohesion. He did not condition alliance legitimacy on cultural or religious homogeneity, nor did he endorse or imply support for specific domestic political movements within allied democracies.<sup>x</sup> With the exception of the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks and the launch of 'War on Terror', the Presidents which followed largely edged away from civilisational language, focusing on the rules-based international order, with an emphasis on inclusion and the universality of human rights.<sup>xi</sup> The shift from promoting a shared defence of collective values to monitoring allies' social landscape is historically new in modern US Presidential doctrine.

The Trump administration would undoubtedly attest that previous Presidents were able to avoid such confrontations because many of the profound changes that have taken place in European societies and political cultures are relatively recent phenomena, with most of the dramatic growth in migration levels, new regulatory frameworks, and affirmative action policies, having taken place within the past 10-15 years. It is also true that during this century, the economic, technological, and military dominance of the West has been eroded in relative terms,<sup>xii</sup> and that European nations have directed considerable resources away from defence spending and into ever-expanding social welfare states.<sup>xiii</sup> These developments are seen by the Trump administration to be mutually reinforcing, and inseparable.

It is difficult to assess the precise relative weight afforded to the different obligations the Trump administration wishes to bestow on its partners. It is also not feasible to anticipate precisely how the civilisational alliances concept will influence the President's decision-making, in part because the President

himself seems to be more amenable to the concept of emotional and symbolic alliances than other members of his administration. President Trump certainly places a special emphasis on the relationship with Britain, which he continues to regard as an enduringly significant nation, even if he does not always agree with its government's domestic political choices.<sup>xiv</sup>

It is true that, deeper in the MAGA ecosystem, some explicit distinctions are made about the hierarchy of alliances, in which the 'civilisational alliance' only extends to the great powers of Western Europe.<sup>xv</sup> For this part of the community, other nations which will continue to command special attention include Germany, France, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and the wider Anglosphere. Other members of the MAGA faithful may include more contemporary 'Western' allies such as Japan and South Korea in their conception of civilisational alliances. These ambiguities are unlikely to be resolved with any definitive clarity, as they reflect the complexity of the civilisational concept and its interactions with allied capability, and the intentional diversity of viewpoints within the administration.

That the NSS was framed in many media reports as representing America's 'divorce' from its European partnerships came as a surprise to many in the MAGA community in Washington. In their view, the demand for domestic policy shifts on freedom of speech and immigration control is in fact motivated by a desire to bring European partners closer, rather than to ostracise them. As the influential America First Policy Institute wrote after the publication of the NSS, "In reality, it [the document] is something closer to an invitation".<sup>xvi</sup>

This intent has been obscured by the discomfort in European capitals about the novel nature of such interventions, and the perceived ambition from the Trump administration to engender a form of 'regime change' at the expense of moderate established parties.<sup>xvii</sup> Moreover, the belief that contemporary domestic policies reflect an ever-improving social state, and therefore should not be adjusted; meaning such proximity to the expectations of the Trump administration cannot reasonably be achieved. The result is that Europe and the United States are increasingly talking past one another, and are unable to interpret each other's motivations in a way that facilitates the desire for a shared strategic outlook.

There is, however, a need to be measured and clear-eyed about where the Trump administration's new posture genuinely affects European interests, as opposed to simply making its leaders feel uncomfortable. Moreover, where the maverick President may indeed be driving pertinent conversations, even if they can be delivered through unconventional means, with unnecessary force, or harsh rhetoric.

President Trump not only shapes political outcomes, but he is also demonstrably astute at diagnosing some elements of social and geopolitical dysfunction. The truth is that many of the expectations held by the Trump administration for its European partners reflect issues with high degrees of public saliency amongst citizens. There is not a European nation for which immigration has not been a major political debate over the past decade, and concerns about the over-extension of online censorship policies are certainly not contained to the fringes of society.<sup>xviii</sup> The short-term economic viability of some visions for the net-zero transition, an issue the US Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Warren Stephens, has been instructed to focus on, has been the subject of debate and policy tinkering in Britain since the height of the cost-of-living crisis.<sup>xix</sup>

What is considerably more concerning about the administration's interventions over the past year is the implication that it could actively seek to support insurgent parties that align with its conservative social policies in their efforts to challenge mainstream elites. There have been several striking examples in which members of the administration have sought to amplify far-right parties and candidates, and have chosen during their international travel to meet with such individuals over the incumbent officials.<sup>xx</sup> These choices propagate concern amongst European governments that extends beyond their own political survival, not

least of all because aside from their domestic positions, these parties often possess geopolitical views which are anti-NATO, and even can be explicitly pro-Russia and pro-China in nature.<sup>xxi</sup>

It may be that some in Washington are not aware of these parties' full policy agendas, or that the value afforded to domestic social policies is considered to be of greater importance. It is also the case that there are a spectrum of such parties and their anti-establishment ideologies. There is also a predictable rebuke from Trump administration officials about the campaigning that many European members of social democratic parties tend to undertake in support of the Democrats in Presidential campaigns, although there is a clear distinction with this form of electoral interference when it is being driven by serving members of the US Government rather than simply enthusiastic party members or backbench MPs.

In Britain, the Reform Party, led by the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, which played a central role in facilitating Brexit, has become a powerful political force, and is thought to pose the single greatest challenge to the electoral prospects of the governing Labour Party. The Reform Party's leader, Nigel Farage, has trumpeted his personal friendship with President Trump, and yet has had to moderate his alignment with the Trump administration around various issues in order to demonstrate his support for the British national interest.<sup>xxii</sup> Furthermore, despite the higher incidence of isolationist instincts within the Reform Party's support base, its voters and the wider British electorate remain steadfast in their commitment to Ukraine, despite Nigel Farage's own misgivings about the nation's continued involvement.<sup>xxiii</sup> So too has the Party been largely muted as the Labour Government has pursued closer economic and security ties with the European Union, acknowledging that public opinion has shifted considerably since the referendum its leaders helped to inspire.<sup>xxiv</sup>

These three facts provide some indication of the degree of moderation that may be required in the Party's foreign policy platform in order to gain power, and suggest that the Transatlantic hedging and balancing approach will remain a strategic imperative for any British Prime Minister, despite some distinctions in rhetoric and the degree to which certain forms of cooperation are deepened over others.

For the current British Government, the most feasible tactical pathway to avoiding unwelcome political interference from Washington during this political term would be to loudly demonstrate any tangible progress on the areas in which both US and British domestic expectations align, and sidestep those issues – such as laws around demonstrative prayer outside abortion clinics – where the British people diverge, and therefore insurgent parties are also less inclined to pursue US alignment as a campaigning strategy. It may also be pertinent to strengthen transparency regulations on party funding and online influence operations, which would defend electoral integrity without succumbing to a speech-policing public narrative.

Beyond the intensive focus on European democracies, there are also implications of America's civilisational alliance construct for its approach to its European security role. The NSS sets forth a new configuration of American interests in Europe, underpinned by a desire to achieve the outcome of 'strategic stability' with Russia. The White House does not regard Ukraine in the same fraternal terms as its NATO allies, and appears to consider the besieged nation as a buffer zone in which a negotiated settlement for the future of European security must be decided. Europe may contest the notion that Russia is a 'great power' by modern standards, but the Trump administration sees a nation having punched above its weight in inflicting considerable military, societal and economic hardship on Ukraine, with major regional powers unable and unwilling to decisively defeat the belligerent power. Washington considers the capacity and appetite for instrumentalising power as a defining characteristic of national influence.

The continued need to maintain irreplaceable US-led capabilities within the European theatre remains self-evident. At the same time, the American efforts to pursue a limited rapprochement with Russia, whether

successful or not, are unlikely to improve the security landscape facing Britain and its regional allies, and may in fact introduce new vulnerabilities. Europeans may indeed wonder whether there is a risk that nationalistic, socially conservative Russia may be regarded by parts of the MAGA ecosystem as a more proximate civilisational ally than traditional Western partners.<sup>xxv</sup> This reality further strengthens the need for a considerably more robust European security marketplace, in which substantively higher spending is motivated by agreement on the realities of the strategic outlook more than the demands made by Washington.

### **Hard Choices and Strategic Costs**

The civilisational alliances construct clarifies the task facing European nations to navigate partnerships with America, the strength of which will now be determined at once by both more transactional and less tangible demands. The expectation of greater proximity to the United States is also reinforced and mediated by an expectation of greater capability. Britain will need to cooperate where its interests continue to align, and be proactive about areas of productive and mutually beneficial new areas of UK-US collaboration, particularly in the realm of technology, innovation, research, financial services, and other common strengths. At the same time, it must invest to remove unhelpful or constraining dependencies where appropriate, challenge the policy conditionality being placed on domestic issues that continue to be supported by the British people, and maintain wider alliance unity where needed.

The current geopolitical environment – of escalating security threats, constrained growth, and the common pursuit of access to limited resources – highlights the need for allied cooperation, but also, on a structural level, provides incentives that drive allied competition. This competitive and scarcity landscape negatively affects Britain in its relationships with both the United States and the European Union, and demands a focus on the ruthless strengthening of instruments of national power in order to enhance leverage and partnership appeal. Every choice that Britain makes to pursue alignment with its major trading and security partners will impose strategic costs, and it will be increasingly difficult to navigate these in a balanced manner when contingencies are made between distinct policy areas – for example, a defence cooperation partnership is rendered permissible through a commitment to demonstrate alignment on agricultural standards or technology regulation.

Let us consider two areas in which the British Government has sought proactive alignment with the United States, with implications for its cooperation with its European partners: namely, defence and security, and technological innovation.

The UK Government has committed to a significant uplift in defence spending over the course of the Parliamentary term, however the extent of these investments and the pace at which they will be implemented are widely believed to be insufficient to meet the nature of current and future threats.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Trump administration will consistently test the UK's hard power capacities, to force Britain to earn its presumptive status as America's most vital ally. Due to the administration's focus on spheres of leadership, there are unlikely to be demands being made of Britain to support and align on missions outside of the Euro-Atlantic and the Middle East, although there will be requests for access to wider British assets, including global bases and overseas territories, and intelligence instruments. Closer to home, it is clear that there are significant American expectations that the UK will play a much more active and expansive role in the Arctic and near-Arctic, a role that Britain itself has agreed to step into as part of the elegant solution the Government played a vital role in negotiating to resolve the NATO crisis over Greenland's governance.<sup>xxvii</sup>

There is no doubt that the Greenland episode represented a nadir in recent Transatlantic relations, with Europeans facing the possibility of NATO's largest member seeking the coercive acquisition of the territory of a smaller NATO member. This striking episode undoubtedly weakened the global standing of the Alliance

and its capacity to project strength towards adversaries, and precipitated a demand from some of its members for greater European autonomy from the United States as a 'predatory power'.<sup>xxviii</sup> However, the crisis also highlighted the profound gulf in hard power capabilities between the United States and its regional allies, which undoubtedly strengthened Washington's hand in its claims towards Greenland. It also underscored the lack of common understanding about America's strategic purview in Europe. The Arctic is the region which the United States considers to be its frontline in NATO, and in which it is reliant to some degree on other partners to defend its interests from the expansive ambitions of both China and Russia. Moreover, it is where America's NATO purview combines with its priority Western Hemisphere sphere of influence.

The aftermath of the allied battle over Greenland's future drew attention to the fissures in the European theatre over the continued security relationship with the United States. The tensions amongst America's NATO allies showcase their distinct strategic outlooks, with countries like Britain considerably more economically and strategically entangled with both the United States, and the day-to-day task of supporting Ukraine – which remains dependent on American capabilities – than other European leaders calling for a clean break.

Britain would undoubtedly find itself highly exposed by any impediments to its security relationship with Washington, as a matter of its own vital defences and its core geostrategic aims. It is also the case that Britain's position as the most established civilisational ally confers opportunities for influence and distinct national advantages, which encourage continued investment. Britain was deeply involved in the successful interventions towards President Trump on Greenland, as it has been in the negotiations around a ceasefire in Ukraine. It is also possible to argue that major initiatives such as the trilateral AUKUS pact between Britain, the United States, and Australia,<sup>xxix</sup> were ultimately able to survive the transition from the Biden to Trump administration in part due to their nature as a symbolic as well as strategic investment in two Anglosphere allies.

These direct advantages and evidence of the capacity to shape outcomes deepen the argument for continued British alignment with the United States, even as the risks of discord and disruption escalate considerably. At the same time, Britain continues to face considerable practical barriers following Brexit to its participation in the development of a European-wide defence marketplace, which diminish the viability of any decision to simply trade US divestment for greater European integration. The EU's perceived geopolitical fragilities – not helped by the NSS seeking for Europe "to operate as a group of aligned sovereign nations" – encourage its defensiveness towards the UK, continuing to fuel the fundamental debate as to whether a stronger European security architecture should be underpinned by a sovereignty principle of 'made in Europe' or 'made in the EU'. The preference of certain EU member states for the latter has undoubtedly impeded British involvement in defence initiatives, including the 'SAFE' instrument as part of the EU's ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 package,<sup>xxx</sup> and has made the outcome of a bifurcation of the Western defence industrial base more probable.

In such an environment, Britain must focus on understanding its national interests divorced from the constraints imposed by its partners, and then determine the measured risks it is willing to take to achieve them.

It is true that Britain certainly has a vested sovereign interest in taking a more active role in the Arctic, as Russia continues to increase its militarisation, surveillance, and interference activities in the North Sea and the North Atlantic.<sup>xxxi</sup> Moreover, Britain has found itself embroiled in China's economic and strategic aspirations for the Northern Sea Route. The maiden voyage launched by Beijing through this formerly untraversable terrain, made with the permission of Russia, docked in port at Britain before continuing its

journey to the European continent.<sup>xxxii</sup> This new commercial shipping route, which Russia is likely to continue to exert some degree of influence over, has the potential to dramatically reduce transit times between China and Europe, with profound consequences for European industry and regional security.

Being in a position to work more closely with the United States on military exercises and patrols, the development of specialist kit, and undersea cable monitoring, would present a meaningful way to strengthen national defences, while also demonstrating seriousness as a regional partner to the Trump administration, and advancing wider European security interests.

The second area for which Britain has sought to align itself more explicitly with the United States is technological innovation. European powers should anticipate continued contest and conflict in this domain, as it serves as a central component of America's global power projection. Britain's evident strengths in capabilities such as AI and quantum have proven attractive to American collaboration for both commercial and military applications, in a rare instance of the Trump administration identifying independent value in an allied partner. Britain has also been invited to join the administration's flagship Pax Silica technology alliance initiative.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This choice to seek greater proximity with the innovation systems of the United States than the EU means that Britain will be less likely to find itself in the spotlight as a direct competitor to Washington. However, both Britain and the EU must grapple with similar tensions with the Trump administration around the regulation of US-owned social media platforms to minimise democratic interference and social harms.

The best possible outcome would be that the value Britain can demonstrate as a technology co-creation partner would highlight the advantages that America derives from a wider cohort of partners aiding its technological competition with China, and it may be persuaded that some flexibility around its absolutist approach on freedom of speech in certain contexts should be permissible. Britain could, for example, pursue structured negotiation tracks to provide greater foresight around areas of potential future discord in technology regulation, such as the recent outcry about the 'deepfake' images being created on the Elon Musk-owned Grok platform.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Efforts to de-risk these areas of tension through early interventions, would help to prevent escalation towards possible alliance fragility and the security crises that could follow.

Britain's decision to align with American innovation principles, prioritising risk-taking, light-touch regulation and the integration of capital markets, is the only viable choice for a knowledge economy with demonstrated expertise and capability in the most significant technological domains. However, it is also possible that there will be regulatory decisions that the British Government may wish to enact in order to meet domestic expectations for the mitigation of social dangers posed by the large American technology platforms, which could put it on a collision course with Washington. In such instances, Britain lacks the capacity of the European Union to wield the power of its consumer market and other trade instruments to contest external pressures, and may also not wish to pursue the same degree of retaliatory action lest it jeopardise the viability of UK-US technology co-creation initiatives.

To avoid a situation in which Britain finds itself out of kilter with its two major trading and security partners on an issue of such vital importance to its economic and geopolitical future, it must therefore also cultivate a third strategic pillar to develop productive relationships with like-minded nations beyond Washington and Brussels.

### **The Minus One Initiative**

Britain must not only balance between its relationships with the United States and the EU, but also balance against them. The United States will chart its own course on areas in which it feels it can act decisively and independently, and there are also indications that President Trump is comfortable with a multipolar geopolitical landscape rather than seeking outright American dominance in a bipolar contest. European

powers will be vastly impacted by both of these phenomena, as they rely on the Western-designed international order – and, historically, its American underpinning – to defend their economic and security interests. In a more contested era of raw power, the European Union will undoubtedly seek to respond to these pressures through the might of its unified market, which is likely to also encourage protectionist impulses that may prove disadvantageous to Britain's interests.

Britain cannot allow the setbacks in its efforts to cooperate more closely with the European Union to impede its involvement in the creation of a viable European security marketplace. It should better harness its existing instruments, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which comprises the United Kingdom, the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, and the Netherlands, to seed focused new initiatives, while continuing its efforts to break the impasse on the EU's punitive approach to third countries.

NATO remains the most vital strategic anchor in Europe and must become more effective at facilitating the creation of viable working groups to solve capability challenges. This should include the enhanced participation of the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. These initiatives need not impinge on the EU's ambitions to build its role as a defence industrial manufacturer at scale, but rather focus on the areas for which pace and flexibility are most important and where small groups of able partners are able to expediently develop capabilities for European application. A better division of labour between initiatives focused on pace versus those focused on scale will defeat the false competition between EU and European regional initiatives.

The deteriorating geopolitical environment in Europe, and particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has refocused Britain's attentions on its home region. However, the crucial third pillar of its resilience strategy will involve a more expansive outlook, particularly focused on like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. America's historic allies have not demonstrated a capacity over the past decade since the first Trump administration to develop meaningful ways of working in which decisions do not need to be contingent on strategic direction from the United States. This has obscured these allies' collective power, and strategic, technological, and economic weight. Countries like Japan, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and also Canada, remain deeply invested in the concept of international law and common standards, even as the world's largest powers abandon its conventions, as they have been the primary beneficiaries of the global order they protected.

Britain should think more ambitiously in its partnerships with these nations, and seed productive and intelligent minilateral groupings as a 'minus one' endeavour, which can focus ruthlessly on advancing specific issue priorities as a matter of urgency. In particular, there are areas in which the United States has taken a distinct path and indicated that it does not seek to pursue allied alignment, such as on free and open trade and regulatory standard-setting. Supporting the integration of the European Union more substantively into the CPTPP trading bloc – of which Britain, alongside Japan, is its largest economy – would also signal to Brussels that Britain remains vested in the Union's preservation and successes, and could make it more viable to draw in other European nations such as Germany and Sweden, for cross-regional, action-focused partnerships which are best pursued in most flexible terms.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The United States under President Trump is pursuing a novel approach to alliances, as a result of which, its traditional partners can no longer expect that precedent nor convention will facilitate endurance. The Trump administration's primary concern about its alliances is that they are no longer culturally proximate, nor effective. It believes that European democracies have become increasingly unrecognisable due to their permissive, hyper-liberal social and political cultures, which have consumed undue attention from

investments in the structural underpinnings of prosperity and power, in turn hindering their capacity to fund and exercise competitive capabilities and defensive instruments.

Although the language emanating from the Trump administration may feel startling for Europeans, there should, in practical terms, be ample opportunities to demonstrate progress in some of the areas of greatest 'civilisational' importance to Washington, as they reflect areas of domestic public demand. On some issues, however, European nations will need to have the confidence to defend their principles and choices and accept that the United States may be charting a course in which its social landscape could feel quite distinct. More importantly, Britain and its European partners will need to focus intently on their ability to project competence, capability, and strength, through new investments in defence, industrial might, and economic competitiveness. Achievements in these areas will correct the perceptions of European decadence and weakness that have taken hold in Washington, and afford considerably more leverage as true partners rather than dependents.

As its closest and most deeply embedded ally, the United Kingdom carries a special responsibility to persuade America of the value of its partnerships, and to mediate in issues of wider European significance. In turn, it must spearhead new initiatives to strengthen the agency and power of Western allies with a vested interest in the future of the existing international order.

None of these tasks are simple and all require considerable diplomatic and strategic investments, which will necessitate greater resources and political attention. Heavy is the head, of course, that wears the crown. However, the cost of absconding from leadership in these vital tasks extends well beyond the squandering of opportunities. Britain must seize the moment, and step into its bridging role, strengthening its relationship with Washington, and driving action among the allies who cannot afford to simply watch from the sidelines.

#### **To respond to the new Transatlantic environment, Britain should:**

- Refrain from indulging in the public outrage of other partners towards unconventional actions by the Trump administration or its new global posture, recognising that others will have a distinct strategic calculus in their relationship with the United States and their view of responsibility towards issues for which Washington remains decisive, such as the future of Ukraine.
- Focus ruthlessly on the foundations of national capability and geopolitical influence, in the domains of economic growth, technological innovation, energy resilience and robust defensive capabilities. This will involve confronting the political challenge of making significant cuts to the nation's welfare spending, and a laser focus on growth over cost-of-living or inequality priorities.
- Become more proactive about the pursuit of future-oriented partnerships with the United States, oriented around areas of recognised British national strengths, to ensure that Britain is understood in Washington as not only a civilisational ally but a capable partner which adds value to American power and prestige.
- Continue to invest in the objective of closer defence and trading relations with the European Union as a national priority, but accept that inward perceptions of geopolitical weakness in Brussels drive outward competition, and therefore without decisive concessions, the progress towards significant outcomes will remain incremental.
- Avoid the slow pace of improvement in UK-EU relations from defining Britain's productive actions in the European theatre, harnessing the JEF and smaller minilateral partnerships to drive scaled outcomes in defence and technological cooperation for which pace and efficiency will be a defining factor.

- Look outside of Europe to the Indo-Pacific, where crucial partners such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, share concerns and vulnerabilities about the international order, and where collective resilience can be advanced outside of both the United States and the European Union.

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