

The Western Alliance Under Strain: Implications for Africa

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Introduction

Since January 2025, the US global policy has shifted radically. The reset has spared no country or region, including the West. Essentially, the West comprises the US and Europe. It is based on centuries-old transatlantic relations between North America and Europe.

It is not entirely a shocker that the US has changed its relationship with the West since January 2025. Even as the Western alliance has endured decades of political alignment, managing internal schisms has been part of the years-long relationship. The first major shift in recent times occurred during President Donald Trump's first presidency, 2016-2020. The partnership went through a period of altercations never experienced in decades. The US raised concerns about shouldering a heavier financial burden in defence partnerships and suffering trade relations that favoured alliance partners. Sharp ideological differences also emerged and played out in public during this period.

During the Joe Biden administration, 2021-2024, relations were on the mend as the Democratic Party sought a return to stable transatlantic partnership. These difficulties not only returned in January 2025 when Trump regained the US presidency but have intensified to the point of an unravelling of the Western alliance. The signal was sent out on the first day of Trump's administration, January 20, with the America First Policy stating that "the foreign policy of the United States shall champion core American interests and always put America and American citizens first". European allies were fair game, as were traditional nemeses like China and Iran!

In an interconnected world, the tumult in Western relations has had a global impact. Broadly, this is what has been labelled a 'shifting global order'. The knock-on effect has had monumental ramifications on Africa's relations with the West. Washington's America First policy on Africa are distinguishable. These include a drastic reduction in aid in favour of transnationalism, with critical minerals as a prominent target. Democracy, human rights and good governance are no longer the cornerstone of the relations. More broadly, if Africa was on the back burner of the US's global engagements, it has dropped further down the agenda.

Less discussed is the impact of America First on Europe, and how this has in turn affected Africa's relations with Canada and Europe. Coincidentally, when Africa-Europe relations are analysed in the context of the friction between the US and its Western allies, the same features of Africa-US relations are observable. Europe is similarly taking the transactional route and decreasing its involvement in the African governance landscape.

These dynamics signal a potentially long-term change in global governance.

Liberal values

Within the Western alliance, North America and the US have operated on stable and shared liberal values. Rule of law and free-market economic doctrines have guided Western relations. These values have formed the bedrock of the international rules governing the global order. Western philosophies have also been global governing principles throughout the post-Second World War period. By and large, African states have been a Western liberal state-formation project.

Individually and collectively, the Western allies have used these liberal values, often simultaneously referred to as Western values, as a key pillar of their engagement with Africa. Paradoxically, a point of contention in the relations since January 2025 is the same values, once unquestioningly shared by the US and Europe. Many African commentators have equally questioned the value of the liberal order, pointing to the Western alliance's uncertainties as justification.

When US Vice President JD Vance spoke at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, he criticized Europe for digital censorship, suppression of freedom of expression, attacks on religious (Christian) liberties, the right of electoral choice, and the targeting of populist groups and persons. Citing examples in the UK, Romania, Sweden, Germany, and the broader EU, he said the anti-democratic incidents showed a democratic backsliding trend, not just a one-off. These, as well as the US's concerns about migration into Europe, were captured in the US Security strategy released in December 2025 to consternation in Brussels and European capitals. The strategy talked of a "prospect of civilisational erasure" due to migration and scorned Europe's repression of anti-migration movements.

An issue that has roiled Europeans is President Trump's intentions for the US to acquire Greenland, an autonomous region of Denmark. In an address to Congress in March 2025, he revived the call for this call, started during his first term as president. He said: "We need Greenland for national security and even international security, and we're working with everybody involved to try and get it". Beyond the alliance's security concern, liberal values have been a point of opposition to the annexation attempts. In January 2026, for instance, the European Parliament issued a statement criticising the US for "a blatant challenge to international law, to the principles of the United Nations Charter and to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a NATO ally (Denmark)".

The foregoing demonstrates deep contestation between the US and Europe over the liberal values that have served as the glue holding them together for nearly eight decades. These disagreements are part of a more extensive crisis in the global liberal order. These developments are beginning to shake Africa's internal and external relations. African countries that followed the Western lead in embracing

Western values of their own volition may suddenly become sceptical, certainly regarding certain liberal principles. Vice President Vance's Munich comments basically leaned towards the promotion of populist, even right-wing values such as pro-life, pro-Christian stances. Some European countries are more inclined towards limiting freedoms that promote populism. For African autocrats, this provides a field day for promoting ideas such as banning sexual orientation rights and entrenching unilateral rather than democratic decision-making.

The Euro-American dissonance over the meaning of liberal values also presents a crisis of legitimacy. How can Europe and the US promote liberal values such as free and open elections when they themselves are divided on these issues? Fragmentation in the understanding and practice of democratic governance is a loophole. African dictators can exploit this gap at an ideational level, let alone practically.

Defence and security expenditure

In the Greenland annexation circumstances, Europe is suddenly vulnerable to an ally. The upshot is that a US that underwrote the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) security arrangements is no longer a benefactor, but a cause for concern. This is evident in rising Danish defence expenditure. Danish military expenditure had been declining from a high of 3% of GDP in 1962 to a low of 1.1% in 2017. From then onwards, expenditure has risen consistently, reaching 1.3% of GDP in 2018, the year President Trump is said to have first indicated interest in Greenland. Today, expenditure stands at 3.3% of GDP, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and is projected to reach 3.5% of GDP by 2030. A big jump in military spending happened in late 2025 when a cumulative \$8.7 billion was made.

Developments in Denmark reflect a general rise in military spending. It also reflects a knock-on effect and a new trend in European policies and methods toward Africa. As military expenditure has risen, Denmark has launched a new "Africa's century" strategy based more on trade than aid. The strategy swaps demands for respect of liberal ideals towards Africa for soft power means of influence through cultural exchanges. While this shift has been welcomed as a move away from colonial-era paternalism, it certainly emboldens African nations that adhered to democratic values only when countries such as Denmark applied pressure.

Beyond the specific Greenland and Danish example, NATO, the bedrock of the trans-Atlantic alliance, has been the theatre of Euro-American fallouts. During his first term, President Trump viewed European nations as free riders in NATO, railing at their failure to meet the 2% of GDP expenditure target set in 2014. During this period, Trump even threatened to pull the US out of NATO, greatly

alarming European leaders. This is the period when European countries began increasing military expenditure.

As fate would have it, Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, forcing accelerated NATO military expenditure and strategy with the Joe Biden administration's material support. On his return to the presidency in 2025, Trump ratcheted criticism toward NATO with dramatic consequences. Part of the criticism comes across as rhetoric because the US still provides support of up to 16% to NATO, according to various sources. US attacks on Iran beginning in February 2026 and NATO's and European nations' decision not to join the war have been a further source of Washington's displeasure with its European allies.

European NATO members have significantly raised their military spending toward the 5% of GDP target by 2035 agreed at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague. The increased European military spending means US criticism of European underspending is not as serious as it was in early 2025. The consequence, however, is that military spending has eaten into budgets for domestic sectors such as health and education. This explains the deep cuts in aid towards Africa.

Trade

Equally important in Europe's financial difficulties is the trade dispute it has endured since Washington announced global trade tariffs in February 2025. The initial US tariffs were set at 20% for the European Union bloc, setting the stage for vitriolic negotiations. The deal reached in July 2025 imposes a 15% U.S. tariff on EU goods. The deal includes the EU's removal of duties on the US's industrial goods. The consequence has been a decline in European exports to the US, hitherto a major destination for European goods.

Overall, Europe is recalibrating towards strategic autonomy from the US. A domino effect has been underway. Overarching European aid to Africa has dropped by as much as 35% according to some sources. Europe is moving to restructure relations based on trade and investment. As African countries look inward for funding through increased taxes, economic and political pressure has risen. The EU had initiated the Global Gateway strategy in 2021, borrowing from the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative strategy, to focus on infrastructure investments that benefit Europe. The Global Gateway has been enhanced as returns on European investments replace values-laden charity.

Recommendations for Africa

First, African stakeholders from political leaders to businesses and civil society should appreciate the fact that relations with the West are not just shifting but have already shifted. The US-Europe relations are not just polarized, but split, at least in certain ideological and economic terms. African stakeholders should approach the US and Europe not as one but as increasingly separate entities.

Second, the US and Europe have taken a transactional approach to engaging internationally. This approach might last for the next couple of years. African governments should invest in their capacity to negotiate and bargain hard with both the US and Europe. This requires not only an African mindset shift but also a recalibration of foreign policies and diplomatic craft.

Third, in European and American ideological disagreements, democracy and governance approaches are changing. African leaders may be tempted to adopt autocracy under the guise of indigenous African leadership philosophies. Innovation to bring in African values should not be tantamount to discarding some of the progressive values of Western liberalism, such as the rule of law.

Fourth, African countries should understand that the era of depending on the West is coming to an end. A lot has already been written about the need for Africa to enhance self-reliance and strategic autonomy, just as Europe is doing. This is perhaps the most urgent matter, one that should be on top of African nations, regional economic communities, and the EU. African think tanks should help governments craft new principles that centre self-reliance even as African self-interest becomes the fulcrum of engagement with the US and Europe.