

When Your Ally Turns Narcissistic

A Self-Help Manual for Europe Navigating Transatlantic Relations

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Main Findings

1

This report applies insights from psychological research to offer a new approach to understanding – and countering – the unprecedented way the current US administration wields power vis-à-vis its allies.

2

Narcissism theory is well-suited to explain the current US administration's use of power for domination, deliberate unpredictability, and recurring controversies that destabilize established relationships. We develop seven criteria for identifying narcissistic foreign policy patterns.

3

Applying a narcissism lens can turn seemingly erratic foreign policy into consistent, even expectable patterns driven by status, visibility, and hierarchy. Three case studies reveal how these patterns play out in practice: the Greenland Affair, the US efforts for a quick deal on Ukraine, and the tariff war with the EU.

4

To avoid becoming trapped in a dynamic defined by uncertainty and dependency, European states should refrain from reinforcing publicity stunts, craft a foreign policy of cordial neutrality, emphasize reciprocity, and strengthen collective confidence, boundaries, and independence.

Recommendations

Hands-on, pragmatic measures for short-term progress

- 1 Invest in the Optics of Confidence, Independence and Unity**
In a status-driven dynamic, symbolic and performative gestures are particularly important. Investing in optics can serve as a stopgap until Europe can leverage increased strengths, independence, and unity.
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- 2 Leverage the Power of Saying (and Doing) Nothing**
Strategic restraint — limiting responses to provocations and reallocating attention to European priorities — can undercut attention-seeking behavior and reduce escalation risks.
-

- 3 Dare to be Bold**
As Europe works to regain initiative by asserting its own priorities on the transatlantic agenda, it should test new ways of shaping relations with Washington by employing bold moves that cut through the noise of controversies.

Building blocks for a mid- and long-term counterstrategy

- 4 Prepare for Radical Volatility**
By anticipating triggers and escalation patterns rather than reacting to every shock, European governments can focus their resources on real risks and structurally prepare for the challenges of an erratic, status-driven US foreign policy.
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- 5 Do Not Submit to Excessive Demands**
Europe must resist one-sided concessions and instead pursue reciprocity, projecting confidence and leveraging its own strengths to prevent falling into cycles of dependency and domination.
-

- 6 Craft a Foreign Policy of Cordial Neutrality**
Europe should maintain a calm, consistent and neutral stance that denies Washington the symbolic wins of outrage, while affirming confidence and partnership without submission.
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- 7 Strengthen European Coordination and Unity**
Unified messaging, disciplined diplomacy and close coordination between Brussels and member states are Europe's best defenses against Washington's manipulation and division tactics.
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- 8 Continue Investing in European Independence**
Reducing strategic dependencies in defense, energy and trade will strengthen Europe's resilience against coercive US behavior and prepare the continent for a potentially lasting shift in global power dynamics.
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Introduction

Since the inauguration of the second Trump administration, every day has brought a new controversy. **The onslaught of unprecedented White House moves has created outrage and noise that make it particularly hard for others to analyze the United States' motives and goals, and to counter these alarming strategies.** With Russia's threat to European security reaching its highest level in 30 years, Europeans' concerns over the unreliability of the US, a key ally, are particularly pronounced.¹

To make matters worse, the Trump administration has further fueled the Putin regime's challenge to Europe's security order, and Washington's and Moscow's moves often appear to reinforce one another. Consider, for instance, when US Vice President JD Vance announced at the 2025 Munich Security Conference that the US views the greatest danger for Europe not to come from Russia or China but from Europe's decay of values. In the same speech, he mocked concerns over Russian influence in European elections, "if your democracy can be destroyed with a few hundred thousand dollars of digital advertising from a foreign country, then it wasn't very strong to begin with."² Moreover, the Trump administration repeatedly falsely blamed Ukraine for Russia's invasion, endorsed and cheered on anti-democratic challengers to European democracies, including Putin, Erdoğan, Orbán, and Vučić, and, in September 2025, decided to end its security assistance programs for Europe focused on Russia.³ Even though European defense capabilities are expanding, Europe remains far from able to withstand an external attack without US support.⁴

Given its strategic dependencies and Washington's willingness to treat Europe's security interests as expendable, Europe risks being a target of US coercion while unable to advance its own security objectives. If European governments devote their resources to reacting to every controversy and unprecedented move from the US, this vulnerability only grows. How can Germany, other European governments, and the European Union develop effective responses to US actions and avoid becoming trapped in a dynamic defined by uncertainty and dependency?

**Given its strategic dependencies,
Europe risks being stuck as a
target of US coercion.**

This report offers a new approach to understanding — and countering — the unprecedented way the current US administration wields power vis-à-vis its allies. By focusing on systematic patterns of state behavior, rather than the substance of individual foreign policy moves, this study demonstrates that US actions, while seemingly erratic, often follow identifiable logics. It applies **insights from psychological research to explain the motives, goals and patterns of the current US administration** and to translate them into practical guidance for states like Germany on **how to avoid common traps when dealing with volatile behavior from a global power, like the US.**

¹ Körömi, Csongor. 2025. "Majority of Europeans See Trump as an Enemy, Survey Shows." *POLITICO*. March 20, 2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/half-europeans-see-donald-trump-as-enemy/>.

² The Spectator. 2025. "Read: JD Vance's Full Speech on the Fall of Europe." February 14, 2025. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/jd-vance-what-i-worry-about-is-the-threat-from-within/>.

³ Spike, Justin. 2025. "Trump Says Ukraine Started the War That's Killing Its Citizens. What Are the Facts?" *AP News*. February 19, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-trump-war-zelenskyy-putin-7fe8c0c80b4e93e3bc079c621a44e8bb>; Pilling, David. 2025. "Autocrats Behaving Badly: Donald Trump Emboldens Global Strongmen." *Financial Times*. March 30, 2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/15cc7dc7-c78a-42c8-b166-29755836335a>; Robertson, Noah. 2025. "Trump Administration to End European Security Programs Focused on Russia." *The Washington Post*. September 4, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/09/04/trump-europe-security-russia-ukraine/>; Beaudouin, Will. 2025. "A Green Light for Authoritarianism: How the Trump Administration Fuels Global Autocracy." *Center for American Progress*. September 19, 2025. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/a-green-light-for-authoritarianism-how-the-trump-administration-fuels-global-autocracy/>.

⁴ Tanghe, Mila. 2025. "How Long before Europe Can Fight Russia?" *CEPA*. March 20, 2025. <https://cepa.org/article/how-long-before-europe-alone-can-fight-russia/>.

Among concepts from psychology, narcissism theory is particularly well-suited to explain the US behavior that inspired this project, which is characterized by its use of power for domination, and to create deliberate unpredictability, and recurring controversies that destabilize established relationships. This report does not aim to offer a diagnostic test for individual political leaders, but rather to use insights from psychology as an interpretive framework to understand state- and system-level power dynamics. After all, the US moves shaping transatlantic relations over the last 8+ months stem not only from US President Donald Trump himself but from the broader “MAGA system” (Make America Great Again) that has brought this foreign policy style to power and continues to sustain and amplify it. These dynamics require Europe to respond at the state level rather than through personal diplomacy alone.

Many conventional approaches to the analysis of foreign relations focus narrowly on material interests or institutions and therefore read the volatility of US behavior as disjointed actions. **Applying a narcissism lens can turn seemingly erratic foreign policy into consistent, even expectable patterns driven by status, visibility, and hierarchy.** To do this, this report develops criteria for identifying narcissistic foreign policy patterns based on evidence from clinical psychology and show why they trigger the international tensions and dynamics visible around the current US administration. These patterns manifest as performative and coercive superiority, pursuit of attention, vindictive retaliation, exploitative and derogatory treatment of allies, externalization of problems, command and control, and high-risk, short-term decision-making.

Although this report applies the proposed framework to the present case of US foreign policy, these patterns of behavior and the risks they pose are not necessarily unique to the US under the Trump administration, nor are they immutable over time. Throughout world history, plenty of states have had periods of dangerously narcissistic foreign policy behavior, leading to many destructive outcomes for themselves and others — and many were able (or forced) to change toward more constructive international postures.

A closer look at three case studies illustrates the fresh perspective a narcissistic policy analysis can offer on foreign policy challenges that particularly affect Europe and what it can contribute to a response strategy:

1. The US bid to take control of Greenland only became a major issue after Denmark dismissed an initial, seemingly casual proposal from the US to open negotiations. The US interpreted this dismissal as a threat to its great power status. The ensuing spiral of reactive escalation now serves as a global spectacle of US superiority, while substantive progress on purchasing or annexing Greenland appears to be only a secondary aim of the US's actions.
2. Washington's push for a quick “peace deal” in Ukraine highlights its exploitative and derogatory approach to dealing with its allies, from whom submission to US command is expected. At the same time, friendly ties with Moscow allow Washington to portray itself as an equally dangerous big player as Russia, and an even more powerful one if Russia appears to follow its lead on Ukraine.
3. The tariff war with the EU demonstrates the importance of perceived status to the current administration: trade balances are treated as quantifiable measures of global hierarchy. Responsibility for identified shortcomings is externalized, with blame for the US trade deficit placed squarely on other states.

To move from a reactive approach to a proactive strategy, Germany, other European states, and the EU should begin by recognizing patterns of status-driven behavior, refusing to be drawn into the spectacle by crafting a foreign policy of cordial neutrality, and constructing collective countermeasures rooted in reciprocity, confidence, boundaries, and independence.

This study offers a starting point for applying insights from narcissism research to international politics – further research is required to develop this approach into a comprehensive theory. One critical step is testing the proposed insights through quantitative content analysis of official statements, diplomatic communications, and public rhetoric across all of US foreign policy. Future research should also test the framework against other state actors that act in seemingly erratic ways but are in fact patterned around status and domination and expand recommendations to non-state actors such as international organizations and private sector companies that are equally confronted with narcissistic governments but need other levers.

Concepts, Context and Methodology

Merging insights from psychology and politics is not a new approach — political psychology is a thriving interdisciplinary field that examines the psychological dimensions of political behavior and decision-making. Most political psychologists focus on individuals or groups of individuals. Political leaders are often the subject of such studies, especially when their leadership styles are as disruptive as Trump's. While it is nearly impossible to “diagnose” leaders from afar, experts in political psychology have long explored how socially maladaptive disorders such as narcissism or psychopathy may shape decision-making.⁵ For example, Yusuf Çifci analyzes the childhood development of Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, concluding that each leader's family history offers grounds for the later emergence of narcissistic personality disorder.⁶

By contrast, **this study addresses how to deal with narcissism at the state- and systemic-level, focusing in particular on managing relations with the current US administration.** After all, the emerging dynamics are driven by state- and system-level acts on both sides of the equation. In the US, the second Trump administration did not come to power by accident — it is an elected government that advertised its disruptive style during campaigning and promised to expand on the first Trump administration's challenge to a system that many citizens want to see overturned. While growing authoritarian tendencies may give President Trump greater influence, policy is still co-produced by state apparatuses, advisors, and cabinet secretaries, as well as popular support. The “MAGA system” — including aligned Republican members of Congress, conservative to far-right think tanks and media outlets, as well as wealthy financiers

The “MAGA system” nourishes and amplifies the administration's signature foreign policy style.

— nourishes and amplifies the administration's signature foreign policy style.⁷ The administration's approach to governing is sufficiently persuasive across the board that prominent leaders such as US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth or Vice President Vance engage in the same behaviors and patterns, even independently of President Trump himself. The cultural change embodied by this administration may well mean that in the 2029 election, a disruptive and volatile style will remain a key requirement for a successful

candidate, even if Trump does not run. Disentangling the power relations within the MAGA system would be a valuable research endeavor in its own right. This study, however, has a different aim: to provide Europe with additional tools for responding to changed and seemingly volatile US behavior.

From Europe's vantage point, the limitations of an individual-based approach are even clearer: US actions affect European governments' policy decisions, the power distribution in the international system, and even how regular citizens think about foreign policy. Official responses to the Trump administration's moves are shaped by party positions, parliamentary debates, coordination across ministries, and the ways desk officers interact with their

⁵ Lee, Bandy. 2017. *The dangerous case of Donald Trump*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, An Imprint Of St. Martin's Press; Nai, Alessandro, and Emre Toros. 2020. “The Peculiar Personality of Strongmen: Comparing the Big Five and Dark Triad Traits of Autocrats and Non-Autocrats.” *Political Research Exchange* 2 (1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736x.2019.1707697>.

⁶ Çifci, Yusuf. 2025. “Child, Family, and Narcissistic Political Leadership: A Comparison of Hitler, Putin, and Trump.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (May). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1579958>.

⁷ Durkee, Alison. 2025. “Project 2025 Author Russell Vought Confirmed by Senate: Here Are All the Trump Officials with Ties to Policy Agenda.” *Forbes*, February 7, 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2025/02/06/project-2025-author-russell-vought-confirmed-by-senate-here-are-all-the-trump-officials-with-ties-to-policy-agenda/>; Sommerlad, Joe. 2025. “How Trump's ‘America First’ MAGA Movement Turned the Republican Party into an ‘Arm of the Kremlin.’” *The Independent*. March 17, 2025. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-putin-russia-maga-republicans-b2716558.html>;

Klein, Liam. 2025. “The Sources of American Conduct Clingendael Alert How MAGA Ideology Could Turn the USA into the EU's Implacable Adversary.” *Clingendael Institute*, May 2025. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/The%20Sources%20of%20American%20Conduct.pdf>.

American counterparts. Coordination within the EU adds yet another layer of complexity. **What is needed, therefore, are not only better approaches for individual European leaders who may find themselves face-to-face with President Trump in the Oval Office, but state-level strategies for responding to the full spectrum of US government action.**

In developing such approaches, this study builds on scholarship that translates insights from psychology to the state and system level, particularly work drawing on narcissism theory and related concepts. Richard Ned Lebow, for example, developed an international relations paradigm that uses human motives – what he calls the “spirit” – rather than material interests or rational calculation, as the basic unit of analysis. Drawing on the Greek classics, he demonstrates how honor and status shape international relations, especially in actions that appear irrational or lead to aggression and conflict.⁸ Similarly, Linus Hagström has shown how narcissism theory can illuminate the evolution of great power identities and the ways in which they express pride, shame, denial, or insult.⁹ This project expands on these analyses by shifting the focus from identity to patterns of policy behavior. It asks how narcissism theory can help explain how some states wield power and, crucially, what practical implications this has for states confronted, on the receiving end, with such patterns. **This study is concerned less with how narcissistic state actions originate than with how to deal with them.**

While traditional great power theories recognize that competition over status and prestige can drive rivalry and war, they largely treat these motives as structural features of the international system – inevitable outcomes of power politics. This study instead looks beneath that structural layer to examine *how* status-seeking plays out through identifiable, recurring behavioral patterns. It focuses on why and when tipping points occur, and how seemingly erratic or unpredictable actions that deviate from rational policy goals can, in fact, be anticipated, interpreted and strategically managed.

To do so, this study proceeds in three steps: First, it outlines a conceptual framework by mapping the key features of narcissistic behavior onto state behavior. This framework generates **criteria for identifying and interpreting narcissistic foreign policy patterns**. Second, it applies the framework through **exemplary case studies of “policy packages”** that illustrate different approaches and levels of relevance to either the Trump administration or European security: the US pursuit of acquiring Greenland, a quick “peace deal” in Ukraine, and a tariff scheme to end trade deficits. While Russia’s war in Ukraine and the tariff war exemplify two recent US moves with the greatest risks and costs for Europe, the question of a Greenland deal is a typical example of a foreign policy move that is perceived as both outrageous and puzzling, and therefore particularly difficult to confront with traditional diplomatic tools. These case studies are not exhaustive analyses but serve to demonstrate the usefulness of this perspective and its implications for European strategy. Third, this paper draws **recommendations for Germany and other European governments by combining lessons from psychological research with insights from the application of this framework to selected case studies.**

This additional perspective on the changed dynamics in transatlantic relations may help Germany and Europe move from being primarily reactive toward a more proactive and strategic approach in their interactions with Washington. The study does not, however, attempt to provide a systematic content analysis or predictive model. It engages with an evolving political situation where outcomes remain uncertain and contested. Moreover, translating narcissistic patterns from individual psychology to state behavior has inherent limits: it is heuristic, not diagnostic, offering a way to make sense of patterns, not to clinically evaluate them. Caution is warranted considering the risk of “pathologizing” leaders or states

⁸ Lebow, Richard Ned. 2006. “Fear, Interest and Honour: Outlines of a Theory of International Relations.” *International Affairs* 82 (3): 431–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2006.00543.x>; Lebow, Richard Ned. 2008. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Hagström, Linus. 2021. “Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics.” *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab011>.

without direct, empirically grounded assessment. This tendency — attributing complex geopolitical dynamics to individual psychological traits or pathologies — can oversimplify multifaceted systems and lead to reductive interpretations of state behavior. Used carefully, the framework can sharpen European strategy and illuminate recurring patterns in state behavior; used carelessly, treating the state as a person risks obscuring the real political and institutional drivers of foreign policy. The aim, therefore, is to expand the range of policy options and stimulate informed debate.

Narcissism: A New Perspective on State Behavior

Background: What is Narcissism?

Before narcissism can be applied to explain patterns in seemingly volatile and unpredictable state behavior, the concept itself must be clarified beyond the clichés of pop culture and social media. In clinical psychology, narcissism exists on a spectrum rather than as a binary condition, with individuals exhibiting varying degrees of narcissistic traits.¹⁰ At lower levels, narcissism can manifest as healthy self-esteem, ambition, humor, and a drive for achievement — qualities often viewed positively in social contexts.¹¹ For instance, innovation and leadership are often driven by individuals pursuing their personal interests or a higher status in their social group. However, when these traits become exaggerated and start causing harm, disruption or dysfunction, they move into pathological territory.¹²

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a diagnosis recognized in the field of psychiatric medicine and codified in official manuals such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) or the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD-10). These manuals describe narcissistic patterns as dimensional and marked by grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, often rooted in fragile self-esteem masked by a projection of superiority. Such traits tie strongly to social hierarchies, where narcissists engage in status-seeking behaviors to maintain dominance. Evolutionarily, these behaviors stem from how primates compete for rank and recognition, but in humans, they can manifest as exploitation and envy, distorting interpersonal relationships.¹³

Narcissistic behavior imposes significant costs on others. Interpersonally, it erodes trust and strains relationships when narcissists exercise domination, manipulation, or a lack of reciprocity.¹⁴ The problem worsens when the gap between a narcissist's idealized self-image and reality widens: in these circumstances, narcissists may "implode" through internal dysfunction or "explode" through outward aggression, especially when their status is threatened. This reactive aggression often targets those a person with NPD perceives to be inferior and can lead them to escalate minor disputes into crises.¹⁵ New narcissism research suggests similar dynamics can play out at the collective level: "collective narcissism" can be characterized by a strong national pride or societal beliefs in national exceptionalism and is

¹⁰ Yakeley, Jessica. 2018. "Current Understanding of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder." *BJPsych Advances* 24 (5): 305–15. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2018.20>; Pincus, Aaron L., and Mark R. Lukowitsky. 2010.

"Pathological Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 6 (1): 421–46. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131215>.

¹¹ Rosenthal, Seth A., and Todd L. Pittinsky. 2006. "Narcissistic Leadership." *The Leadership Quarterly* 17 (6): 617–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.005>.

¹² Yakeley. 2018.

¹³ Grapsas, Stathis, Eddie Brummelman, Mitja D. Back, and Jaap J. A. Denissen. 2020. "The 'Why' and 'How' of Narcissism: A Process Model of Narcissistic Status Pursuit." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15 (1): 174569161987335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619873350>; Elleuch, Dalia. 2024. "Narcissistic Personality Disorder through

Psycholinguistic Analysis and Neuroscientific Correlates." *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 18 (July). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2024.1354258>.

¹⁴ Grapsas et al. 2020; Park, Sun W., Joseph Ferrero, C. Randall Colvin, and Dana R. Carney. 2013. "Narcissism and Negotiation: Economic Gain and Interpersonal Loss." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 35 (6): 569–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2013.840633>.

¹⁵ Park, Sun W., and C. Randall Colvin. 2014. "Narcissism and Other-Derogation in the Absence of Ego Threat." *Journal of Personality* 83 (3): 334–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12107>; Giacomini, Miranda, and Christian H. Jordan. 2018. "Momentarily Quieting the Ego: Short-Term Strategies for Reducing Grandiose Narcissism." *Handbook of Trait Narcissism*, 425–33. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92171-6_46.

often associated with support for populist leaders and authoritarianism, including anti-establishment sentiments and hostility toward those considered “outsiders.”¹⁶

Narcissism can help explain recurring behaviors that serve goals such as power projection and status in the international arena.

Narcissism is a particularly useful concept to draw lessons from psychology for international relations. Its maladaptive consequences appear in patterned, relational dynamics with others, meaning that even without treating states as persons, narcissism can help explain recurring behaviors that serve goals such as power projection and status in the international arena — even when these are not tied to explicit foreign policy objectives. It also illustrates how another state’s response can elicit counter-responses that may appear unpredictable: for example, narcissism can help explain why a state might react to the status message conveyed in another state’s statements, rather than the substantive argument or offer they are making. In addition, narcissism thrives in hierarchical settings, where recognition and relative ranking are central. International relations theories differ on how they conceptualize the organization of the international system; what unites much of this literature, however, is the insight that states seek ways to project influence, assert status and secure recognition in the absence of overarching authority. Narcissism can capture versions of this pursuit that are maladaptive and go against recent achievements in international cooperation, including collectively established recognized principles — such as state sovereignty as equality or territorial integrity — and don’t even bother to cloak transgressions in the mantle of legality or exceptional legitimacy.

Criteria to Identify Narcissistic Foreign Policy Patterns

What do maladaptive narcissistic patterns look like for states? To answer this question, this paper translates the criteria for NPD set out in DSM-5 to political institutions. An NPD diagnosis requires at least five of nine traits to be consistently present in the patient, including (1) grandiosity, (2) fantasies of success, (3) belief in specialness, (4) need for admiration, (5) entitlement, (6) exploitation and manipulation, (7) lack of empathy, (8) envy and belief in other’s envy, and (9) arrogance. To ensure the translated criteria are useful in analyzing state moves, in this study, we focus on patterns of behavior over identity markers and emotions and draw from research further analyzing the manifestations of different DSM-5 criteria. Based on this analysis, we identify **seven criteria to identify narcissistic foreign policy patterns**:

1. Performative and Coercive Superiority

This criterion reflects the traits that DSM describes as grandiose self-importance and belief in superiority. Among individuals, narcissistic performance of superiority is marked by repeated bragging and exaggerating achievements while diminishing the contributions of others. To ensure their superiority, relative to others, narcissistic actors make frequent and unreasonable demands, expect preferential treatment, and resort to coercive measures to get what they want. They often overestimate their own capabilities, blinded by the drive to showcase their dominance.¹⁷

At the state level, this pattern appears in foreign policy moves that take self-promotion and national pride to extremes — for example, exaggerated claims of military strength or cultural exceptionalism. Leaders and spokespersons of the state may give speeches demanding recognition and preferential treatment for their nation’s inherent superiority, while official communications from ministries adopt dominant rather than compromise-seeking positions.

¹⁶ Golec de Zavala, Agnieszka, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Irena Iskra-Golec. 2013. “Collective Narcissism Moderates the Effect of In-Group Image Threat on Intergroup Hostility.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104 (6): 1019–39. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032215>.

¹⁷ Elleuch. 2024.

States operating under this pattern may also pursue expansionist policies, risking overextension, backlash and the escalation of territorial disputes into miscalculated wars. Their diplomatic relations are often characterized by demeaning treatment of others, rhetorically establishing hierarchy and dismissing the accomplishments of other states.

2. Pursuit of Attention

Aligned with DSM's criteria related to the need for admiration and fantasies of success, this pattern highlights excessive efforts to seek validation — often through manipulative tactics — and repeated attempts to control the spotlight. For some narcissistic individuals, status promotion overrides other motives, and the outcome of these efforts determines whether the narcissistic actor responds favorably or resorts to antagonistic moves.¹⁸

States pursuing attention this way treat visibility as a core asset, engaging in provocative actions to capture global attention. This includes high-profile summits, (social) media campaigns or symbolic gestures. Different representatives of the state may engage in showmanship, amplifying the relevance, urgency or implications of a given move to ensure international focus. This behavior often results in short-term diplomatic stunts instead of substantive agreements, or in manufactured disagreements that fuel cycles of provocation and de-escalation — ultimately eroding trust. Information warfare and narrative control, often discussed as elements of hybrid warfare, are common tools in an attention-focused, narcissistic foreign policy style.

3. Vindictive Retaliation

This criterion is adapted from the NPD trait of arrogance and envy, which can trigger disproportionate responses to perceived threats or denied status ambitions. Vindictive retaliation may begin with rhetorical attacks — such as the public demeaning of others — but can extend to coercion and outright aggression.¹⁹ Narcissistic actors are often willing to punish others for having or withholding something they want for themselves.²⁰ Those most vulnerable to these behaviors are usually partners from whom a narcissistic actor expects assistance in their pursuit of status and attention, or those they regard as inferior.

At the state level, this manifests as aggressive reactions to perceived slights, such as trade imbalances, military buildups or statements made by others that are interpreted by narcissistic actors as condescending or unworthy of their superiority. A tendency toward vindictive retaliation raises the risk of arbitrary tipping points in crises. It also drives narcissist actors to go to great lengths to preserve or restore status — for instance, by prolonging wars or pursuing disputes unilaterally.

4. Exploitative and Derogatory Approach to Allies

Drawing from DSM's description of narcissists' tendencies towards exploitation and lack of empathy, this criterion highlights antagonistic behaviors most visible in long-term or close relationships.²¹ Narcissistic individuals struggle to understand and accurately assess others' needs and motivations. Unable to build equal partnerships or compromise, they instead rely on manipulation and intimidation to extract what they want — most often, status reinforcement and submission.²² If that goal cannot be achieved through cooperative means

¹⁸ Grapsas et al. 2020; Elleuch. 2024.

¹⁹ Bushman, Brad J., and Roy F. Baumeister. 1998. "Threatened Egotism, Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Direct and Displaced Aggression: Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Lead to Violence?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 (1): 219–29. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.219>.

²⁰ Giacomini and Jordan. 2018; Grapsas et al. 2020.

²¹ Miller, Joshua D., Mitja D. Back, Donald R. Lynam, and Aidan G. C. Wright. 2021. "Narcissism Today: What We Know and What We Need to Learn." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30 (6): 519–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211044109>.

²² Park et al. 2013; Brunell, Amy B. 2024. *Understanding and Coping in Social Relationships with Narcissists. Elements in Applied Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108908306>.

(e.g., flattery demands), the actor may resort to antagonistic tactics (e.g., undermining others).²³

At the state level, this translates into treating alliances hierarchically, with partners reduced to subordinate instruments for reinforcing superiority. Any deviation from the state's desired course provokes derogation. Alliances may fracture under such pressure, leaving the narcissistic state isolated. Partners also risk abandonment in crises when their support no longer serves the state's narcissistic foreign policy. Agreements within these partnerships become highly transactional, as the alliance per se holds no value and is not founded on an assumption that mutual assistance benefits all sides in the long run. Moreover, the narcissistic state may attempt to play allies against one another, seeking to control relationships and prevent them from uniting in opposition.

5. Externalization of Problems

This criterion draws together elements of DSM's descriptions of narcissistic entitlement and envy, where blame for unwelcome developments is shifted outward to avoid self-reflection.²⁴ Narcissistic individuals often reject any treatment that falls short of their expectations. The gap between what they believe they deserve and what others provide fuels a strong sense of victimhood.²⁵ How responsibility is pushed onto others is closely linked to vindictive retaliation, as outlined in criterion three, where envy leads to rivalry and further feeds escalation dynamics.²⁶

States may attribute challenges to "enemies" or conspiracies while denying internal mistakes or mismanagement. The risk of becoming a scapegoat heightens the vulnerability of partners or neighbors dependent on the state's reasonable behavior or protection. At the same time, this pattern of externalization may foster opportunistic alliances among rogue states, each using the other to deflect blame and legitimize its own behavior. Such patterns can spark or intensify diplomatic crises and, over time, erode trust in state-to-state relations.

6. Command and Control

Corresponding to what DSM describes as entitlement and arrogance, this criterion captures the narcissistic need to assume control and set the rules of interaction.²⁷

States displaying this pattern demand compliance from partners and expect to dictate the terms of global politics. They consider themselves above the rules and may demonstrate this by making a deliberately provocative show of breaking well-respected regulations and principles, including international laws. One expression of this is coercive agenda-setting: not only determining how interactions unfold but also deciding which topics are discussed. By keeping the ball in their own court, such states further enable other narcissistic patterns, including the pursuit of attention and the performance of superiority. Resistance to their command can trigger conflict, for example, through trade disputes or cyberattacks. Such states may also withdraw – formally or informally – from international institutions. Large,

²³ Grapsas et al. 2020.

²⁴ Campbell, W. K. and J.D. Foster. 2007. "The narcissistic self: Background, an extended agency model, and ongoing controversies." In C. Sedikides & S. Spencer (Eds.), *Frontiers in social psychology: The self* (pp. 115–138). Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

²⁵ McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, Shelley Dean Kilpatrick, and Courtney N. Mooney. 2003. "Narcissists as 'Victims': The Role of Narcissism in the Perception of Transgressions." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29 (7): 885–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203029007007>; Yakeley. 2018.

²⁶ Lange, Jens, Jan Crusius, and Birk Hagemeyer. 2016. "The Evil Queen's Dilemma: Linking Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry to Benign and Malicious Envy." *European Journal of Personality* 30 (2): 168–88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2047>.

²⁷ Zeigler-Hill, Virgil, Destaney Sauls, Victoriano Ochoa, Jessica Kopitz, and Avi Besser. 2021. "Narcissism and Motives to Pursue Status through the Use of Dominance-Based Strategies, Prestige-Based Strategies, and Leadership-Based Strategies." *Evolutionary Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-021-00278-w>; Bell, Edward, Christopher Marcin Kowalski, Philip Anthony Vernon, and Julie Aitken Schermer. 2021. "Political Hearts of Darkness: The Dark Triad as Predictors of Political Orientations and Interest in Politics." *Behavioral Sciences* 11 (12): 169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11120169>.

structured multilateral organizations make dominance by a single state difficult, prompting such actors to either block cooperation from within or abandon the institution altogether.

7. Risk-Prone, Short-Term Focus

This pattern reflects the narcissistic tendencies, toward fantasies of success and lack of empathy, as they are outlined in DSM. Taken together, these traits can lead narcissistic actors to favor immediate status boosts over sustainability — even at the risk of significant long-term losses. High-risk or extreme moves can deliver the immediate and heightened visibility that narcissists crave and project an image of leadership and strength.²⁸ The competitiveness of narcissistic actors often comes with disregard for the broader social or systemic costs of individual gain.²⁹

At the state level, a risk-prone, short-term foreign policy may introduce economic volatility into a globally interconnected economy or destabilize alliances that rely on long-term, credible commitments. Over time, this pattern of behavior can erode the power of the state employing a narcissistic foreign policy itself, through the costs of prolonged conflicts or the damage to its international reputation. States with narcissistic foreign policies may also pursue aggressive resource grabs, complicating global efforts to address collective challenges such as climate change.

These criteria are designed to help identify narcissistic patterns in foreign policy, which is crucial for choosing counterstrategies with a significant likelihood of success. They also enable governments to place a state's overall behavior along a continuum of narcissism. Just as some level of narcissistic behavior in individuals is associated with innovation or leadership, moderate levels of narcissism among states are indistinguishable from national exceptionalism, hegemonic leadership or assertive diplomacy. At excessive levels, however, these traits produce dysfunctional international behavior such as isolationism or aggression. Both the intensity and frequency of narcissistic patterns should be carefully assessed to determine how other states should position themselves in state-to-state negotiations. If numerous of the above patterns occur regularly, decision-makers should consider broadening their approach beyond traditional tools of diplomacy and dispute resolution.

Principles in Countering Narcissistic Behavior Patterns

Dealing with narcissistic behaviors is tricky, even at the individual level. The patterns described above are inherently about power projection and domination. They come with a high degree of volatility and leave little room for others to deviate from a narcissistic actor's expectations.

When confronted with such dynamics from another individual, the instinct is often either to walk away and exit the situation or to play by the narcissistic actor's rules in the hopes of a favorable outcome. For states, however, the first option (walking away) is rarely possible in today's interconnected world, and even less so among deeply interdependent allies such as the US and most European countries, in particular Germany. At the same time, psychologists' research and experience with confronting narcissistic behaviors show that the second option (giving in) is rarely in the interest of those affected, either.

²⁸ Grapsas et al. 2020.

²⁹ Campbell, W. Keith, Carrie Pierce Bush, Amy B. Brunell, and Jeremy Shelton. 2005. "Understanding the Social Costs of Narcissism: The Case of the Tragedy of the Commons." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31 (10): 1358–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205274855>.

Giving in to narcissistic foreign policy demands may temporarily smooth things over but sets up a fragile and unstable dynamic prone to rupture.

Rather than mitigating the consequences of narcissistic behavior, providing the attention and status the narcissistic actor seeks and giving in to the control they demand only reinforces and entrenches the patterns.³⁰ Concessions teach the narcissistic actor that their tactics work, increasing the likelihood of repetition. This is why psychologists caution against loyalty and submission in such relationships.³¹ Moreover, because narcissistic behavior is driven less by fixed goals than by the process of power projection and admiration, successes rarely satisfy them. Instead, each success raises the threshold for what they count as an achievement, eventually creating expectations that cannot be met. Even minor deviations from enforced “loyalty” may then provoke aggressive reactions.³² For those seeking cooperation on specific issues, this carries significant risks: they may make costly concessions to preserve the relationship, only to find the issue discarded once it no longer serves the narcissistic actor’s purposes.

Giving in to narcissistic foreign policy demands may temporarily smooth things over, but it sets up a fragile and unstable dynamic — one prone to rupture when the state employing a narcissistic foreign policy identifies better opportunities elsewhere or when the “submissive” state can no longer meet the escalating demands. At the same time, attempts to satisfy these demands may require significant resources that could otherwise be used for the protection and pursuit of a state’s own interests and foreign policy goals.

What then should states do when confronted with narcissistic foreign policy patterns? Some strategies advised for individuals in personal or professional contexts do not transfer easily to the state or systemic level. States cannot, for example, impose behavioral rules enforced by supervisors or “coach” narcissistic allies toward better conduct.³³ Yet psychologists have developed a few mechanisms at the individual level that can be translated to states and may help them not merely endure but actively shape and redirect the dynamics of narcissistic foreign policy.

Projecting Confidence and Integrity

When confronted with narcissistic foreign policy behavior, states benefit from projecting confidence without escalating confrontation. Showing stability and strength in their positions communicates to states exhibiting narcissistic behaviors that attempts at manipulation or domination are unlikely to succeed easily and quickly. This response makes use of the limited patience typical of narcissistic patterns. **Moreover, psychological research on narcissists shows that they are more tolerant of and positively inclined toward counterparts displaying narcissistic traits such as self-assurance and extroversion, which they recognize as similarity.**³⁴ Analogously, displaying integrity in the pursuit of state priorities, without moving into an accusatory or defensive mode, elicits respect from the state employing a narcissistic foreign policy. This enables more eye-level interstate negotiations. Rather than reacting to narcissistic moves with concessionary gestures, states should project strength, establish reciprocity as the underlying principle of the relationship, and calmly reassert agreed rules and processes.³⁵

³⁰ Campbell and Foster. 2007; Giacomini and Jordan. 2018.

³¹ Brunell. 2024.

³² Campbell and Foster. 2007

³³ Brunell. 2024; Diller, Sandra Julia, Dieter Frey, and Eva Jonas. 2020. “Coach Me If You Can! Dark Triad Clients, Their Effect on Coaches, and How Coaches Deal with Them.” *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, August, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2020.1784973>.

³⁴ Hart, William, and John M. Adams. 2014. “Are Narcissists More Accepting of Others’ Narcissistic Traits?” *Personality and Individual Differences* 64 (July): 163–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.02.038>.

³⁵ Behary, Wendy T. 2021. *Disarming the Narcissist*. New Harbinger Publications.

Gaining Autonomy and Setting Boundaries

Narcissistic dynamics flourish when counterparts perceive themselves as dependent or lacking alternatives. Leverage makes manipulative and dominating tactics particularly successful. To counter this, states should strengthen their own resources, diversify their partnerships, and increase their autonomy wherever possible.³⁶ At the same time, attention itself can be considered a resource useful for mitigating narcissistic patterns. Offering positive reinforcement for cooperative and predictable behavior — rather than rewarding grandstanding — helps redirect interactions toward constructive patterns.³⁷ Setting clear (but realistic) boundaries and staying consistent once limits are established are key to gaining autonomy. This allows states to minimize the room for manipulation and unilateral changes by a demanding partner.³⁸ Moreover, drawing on objective or general principles to explain boundaries enables states to reject narcissistic power grabs without engaging in the type of direct critique that could immediately set off another round of vindictive retaliation.

Establishing Eye-level Partnerships

Finally, states can defuse asymmetry by positioning themselves as partners on (somewhat) equal footing. While factors such as economic power or military superiority (including nuclear capabilities) can make this difficult, states do not have to submit to an overly hierarchical relationship, which will only further boost a narcissistic pattern. Just as, on an individual level, loved ones of narcissists practice empathy — acknowledging legitimate concerns or grievances without collapsing into sympathy or concession — recognizing both shared and conflicting policy goals can help states build more pragmatic cooperation.³⁹ Moves in line with the demands of a narcissistic foreign policy can be constructive when the underlying reasons for the moves are shared goals and burdens rather than mere appeasement. Rejecting the subordinate position narcissistic actors try to impose, can allow states to signal that mutual respect and reciprocity — as appropriate, even with material disparities of power — and not excessive domination, will guide the relationship.⁴⁰

The case studies in the next section illustrate what happens when responses fall short of these principles and, conversely, when European governments have occasionally succeeded in employing elements of these recommended approaches.

³⁶ Ellen, B. Parker, Christian Kiewitz, Patrick Raymund James M. Garcia, and Wayne A. Hochwarter. 2017. “Dealing with the Full-of-Self-Boss: Interactive Effects of Supervisor Narcissism and Subordinate Resource Management Ability on Work Outcomes.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 157 (3): 847–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3666-4>.

³⁷ Behary. 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.; Brunell. 2024.

³⁹ Behary. 2021.

⁴⁰ Malkin, Craig. 2015. *Rethinking Narcissism: The Secret to Recognizing and Coping with Narcissists*. New York, NY: Harper Collins; Behary. 2021.

Case Studies: Narcissistic Patterns in US Foreign Policy in 2025

In the following, we apply the framework established in Chapter 3 for identifying narcissistic foreign policy patterns to several case studies from the current US administration's moves towards Europe. We focus on "policy packages" to discern patterns of state behavior, rather than analyzing individual leaders' statements or isolated executive decisions. These case studies illustrate what a narcissistic perspective can reveal about how consistent Washington's motivations and strategies are, even when US behavior may seem erratic. They also highlight where European reactions have fueled these patterns — or, at times, helped to mitigate them.

We examine three examples: (1) Washington's bid to take control of Greenland, (2) the administration's push for a quick "peace deal" in Ukraine, and (3) the tariff war with the EU. These cases demonstrate how narcissistic power dynamics play out depending on the scale of each side's interests and vulnerabilities. Greenland illustrates an issue vital to Europe (border inviolability) but of limited material importance to the US. Ukraine represents enormous vulnerability for Europe (Russia's security threat) alongside heightened US interest in limiting any further spending. The tariff war reflects more evenly matched vulnerabilities on both sides, though framed by Washington as a matter of national security and recovering lost economic strength by diminishing "unfair" competition.

Policy Package 1: The Greenland Affair

What happened?

US interest in buying Greenland from Denmark dates back more than a century. However, before the Trump administration revived the idea, it had not been raised for about 70 years.ⁱ When President Trump brought the issue up in August 2019, the administration publicly downplayed its importance, framing it instead as a mutually beneficial deal given Denmark's annual subsidies to Greenland.ⁱⁱ The same day, in an interview with a Greenlandic newspaper, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen dismissed the proposal as "an absurd discussion" and stressed that "Greenland is not for sale."ⁱⁱⁱ

Days later, President Trump canceled his planned visit to Denmark, calling her response inappropriate: "You don't talk to the United States that way," he said, adding, "all she had to do is say no, we wouldn't be interested."^{iv} In April 2020, the US State Department announced a \$12.1 million aid package for Greenland and the reopening of its consulate in Nuuk, which had been closed since 1953. Leading Danish politicians described the moves as "unheard of" from a close ally, "cross[ing] a line" and "reprehensible."^v Trump's loss to Joe Biden in the November 2020 presidential election quieted the US pursuit of Greenland until the end of 2024.

As the second Trump administration prepared to take office, it elevated Greenland to a key security issue, with US control of the territory described as an "absolute necessity", for which military coercion could not be ruled out.^{vi} In the following months, several official and unofficial US delegations visited Greenland, including the US President's son, Donald Trump Jr., and Vice President Vance.^{vii} Government officials continued to outline US intentions in the media, and the issue was raised in Congress multiple times. In one instance, Trump reiterated that the US would take control of Greenland "one way or another."^{viii} Danish and Greenlandic officials pushed back, calling the repeated visits and public statements "aggressive" and reminding Washington of the international legal provisions protecting state sovereignty.^{ix}

Responses from other European states, notably Germany and France, emphasized the inviolability of borders and stressed coordination among European partners, including within the European Union (EU).^x At the same time, Greenland and Europe deepened their economic ties. In May 2025, for instance, a Danish-French consortium received a 30-year mineral mining permit, limiting US access. In September 2025, the EU announced a €500 million infrastructure package for Greenland.^{xi} Tensions, however, have persisted. Most recently, Denmark's foreign ministry summoned the US envoy over reports of covert US influence operations in Greenland.^{xii} Moreover, the Danish government decided to direct its anticipated \$9 billion air defense investment to European producers only, excluding the well-regarded US Patriot system.^{xiii}

Grasping at Greenland: A US Show for Attention

At its core, the US's push to control Greenland reflects a display of **performative and coercive superiority** — a trait already prominent in US foreign policy during the first Trump administration. While the initial suggestion of a purchase deal illustrates this tendency, such a move was not in itself extraordinary for a great power seeking to expand its sphere of influence. This is especially true given past US attempts to buy Greenland and the growing security stakes in the Arctic. The Trump administration's approach, however, differs from historical negotiations in two critical ways: its utter disregard for Denmark's and Greenland's refusal to engage and its failure to secure their consent before publicizing the move. The US's official communications and policy tools have claimed Greenland as if by right, implying — or explicitly stating — an American entitlement to control the territory against the wishes of its current political authorities. By insisting on its demands and labeling control of Greenland “an absolute necessity,” the Trump administration has reframed the issue as a matter of US dominance. Washington's persistent efforts to sideline Denmark rather than work with this close ally suggest that the US may be more focused on showcasing its superiority and willingness to strong-arm allies for not complying, than on actually acquiring Greenland.

One reason the Greenland question has persisted for years and escalated into an ongoing international conflict lies in the administration's tendency for **vindictive retaliation**. Two moments were decisive for the escalation of the Greenland question. The first was triggered by Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen's dismissal of the US's early suggestion to open negotiations on the purchase of Greenland as “absurd.” What others might have seen as a surprised response to an unprecedented proposal from an ally was instead interpreted by the Trump administration as a direct challenge to American superiority and its image as a successful, deal-making global power. The entire administration mobilized in response, with the State Department playing a particularly active role in pushing Greenland to the forefront of US efforts to assert leadership in the Arctic. Although the **externalization of problems** is not a major theme in this case, this example also shows how the US blames Denmark for the escalation, without any reflection on the possible effect of its unilateral and unexpected public proposal to purchase Greenland.

The second moment of escalation came with the transition between administrations. The first Trump administration left office without any tangible achievements on the Greenland front: no negotiations, no significant Greenlandic support for US control, and no European investments that could be spun as successes. When the second Trump administration prepared to return to office, it had something to prove: that it could strike deals, exercise sway over allies, and establish power in the Arctic. This ushered in a second wave of vindictive retaliation, marked by increasingly threatening rhetoric and a continued dedication of resources.

The drastic measures taken by the current US administration to pursue control of Greenland likely serve a purpose beyond asserting superiority or “punishing” Denmark. Each unprecedented move captures international **attention**, dominating headlines and forcing leaders and ministerial staff in Greenland, Denmark, other European countries, and the EU to

conduct analyses, comment, draft responses, organize meetings, and engage with the media fallout. Beyond control of Greenland itself, the administration's repeated success in moving the global spotlight to this issue demonstrates the US's power and serves its status goals in their own right. Since the escalation of rhetoric in late 2024, even negative reactions from Greenlandic leaders may be seen as useful, reinforcing Denmark and Greenland's role as "inferior" actors and highlighting the US's position as an aggressive great power.

Moreover, repeatedly raising the Greenland question — even in the absence of developments warranting further action — underscores the administration's desire for **command and control**. The administration expects others on the world stage and the media to follow their lead on all matters, including in deciding what gets discussed in the public sphere. The first exchange in 2019 illustrates this dynamic: the Trump administration did not consult Denmark before publicly announcing its plans to buy Greenland, performatively appearing to dictate the outcome and expecting Denmark to fall into line. When Denmark rejected the proposal outright, the US government saw this as a violation of its position at the top of the global power hierarchy, and this became an explicit motive for escalation. Reviving the issue in December 2024, seemingly out of nowhere, illustrates this tendency yet again. That this has become the central issue in Danish-American relations and remains a salient topic in global politics indicates the effectiveness of this narcissistic foreign policy pattern in maintaining control and attention.

This episode also demonstrates the administration's **exploitative and derogatory approach to alliances**: so long as Denmark is withholding the one thing the US is interested in (compliance with its demands), Washington is willing to damage the relationship altogether.

Finally, the US approach to Greenland highlights a **risk-prone, short-term style of decision-making** in which status pursuits override other motives. While Washington has succeeded in capturing global attention, exercising significant control over its relationship with Denmark, and demonstrating its ability and willingness to resort to vindictive retaliation, it has lost tangible influence in the Arctic. American firms have been excluded from Greenlandic mineral mining for the next 30 years, and Greenland's economic ties to Europe are stronger than ever. Similarly, although Danish officials cited lengthy procurement processes and multi-dimensional benefit assessments when deciding to channel their largest-ever defense investment into European systems, it is difficult to imagine that the rift with Washington did not play a role in sidelining the US Patriot system. These contradictions between rhetoric, means, objectives, and outcomes also highlight how detached status motives and substantive policy goals can be within a narcissistic foreign policy.

Defying the Deal: Europe Provokes Retaliation Over Greenland

The initial reactions to the US administration's proposal to purchase Greenland show how well-intentioned moves can exacerbate narcissistic foreign policy dynamics. Denmark's dismissal of the proposal as "absurd" in August 2019 may have triggered the cycle of tensions that continues today. While understandable from a domestic political perspective, this blunt rejection was interpreted in Washington as a direct challenge to US authority, prompting vindictive retaliation. When the issue resurfaced in 2024, European governments again appeared unprepared; their high-level coordination meetings and public statements paradoxically amplified US attention-seeking and controlling behaviors rather than blunting them. Repeated public communication highlighting the leaders' outrage and shock, paired with a sudden increase in high-level European delegations to Greenland, ensured the administration's diplomatic stunts achieved their intended effect over and over again.

A less personalized initial response — stating that Denmark had no intention of negotiating with any party over Greenland's status, while offering to jointly address US security concerns in the Arctic — might have contained the fallout. Such an approach would have covered elements of all three mechanisms to counter narcissistic behaviors: signaling confidence

without provocation, setting clear boundaries, and shifting the exchange back to an equal footing. Another option would have been to defuse the media storm and buy time by simply noting that, without any official outreach from Washington, there was nothing to comment on. An important lesson to draw from this episode: knowing what not to do can be even more important than knowing what to do when it comes to evading the ensnaring dynamics of narcissistic attention-seeking, retaliation, and control.

Still, Greenland, Denmark, and Europe avoided some of the more dangerous traps. Denmark and its partners never conceded to negotiations over Greenland's sale, even though doing so might have seemed a pragmatic short-term de-escalation strategy. Instead, European leaders consistently grounded their stance in international law, emphasizing sovereignty and the inviolability of borders, rather than directly criticizing US actions. Importantly, this framing was shared across European actors, including Germany, France, and the EU. Such unity reduced Washington's ability to play partners against each other and underlined the credibility of Europe's position, projecting its confidence and integrity. This consistent, depersonalized, rules-based messaging represented a significant effort to re-establish reciprocity and eye-level relations and signaled to the US that Europe would not tolerate transgressions. With Greenland deepening ties to Europe, this approach has achieved some success, even if the risk of further escalation remains.

Policy Package 2: An American “Peace Deal” for Ukraine

What happened?

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a shock wave ran through Europe. While the attack spurred extensive defense reforms across the continent, Ukraine defied expectations by repelling the first wave of Russian assaults.^{xiv} Almost immediately, it became the world's top recipient of US aid, receiving \$175 billion between 2022 and 2024. In the war's early weeks, Moscow and Kyiv held several rounds of peace talks, which quickly collapsed.^{xv} Although the Biden administration maintained limited contacts with Moscow, Washington remained committed to Ukraine's independence in deciding its own fate — summed up in the oft-repeated phrase, “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.”^{xvi} Behind closed doors, however, both the US and Europe increasingly discussed the possibility of a negotiated settlement.^{xvii} No official negotiations took place between mid-2022 and late 2024.

In the lead up to the November 2024 presidential elections in the US, the Trump campaign pledged that he would secure a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia “within 24 hours” of taking office.^{xviii} A quick “peace deal” for Ukraine remained a foreign policy priority following Trump's inauguration and to that end, the Special Envoy to Ukraine and Russia outlined a “100-day plan,” for a peaceful settlement in Ukraine. In early 2025, Washington also opened parallel track discussions with Kyiv and Moscow. Relations between the US and Russia deepened through regular high-level contacts, including phone calls between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin and a meeting between US Foreign Minister Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Saudi Arabia — conversations that excluded Ukraine and Europe.^{xix} European leaders pushed back, insisting that any peace deal required Ukrainian and European participation, underscoring this in joint statements by foreign ministers and EU representatives.^{xx}

Talks with Ukraine proved more contentious. Secretary of Defense Hegseth categorically ruled out US support for Kyiv's key demands, including a return to pre-2014 borders and NATO membership.^{xxi} Infamously, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy left his first White House visit in February 2025 early, and without signing the deal granting the US increased access to Ukraine's rare earths in exchange for continued support.^{xxii} Soon after, the US suspended military aid to Ukraine and halted intelligence sharing.^{xxiii} In March, Ukraine accepted a US-brokered 30-day-ceasefire, but Russia rejected the proposal and demanded an end to foreign support and intelligence sharing as preconditions for negotiations.^{xxiv} In April, Washington framed a new proposal as its “final offer,” but with little effect.^{xxv} In June and July, Ukraine and Russia held their first direct talks since

2022, hosted in Turkey, but achieved only a prisoner exchange. No progress was made toward a negotiated end to the war.^{xxvi}

The US push for a peace deal regained momentum in August 2025, when the US hosted President Putin and a Russian delegation at a summit in Alaska. No decisions were announced, but President Trump declared afterward that it was now up to President Zelenskyy to reach a settlement with Moscow.^{xxvii} In the summit's aftermath, public statements increasingly placed blame for the conflict on Ukraine — a line Washington had already promoted earlier in the year.^{xxviii} During President Zelenskyy's follow-up visit to Washington in early August, he was accompanied by a high-level European delegation, including German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The visit produced one key outcome: Washington pledged to coordinate with Europe on security guarantees for Ukraine.^{xxix} In early September, however, the US announced it would only consider joining European sanctions against Russia if Europe first ended imports of Russian oil and gas and raised tariffs on Chinese goods.^{xxx}

Meanwhile, the war shows no signs of slowing. In September 2025, Russia launched the largest air attack of the war, striking a government building in Kyiv for the first time.^{xxxi}

Performative Peacemaking: The US Effort to Reassert Superiority

Striving to play a leading role in conflicts with major geopolitical implications — such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine — is not unusual for a great power like the US. This was evident in Washington's approach during the first two years of the war. With the change of government in early 2025, however, there was a marked shift: what was once the pursuit of leadership now more closely resembles the **performative and coercive superiority** characteristics of a narcissistic foreign policy.

It is unacceptable, according to the current US administration's rhetoric, for a country as powerful as the US to remain unable to “solve” an inconvenient war. The previous administration's costly support for Ukraine, which came without progress toward ending the conflict is portrayed by the current government as downright embarrassing. To overcome this embarrassment and deliver on the quick peace deal the administration promised, the US seems prepared to let Ukraine pay the high price — both in territory and human lives — that comes with Russian occupation.

The Trump administration also appears determined to prevent any global perception that Russia is successfully threatening its sphere of influence. By casting itself as a friend and equal to Russia, to whom Ukraine itself does not really matter, rather than a rival unable to protect a Ukraine it wants to welcome into NATO in the future, Washington may be able to demonstrate that it can be just as dangerous as Russia. This is particularly important, they reason, after previous administrations allowed the US to be perceived as “weak.” The extreme measures under consideration work towards that point.

The way status-seeking and the projection of dominance override other foreign policy goals is also evident in Washington's **exploitative and derogatory treatment of its allies** in this case. Securing the buy-in of European partners and Ukraine, even on a surface level or in public messaging, has not been a priority for the US. While the Trump administration was investing time and resources into courting Russia to get them to the table, Europe and Ukraine were simply expected to heed US command. The US efforts to force Ukraine into a contract granting them access to the country's rare earths, which likely have limited real economic value, can be read as a symbolic act to demonstrate Washington's control over Kyiv against the strong wishes of European powers. It also reveals the price the US has attached to securing its “neutral” stance on the Russia and Ukraine issue. The same might be said of the administration's demand that European allies raise tariffs on Chinese goods as a condition for US sanctions on Russia.

Washington did not shy away from exploiting its partners' vulnerabilities to apply pressure aimed at securing their submission. For example, the Trump administration swiftly suspended military aid and intelligence sharing crucial to Kyiv's defense when Ukraine refused to submit to US control. Europe's reliance on US security guarantees within NATO was frequently pointed out. The US went as far as to question Europe's role in the peace negotiations, given its inability to sustain Ukraine's fight without US backing anyway. Longstanding transatlantic ties seem to have carried little weight; Washington did not even see value in publicly presenting a united front.

The US push to end the war in Ukraine on its own terms illustrates how **vindictive retaliation** and the **externalization of problems** intersect in Washington's approach. In line with a narcissistic foreign policy pattern, the US has responded aggressively to Ukraine's refusal to comply with and accept its prioritization of a quick end to the war at any cost. At the same time, Russia's responses to American interventions suggest that it shares the current US administration's goal of being perceived as equals, and more broadly, that the two states are aligned in their devaluation of international principles such as the inviolability of borders. Current administrations in both the US and Russia are also seeking to (re)establish the global dominance of great powers over smaller states. This alignment is understandable: Washington's approach grants legitimacy to Russia's claims over Ukrainian territory and allows Moscow to demonstrate domestically that the era of isolation, and its associated burdens on Russian businesses and citizens, is ending.

In this dynamic, Ukraine consistently draws the short straw. It is punished whenever it resists its assigned vassal status, as when President Zelenskyy was expelled from the White House and the US withdrew its crucial support. More damagingly, Ukraine is blamed for the continuation of the war. For the administration's logic to hold, neither the US nor Russia can be at fault — so responsibility is shifted onto Ukraine, which, as one statement put it, should never have “take(n) on a nation that's 10 times (their) size.”⁴¹

Although not as central a driver as in other policy patterns, the **pursuit of attention** also shapes US actions on this issue — global visibility is essential for projecting power and asserting superiority. The administration, therefore, ensures it is always seen to be “doing something” to achieve a peace deal. The result is a sequence of theatrics — new acts every few months, without sustained commitment to previously declared goals or strategies. What began as a promise of a deal “within 24 hours” in late 2024 became a 100-day plan in February 2025, followed by a “final offer” in April, and culminated in an in-person summit with President Putin in August. Each step was framed to guarantee media attention and to compel responses from European states. This also plays into the narcissistic desire for command and control: the US administration is well aware of how vital the outcome of the Ukraine war is for European security and how easily manipulatable this makes Europe.

Finally, the US's moves in this policy area also display its tendency toward **high-risk and short-term decision-making**. While rebuilding ties with Moscow may serve US status goals, the administration's plan for a deal on Ukraine rests on the Kremlin's cooperation. Courting Russia may help settle a deal in the nearer future, but it also engages Washington in a volatile dynamic that could end in an escalation spiral with mutual vindictive retaliation. Moreover, a deal is not necessarily a *sustainable* deal. If the US prioritizes a quick fix over a real solution, it might have to face the Ukraine question again sooner rather than later — perhaps even within the current administration's term of office — and might sacrifice Ukrainian lives and European security in the meantime.

⁴¹ Lubin, Rhian. 2025. “Trump Blames Ukraine for ‘Taking on Nation That’s 10 Times Your Size’ despite Russia Being the One That Invaded.” *The Independent*. August 20, 2025. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-ukraine-russia-putin-zelensky-fox-and-friends-b2810752.html>.

Shouting from the Sidelines? Europe Works to Be Included on Ukraine

Ukraine itself is caught in an impossible dilemma when facing the US's narcissistic foreign policy patterns. Any attempt to appease Washington would only further enable US pushes for a deal at Ukraine's expense, while efforts to push back and assert independent confidence are quickly punished and lack credibility given Ukraine's dependence on external support. In practice, this leaves the initiative squarely with Europe: only by shaping the transatlantic dynamic can European partners shield Kyiv from being forced into concessions that would undermine its survival — and European security in the mid- and long-term.

Since late 2024, Europe has taken some important steps that signal confidence backed by capabilities to enable a more eye-level negotiation dynamic with Washington. Rather than framing Ukraine's and Europe's involvement in any negotiations to end the war as being "right" and something the US "should" do, European leaders have repeatedly emphasized that no viable settlement is possible without them. However, in this particular struggle with the US, negotiation skills and framing efforts can only go so far. Luckily, Europe has been moderately successful at demonstrating that its role doesn't rest on words alone; many European countries have made unprecedented investments in national defense and support for Ukraine. While Europe's capabilities are not yet sufficient to replace US contributions, which would allow it to take an even more credible stance vis-à-vis the current administration, this is nonetheless great progress.

At the same time, Europe has missed chances to channel US status-seeking into more constructive directions. The drawn-out public tensions between European capitals and Washington rewarded the latter's assertions of superiority with endless news cycles that fed the US's narcissistic hunger for attention. Instead, European governments could have made the case that driving Russia out of Ukraine would be the clearest demonstration of US global power, even if framed in terms that appeal to Washington's image rather than humanitarian goals or the safeguarding of international principles. Similarly, Europe could have advocated more strongly for how much more powerful Washington would appear if NATO presented a united front under US leadership, and pitched in towards that goal, e.g., by ending remaining imports of Russian oil and gas. This last example is also a case in point for European governments undermining their integrity and weakening their already difficult position — continued procurement of Russian energy by some European states provides easy openings not only for Washington to question Europe's seriousness, but Moscow, too. These contradictions dilute the impact of sanctions, weaken Europe's rhetorical authority, and provide ammunition for US narratives that depict Europe as unreliable or hypocritical. Such credibility gaps also undermine any counterstrategy to narcissistic foreign policy patterns that would need to be based on confidence and reciprocity.

Policy Package 3: The Tariff War

What happened?

Unlike the US push to acquire Greenland or secure a peace deal in Ukraine, its tariff wars have affected not just Europe, but the whole world. In fact, the US's trade disputes with Europe are often reduced to a sideshow compared to its conflicts with countries such as China, Mexico or India.

The US's use of tariffs as a trade policy tool first shifted significantly in 2018, when the Trump administration imposed a 25% tariff on steel and a 10% tariff on aluminum, including on imports from the EU. These measures were justified as a response to the US's persistent trade deficit — the largest in the world.^{xxxii}

The Congressional Research Service summarized the administration's approach as "using the US trade deficit as a barometer for evaluating the success or failure of the global trading system, US trade policy, and bilateral trade relations with various countries," which "harm(s) the performance and national security of the US economy." They also stressed that this interpretation "contrasts with the view of most economists."^{xxxiii}

Three months after the US's first steel and aluminum tariffs, the EU retaliated with tariffs targeting products emblematic of American culture, such as bourbon whiskey, Harley-Davidson motorcycles, and jeans — leading to losses of \$256 million in whiskey exports alone.^{xxxiv} By the 2020 election, however, the U.S. trade deficit had reached its highest level since before the 2008 financial crisis.^{xxxv} The Biden administration maintained most tariffs but negotiated a trade agreement with the EU in October 2021, just before a new wave of retaliatory tariffs was set to take effect in December.^{xxxvi}

With the trade deficit persisting, tariffs returned to the forefront under the second Trump administration in spring 2025. The President framed deficits, particularly with allies, as "loot(ing), pillag(ing), rap(ing) and plunde(ring)" while portraying tariffs as the path to ensuring that "jobs and factories will come roaring back" to the US.^{xxxvii} In March 2025, the administration re-imposed a 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminum imports from all countries, again, including EU members. In response, the EU reinstated its 2018 and 2020 retaliatory measures and announced that it would match all US tariffs starting in mid-April.^{xxxviii} Washington responded by threatening a 200 percent tariff on European alcohol.

In April, the US administration announced an even larger package: 10 percent universal tariffs, reciprocal tariffs — including 20 percent on all EU goods — and a 25 percent tariff on foreign-made cars, which would disproportionately affect Germany and the UK.^{xxxix} Soon after, a 90-day pause on reciprocal tariffs was declared to allow for negotiations, which US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent insisted had been part of the strategy "all along."^{xl} When talks with the EU stalled, the US threatened a 50 percent tariff on all European imports starting June 1.^{xli} Coordinated European efforts, culminated in a phone call between European Commission President von der Leyen and President Trump, during which a delay was secured. EU-US trade "must be based on mutual respect, not threats," the European Trade Commissioner stressed.^{xlii}

Ultimately, after further back-and-forth, the US and the EU agreed to a compromise: a 15 percent tariff across most EU goods, coupled with Europe increasing imports of US energy and reducing tariffs on certain American products. While this outcome was far less severe than what the US initially threatened, it still carries a heavy cost for Europe's economy. Responses from member states reflected deep frustration. German Chancellor Merz criticized the deal's "substantial damage," while French Prime Minister François Bayrou went further, lamenting Europe's "submission" to Washington.^{xliii}

Tariffs to Combat Trade Deficits: A US Grasp for Hierarchy and Control

Performative and coercive superiority is one of the defining features of maladaptive narcissistic patterns — and may be even more prominent in the case of the tariff wars than in the other two case studies. In the US administration's simplified and, many argue, misguided interpretation of trade deficits and surpluses, these figures become a quantifiable tool to assess a state's place in the international hierarchy. In its pursuit of demonstrating American superiority, any means appear justifiable — even when they come at the cost of damaging relations with key partners or may harm the US economy more than the exporting nations'.

Through **externalization, responsibility is shifted abroad**: other states' trade policies are blamed, in stark rhetoric, for preventing the US from realizing its potential as the world's leading industrial power. Official statements have even suggested intent, implying that allied nations deliberately conspire to push the US into deficit. While concerns about, for instance, Germany's trade surplus may have some merit (and even more so in the case of other trade

wars, e.g., with China), the US trade deficit is largely a function of its advanced service economy and thriving consumer market — both pillars of growth. Nevertheless, the US has imposed tariffs on Europe (as elsewhere) without clear necessity, and economists widely expect the costs to fall primarily on US consumers.

This approach reflects the **risk-prone, short-term focus** of current US trade policy. Both the tariffs themselves, and the extreme negotiating tactics used by the US in discussions around them — such as threatening a 200 percent tariff on European alcohol in March or announcing a 50 percent tariff on all European goods in May — risk impairing transatlantic trade in the medium term. Given the current volatility of trade with the US, European producers and buyers, particularly in major public procurement sectors like defense, are likely to seek more stable markets. Once new trade ties are established, significant incentives might be needed to shift business back toward the transatlantic space.

The administration's tendency toward **vindictive retaliation** has further exacerbated these risks. The US administration has labeled its trade deficits, including with Europe, as national security threats. It justifies these threats through hyperbolic language invoking interpersonal and even intimate violence. This framing has served as the rationale for extreme measures, sold as retaliation against supposed efforts to undermine US superiority. When allies such as the EU responded to US import levies with retaliatory tariffs rather than accepting their “punishment,” the administration launched wave after wave of further escalation.

The tariff war also exemplifies the administration's pursuit of **command and control**. Tariffs have been wielded not only as a trade instrument but as a mechanism to dictate the terms of engagement, positioning the US as the rule-maker to whom Europe needs to submit. This was evident in the US's repeated escalation against the EU's retaliatory tariffs. The extremity of the US's measures against Europe, and their economic impact, forced repeated rounds of negotiations with European ministers, heads of government, and the European Commission. This put tariffs at the center of both intra-European coordination and transatlantic relations. To ensure threats hit home and were also observed by other nations engaged in tariff negotiations with the US, theatrical public statements by US officials were used to capture **international attention**.

Finally, this policy package reveals, yet again, the US administration's **exploitative and derogatory approach to allies**. Tariffs themselves are not inherently narcissistic, but the way they have been justified and deployed by the US — as a quantifiable and manipulable measure of power and status — is. This contrast is clear when compared to the Biden administration, which maintained tariffs imposed by the first Trump administration but engaged the EU on equal footing to preserve trust and reciprocity. The current administration abandoned that approach, instead pushing Europe to submit to a US-defined tariff framework, attaching numerical values to the relationship, and openly risking a destabilizing trade war. Given the administration's track record of disregarding prior commitments, it remains uncertain whether the tariff question will re-emerge should cooperation in other policy areas fall short of US expectations.

Tit-for-Tat: Europe's Strategy on Tariffs

Europe's initial response to the renewed US tariffs demonstrated confidence and consistency. The EU quickly reinstated retaliatory measures, applying the same tariff packages whenever Washington imposed new duties on steel and aluminum. This signaled its readiness to match the US escalation step for step, established a clear boundary, and conveyed that the EU would not be intimidated into unilateral concessions. Equally important, Brussels framed its position in terms of mutual respect and reciprocity — insisting that transatlantic trade must be based on rules and parity rather than submission to threats. This depersonalized framing denied Washington the satisfaction of casting the conflict as a dominance contest and reinforced the image of Europe as a partner demanding fair treatment.

Yet Europe ultimately conceded more ground than might have been necessary. By settling for a 15 percent tariff across most EU goods while simultaneously agreeing to increase American energy imports, the EU paid a steep price for the privilege of avoiding even harsher measures. Given the looming threat of a 50 percent blanket tariff on all European exports and continued European dependencies in the security realm, this decision may have been unavoidable in the short term — but if Brussels judged the fight unwinnable, then it should have focused on maintaining discipline and unity among EU members. Instead, frustration spilled into the open, with leaders in major capitals publicly lamenting Europe’s “submission.” Such disunity undercut the EU’s credibility, amplified Washington’s positioning as a rule-setting power, and conveyed an image of a bloc unsure of its own strategy, perhaps inviting another round in the trade war. A more consistent messaging strategy — underscoring Europe’s economic weight and its capacity to impose sustained, targeted counter-measures — might have deterred some of Washington’s more extreme threats. Instead of counting on and consistently demonstrating Europe’s confidence and strength, Brussels might have given in too soon and sacrificed negotiation leverage not only in economic policy but security policy, too.

Discussion and Recommendations

What Does a Narcissistic Foreign Policy Analysis Add?

Traditional security or economic perspectives offer ways of parsing the interests at stake in even the most disruptive initiatives by the current US administration, and can provide deceptively plausible and rational ideas for the motives of US moves: one can point to the US's legitimate security interests in the Arctic, Washington's significant costs in supporting Ukraine at a time of strategic shift to the Indo Pacific, and the US's relative gains in the tariff war by slowing down competitors' economic growth.

What these perspectives cannot explain, however, is the erratic way policies are implemented, and how and when escalation spirals are triggered. From a conventional lens, for example, the EU's retaliatory tariffs in spring 2025 would be interpreted as an equal and legitimate power move that signals Europe's ability to act independently, not as a provocation warranting punishment by the US. Likewise, multilateral coordination, such as collective NATO support for Ukraine, would be understood as a form of US power projection. A conventional analysis would miss the fact that a narcissistic US foreign policy might be against it because it could weaken the state's demonstration of performative and coercive superiority. **A narcissism perspective is not a universal grand theory, but it adds crucial variables for explaining the complex transformation of transatlantic and international relations in recent years, and especially their acceleration in recent months.**

Drawing from psychology, this study identified seven criteria for narcissistic foreign policy patterns: (1) performative and coercive superiority, (2) pursuit of attention, (3) vindictive retaliation, (4) exploitative and derogatory treatment of allies, (5) externalization of problems, (6) command and control, and (7) high-risk, short-term decision-making. Case study analyses of the US's pursuit of controlling Greenland, a quick "peace deal" in Ukraine, and the tariff war with Europe showed how coherently the US administration's foreign policy moves align with these criteria.

Performative and coercive superiority (criterion 1) is the primary theme in all three case studies and clearly extends beyond "normal" great power positioning. In some instances, this strategy has been substantially effective — for example, in pressuring Ukraine to agree to a ceasefire by withholding crucial support. **In many cases, however, dominating demeanors have clearly been more about showcasing superiority than achieving substantive outcomes, even creating issues out of thin air** — as demonstrated in the first escalation of the Greenland acquisition attempt. Beyond the analyzed case studies, there are a great variety of symbolic moves illustrating the performative superiority approach, including the Executive Order to unilaterally rename the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America" and attacking media representatives, including the Associated Press, for refusing to comply.⁴²

Similarly, the extremity and publicity of many foreign policy moves in the three analyzed case studies illustrate how central international attention (criterion 2) is as a driver of US behavior — and how firm Washington's grip on the spotlight is. Important actions and decisions made by this administration are rarely communicated through official channels; instead, they are announced via press statements or social media to maximize exposure. Examples range from comparing trade deficits to being "raped" by allied nations and publicly humiliating President Zelenskyy on his first visit to the White House. Across all three case studies, the

⁴² Debusmann, Bernd Jr. 2025. "Judge Declines to Immediately Restore AP Access to Trump White House." *BBC*. February 24, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd650zdwe8do>.

administration ensured that bilateral and multilateral interactions revolved around its priorities — enforced through threats or public declarations, such as Trump’s announcement that the US would take Greenland “one way or another,” provoking a response from the intended addressee. **The topics of these outbursts appear unpredictable, and they are — but their purpose and framing in terms of attention and control remain consistent.**

Implicit in agenda-setting is the administration’s expectation for other states to accept its command and control (criterion 6) — and Washington’s tendency to resort to vindictive retaliation (criterion 3) when they don’t. **Moves that may appear disproportionate or erratic appear instead expectable when understood as a reaction to perceived status threats or deviations from demanded submission.** The 200 percent tariff threat following the EU’s

It’s not that Washington doesn’t want partners; but it only wants partners able and willing to serve the US’s purposes — nothing more, and nothing less.

retaliatory tariffs in spring 2025 or the immediate escalation of the Greenland issue after Denmark brushed off the first acquisition proposal in 2019, both exemplify how the US seeks to reassert dominance when partners resist its control.

In this context, the three case studies also reveal the current administration’s exploitative and derogatory approach to alliances (criterion 4). **It’s not that Washington doesn’t want partners, but it only wants partners able and willing to serve the US’s purposes**

— nothing more, and nothing less. When domination alone is insufficient, it turns to manipulation and division — particularly vis-à-vis Europe, where a unified EU is harder to control than individual states competing for US favor. During tariff negotiations, for example, Washington alternated between courting and threatening individual EU member states, undermining collective bargaining power. This view of alliances extends to using “inferior” partners as convenient scapegoats for externalizing problems (criterion 5) — blaming Ukraine for provoking the invasion the US is struggling to end, or Europe for US trade deficits, rather than also addressing the role of American trade policy in perpetuating the imbalance.

What Could a Future with a Narcissistic US Foreign Policy Look Like?

So far, the negative consequences of the US’s narcissistic foreign policy patterns have been costly but survivable for Europe — but this could change at any point. Prioritizing status over substantive objectives fosters high-risk, short-term decision-making (criterion 7), which, when coming from a country as powerful as the US, has implications for the rest of the world. The economic impacts of the tariff war may already affect growth in the US and Europe this year, with unclear costs over the next years. Should the US succeed in forcing Ukraine into an unsustainable ceasefire deal, it could grant Russia the opportunity to regroup and strike again, likely also against NATO’s eastern flank. A few times, we’ve come close to larger eruptions — for instance, in summer 2025, the White House’s deliberately vague statements about US intervention in Israel’s conflict with Iran raised fears of an all-out war in the Middle East with unclear escalation potential.⁴³

Beyond these immediate effects, **prolonged exposure to narcissistic foreign policy patterns reshapes the international system itself:** over time, it could hasten the erosion of the multilateral institutions and cooperative formats that defined the post-Cold War order, replacing structured geopolitics with unilateral spectacle. What an orderly turn to great-power competition might have eroded gradually, a narcissistic approach tears down rapidly and for attention — undermining global trade, international aid, and collective problem-solving, while increasing the risk of major power conflict.

⁴³ Ebrahim, Nadeen. 2025. “A US Strike on Iran Could Open a ‘Pandora’s Box’ in the Middle East, Experts Warn.” *CNN*. June 18, 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/18/middleeast/us-iran-pandoras-box-intl>.

Europe must prepare not only for US domination but also for a scenario in which the US implodes rather than explodes.

For European governments, recognizing the system-level implications and broader risks of narcissistic foreign policy is crucial. The narcissistic drive for superiority often correlates with an overestimation of one's own capabilities; moves others might dismiss as impossible remain plausible for a state unwilling to recognize its limits. Any crisis planning must account for the asymmetry in analysis on this point and should not discount any given scenarios based on an assumption that even a powerful state won't punch above its weight. The inherent tendency for reactive escalation in narcissistic foreign policy patterns means tipping points can occur at any moment, as triggers do not need to be deliberate or even new developments — consider years-long accrued trade deficits that causing a sudden tariff war. Consequently, conflict and escalations are much more likely across policy topics — which means even beyond states' interactions with the US, international relations may become more unstable. Moreover, while a narcissistic great power is dangerous to others, it is also vulnerable to self-damage through overstretch or backfiring high-risk decisions. Europe must therefore prepare not only for US domination but also for a scenario in which the US implodes rather than explodes.

How Can States Counter Narcissistic Foreign Policy Patterns?

Psychologists caution against submitting to the often-excessive demands of narcissistic actors. Concessions may smooth things over temporarily, but they set a trap: once the status pursuit behind a given move succeeds, the tactic is more likely to be repeated. With each round, expectations for providing attention, promoting superiority, proving loyalty only increase, locking others into an unwinnable dynamic. Instead, three counterstrategies can help break the cycle: (1) projecting integrity and confidence without provocation, (2) gaining independence and setting boundaries, and (3) working toward an eye-level partnership.

The mixed track record of European responses to US actions in the cases of Greenland, Ukraine, and the tariff war offer important lessons about the practical implications of following — or failing to follow — the principles of confronting a narcissistic foreign policy. Missing the status and recognition dimension, and misreading narcissistic patterns as material-interest conflicts, risks serious miscalculation. What often matters most is not the substantive issue, but the message conveyed about US power and superiority. For example, shocked European reactions to Washington's Greenland moves only fueled US attention-seeking. Moreover, confrontation without coordination among European partners can easily backfire, undermining Europe's credibility and amplifying Washington's agenda-setting advantage. Negative public reactions in European capitals to the EU's tariff deal with the US opened vulnerability for potential future exploitation, and the continued imports of Russian oil and gas by some member states gives ground to US doubts about Europe's seriousness when it comes to supporting Ukraine.

However, at times, European governments have successfully used the principles underpinning effective counterstrategies in their responses. For instance, coordinated efforts by European leaders in spring 2025, stressing sovereignty and the inviolability of borders to rebuff US claims to Greenland, projected **confidence** and unity while **setting clear boundaries**. Strengthening European defense capabilities is an essential step toward **gaining independence**, while repeated reminders that any Ukraine settlement requires European involvement, have reinforced the push for an **eye-level partnership**. The EU's consistency in implementing retaliatory tariffs demonstrated its refusal to accept excessive US demands, though it remains uncertain whether the eventual 15 percent tariff settlement may instead embolden Washington to view economic pressure as an effective tool against Europe.

The varying success of European responses shows that while governments have at times selected adequate countermeasures to the US's narcissistic foreign policy patterns, success is still coincidental and sporadic, rather than the result of a comprehensive strategy tailored to break through cycles of disruption and escalation. Taking together the insights from narcissism research, psychologists' principles for countering narcissistic behaviors, and the lessons drawn from the case study examples presented here, leads us to the recommendations for European states and the EU – as well as other governments around the world finding themselves in similar positions. These recommendations are meant to inform whole-of-government strategic adjustments: they should inform the actions of European high-level officials, such as ministers or heads of state, who are engaging with the political leaders of the current US administration, as well as providing guideposts for desk officers facing American counterparts who are under enormous pressure to realize a narcissistic foreign policy imposed from above.

We propose key elements of promising counterstrategies on two levels: hands-on, pragmatic measures that governments can use now to navigate imminent US narcissistic foreign policy patterns; and larger “design principles” for a counterstrategy that can enable Europe to sustainably move from a reactive to a proactive position in the mid- to long-term future.

Hands-on, pragmatic measures for short-term progress

1

Invest in the Optics of Confidence, Independence and Unity

Structural changes take time – but in the meantime, European governments can use levers already within their control to counter US volatility. Managing the optics of diplomatic engagement is certainly not a new concept, but it can be decisive when dealing with narcissistic foreign policy patterns. A good example was German Chancellor Merz's inaugural visit to Washington, when he presented President Trump with a framed copy of his German grandfather's birth certificate. The gesture worked because it projected confidence and established an eye-level relationship (“my country produced your ancestor; without us, you wouldn't be here”) without ever having to spell it out. When facing narcissistic foreign policy patterns, performance and perception take on even greater importance than in regular diplomacy, often becoming the only effective way to break through such behavior. As Europe continues to build real independence and unity, its governments should also ensure that every diplomatic move already visibly communicates these traits. To this end, the chiefs of staff and offices of high-level politicians, in particular, should consider creative alternatives to standard protocol when it comes to selecting meeting venues, jewelry such as pins or broches, or gifts. On the working level, efforts for synchronized talking points and coordination with European partners should be strengthened. Shared and confident language on specific issues across official documents, speeches and direct interactions with the US could go long way to signal strength and unity.

2

Leverage the Power of Saying (and Doing) Nothing

One of the more easily implemented measures European governments can adopt to limit attention-seeking and the effects of “flooding the system” with outrageous demands and statements is simply not to respond. Even before the establishment of coherent strategies and processes to filter the constant inflow of controversies, ministries should take measures to decrease the capacities dedicated to reactively analyzing US moves on the working level. Instead, reactive speaking points for official government representatives facing public scrutiny should focus on options

such as “we have not received any official communication from the US government on this matter, but are always open to dialogue.” When high-level officials meet, they should let their American counterparts do most of the talking and look friendly, focusing preparation and resources on issues relevant to Europe. Not responding to every provocation limits risks of triggering vindictive retaliation, fueling attention-seeking cycles, it buys time to decide on further action, and frees resources to dedicate to European interests rather than American agenda points.

3 Dare Boldness

Europe should not lose sight of its own interests. That means not only speaking to US priorities — not an easy feat after decades of following the US’s lead. However, appeasement won’t get us far in the current dynamic. The US may still exploit even minor deviations from commanded compliance and will likely not let go of asserting coercive superiority. While shifting the relationship to allow Europe to shape the transatlantic agenda will take time, experimenting with stepping out of the US shadow can start tomorrow. To cut through the noise of Washington’s narcissistic foreign policy patterns, European governments need to dare some boldness and choose individual moves to test out tactics that allow them to set their own agenda. For example, Europe can leverage its existing strengths to deepen ties with emerging powers, forming closer strategic industrial partnerships with India or Brazil.

Counterstrategies for mid- and long-term success

4 Prepare for Radical Volatility

The substance of US actions will remain unpredictable, but with a narcissism framework in mind, triggers and escalation paths become foreseeable. Decision-makers in all policy areas should apply strategic foresight, focusing less on *what* issues arise and more on *how* dynamics are likely to play out. Scenario-planning and early warning systems should focus on clear trigger points that should alert governments to greater caution, such as a public rejection of narcissistic status-seeking pursuit (e.g., if the Kremlin were to change course fundamentally and apply the kind of rhetoric it currently reserves for Ukraine and President Zelenskyy to the US and President Trump, the alarm bells should be ringing). Europe should prepare for outcomes previously dismissed as unlikely, recognizing that shock and disruption are central to narcissistic foreign policy — and that actors prioritizing status over all other motives may seriously overestimate their abilities and resources. Applying a narcissism lens can help discern between moves that are designed to create waves of outrage but have little tangible consequences for European realities (think much of the Greenland rhetoric or the social media video which portrayed a future Gaza strip as the “Middle East’s Riviera” including a pizza-eating Elon Musk⁴⁴) and those with real implications (such as withholding crucial military support from Ukraine). Resources should be focused on the latter. Structurally preparing for US volatility also requires lowering expectations for what the US can deliver for Europe.

⁴⁴ DER SPIEGEL. 2025. “Umstrittene»Riviera«-Pläne: Trump Postet Groteskes KI-Video Zur Zukunft Des Gazastreifens.” February 26, 2025. <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/donald-trump-us-praesident-postet-bizarres-ki-video-a-a41af3a6-518f-4845-80c7-dcbaf3a4b6e9>.

5 Do Not Submit to Excessive Demands

European governments and the EU should avoid one-sided concessions that reinforce Washington's status-driven tactics. Unless faced with an absolute and imminent threat to European security or prosperity, any concessions must be framed in terms of reciprocity — a classic “tit-for-tat” that is easy to communicate on the global public stage. Even in cases where European dependencies are dominant (such as the current security predicament), officials should remember that in a negotiation that might be more about status than about substantive issues, perception is everything. Entering conversations about conflicting policy goals from a position of self-declared inferiority only enables domination and exploitation patterns. And it is possible: retaliatory tariffs or the refusal to engage in a purchase deal for Greenland already illustrate how Europe can set clear boundaries and leverage its strengths. Europe may have more of those than we think. Consider the crucial role the Dutch high-precision chip manufacturing technology plays in the US semiconductor industry. Hard and costly bargains are preferable to falling into a cycle of concessions where US expectations continuously rise, leaving Europe repeatedly threatened with new penalties for failure to comply, while gaining little in return.

6 Craft a Foreign Policy of Cordial Neutrality

Europe should deny Washington exaggerated symbolic wins and avoid being pulled into cycles of manufactured outrage, including well-meaning but destructive stunts of “baiting the bully.” This means limiting official responses to US moves announced through press conferences or social media rather than formal channels, and refraining from amplifying scandalizing rhetoric. Calm, neutral, and consistent messaging is key — and should become a strategic paradigm for individual governments and the EU in dealing with narcissistic grabs for attention. Without resorting to provocation by dismissal or ignorance, Europe should position itself as a friendly partner, but ultimately unmoved by theatrical stunts or showcases of superiority. Even if the extremity of US measures are a rightful cause for alarm and caution, public responses should emphasize Europe's confidence in its ability to handle the challenge.

7 Strengthen European Coordination and Unity

In areas where Europe lacks sufficient military or economic power to deter domination tactics, coordination and unity are its strongest capital. A unified European front increases credibility and reduces opportunities for exploitation and manipulation by Washington. Consider, for example, how successfully Canada rebuffed the US administration's threat to its sovereignty in spring 2025. A country not particularly known for its patriotism rallied around the flag in a matter of weeks. The Canadian government's strong response to the US's enormous tariffs and threats of annexation were supported by citizens boycotting US products, protests with a slew of slogans such as “elbows up” and “Canada is not for sale,” and provincial leaders threatening cuts to cross-border electricity supply, which brought surprising power resources on Canada's side to the public's attention.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Reynolds, Christopher. 2025. “Hands Off: Across Canada, Protesters Rally against Trump.” *Global News*. April 6, 2025. <https://globalnews.ca/news/11118610/hands-off-across-canada-protesters-rally-against-trump/>; Thornton, DeLon. 2025. “How Canadian Boycotts Are Impacting the U.S.” *CNBC*. July 22, 2025. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/22/how-canadian-boycotts-are-impacting-the-us.html?msockid=028ea5e7f2bd6969033fb09cf37168c4>; Casiano, Louis. 2025. “Canadian Premier Threatens to Cut off Energy to US in Response to Trump Tariffs: ‘They Need to Feel the Pain.’” *Fox News*. March 4, 2025. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/canadian-premier-threatens-cut-off-energy-us-response-trump-tariffs-they-need-to-feel-the-pain?msockid=028ea5e7f2bd6969033fb09cf37168c4>.

The important part is not the precise extent to which these boycotts or energy cuts could have hurt the American economy: optics matter, and the performance of these countermeasures remade the passive victim into a plucky underdog who might actually be dangerous and worth some respect. Europe should strive for a similar effect, denying openings for division and manipulation by maintaining discipline in public messaging, avoiding contradictory national policies and ensuring that internal disagreements are resolved quietly. This requires close coordination between Brussels and European capitals as well as public messaging highlighting the importance of European unity in times of international volatility. As the most populous EU member state and the union's biggest financial contributor, Germany in particular should orient itself towards Brussels rather than Washington and further tighten relations with key European partners.

8 Continue Investing in European Independence

Building greater European autonomy — especially in defense, energy and trade — is the most difficult but also the most essential long-term strategy against the assertion of performative and coercive superiority and vindictive retaliation. Reducing dependency does not undermine the transatlantic partnership but strengthens Europe's position when US behavior becomes erratic or coercive. Additionally, independence provides a buffer against high-risk US decisions and shields Europe from being drawn into costly policy failures. It also prepares Europe for the possibility that even a change of administration may not return relations and larger global power dynamics to what they were before. A part of building independence could also be forming new alliances elsewhere, at least in individual policy areas, making close ties to Washington less relevant. To this end, European governments should invest in better relations and eye-level dialogue with the countries of the Global South.

This study presents a novel way of thinking about recent changes in transatlantic relations — and about how some states wield power in the international arena more broadly. Within the scope of this project, we could only offer a glimpse of the perspectives a narcissism lens can open. **We hope future research will expand on this pitch to rethink how power, status, and hierarchy can work differently to conventional international relations theories.**

A comprehensive analysis of the scope and intensity of narcissistic patterns across US foreign policy could offer insight on the overall level of consistency with this framework. The power dynamics examined here at state-to-state and system levels could also be applied to other types of actors, helping international organizations or private sector entities develop strategies for confronting narcissistic government behaviors when they lack the same levers available to states. Further exploration of the unfolding dynamic between the US and Russia or China could illuminate how these dynamics evolve when the counterpart is not perceived as inferior as European partners often are. Finally, the current US administration may not be the first or only government to employ a narcissistic foreign policy style. This framework could also be applied to other state actors that routinely defy traditional diplomatic playbooks, undermine international principles, or act in ways that seem erratic but are in fact patterned around status and domination.

This study outlines what to do when your ally turns narcissistic - but it is up to policymakers to use the tools at their disposal to anticipate volatility and disengage from escalation spirals. Waiting this storm out is not an option - we need to prepare for a world where narcissistic behaviors shape global power relations even beyond the current US administration.

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