



UI Symposium on Europe's Moment

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Jakob Hallgren with Alma Rudenlöv Karlsson





Jakob Hallgren

Jakob Hallgren is the Director of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



Alma Rudenlöv Karlsson

Alma Rudenlöv Karlsson is a former intern at the Europe Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



Introduction

On the 28th of April 2025 the Swedish institute of International Affairs (UI) hosted a Symposium on Europe's Moment at the occasion of the inauguration of their new premises in Stockholm. In keeping with UI's mission of bringing new knowledge to global questions, the symposium discussed the current, rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and how Europe should navigate in this new and challenging situation. The event took place in the presence of His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf. Attendees consisted of both national and international experts.

The symposium commenced with welcome remarks by UI's Director Jakob Hallgren who welcomed guests and underlined the critical importance of UI's mission in today's world. This was followed by a keynote address by Professor Stephen E. Walt of the Harvard Kennedy School, who outlined key changes in the transatlantic relationship and discussed how Europe should cope. Thereafter three panels took place, all moderated by Stefan Ingvarsson, analyst at Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at UI. The first panel consisted of, along Stephen Walt, former prime minister Carl Bildt and former EU commissioner Ylva Johansson.

The second panel included Åsa Malmström Rognes, Head of Asia programme at UI, Henrik Chetan Aspengren, Senior Analyst at the Asia programme at UI, and Björn Jerdén, Director of the Swedish National China Centre (NKK) at UI. The final panel featured former ambassador and President of the Munich Security Conference Foundation Council, Wolfgang Ischinger, former Finnish

EU Minister Tytti Tuppurainen and UI board member and head of international and EU affairs at the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, Anna Stellingner.

Introductory keynote address by Professor Stephen E. Walt

The introductory keynote address focused on the current state of transatlantic relations, examining shifts in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration and outlining a series of pragmatic responses for Europe.

Understanding U.S. Policy Under Trump

Walt outlined five core characteristics of the Trump administration's approach to foreign policy:

1. Structural Shift Beyond Trump

Walt argued that the current shifts in transatlantic relations were inevitable, regardless of Trump's election. Its Cold War commitment was driven by strategic imperatives which have now shifted toward domestic challenges and competition with China. U.S. interventions in Europe during the 20th century intended to prevent dominance by one European country over others. This does not currently apply since the U.S. assesses that Russia does not have the ability to dominate the rest of Europe. Europe, in turn, must assume more responsibility for its own defence. With four times Russia's population and ten times its GDP, Europe has the capacity to independently deter or defeat threats from Russia. In the current strategic situation, the U.S. should therefore become an "ally of last resort,"



rather than a frontline guarantor of European security.

2. Radical Disruption of Existing Arrangements

The Trump administration perceives current domestic and international systems as harmful to U.S. interests and seeks to disrupt them entirely. It holds the belief that U.S. allies have long taken advantage of American goodwill and therefore seeks to pave a new way moving forward.

3. Economic and Strategic Divergence from Europe

The U.S. no longer views Europe as a vital strategic or economic partner. Trump has openly rejected many liberal democratic values foundational to the EU, aligning instead with leaders like Viktor Orbán and supporting movements such as Brexit. Walt cited Trump's comment that "the European Union was created to harm the United States" as indicative of this worldview and seems indifferent towards the prospect of Russia enjoying a sphere of influence over Europe.

4. Preference for Authoritarian Leadership

Trump demonstrates minimal regard for democracy or human rights norms and little concern for international institutions or legal constraints. The administration shows clear preference for authoritarian figures over liberal democratic leaders. Admired figures include Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Jair Bolsonaro, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Kim Jong-Un, while democratic leaders

like Justin Trudeau and Angela Merkel are viewed unfavorably.

5. Incompetence and Disarray in Governance

While the administration sets out clear objectives, it often lacks the competence to achieve them. Examples include diplomatic conflicts with allies such as Canada and Denmark, erratic trade wars, and internal controversies like "Signal-gate" in which unauthorised participants were included in official communication on a commercial social media platform. These actions reflect a broader disorganization that complicates transatlantic cooperation.

Recommendations for Europe

1. Adapt to the Return of Great Power Politics

Europe must acknowledge that it cannot insulate itself from strategic competition. While avoiding provocation, it must be prepared to defend its interests when challenged.

2. Deepen Internal Unity and Institutional Reform

The EU should prevent individual member states from blocking collective progress. Treaty revisions and major economic reforms, such as those outlined in the Draghi report, should be pursued. Increased defence spending must translate into real combat capabilities of a size that instils respect among great powers, thereby reducing reliance on American military support.

3. Reconsider the Nuclear Question

The American nuclear umbrella is no



longer a dependable security guarantee. Europe must begin internal discussions on nuclear deterrence. While the outline of such a strategy remains to be determined, the issue can no longer be ignored.

4. Exercise Strategic Autonomy

Europe should actively consider alternative partnerships if U.S. cooperation proves unproductive or hostile. Engagement with China is among the options that may need to be explored.

5. Pursue Long-term Stabilization with Russia

While challenging, it is not in Europe's interest to maintain the current adversarial relationship with Russia. The speaker recommended a dual-track approach: strengthening deterrence capabilities followed by confidence-building measures, similar to the OSCE framework or the Helsinki process. Stability should be a medium- to long-term objective.

6. Accept the Challenge

The speaker closed with a frank assessment: the path forward for Europe will be difficult, but necessary. "It will not be easy. But you, like us, have no choice."

This keynote highlighted the urgency for Europe to adapt to a new geopolitical reality and adopt greater strategic autonomy in the face of evolving American foreign policy.

Panel 1: European response in a changing global order

Participants: Stephen E. Walt, Carl Bildt & Ylva Johansson.

This panel focused on the EU's response capabilities, its place in the global order, and the implications of the Ukraine conflict.

European Strategic Shift

Johansson opened the discussion by emphasizing the gravity of the current geopolitical environment, particularly for Ukraine, Moldova, and the EU. She argued that the EU must stop dwelling only on internal integration—such as the single market and free movement—and shift towards external geopolitical engagement. According to Johansson, this is a crucial moment for Europe to act globally and assertively, leveraging its capabilities.

Regarding the European Commission's role, Johansson commended its quick response, noting that Commission President von der Leyen had committed €800 billion to military capacity building, and commented that the EU is stronger than often assumed—even by its own institutions. Johansson maintained that Europe must seize the initiative and be vocal, as it is uniquely positioned to respond effectively.

Addressing the current nature of US-Europe relations, Johansson characterized the situation as a transatlantic crisis, stressing that unity and collective action from the EU is the only path forward.

Beyond the Transatlantic Lens



Bildt responded to Walt's earlier keynote by advocating for strategic diversification. He argued that Europe must free itself from its dependency on the United States, noting that two-thirds of global economic growth is occurring in Asia. While recognizing the U.S. as an innovation leader, Bildt highlighted Europe's role as a trading superpower capable of leveraging global influence. He emphasized the importance of building independent capabilities and reorienting focus beyond the transatlantic axis.

Bildt cited political developments in the U.S., including the influence of JD Vance and Donald Trump, as further evidence that Europe must prepare to act independently. He suggested that Europe's energy should shift toward building its own global connections and standing firmly on its own footing.

Regarding defence cooperation, Bildt supported a multi-format approach. He emphasized the growing importance of Nordic-Baltic collaboration and supported continued NATO involvement, albeit with reduced U.S. dependency. He noted the emergence of "coalitions of the willing," potentially involving the UK, the Netherlands, Norway, and Iceland, as complementary formats to formal alliances.

Deterrence and Russia's Strategy

Walt offered a U.S. perspective on Russia's ambitions. He explained that the Trump administration viewed Russia's geopolitical goals as largely confined to Ukraine. The U.S. strategy, he said, was grounded in a balance-of-power approach, aiming to end the Ukraine conflict and gradually detach Moscow from Beijing. Walt critiqued this

model as unrealistic, emphasizing that Russia may still have incentives to undermine Western cohesion.

Walt asserted that Europe must plan for the worst while hoping for the best. This includes building genuine military capabilities, not just increasing defence budgets. He cautioned against deploying ineffective peacekeeping models and advocated for robust, mobile European forces that can stand their ground. He also noted that increasing Europe's military and economic strength would lead to renewed American respect and engagement, particularly under current and future U.S. administrations sceptical of current alliances.

Diverging Views on Russia

Johansson disagreed with the idea that Russia's actions were purely defensive. She rejected the notion that the West provoked Russia, arguing that Europe had previously made significant efforts to cooperate with Moscow through economic and security channels. She stressed the existential nature of the conflict for Ukraine and warned that success in Ukraine could embolden Russia to pursue further aggression. She concluded that Europe must defend its values and democracies, including against future unpredictability from the U.S. Bildt partially agreed with Walt, characterizing the Ukraine invasion as a preventive war, but focused less on NATO and more on how Putin's fears a democratic Ukraine, which represents a profound political threat to Russia. Bildt noted that from a Western perspective, support for Ukrainian democracy was aimed at eventually creating an opening for change in Russia. He also highlighted the wide range of possible futures for Russia, including the



risk of collapse due to overextension, as seen in its past century.

Strengthening European Readiness

In response to how Europe should prepare for such uncertainty, Johansson highlighted that the EU has already begun enhancing its internal security and defence capabilities. As a former Commission official responsible for internal security, she described weekly cyber and physical attacks, including incidents like cable sabotage in the Baltic Sea. She emphasized the importance of EU coherence, highlighting the recent creation of a European Defence Commissioner. Johansson stressed that the EU is not competing with NATO but complementing it, particularly in areas beyond conventional military operations. She expressed confidence in the EU's trajectory toward becoming a stronger geopolitical actor, capable of shaping a new global order that should include, but not depend solely on, the United States.

Walt emphasized that the U.S. also responds strongly to perceived military threats and therefore understands Russia's hypersensitivity. He called for Europe to create meaningful military capabilities, citing potential EU peacekeeping efforts as a test case. He warned that symbolic forces would not suffice, and that Europe must invest in forces capable of long-term, autonomous operations. Bildt concluded by arguing for continued financial support for Ukraine, arguing that its defence is achievable and essential to the broader stability of Europe. Despite the gravity of the situation, Bildt expressed cautious optimism about Ukraine's resilience and competence.

Panel 2: Insight from India, China and Japan

Participants: Åsa Malmström Rognes, Henrik Chetan Aspengren, Björn Jerdén.

This panel introduced alternative perspectives to the discussion including insights from India, Japan, and China on the West's evolving strategic landscape, particularly regarding Europe's role and the consequences of a second Trump administration.

India: Confident and Cautiously Engaged

Chetan Aspengren described India's perspective as sympathetic but not alarmed by Western anxieties. Optimism and momentum dominate India's long-term outlook, especially regarding its rising global influence. India sees Europe as an important economic partner but does not prioritize it in traditional security matters.

India's worldview is shaped by three key priorities: securing space for its continued economic growth, balancing China's influence, and promoting a multipolar world order. While reforming global governance and diversifying partnerships are key goals, India does not view Europe as its most crucial partner in these efforts.

Japan: Steady Amid Shifting Sands

Malmström Rognes noted Japan's long-standing dependence on the U.S., particularly through its security treaty—a point of contention for Trump, who has criticized the agreement as non-reciprocal.



Although Japan increased defence spending during Trump's previous term, its strategic reliance on the US remains. However, with the U.S. pivoting toward the Indo-Pacific, American dependence on Japan's military bases has also grown.

Economically, the Japan-U.S. relationship remains robust, with longstanding trade and investment ties. Japan is well-versed in managing U.S. trade tensions, drawing on experience from the 1970s and 1980s. Despite the current unpredictability, Tokyo has managed similar dynamics before.

Japan's economic integration with Asia—including participation in regional trade agreements and the Trans-Pacific Partnership—positions it to resist volatility. Joint efforts with China and South Korea to strengthen the WTO suggest potential alignment with EU trade priorities.

China: Strategic Patience and Multipolar Ambitions

Jerdén explained that Chinese leaders interpret current events as vindication of their long-held belief that the U.S. seeks to suppress China's rise. Internal dysfunction in the U.S. and its perceived unilateralism on the global stage reinforce this narrative. China's strategy has been to prepare for instability by reducing dependencies and building alternative networks. Presently, Chinese leaders are content to allow the U.S. to undermine its own global standing.

Regarding Europe, Beijing continues to advocate for a multipolar world where Europe acts independently of Washington. Chinese leaders emphasize their support for

Europe's autonomy, arguing that the U.S. does not genuinely respect European interests.

Panel 3: European cohesion and trade strategy

Participants: Wolfgang Ischinger, Tytti Tuppurainen and Anna Stellingner

The last panel explored Europe's trade resilience, strategic autonomy, and policy cohesion amid shifting global power dynamics, particularly in relation to U.S. unpredictability and emerging Asian economies.

Trade Outlook and the EU's Strategic Position

Stellingner opened the discussion by characterizing the global trade environment as exceptionally volatile. She warned of the erosion not only of the multilateral trading system but also the foundational principles underpinning it - transparency, predictability, and non-discrimination. This systemic instability, largely driven by the U.S.'s erratic tariff regime and unilateral decisions, marks a significant departure from post-World War II norms.

However, Stellingner remained optimistic about the EU's capacity to navigate this disruption. She identified five reasons for confidence: (1) Trade is an exclusive EU competence, enabling a unified approach through over 43 trade agreements; (2) U.S. actions have united rather than divided the EU; (3) a new urgency has emerged within the EU to boost competitiveness; (4) the EU retains credibility within the WTO and



adheres to multilateral norms; and (5) the perceived slowness of EU processes is a sign of stability and rule-based governance. While concerned about global trends, Stellingner sees the EU as well-positioned to maintain influence in global trade.

Finland: Security, Trade, and Strategic Realism

Tuppurainen provided a Finnish perspective, emphasizing the national ethos of survival through global integration. For Finland, economic survival depends on access to global markets and adherence to free trade principles. She affirmed Finland's commitment to the EU single market and a liberal trade agenda.

On security, Tuppurainen stressed Finland's need to embed itself within strong alliances—NATO, the EU, and Nordic-Baltic formats. However, public trust in U.S. defence guarantees is declining, with only 16% of Finns confident in American support. While not advocating a break from the U.S., Tuppurainen urged the creation of a robust European pillar within NATO, suggesting a Euro-NATO grouping or coalition of the willing to act swiftly and decisively. Citing Ukraine as an inspirational source of determination, she called for urgent action to ensure European self-reliance.

Germany: Leadership, Reform, and Nuclear Debate

Ischinger, highlighted three main developments from the German perspective. First, a unified German foreign policy is emerging, with the Chancellor and Foreign Minister aligned under the CDU party—a first

in six decades. Merz also plans to modernize governance by creating a new digitalization ministry.

Second, Ischinger invoked the legacy of Wolfgang Schäuble, suggesting that Germany must once again contribute meaningfully to European integration. He highlighted the lack of major initiatives since the Euro project of 1989–90 and expressed hope that Merz would reverse this trend.

Third, Ischinger addressed a significant cultural shift: reopening the debate on nuclear deterrence in Germany. Traditionally reliant on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, Germany has resisted considering French or British alternatives. Merz is now encouraging a reassessment of these options. Additionally, Ischinger identified illegal migration as a pressing challenge, particularly as the AfD rises in national polls. Merz's ability to respond to this and other crises will be critical to his government's credibility.

Final Reflections

In closing remarks, Stellingner emphasized the need to broaden Europe's trade focus to include regions like Africa, urging future sessions to reflect this wider lens. Tuppurainen ended on an optimistic note, affirming Europe's capacity and resources to meet today's challenges, provided there is political leadership and public will.

Final keynote address: Wolfgang Ischinger



In the concluding address, Ischinger reflected on the overarching themes of the symposium, offering a candid assessment of Europe's strategic posture in a changing global order. He framed his remarks around three key points: the war in Europe, Europe's defence structure, and the political future of the European Union as a global actor.

1. The War in Europe: A Strategic Reality

Ischinger began by emphasizing that the war in Ukraine is not only a regional conflict but a confrontation involving one of the world's two major nuclear powers—an aspect that fundamentally alters its character. He noted that in Germany, and more broadly in Europe, the dominant narrative has framed support for Ukraine as an act of solidarity. However, he argued that this should instead be seen as an act of self-defence: by helping Ukraine resist aggression, Europe is safeguarding its own security. The unsettling reality, he warned, is that Europe may be less safe once the war ends if a ceasefire allows Russia to regroup and rebuild its military strength. Any peace or ceasefire agreement, therefore, must be durable and strategically sound, not just politically convenient.

2. Fragmentation of European Defence

Turning to defence, Ischinger underscored the inefficiencies caused by Europe's fragmentation. He compared Europe's situation with the United States, noting that while the US maintains approximately 30 large weapons systems, the EU collectively operates around 180. The US has a defence budget that is more than double

the collective budget of all European nations together. Nevertheless, Inschinger argues, if Europe coordinated more effectively, it could significantly enhance the impact of its defence spending, closing the gap between potential and reality.

3. Europe's Political Future and Strategic Cohesion

Ischinger's final point focused on Europe's political capacity to act as a unified strategic entity. He acknowledged past efforts to develop a common foreign policy but noted that the EU still lacks the coherence and decisiveness needed to operate effectively in global affairs. The war in Ukraine has highlighted this weakness, particularly when key actors like the US engage Russia without meaningful EU involvement. To address this, Ischinger proposed reconsidering the EU's unanimity rule in foreign and defence policy decisions. If comprehensive reform is not feasible with all 27 member states, he suggested forming a "core group" of countries committed to majority decision-making in foreign, security, and defence matters—a step toward creating a more cohesive and credible European actor on the world stage.



Conclusions

Some common, if not necessarily unanimous, themes emerging from this rich tapestry of debate and discussion focus on the urgency facing Europe to redefine its strategic autonomy in an increasingly volatile world. Facing unpredictability from the United States, rising competition from China, and

persistent threats from Russia, Europe must evolve from a reactive actor into a proactive global power. Strengthening defence integration, enhancing political unity, and pursuing a multipolar diplomatic strategy are crucial. These steps are not merely optional, in the eyes of many speakers; they are essential to securing Europe's role in the future global order.



About UI

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The Swedish Institute of International Affairs

Visiting Address: Amiralitetsbacken 1, 111 49 Stockholm

Postal Address: Box 3163, 103 63 Stockholm

Phone: +46 8 511 768 00

www.ui.se info@ui.se X: @UISweden