

WORLD

EU awakens to reality of ‘America First’

While US tariffs pose threat to continent, experts see chance for greater autonomy

By ZHENG WANYIN in London
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Tariffs of 25 percent that US President Donald Trump has threatened to impose on the European Union may push the bloc toward greater strategic autonomy, even if uncertainties remain on how far things will go, experts say.

“If Trump imposes the threatened 25-percent tariffs or any tariffs on Europe, which he has so far only indicated but not implemented, it will send the Europeans further down the road that they are already taking, which is, increasingly, they are talking about their own autonomy,” said Radhika Desai, a professor in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Manitoba in Canada and a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

“But with Trump it’s hard to tell. One day he is imposing tariffs, and another day he is reversing or modifying them. Exactly how that unfolds will depend.”

The specter of 25-percent tariffs on all imports to the US from the EU came into play in late February when Trump told reporters in a cabinet meeting at the White House that “we’ll be announcing it very soon”.

Tariffs of 25 percent on all steel and aluminum imports into the US came into effect on March 12. In response, the European Commission has said it will retaliate in two steps, targeting US exports worth up to 26 billion euros (\$28 billion).

However, the first step, originally to take effect on April 1, has been delayed until mid-April, pending negotiations, the commission announced last week.

Desai described the EU counter-measures as “saber-rattling noises”, saying the Europeans “must be seen” to stand up to Trump to send a message to him and European voters generally.

‘Historically close’

“The question is how much (European countries) want to separate from the US. Because at the end of the day, the relations between the big capitalist classes of the US and Europe are fairly close, and they have historically been made so.

“The other question is how much they can assert their autonomy, particularly in the form in which they are saying they will do so, which is extremely belligerent, warlike. They said, ‘We are going to arm ourselves’ or ‘We are going to spend more on European security’ ... The fact of the matter is that there are all sorts of logistical problems with this.

“Overall, things are going to get a



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Martin Jacques, senior fellow at Tsinghua University and Fudan University

lot more confusing. It’s not that we’re going to see a very straightforward emergence of an autonomous Europe.”

Martin Jacques, a senior fellow at Tsinghua University in Beijing and Fudan University in Shanghai, said Europe is “in a quandary”, having realized only belatedly what a serious impact so-called America First policies could have on the continent.

“Europe was utterly and completely unprepared for this situation. There was really no excuse for this lack of preparation. We’ve had Trump 1.0. We’ve had all the stuff coming from him in the four years since he was out of office. Trump has made his position and attitude toward Europe clear, but Europe was still living in a dreamland, really.

“The dreamland was the relationship with the US was absolutely secure and would continue. So it has never had a plan B; it only had plan A, and that was the relationship with the US.”

Jacques said he has discerned a “grudging acceptance” among European leaders that the old days are largely over, which may lead to a more united EU.

“When you think all this has happened in a matter of days and weeks, people move at different speeds in the face of new realities. Some people do that very quickly, some people don’t want to believe it, but I think that we are now in a situation where (we can see where) things are going to go.

“Europe’s reactions to the shifts (will) probably have the effect of bringing Europe more together.”



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People gather by the rubble of a collapsed building at the site of a reported US airstrike on Yemen’s Houthi-held capital Sanaa on Monday. MOHAMMED HUWAIS / AFP

White House ‘leaks’ Yemen war plans

WASHINGTON — Top Trump administration officials mistakenly disclosed war plans in a messaging group that included a journalist shortly before the United States attacked Yemen’s Houthi, the White House said on Monday, following a firsthand account by The Atlantic.

Democratic lawmakers swiftly blasted the misstep, saying it was a breach of US national security and a violation of law that must be investigated by Congress.

The Atlantic’s editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg said in a report on Monday that he was unexpectedly invited on March 13 to an encrypted chat group on the Signal messaging app called the “Houthi PC small group”. In the group, US National Security Adviser Mike Waltz asked his deputy Alex Wong to set up a “tiger team” to coordinate US action against the Houthis.

National Security Council spokesman Brian Hughes said the chat group appeared to be authentic.

US President Donald Trump launched a campaign of large-scale military strikes against Yemen’s

Houthis on March 15 over the group’s attacks on Red Sea shipping. He has warned Iran that it needed to immediately halt support to the group.

Hours before those strikes started, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posted operational details about the plan in the messaging group, “including information about targets, weapons the US would be deploying, and attack sequencing”, Goldberg said. His report omitted the details but termed it a “shockingly reckless” use of Signal chat.

Accounts that appeared to represent Vice-President JD Vance, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles, and senior National Security Council officials were in the chat group, Goldberg wrote.

Trump told reporters that he was unaware of the incident. “I don’t know anything about it. I’m not a big fan of The Atlantic,” he said.

A White House official said later that an investigation was underway and Trump had been briefed on it. Hughes of the National Security

Council said in a statement: “At this time, the message thread that was reported appears to be authentic, and we are reviewing how an inadvertent number was added to the chain.”

Under US law, it can be a crime to mishandle, misuse or abuse classified information, though it is unclear whether those provisions might have been breached in this case. The Atlantic report said the messages were set up by Waltz to disappear from the Signal app after a period of time — raising questions about possible violations of federal recordkeeping laws.

Top intelligence officials will face Congress this week to offer their first testimony in office about the threats facing the US and tackle urgent questions about the security breach.

The US strikes on Houthis entered their 10th day without any sign of stopping. The airstrikes pounded sites across the country into early Tuesday, with the group saying one attack in the capital killed at least two people and wounded more than a dozen others.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Briefly

DR CONGO
Lab testing confirms malaria outbreak

Testing has confirmed that an initially unidentified illness that killed more than 50 people in northwest Democratic Republic of Congo was malaria, the country’s National Public Health Institute said on Monday. At least 943 people fell sick and 52 died in Equateur Province at the start of the year, with symptoms ranging from fever and fatigue to vomiting and weight loss. Health officials said in February that the condition was suspected to be either malaria or food poisoning.

AUSTRALIA
Budget unveiled as federal election looms

The Australian Labor government unveiled the federal budget on Tuesday ahead of the upcoming election. Delivering his budget speech to the parliament, Treasurer Jim Chalmers outlined five key priorities of the 2025-26 budget: easing cost-of-living pressures, strengthening Medicare, expanding housing, investing in education and boosting economic resilience. Australia’s economy is set to grow from 1.5 percent this year to 2.5 percent by 2026-27, driven by a rebound in private sector demand, he said.

FRANCE
Chewing gum releases microplastics: Study

Chewing gum releases hundreds of tiny plastic pieces straight into people’s mouths, researchers said on Tuesday. The study comes as researchers have increasingly been discovering small shards of plastic, called microplastics, throughout the world. They have also discovered microplastics rid-dled throughout human bodies, sparking fears of the potential effect this could be having on health. There is no evidence directly showing that microplas-tics are harmful to human health, said Sanjay Mohanty, the lead researcher behind the new study.

AGENCIES — XINHUA

Indonesian economy faces headwinds

By PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong
and LEONARDUS JEGHO in Jakarta

Recent losses in Indonesia’s stock and currency markets reflect uncertainties over the country’s economic prospects this year as concerns over local policies, US tariffs and falling commodity prices weigh on Southeast Asia’s biggest economy, analysts say.

The rupiah fell to a record 16,642 against the dollar during early trade on Tuesday, the weakest level for the Indonesian currency since the Asian financial crisis in 1998. It recovered in the afternoon thanks to intervention by the Bank Indonesia, the country’s central bank.

Earlier on March 18, a steep sell-off in equities forced the Jakarta Stock Exchange to temporarily halt

trading after the benchmark Jakarta Composite Index tumbled 7.1 percent — its biggest intraday slump since September 2011. The index recovered in the afternoon session, but it still closed more than 3 percent lower. The losses were extended in the following week, with the index closing 1.55 percent lower on Monday.

The government has set a 5.2 percent GDP target for this year. However, President Prabowo Subianto is aiming for an 8 percent growth during his first term that ends in 2029.

Indonesia is facing “a lot of headwinds”, said Alicia Garcia-Herrero, chief economist for Asia-Pacific at the French investment bank Natixis.

Apart from concerns over the management of the sovereign wealth fund Danantara and the huge household debt, the Indone-

sian economy is taking a hit from weak global commodity prices and United States President Donald Trump’s decision to slap punitive tariffs on major trading partners, Garcia-Herrero said.

Indonesia is one of the world’s biggest commodity exporters, and earnings from mineral and agricultural exports have long propped up its economy.

However, in the first two months of this year, Indonesia’s tax revenues fell by more than 30 percent to 187.8 trillion rupiah (\$11.3 billion). Anggito Abimanyu, Indonesia’s deputy finance minister, said earlier this month that a decline in coal, oil and nickel prices is one of the key reasons behind the lower revenues.

The “accumulation of the various negative sentiments, which are global and domestic, has contribut-

ed to the fall” of the main Jakarta stock market index, said Primus Dorimulu, chief communication officer of the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Rumors that the widely respected Indonesian Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati could resign from her post have also hurt market sentiment, he said. The rumors have been dispelled by the Presidential Communications Office.

Josua Pardede, chief economist of Permata Bank in Jakarta, said the market reaction to Danantara has been “relatively mixed, with ongoing concerns about its governance”.

“However, as the government has revealed the management and advisory team, I believe public caution may start to ease.”

Leonardus Jegho is a freelance journalist for China Daily.

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