

All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace?

How techno-libertarian ideas shape
US power and challenge Europe

Diederick van Wijk
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Clingendael Report



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About the authors

Diederick van Wijk is a Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael” in The Hague. His research focuses on relations between the European Union and the United States, and on the role of the private sector in international affairs and geopolitics.

Alexandre Ferreira Gomes is a Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael” in The Hague. His research focuses on the geopolitics of technology, covering (inter)national security issues and discussions on economic security, de-risking and what the changing global order means for the European Union and the Netherlands.

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Executive summary

A group of elites in the US technology sector have become key political allies of Donald Trump's second administration. This partnership, forged from mutual interests in deregulation and the dominance of frontier technologies, is reshaping global technology politics. Seeking to provide European policymakers with actionable steps to deal with the public hostility that has emerged as a result of this confluence of geopolitical and commercial interests, this report introduces a framework for disentangling the objectives, interests and motivations of the tech elites in Trump's orbit.

The focus is on a network of technology leaders, investors and entrepreneurs – referred to here as techno-libertarians – whose ideas and institutional access increasingly shape US technology policy. The worldview of these techno-libertarians is structured around five interlinked elements that together make for the GOALS framework of this report:

- **Growth**, the primary driver of human progress, pursued regardless of social or environmental cost.
- **Optimisation**, based on the belief that social and political problems can be solved through engineering and data.
- **Automation**, especially through artificial intelligence (AI), is the main instrument to realise growth and optimisation at scale.
- **Liberty**, understood as freedom from regulation and democratic constraint.
- **Salvation**, the promise that sustained technological acceleration will deliver abundance, expanded human capacities and even the transcendence of biological limits.

While elements of this vision have long circulated in Silicon Valley, it has moved into the policy mainstream under Trump's second administration. Tech executives such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Sam Altman now wield direct influence within government and related agencies. Notwithstanding differences among them, together they promote agendas of tech deregulation, AI acceleration and data-driven governance in the United States and seek to advocate this agenda globally.

This fusion of techno-libertarian ideas with nationalist politics has produced open hostility towards European digital regulation and its human-centric approach. On full display in Vice President JD Vance's 2025 Paris AI Summit speech, this

confrontational stance is codified in the 2025 US National Security Strategy, which portrays EU regulation as a form of “regulatory suffocation”.¹

For the EU, the implications are significant. European institutions face growing pressure to dilute safeguards such as the AI Act in the name of competitiveness. While concerns about Europe’s innovation gap are also raised in the Letta and Draghi reports, the risk is that regulatory reform becomes aligned with US Big Tech interests rather than Europe’s own political and social priorities.²

Early signs of the success of this pressure are visible in initiatives such as the Digital Omnibus Regulation, proposed in November 2025.³ If this trajectory continues, the EU risks regulatory erosion, weakened democratic oversight over digital infrastructures, and deeper structural dependence on US-controlled technologies.

Building on the GOALS framework, this report identifies three strategic priorities for European policymakers:

- **Anchor technological development in democratic governance** by enforcing existing safeguards and strengthening oversight in sensitive public domains.
- **Build European strategic capacity in key technology areas where dependence is most acute and treat those as geopolitical assets rather than neutral market goods**, using industrial policy, public investment and coordinated procurement.
- **Develop a European techno-political narrative** that links innovation to public purpose, accountability and limits, and that can be projected through standard-setting and external engagement.

Together, these priorities inform a range of policy options that can help ensure that Europe continues to benefit from frontier technologies without importing the governance assumptions and dependency risks embedded in the techno-libertarian model. The central challenge is not whether Europe innovates, but on whose terms and to what political ends.

1 The White House, [National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#), November 2025.

2 European Commission, [The Future of European Competitiveness](#), September 2024; and European Commission, [Much More than a Market](#), April 2024.

3 European Commission, [Digital Omnibus Package](#), November 2025.

1 The tech-Trump alignment

During the inauguration of Donald Trump's second presidency in January 2025, American tech-sector royalty was put prominently on display. The tech CEOs in attendance sealed a marriage of convenience. They had fallen in line with the incoming president, hoping that President Trump would eliminate the guardrails that limited their ambitions.

Big Tech's most powerful were hopeful for a new phase in American tech policy, following curtailments by the Biden administration of a sector towards which American public opinion was increasingly negative.⁴ In recent years, the Federal Trade Commission had opened antitrust and consumer protection cases against Amazon, Twitter, OpenAI and others.⁵ Marc Andreessen, an influential investor and internet pioneer, complained of "the raw application of the power of the administrative state".⁶

It did not take long for the tech sector's influence on the Trump administration to become visible, with new contracts for high-tech defence companies, relaxation of export controls, extensive deregulation efforts and a more explicitly pro-Big Tech diplomatic agenda.⁷

This alignment did not emerge overnight. In 2016, prominent tech investor Peter Thiel broke a Silicon Valley taboo by endorsing Donald Trump and later joined Trump's transition team. Then an advisor to Trump, Steve Bannon, later remarked: "[Thiel] brought Silicon Valley into Trump's orbit".⁸ After Bannon was fired by President Trump, Thiel lost his powerful connection to the White House and so focused on what he did best as a tech power-broker: gathering power and influence behind the scenes.

4 Pew Research Center, [64% of Americans Say Social Media have a Mostly Negative Effect on the Way Things are Going in the US Today](#), 15 October 2020.

5 WBUR, [Biden's FTC took on Big Tech, Big Pharma and More: What Antitrust Legacy will Biden Leave Behind?](#), 2 October 2024.

6 Ross Douthat, ["Matter of Opinion: How Democrats Drove Silicon Valley into Trump's Arms"](#), *New York Times*, 17 January 2025.

7 White House, [Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan](#), July 2025.

8 Max Chafkin, *The Contrarian*, Penguin Publishing, 2021.

Thiel had fostered a network of likeminded people and protégés he mentored (such as Mark Zuckerberg and Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI) and he was now looking at who could translate Silicon Valley's libertarian ethos into political power. One of his most noteworthy contacts was JD Vance, a former venture capitalist whose career he had helped launch and later financed with over USD 10 million in donations to Vance's 2022 Senate race.⁹

One of the most influential voices in Trump's administration is David Sacks,¹⁰ who (like Thiel and Musk) belongs to the group of former PayPal founders and executives who became political power-brokers.¹¹ Sacks organised high-profile fundraisers, particularly among the crypto community.¹² Together, Thiel, Sacks and others forged a pipeline of cash, ideas and personnel that aligned Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement with Silicon Valley's libertarian wing.¹³

While Thiel's influence grew, the company he co-founded in 2023 – Palantir – became a stock market sensation.¹⁴ The data-intelligence firm built a vast influence network by hiring extensively from government and placing its own alumni in key posts.¹⁵ By early 2025, Palantir had won more than USD 3 billion in US government contracts and hundreds of millions more in the UK, with analysts describing its “revolving door” in Washington and Westminster.¹⁶ Through its platforms, Palantir translates vast volumes of data into operational decision-making power across defence, policing, border security and public administration.

9 Raphaëlle Bacqué, Damien Leloup and Alexandre Piquard, [“Peter Thiel, the Libertarian Billionaire Waging War on Government”](#), *Le Monde*, 22 July 2025.

10 Bloomberg, [“Trump Names David Sacks as White House AI and Crypto Czar”](#), 6 December 2024.

11 Jacob Silverman, [“The Quiet Political Rise of David Sacks, Silicon Valley's Prophet of Urban Doom”](#), *The New Republic*, 18 October 2022.

12 Charles Duhigg, [“Silicon Valley, the New Lobbying Monster”](#), *The New Yorker*, 7 October 2024.

13 Such as Michael Kratsios, who was Thiel's right-hand person at Thiel Capital and has held several senior government positions since 2021; Ken Howery, another PayPal alumnus, who currently serves as the US ambassador to Denmark; and Gregory Barbaccia, who worked for Palantir for ten years and now serves as Federal Chief Information Officer at the Office of Management and Budget.

14 An insightful visualization of these efforts is [The Authoritarian Stack](#), a project funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Future of Work and led by Francesca Bria and José Bautista.

15 Tabby Kinder and Cynthia O'Murchu, [“Palantir's 'Revolving Door' with Government Spurs Huge Growth”](#), *Financial Times*, 8 February 2025.

16 Former political advisor to Palantir's CEO Alex Karp, Jacob Helberg was, for instance, [appointed](#) as Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment.

Larry Ellison, the founder and chairman of Oracle, also maintains good relations with the president. Less publicly visible than figures such as Musk or Thiel, Ellison operates through the infrastructure necessary for the digital economy: cloud services, databases and large-scale data centres. In January 2025, he appeared alongside Trump in the White House for the launch of the Stargate project – a flagship AI infrastructure programme led by Oracle and OpenAI, aimed at building the next generation of hyperscale data centres for advanced AI. Oracle is also deeply embedded in sensitive US data flows, most notably through its role as the hosting partner for TikTok’s American user data.

The privileged access of the tech sector to the Trump administration, combined with massive investment pledges in the US economy, helped persuade Trump to respond to Silicon Valley’s policy demands. This dynamic was undoubtedly reinforced by growing investor and public confidence in AI as a transformative technology. In July 2025, Silicon Valley’s agenda became visible in America’s AI Action Plan.¹⁷ The plan is underpinned by three executive orders: rolling back regulatory safeguards on AI development; fast-tracking permits for data centres; and promoting the global export of “American AI”.¹⁸ In effect, the administration positioned the entire American AI ecosystem as a pillar of national power. As Trump put it, “winning the AI race will demand a new spirit of patriotism and national loyalty in Silicon Valley”.¹⁹

The executive orders were followed up by several US federal departments. During his “Arsenal of Freedom” tour, **Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that his Department of War explicitly positioned the US technology sector as a core partner in the national security architecture, integrating commercial AI models, startups and private capital directly into military innovation and capability development.**²⁰ This marks a shift away from the traditional closed defence-industrial model towards a system of deep public-private integration, in which Silicon Valley functions as a strategic pillar of American military power.

The export of American AI goes beyond the use of American Large Language Models (LLM) like ChatGPT abroad. Trump’s executive order wants a national

17 White House, [Winning the Race: America’s AI Action Plan](#), July 2025.

18 [“Winning the AI Race, Part 5: President Trump on the AI Action Plan”](#), *All-In* podcast, 24 July 2025.

19 *Ibid.*

20 US Department of War, [Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at SpaceX](#), January 2026.

effort in “promoting the export of full-stack American AI technology packages”.²¹ While there are many elements to the AI stack, the most notable in recent US efforts to export have been data centres. In September 2025, the UK-US Tech Prosperity Deal led to a memorandum of understanding between the countries on deepening tech cooperation, with a USD 30 billion investment in data centres in Britain.²²

One of the central figures in the global export of the American AI stack is Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang. After initially struggling to gain access to the Trump administration, Huang cultivated a close relationship by pledging USD 500 billion in US manufacturing investment.²³ This was followed by a series of lucrative international deals. Huang joined Trump on his trip to the Middle East in May 2025, where Nvidia reportedly secured orders worth over USD 200 billion under the US-UAE AI Acceleration Partnership.²⁴

Following Washington’s mediation of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan in August 2025, senior US officials engaged both countries on AI cooperation, soon followed by a USD 500 million public-private partnership between Nvidia and the Armenian government to build the first AI supercomputing data centre in the Caucasus.²⁵ In late 2025, Kazakhstan signed onto the Abraham Accords and simultaneously announced a USD 2 billion deal to develop AI data centres using Nvidia chips.²⁶

Huang’s influence became even more apparent when Trump reversed US export restrictions on advanced AI chips to China. Nvidia was allowed to sell its second-most powerful H200 chips to approved Chinese customers, in exchange for a 25 per cent cut of the proceeds going to the US government.²⁷ This ended

21 White House, [Promoting the Export of the American AI Technology Stack](#), July 2025.

22 Gov.UK, [Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the USA and the Government of the UK regarding the Technology Prosperity Deal](#), September 2025; and Tom Bristow, [US Tech Firms Pour £30B into UK as Trump Lands](#), September 2025.

23 Tripp Mickle and Ana Swanson, [“How Trump and Nvidia’s CEO Became Partners on the International Stage”](#), *New York Times*, 19 November 2025.

24 Ana Swanson, [“US Unveils Sweeping AI Project in Abu Dhabi”](#), *New York Times*, 15 May 2025.

25 Elizabeth MacBride, [“Armenia Gets a Data Center with Nvidia Chips”](#), *Forbes*, 30 November 2025.

26 Mickle and Swanson, [“How Trump and Nvidia’s CEO Became Partners on the International Stage”](#).

27 Dara Kerr and Helen Davidson, [“Trump Clears Way for Nvidia to Sell Powerful AI Chips to China”](#), *The Guardian*, 9 December 2025.

a ban imposed on national security grounds and marked a break with the Biden administration's strategy of denying China access to advanced AI compute.

It is not uncommon for powerful industries to exert outsized influence on public policymaking in the United States. **What distinguishes the current alignment between Big Tech leaders and the Trump administration, however, is that the tech sector no longer merely influences the state from outside through lobbying. Big Tech is increasingly embedded within the state itself.** As a result, a relatively small group of tech figures are able to project their vision of the future far beyond the borders of the United States and largely outside the scope of democratic oversight.

This report offers a framework to understand better what drives the tech executives who have entered Trump's political orbit and what this could mean for Europe's democratic governance and strategic autonomy. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of ideology in the US technology sector, nor does it assume that all technology entrepreneurs share the same beliefs. Instead, it focuses on a distinct network of technology leaders, investors and entrepreneurs whose ideas, capital and institutional access increasingly shape US technology policy and global digital governance.

The analysis builds on the observation that technological power is no longer limited to market dominance or external lobbying. In what has been described as the "Authoritarian Stack", parts of the US tech sector are increasingly embedded within government itself, shaping operational capacity, policy priorities and governing logics, with spillover effects for European markets, labour relations and institutions.²⁸

28 This report describes a layered system of digital infrastructure, capital, cloud computing, data extraction, artificial intelligence and platform governance controlled by a small number of corporations and investors. This stack concentrates economic, informational and political power in the hands of a limited group of actors, enabling them to shape markets, security architectures and public institutions across borders. See [The Authoritarian Stack](#), a project funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Future of Work and led by Francesca Bria and José Bautista.

Marietje Schaaque has shown how a laissez-faire approach enabled a small number of firms to accumulate structural power over public infrastructure and information flows.²⁹ Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson similarly argue that technological development reflects political and economic choices and must be governed democratically to serve public goals.³⁰

Methodologically, the report combines discourse analysis of public speeches and writings by leading technology entrepreneurs and investors; elite network analysis tracing links connecting technology leaders, venture capital, defence firms and political actors; and analysis of US tech policy, drawing on primary sources, policy documents and international media reporting.

To structure the analysis, the report introduces the GOALS framework as a tool to capture five recurring objectives: Growth, Optimisation, Automation, Liberty and Salvation. The actors discussed – referred to as “techno-libertarians” – differ in motivation and background, but their interests increasingly converge around scale, speed and deregulation.

The report aims to provide entry points for European policymakers to understand this fusion of technological ambition and political authority, and to identify options to protect democratic oversight and strategic autonomy. It explains the GOALS framework (Chapter 2), analyses the implications for Europe (Chapter 3) and concludes with policy recommendations (Chapter 4).

29 For a comprehensive account of the laissez-faire approach to US tech regulation and its consequences, see Marietje Schaaque, [The Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley](#), Princeton University Press, 2024.

30 Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, [Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity](#), Princeton University Press, 2023.

2 The GOALS of the techno-libertarian

Chapter 1 showed that a small group of technology leaders has become embedded in US state power and global digital governance. This chapter shifts from institutional alignment to the ideas that help justify and sustain it. Figure 1 (below) presents an overview of how Silicon Valley shaped the current US tech sector. Building on this, this section introduces the GOALS framework to analyse a recurring pattern of assumptions articulated by a specific network of technology leaders, investors and entrepreneurs whose influence over technology policy has grown markedly in recent years.

Figure 1 The techno-libertarian is a product of the complex history of Silicon Valley



Source: authors' compilation." (see below Figure 2)

Across different companies and personalities, a shared logic can be observed. Growth is treated as the primary driver of human progress. **Social and political problems are reframed as technical systems that can be improved through better models, more data and greater computational capacity. Optimisation and automation are presented as the natural next steps once processes become measurable and predictable. Regulation, public debate and institutional constraint are therefore cast less as sources of legitimacy than as frictions that slow innovation and should be minimised.**

These assumptions do not constitute a single, coherent ideology uniformly shared across the technology sector. Nor do they imply that all technology entrepreneurs hold the same political views. Instead, they form a recurring justificatory logic through which technological ambition, commercial expansion and geopolitical power are presented as parts of one coherent project rather than as separate domains. Within this logic, technological acceleration is framed not only as economically necessary, but also as socially desirable and politically inevitable.

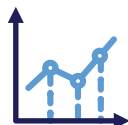
This report refers to the actors who most clearly articulate and institutionalise this logic as “techno-libertarians”. They differ in background and motivation, but their interests increasingly converge around scale, speed and deregulation. **Core figures include Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Larry Ellison, Marc Andreessen, David Sacks and Mark Zuckerberg, surrounded by a wider ecosystem of executives, investors and engineers who adopt similar assumptions about technological progress, even when they diverge in political orientation or degree of influence.**

Figure 2 GOALS framework summarising the worldviews of some of the most influential Big Tech Libertarians



Source: authors' compilation.

To structure our analysis of this worldview, the report introduces the GOALS framework (see Figure 2) as an analytical tool capturing five recurring objectives: **Growth, Optimisation, Automation, Liberty** and **Salvation**. The framework does not describe what these actors explicitly claim to believe in every instance, but how technological development is repeatedly justified in terms that link innovation, power and political authority into a single narrative.



Growth (at whatever cost)

Growth and technological advancements are core drivers in Silicon Valley. Growth is seen not just as desirable but as inevitable, almost a law of nature. With virtually unlimited venture capital, oceans of data and a culture of boundless innovation, expansion is the metric by which everything is judged.³¹ Marc Andreessen captures this logic in his Techno-Optimist Manifesto:

[...] everything good is downstream of growth. [...] not growing is stagnation [...] and ultimately death. [...] the only perpetual source of growth is technology.³²

Andreessen's statement reflects a worldview widely shared across the Bay Area, where slowing down equates to decline. The social costs of this pursuit are often waived away as temporary. **A Stanford survey of 600 tech entrepreneurs showed that 80 per cent considered “wide income disparities acceptable if this means faster growth”, and 74 per cent wanted to weaken labour unions. Inequality is thus not denied but rationalised: if growth delivers abundance, then the fair distribution of it can wait.**³³

The early mantra of Facebook describes Silicon Valley's DNA: “move fast and break things”. To Mark Zuckerberg and his peers, disruption was not a side effect but the way that innovation and progress could be delivered. When challenged in 2020 about Facebook's role in Myanmar's genocide and in electoral disinformation, Zuckerberg conceded that “some of the bad stuff is very bad”, but insisted that “the positive over the long term can still dramatically outweigh

31 Jovan Cicmil, [The Rise of Profitable Startups: Is Growth-at-All-Costs Finally Dead?](#), 12 May 2025.

32 Marc Andreessen, [The Techno-Optimist Manifesto](#), 2023.

33 David E. Broockman, Gregory Ferenstein and Neil Malhotra, [Wealthy Elites' Policy Preferences and Economic Inequality: The Case of Technology Entrepreneurs](#), Working Paper, Stanford University, 2017.

the negative”.³⁴ The logic is utilitarian: short-term harm is tolerated if long-term benefits are expected to outweigh the costs.

Within tech circles there are diverging views of how fast progress should unfold.³⁵ Nonetheless, this utilitarian mentality is reflected in an increasingly louder call for “hyperscaling”, best described as a race to expand computational capacity as rapidly as possible, even when the social or environmental consequences remain uncertain. At a moment when experts debate whether there is an “AI bubble”,³⁶ figures like Zuckerberg and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos openly describe it as a necessary catalyst for progress.³⁷



Optimisation (coding a better future)

To tech-libertarians, any challenge, whether social, political or moral, can be solved through technology, code and data. Tech critic Evgeny Morozov describes this as solutionism: the belief that complex problems can be fixed as if they were software bugs. **From inequality to climate change, the sector treats issues of governance and social organisation as engineering puzzles awaiting optimisation.** Elon Musk, for instance, has framed poverty as “an engineering problem”.³⁸

This outlook has given rise to what scholars call **dataism – the belief that with sufficient information and computation, human bias and uncertainty can be overcome. In this worldview, decision-making becomes a technical exercise, and efficiency replaces deliberation as the main standard of progress.**

34 Steven Levy, “[Inside Mark Zuckerberg’s Lost Notebook](#)”, *Wired*, 12 February 2020.

35 Within the tech community, debates about the pace of innovation often reference the Effective Altruism movement, which advocates directing resources towards the greatest measurable good. A subgroup, Longtermism, stresses that today’s choices may shape the fate of future generations; see William MacAskill, [What We Owe the Future](#), Basic Books, 2022. Others, known as Accelerationists, see restraint as dangerous; Marc Andreessen, for instance, has called slowing down AI “murder”.

36 Brian Merchant, “[AI is the Bubble to Burst Them All](#)”, *Wired*, 27 October 2025. See also: “[Sam Altman Says ‘Yes’, AI is in a Bubble](#)”, *The Verge*, 15 August 2025.

37 Lee Chong Ming, “[Mark Zuckerberg Says He’d Rather Risk ‘Misspending a Couple of Hundred Billion’ than be Late to Superintelligence](#)”, *Business Insider*, 19 September 2025; and Victor Tangermann, “[Jeff Bezos Says AI Bubble is Good because it will Eliminate the Weak](#)”, *Futurism*, 8 October 2025.

38 Elon Musk on [X.com](#), 19 November 2025.

Palantir Technologies, co-founded among others by Peter Thiel and Alex Karp (its long-time CEO), exemplifies this logic in the realm of national security. Originally developed to bring Silicon Valley's data-driven methods to intelligence analysis, Palantir presents its software as indispensable for liberal democracies to "see patterns where others see noise". Karp often contrasts the speed and coherence of algorithmic decision-support with the slowness and fragmentation of democratic politics. This is important, as Palantir has deep connections to the current Trump administration as well as with European and other foreign governments and agencies, including the Dutch police.³⁹

The principle of dataism extends far beyond defence and intelligence. Whether in logistics, healthcare or urban planning, digital products and services increasingly promise to optimise entire systems by collecting, integrating and analysing vast quantities of data.

As this logic expands, optimisation ceases to be merely a business model and becomes a governing ideology wherein measurement, predictability and efficiency are privileged over pluralism, democratic deliberation and institutional checks and balances. When public governance increasingly relies on privately owned digital infrastructures and optimisation logics, control over core public processes shifts from democratic institutions to corporate actors, obscuring responsibility and weakening public oversight.⁴⁰ In the words of Joe Gebbia, co-founder of Airbnb and appointed by Trump to improve the websites of government services: "What you're seeing is taking the best of Silicon Valley and the business world and bringing it into the government [...] the government can have an Apple store-like experience".⁴¹



Automation (as a critical instrument)

Automation is the decisive instrument by which growth and optimisation are to be realised. More than any other technology, AI (the ultimate automation technology) concentrates Silicon Valley's hopes and anxieties. It is expected to

39 ["Nederlandse politie gebruikt omstreden software van dataverwerker Palantir"](#) (in Dutch), *NU.nl*, 22 August 2025.

40 Quirine van Eeden et al., [Achter de macht van big tech: Verklarende factoren voor digitale macht](#) (in Dutch), 2025.

41 Natalie Alms, ["Musk and DOGE Make the Case for their Efficiency, Tech Work"](#), *Nextgov/FCW*, 28 March 2025.

create vast new wealth, solve scientific bottlenecks and accelerate humanity's trajectory.

The AI that executives and lead engineers from Meta, Google and OpenAI speak about is not the chatbots with which most people have become familiar. The popular belief in Silicon Valley is that, with the current pace of development, we will soon reach Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). Its exact definition and timeline are heavily debated, but it is essentially a model that is vastly more intelligent than humans.

The discourse about AGI carries near-religious significance for the techno-libertarians. Singularity, popularised by Google's Director of Engineering Ray Kurzweil, is revered as the moment when machines surpass human intelligence and begin designing ever-smarter successors in an unstoppable chain reaction of progress. In this view, AI has a very utopian character: the key to eradicating scarcity, curing disease and expanding human consciousness – perhaps even throughout the entire universe.

Beyond the rhetoric, this faith in automation is shaping institutions. Billions in capital flow into AI ventures; governments and militaries reorient procurement towards automation; and universities reframe curricula around machine learning and AI-adjacent technologies. What once was speculative science (fiction) is now shaping the global economy.



Liberty (and the escape from politics)

Regulation is equated to obstruction. At the turn of the century, Bill Gates (founder of Microsoft) warned that overregulation would “cripple” the software industry. Steve Jobs (founder of Apple) dismissed government oversight as “bullshit”.⁴² Elon Musk is also clear: “If the rules are such that you can’t make progress, then you have to fight the rules”.⁴³ For Peter Thiel, the problem goes deeper: politics is “evil and distasteful and bad”, constrains technology and should be bypassed altogether. His search to escape the regulatory pressure of the state spans the internet, outer space, sovereign cities and “network states”. Thiel wants to carve out spaces where entrepreneurs and engineers are left alone – a vision rooted in the concept of negative liberty, the belief that freedom

42 John Heilemann, “[Fear and Trembling in Silicon Valley](#)”, *Wired*, Special Report, 1 March 2000.

43 Ashlee Vance, [Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future](#), Ecco, 2017, p. 187.

means being left free from external interference.⁴⁴ Somewhat ironically, Thiel turned to politics to work it from the inside out, as described below.

In 2023, a group of billionaires – including Reid Hoffman, Marc Andreessen and Laurene Powell Jobs – unveiled plans for a solar-powered, walkable city on 50,000 acres of farmland near San Francisco.⁴⁵ Elon Musk went further in Texas, where the SpaceX settlement at Boca Chica was formally recognised as “Starbase”, effectively turning a company town into a municipality.⁴⁶

Former Coinbase executive Balaji Srinivasan describes digital-first nations, built on blockchains, smart contracts and shared ideology, which first organise online, accumulate capital and legitimacy, and ultimately negotiate for political recognition.⁴⁷ For Balaji and his followers, the internet is the perfect frontier: jurisdictions can be coded rather than legislated; currencies minted outside central banks; and collective identity secured by cryptography.⁴⁸ Thiel has described PayPal as a tool to “overturn the whole monetary system”.⁴⁹

In the end, liberty becomes the most explicit political manifestation of the techno-libertarian mindset: the conviction that science and technology are the true sources of power and progress and the need to bend the state to that vision. For Peter Thiel and his fellow travellers, exiting a society in which technology is constrained by what they view as the tyranny of big government is

44 [“Peter Thiel at Libertopia 2010”](#), Thiel Talks podcast, Spotify, 5 June 2021.

45 Kevin Truong and Jonah Owen Lamb, [“Bay Area Tech Billionaires behind Mystery Land Grab Revealed”](#), *The San Francisco Standard*, 25 August 2023; and Conor Dougherty and Erin Griffith, [“The Silicon Valley Elite who Want to Build a City from Scratch”](#), *New York Times*, 25 August 2023.

46 Boca Chica has similarities to Los Alamos, the company town that made the Manhattan Project possible – although with the major difference that the role of state has been completely reversed. See Bacqué, Leloup and Piquard, [“Peter Thiel, the Libertarian Billionaire Waging War on Government”](#).

47 See Balaji Srinivasan, [The Network State: How to Start a New Country](#), self-published on Kindle, 2022.

48 Experiments range from charter cities like Próspera in Honduras to “crypto nations” such as Praxis, backed by investors linked to Sam Altman and Peter Thiel. Praxis, according to the founder Dryden Brown, must become a nation of like-minded people that share the same ideals about beauty and sovereignty. The sovereign cities will be dedicated “acceleration zones” where technologists can innovate freely without being limited by the state. Brown travelled to Greenland in 2024, declaring he wanted to “buy it” as the site of a new crypto enclave powered by drones, nuclear energy and private capital.

49 [“Peter Thiel at Libertopia 2010”](#).

no longer the most attractive option. Instead, their focus has shifted to reforming the state from within: funding political candidates; shaping executive orders; embedding firms like Palantir deep inside the bureaucracy; and aggressively pushing for deregulation.

Where European policymakers speak of digital sovereignty as the capacity to preserve democratic control over technology, tech-libertarians invoke a far more negative conception of freedom: sovereignty from democratic oversight itself; and freedom for innovation from regulation, and for entrepreneurs from the state. Thiel described it as follows: “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible”.⁵⁰



Salvation (all watched over by machines of loving grace)

Beneath all the other elements runs a powerful current of techno-libertarian discourse: the belief that technology will ultimately deliver humanity from scarcity, disease and even mortality.⁵¹ **These tech leaders frame themselves as entrepreneurs who do not just seek profit or market dominance; many portray (and are intrinsically convinced that) their work as delivering salvation for the human species. Two clear expressions of this are their quests for immortality and for interplanetary life.**

Ageing and dying are deeply unpopular in Silicon Valley circles. Thiel has argued that death can one day be “reduced from a mystery to a solvable problem”,⁵² like fixing the bugs of a computer program, and he has invested millions in longevity research. Companies like Altos Labs, Retro Biosciences and Google subsidiary Calico have all attracted major funding from Jeff Bezos, Sam Altman and Thiel.⁵³

50 Peter Thiel, “[The Education of a Libertarian](#)”, essay, Cato Institute, 13 April 2009.

51 For an exhaustive theoretic overview on different strands of utopianism, see Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres, [The TESCREAL Bundle: Eugenics and the Promise of Utopia through Artificial General Intelligence](#), 2024.

52 Ian Sample, “[If They Could Turn Back Time: How Tech Billionaires are Trying to Reverse the Ageing Process](#)”, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2022.

53 Tracy Swartz, “[Behind the Billionaire-backed Longevity Business – and the Innovations that could Help Us Live Longer](#)”, *New York Post*, 7 January 2025.

These efforts fit within the broader current of transhumanism:⁵⁴ the belief that humanity can radically enhance itself through science and technology to become a “posthuman” species with longer lifespans – and even immortality – and superior intelligence.

At the collective level, salvation also means ensuring the survival and flourishing of humanity, especially in the face of planetary limitations or existential threats. Elon Musk hopes people will adhere to what he calls a “philosophy of curiosity”. Humanity, Musk argues, must expand its scope of consciousness, aided by AI, to solve vital scientific conundrums and unlock new horizons.⁵⁵ SpaceX, alongside Musk’s other ventures such as Neuralink, is designed to serve this purpose.

Jeff Bezos is also utopian in his contemplation of a future in orbit. Drawing on physicist Gerard O’Neill, Bezos imagines vast orbital habitats where trillions of people could live in comfort while heavy industry is shifted “off world”.⁵⁶ Where Musk invokes catastrophe to drive urgency, Bezos invokes stagnation: civilisation will slip into “stasis” unless humanity expands into space.⁵⁷

Each of these efforts springs from the belief that no challenge is too great if we harness human ingenuity and cutting-edge technology. In the techno-libertarian vision, science and technology are the saviours that will overcome scarcity and even death itself.

54 That is, the belief that humanity can radically enhance itself through science and technology to become a “posthuman” species with longer lifespans, superior intelligence and even immortality. Thinkers such as Nick Bostrom helped institutionalise transhumanism academically and connected it to debates on superintelligence, while Eliezer Yudkowsky later became central to framing AI and Singularity as humanity’s greatest aim. For the tech elites, achieving vastly longer lifespans, or even immortality, is part of delivering humanity’s utopia: salvation from our oldest enemy, death.

55 [“Elon Musk on DOGE, Optimus, Starlink Smartphones, Evolving with AI, Why the West is Imploding”](#), All-In Summit on YouTube, 10 September 2025.

56 [“Blue Origin 2019: For the Benefit of Earth”](#), Blue Origin on YouTube, 10 May 2019.

57 Adam Becker, [More Everything Forever: AI Overlords, Space Empires, and Silicon Valley’s Crusade to Control the Fate of Humanity](#), Basic Books, 2025, p. 31.

3 Techno-libertarians versus the European Union

With the consolidation of techno-libertarian influence in the Trump administration, attention has increasingly shifted to Europe. **EU digital regulation has become a focal point of criticism from both Silicon Valley leaders and the MAGA movement, which portray it as a barrier to innovation and a form of economic coercion.**⁵⁸ During his first trip to Europe as vice-president, JD Vance gave a speech at the February 2025 AI Summit in Paris. Vance expressed the lamentations of the US tech sector and made deregulation a central point. Vance later explained what he had wanted to convey during the AI summit: “America is done with the overregulating. [...] We’re going to embrace the future and try to make sure America dominates in the future”.⁵⁹

Enmity towards the EU’s tech laws fits into a broader trend of confrontational posture from the Trump administration towards EU policy. The November 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States makes this view explicit. In its chapter on the EU, the strategy explicates: “We want Europe to remain European, to regain its civilizational self-confidence, and to abandon its failed focus on regulatory suffocation”. This convergence of ideological and commercial pressure places European technology governance directly within the increasingly tense Transatlantic relationship.⁶⁰

For techno-libertarians, European rules on data protection, competition and AI governance do not merely constrain business models; they challenge

58 Liam Klein, [The Sources of American Conduct: How MAGA Ideology Could Turn the USA into the EU’s Implacable Adversary](#), Clingendael Report, May 2025; and [“OpenAI May Leave the EU if Regulations Bite – CEO”](#), Reuters, 24 May 2023.

59 [“Winning the AI Race, Part 2: Vice President JD Vance”](#), All-In podcast, 23 July 2025.

60 This confrontational posture was further underlined by the imposition of US visa sanctions on former Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton and several civil society figures involved in enforcing EU digital regulation, widely interpreted as retaliation against the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act. See Le Monde, [US sanctions on Thierry Breton signal a new warning for Europeans](#), editorial, 27 December 2025.

the broader worldview captured by the GOALS framework.⁶¹ As a result, EU regulation is increasingly framed not as an expression of democratic choice, but as an obstacle to be overcome through diplomatic pressure, trade leverage or regulatory reform. These dynamics translate into a set of specific risks for the European Union.

First, techno-libertarian power combines ideological influence with structural reach. **Through control over digital infrastructures, data and platforms, these actors shape public debate, economic organisation and state capacity beyond their formal jurisdiction.** Their view of technological progress as universal and inevitable risks displacing democratic contestation over its purposes and limits, potentially undermining European commitments to pluralism, inclusion and accountability. As innovation transforms society, it may increasingly serve narrow private agendas rather than the public good, in the absence of countervailing forces such as competitive markets and democratic oversight.

The impact is both direct, affecting European social and economic structures, and indirect, through US policy spillovers. If, for instance, the belief that climate change is a problem that can be solved with AI is inserted into active corporate and US policy, this could form a direct challenge to the EU's (democratic) efforts to decarbonise the economy.⁶² A similar dynamic emerged with the sudden reversal of US export controls on advanced chips to China. This uncertainty over US economic security policy vis-à-vis China complicates efforts by European governments and firms to develop aligned industrial and geopolitical strategies.

Second, Europe confronts a persistent asymmetry of scale and influence. No EU member state matches the financial or technological capacity of leading US platforms. The techno-libertarian imperative of continuous growth and optimisation intensifies demand for data, compute and capital, reinforcing this imbalance. While the EU remains an attractive market, individual member states may be drawn into bilateral investment arrangements to host hyperscale data centres or into large-scale financing commitments by semi-public institutions.

61 [“Joe Rogan Experience #2255 – Mark Zuckerberg”](#), The Joe Rogan Experience on YouTube, 6 January 2025; and Ross Douthat, [“How Democrats Drove Silicon Valley into Trump’s Arms”](#), *New York Times*, 17 January 2025.

62 Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt captured this sentiment when he remarked, “[w]e’re not going to hit the climate goals anyway because we’re not organised to do it. I’d rather bet on AI solving the problem than constraining it”.

The combination of collective action problems and short-term economic incentives increases structural dependency risks and enables divide-and-rule strategies by US technology firms.

Finally, the embedding of techno-libertarian actors within US state power turns technological dependence into potential political leverage. **As digital infrastructures become integral to defence, public administration and security functions, switching costs rise and regulatory autonomy narrows.** Dependence thus becomes both political and technical. On the one hand, diplomatic pressure can be exerted through US trade and security policy. On the other hand, vendor lock-in for cloud services, data storage and AI-enabled decision-making systems makes disengagement increasingly costly and sensitive.⁶³ This creates sustained pressure on European institutions to dilute existing regulatory safeguards in the name of competitiveness and technological leadership, potentially aligning reform agendas more closely with US commercial interests than with Europe's own political and social priorities. These risks highlight why regulatory enforcement, strategic capacity-building and narrative framing must be treated as interconnected policy challenges rather than as separate domains.

63 Rem Korteweg and Diederick van Wijk, [Coercive Extractionism – The Tenets of Trump's Transactionalism](#) (forthcoming report).

4 Conclusion: three policy options for Europe

The risks identified in the previous chapter point to three interconnected policy priorities for the European Union: safeguarding democratic control over technology; reducing structural dependencies in critical infrastructures; and articulating an alternative techno-political narrative. These priorities should be treated as mutually reinforcing rather than as separate domains of action.

Anchor technological development in democratic governance

The EU should not reject technological innovation but instead ensure that its development and deployment remain subject to democratic oversight and legal accountability. This is particularly urgent in sensitive public domains such as defence, border management, policing and health services, where digital systems increasingly shape operational decisions.

Existing regulatory frameworks such as the AI Act, the Digital Services Act and public procurement rules already provide instruments for this purpose. Their impact depends, however, on consistent enforcement and political backing. Rather than viewing these frameworks solely as market regulations, the European Commission should treat them strategically as mechanisms for preserving public authority over algorithmic systems, data use and automated decision-making.

European policymakers should be cautious about substituting political judgment with technical optimisation. Impact assessments, human-in-the-loop requirements and auditability obligations should be mandatory for algorithmic systems used by public authorities, especially in areas involving surveillance, risk profiling and decision support. Without such safeguards, the boundary between public authority and private infrastructure risks becoming blurred, weakening democratic accountability.

This governance task also has an external dimension. As US firms seek to export full-stack AI systems and embed them in European administrations and security architectures, Europe risks importing not only technologies but also

the governance assumptions associated with the techno-libertarian model. A coordinated European approach to public-sector AI procurement, shared evaluation standards and collective positions on security-related uses of AI can help prevent bilateral arrangements that bypass common safeguards and reinforce regulatory dilution.

Build European strategic capacity and treat critical infrastructure as geopolitics

Techno-libertarian power is exercised not only through platforms and narratives, but mostly through control over the technological stack: compute capacity, cloud services, data infrastructures and security-relevant applications. These assets increasingly function as geopolitical levers, shaping who sets the standards, who captures value and who can exert pressure in moments of crisis.

Europe's vulnerability lies less in its capacity to innovate than in its fragmented ability to translate innovation into strategically autonomous systems. **Hyperscale data centres, cloud services and advanced chips are deeply embedded in European economies and public administrations, while governance over these systems remains largely external. This exposes European states to foreign export controls, licensing regimes and diplomatic bargaining over access to critical technologies.**

With regulatory frameworks in place to protect fundamental rights, the EU should complement them with targeted efforts to strengthen strategic technological capacity in areas where dependence is most acute. This does not imply replicating Silicon Valley's growth model but selectively reinforcing European capabilities in domains that underpin economic security and political sovereignty. Industrial policy, public investment and coordinated demand should be combined rather than left to market competition alone.

In AI, this means supporting European model development and deployment ecosystems that are not structurally dependent on US hyperscalers. European research consortia and firms already demonstrate technological potential, but their long-term viability depends on access to compute, capital and public-sector demand. Shared European compute facilities, coordinated procurement and sustained public investment can help prevent European capacity from being absorbed into external infrastructures.

In cloud and data infrastructure, strategic capacity requires ensuring that critical public and industrial data can be stored and processed within European-controlled environments. Cloud services should be treated not as neutral utilities, but as strategic assets shaping data flows, security architectures and service continuity. Public procurement, competition policy and industrial strategy can be used to foster providers capable of serving public administrations and critical sectors under European legal authority.

Space and defence-related systems form another layer of the strategic stack. Satellite communications, navigation and earth observation increasingly rely on AI-enabled processing and digital networks. Strengthening European capacity in these fields would reduce exposure to external providers in areas directly linked to security, crisis response and military operations. Civilian, industrial and defence policies therefore require closer coordination at both EU and member state levels.

Strategic autonomy does not imply technological decoupling, but the capacity to prevent critical infrastructures from becoming instruments of external leverage in an international order where technology increasingly functions as a source of power.

Develop a European techno-political narrative

Techno-libertarian influence operates not only through technology and capital, but also through ideas about technology's purpose. The GOALS framework shows how technological expansion is framed as morally necessary and politically inevitable, casting democratic debate as a source of delay rather than legitimacy. If Europe responds only through regulation, it risks leaving this ideological terrain uncontested.

At the same time, public debate on digital technology and large US tech companies has increasingly focused on their societal impact. Across advanced economies, concerns have grown about the effects of digital platforms on

children's wellbeing, public discourse and democratic processes.⁶⁴ The European Union is not alone in responding to these concerns. Countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Brazil and India have adopted regulatory measures aimed at curbing harmful platform practices and strengthening user protections.⁶⁵ This points to a broader political mandate for public intervention in the digital domain.

A European response should therefore extend beyond rules and enforcement to include a positive techno-political narrative that links innovation to public purpose, democratic accountability and political choice. Rather than defining success primarily in terms of scale and speed, such a narrative would emphasise the social objectives of technological development, including resilience, inclusion, institutional trust and strategic autonomy.

This narrative has practical implications. It can guide priority-setting in research funding, shape public procurement strategies and influence how emerging technologies are presented to citizens. It can also be projected externally through international standard-setting, development cooperation and diplomatic engagement on digital governance and AI. Crucially, it provides a basis for structured cooperation with like-minded middle powers outside the EU, enabling joint agenda-setting and coordination in international forums.

A coherent European techno-political narrative can thus function as an element of strategic autonomy. By articulating an alternative model of technological progress grounded in democratic limits and public purpose, Europe can counter the techno-libertarian worldview, not only through regulation and investment, but by advancing a competing vision of how technology should serve society.

64 Mathieu Pollet, "[Europeans Agree EU should Enforce Rules on Big Tech, Says Poll](#)", *Politico*, 3 July 2025; "[Years of Polling Show Overwhelming Voter Support for a Crackdown on AI](#)", *Public Citizen*, 21 November 2025; Monica Anderson and William Bishop, "[Republicans, Democrats Now Equally Concerned about AI in Daily Life, But Views on Regulation Differ](#)", Pew Research, 6 November 2025; and Brooke Auxier, "[64% of Americans Say Social Media Have a Mostly Negative Effect on the Way Things are Going in the US Today](#)", Pew Research, 15 October 2020.

65 Australian Government, [Online Safety Amendment Act 2024](#); UK Government, [Online Safety Act 2023](#); Government of Brazil, [Marco Civil da Internet](#) (Law No. 12.965/2014); and Government of India, [Information Technology Rules](#), 25 February 2021.