

Europe braces for a swift and brutal transition to the world of Trump



Brussels, November 12 (RHC)-- European Union leaders have taken to social media to congratulate Donald J Trump on a sweeping presidential election victory in the United States, but few are likely to feel positive about the change of U.S. leadership on security and trade, experts tell Al Jazeera.

“Trump has been very clear that Europeans need to ramp up their defense spending even further. He wants a three percent of GDP pledge and we can expect him to push this hard,” said Anna Wieslander, director for Northern Europe at the Atlantic Council.

NATO members pledged to raise defence spending to two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) after Russia invaded Crimea a decade ago. It has taken them until this year to achieve that, according to NATO, because many states did not act until Russia's military action against Ukraine in 2022.

"Europeans have long recognized the need to step up on security and defence, but this realisation has not been matched by resources or true political will," Wieslander told Al Jazeera. "The systemic threat that Russia poses to European security makes this shift extremely urgent if American engagement decreases. The first thing Europe needs to do now is to take the lead in supporting Ukraine towards victory against Russia."

Trump put pressure on Congress last year to delay \$61 billion in military aid to Ukraine, and has expressed scepticism about approving further aid, potentially saddling Europeans with that bill in addition to the 43.5 billion euros (\$46.3 billion) that the EU has already spent.

Bullying the Europeans into higher defense spending could be a double-edged sword.

Guy Verhofstadt, the federalist MEP who leads the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, wrote on X: "The 'free world' will be led by a convicted felon and demagogue who doesn't share our values but wants to destroy them. Liberal democracy is in peril. Is Europe prepared? No. Can it be and will we see real leadership we desperately need? Hopefully!"

French President Emmanuel Macron has been the standard-bearer for greater European strategic autonomy.

On Wednesday morning, he wrote on X: "I have just spoken with the [German] Chancellor Olaf Scholz. We will work towards a more united, stronger, more sovereign Europe in this new context."

Within hours of that message, German Finance Minister Christian Lindner had left the tripartite coalition in a dispute over defence spending, and Scholz had declared a vote of confidence for January, followed by a possible early election in March.

'It's not going to be an instant wake-up call'

"Strategic autonomy will be hobbled by domestic conditions in France and Germany," said Dimitar Bechev, director of the Dahrendorf Programme on Europe in a Changing World at the European Studies Centre at the University of Oxford.

Alongside Germany's crumbling coalition, Macron has ruled through a minority government since parliamentary elections in July. "There's going to be some pain before that pain galvanises [the continent] into further European unity. It's not going to be an instant wake-up call," Catherine Fieschi, a fellow at the European University Institute's Robert Schuman Centre, told Al Jazeera.

She attributed that to the German election and the European Parliament "auditioning commissioners, half of whom have been doing their job for the past five years, so it's a colossal waste of time".

"In January as we know, it's going to be a swift and brutal transition of [US] power," she said. "We're going to see a dip, some panic, some chaos, some uncertainty. In the end, given the brutality of what's coming from the Trump White House, we're going to see more cohesion in Europe than what we've seen for the past years."

She added: "I think we're finally maybe going to see the Zeitenwende that's been promised for years actually taking shape." Scholz announced a Zeitenwende, or epochal change, soon after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, consisting in part of a defence-spending hike of 100 billion euros (\$106 billion). It has taken him until 2024 to actually bring defence spending to two percent of GDP.

Europe will also be up against opposition to autonomy from Trump, says Wieslander. “He does not want the European defence market to become autonomous, which is a prerequisite for European strategic autonomy. Rather, we saw during the previous Trump administration that he pushed Europeans to buy more American defence material. Neither has he expressed any wish for the Europeans to develop their own nuclear deterrence, another necessary condition for European strategic autonomy.”

European Parliament research recently showed that after 2022, 78 percent of EU members’ procurement budgets were awarded outside the EU, including 63 percent in the US – an even higher proportion than before the Ukraine war.

And despite the fact that the EU is fast transitioning to autonomous, renewable energy, it still bleeds at least half a trillion dollars a year importing fossil fuels, partly from the United States. Yet Europe contains two nuclear powers, with permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. It could act autonomously if it wanted to.

If they react to outside pressures in the right way, European leaders can still achieve autonomy, says Constantinos Filis, a professor of history at the American College of Greece. “It could turn out that Trump and Putin actually mould the new shape of Europe,” he said.

Trump’s promise to slap a 10 percent tariff on all imports, including those from Europe, and a 60 percent tariff on all Chinese imports, will be a greater concern, believes Fieschi. “We’re in for a double whammy. On the one hand, [there’s] a security guarantee dependent on Europe’s toeing the line on China. We’re in line to see very transparent and aggressive measures to force key industries to manufacture in the United States,” she said, with tariffs as a stick complementing the carrot of subsidies under US President Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act.

Bechev agrees on expectations of “protracted negotiations on trade, with the spectre of an all-out trade war looming large in the backdrop.” It is this assault on European agriculture, manufacturing and trade that may unite European mainstream and anti-systemic parties, in the end, believes Fieschi. “[Jordan] Bardella and [Marine] Le Pen have been going out of their way to say, ‘We want to protect our Europe,’” she said of the leaders of the far-right National Rally party in France. “They’re sounding exactly like Macron on strategic autonomy.”

That fear of a complete colonization of the European economy by the U.S. will be further reinforced, she predicts. “We’re going to see someone who is really prepared to break the rules completely, not just rewrite them,” said Fieschi.

“What that will mean for Europe is how much time are we going to spend dragging disputes in front of the World Trade Organization, and European Court of Justice. We’re going to drown in our own regulations and self-righteousness with someone who really may not care at all.”

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA]

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