

“Trump and Europe – An Inauspicious Start”

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European public opinion has a problem with U.S. Republican Presidents. Ronald Reagan was deeply mistrusted in his early years in power;¹ George W. Bush was regarded as a disaster and liability well before the crisis-scarred end of his term.² Barack Obama, meanwhile, continued to enjoy excellent approval ratings on this side of the Atlantic.³ As such it is tempting to dismiss a great deal of the European anguish and anxiety at Donald Trump’s election victory as no more than a confirmation that European opinion – and particularly perhaps the opinion of that part of the European public which is informed about and interested in U.S. politics – is significantly to the left of U.S. opinion and hence bound to regard rather negatively the election and early policy decisions of the 45th President. That Trump’s lifestyle, both before his election and since, also plays into deeply rooted European stereotypes about crass and vulgar American materialism only makes unfavourable European reactions even more predictable.

There are, however, a number of rather more serious factors underpinning European concerns. When that other Donald, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, included “worrying declarations by the new American administration” in a list of serious global challenges which he outlined to the EU’s leaders as they assembled for a summit in Malta earlier this year, he was not, in other words, simply expressing partisan

¹ Kiran Klaus Patel and Kenneth Weisbrode, eds., *European Integration and the Atlantic Community in the 1980s* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23.

² Frédéric Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis: France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991-2003*, trans. Susan Emanuel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

³ Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter and Hani Zainulbhai, “As Obama Years Draw to Close, President and U.S. Seen Favorably in Europe and Asia,” Pew Research Center, 29 June 2016, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/06/29/as-obama-years-draw-to-close-president-and-u-s-seen-favorably-in-europe-and-asia/>.

dismay at the Republicans' victory.⁴ He was instead reflecting a series of very real European misgivings about both Trump's campaign promises and his early actions once in power.

The most fundamental of these—and the most easily comprehensible—was anxiety about what Trump's election might mean for the Transatlantic alliance and for the American security guarantee under which Europe has thrived since 1949. Trump's campaign rhetoric about NATO's 'obsolescence,' combined with his perceived closeness to Russian President Vladimir Putin were of great concern to all European countries, especially when Russia seemed to pose a greater territorial threat to Europe than at any time since the end of the Cold War.⁵ How would Trump's America react were Russian troops to threaten one of the Baltic States?⁶ And how realistic would it be to maintain the European Union's (EU) sanctions towards Moscow were the new U.S. leader to seek a 'reset' of U.S.-Russian relations? And if the U.S. did move closer to Putin's Russia, would this not suggest an American willingness to acquiesce in the legitimacy of forcible territorial conquest within Europe for the first time since 1945?

European countries have long been hyper-sensitive about any indication that the U.S. was losing interest in their security concerns, or was less willing or able to respond to threats to European peace. During the Cold War such an acute sense of vulnerability had led to crises surrounding the launch of Sputnik and the development of Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs)—would a U.S. President be willing to endanger New York or Los Angeles in order to deter an invasion of West Berlin or Hamburg?—or to the highly charged debate about the so-called 'grey area' threat constituted by the new generation of intermediate range missiles deployed by the Soviets in the 1970s.⁷ Since the end of the Cold War it has also underpinned the periodic anxieties amongst European Atlanticists about the United States' pivot towards the Pacific. But no previous U.S. president had actually questioned the utility of the Atlantic Alliance in quite the way that Trump was doing. Nor had any U.S. president come to office seemingly intent on building a closer and more friendly relationship with Moscow than with any European capital.

Many European observers have, admittedly, drawn some comfort from the way in which Trump and his entourage have backtracked on both Transatlantic relations and ties with Moscow. NATO's Lazarus-like recovery from 'obsolescence' has been a relief, as has the way in which Washington-Moscow relations have chilled rather than thawed. But an underlying suspicion remains that the new President neither understands nor cares for Europe, and has a transactional approach to international relations that sits uncomfortably with a transatlantic-alliance relationship supposedly build on shared values and civilization. The widely circulated story about the 'bill' for U.S. military support for Germany that Trump supposedly handed German

⁴ "Tusk implores EU to stand firm in face of attacks," *Financial Times*, 1 February 2017.

⁵ "Trump brands NATO 'obsolete' ahead of tough Wisconsin primary," *Financial Times*, 4 April 2016.

⁶ "Trump's Baltic shift sends shivers through region's capitals," *Financial Times*, 1 August 2016.

⁷ Leopoldo Nuti et al., *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015).

Chancellor Angela Merkel during her visit to Washington in March perfectly symbolized this gulf in approach, despite the subsequent denials by both parties that the incident ever happened.⁸

Such suspicion is reinforced by the second great European concern about Trump, namely the new President's attitude towards European integration and the EU. U.S. support for European integration has been a vital outside buttress to the European Community (EC)/EU ever since the start of the integration process in 1950. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson was one of only two foreign interlocutors informed about the French Schuman Plan prior to its launch in May 1950; Jean Monnet, the man generally regarded as the progenitor of supranational integration, was so close to much of the U.S. elite that his Gaullist critics in France dubbed him 'l'Américain'. Both the European institutions themselves and most European governments attached huge importance to the support for integration, both rhetorical and practical, provided by U.S. administrations from Harry S. Truman through to Obama.⁹ Conversely, every momentary lapse or dip in U.S. rhetorical backing for European unity has led to howls of anguish in Europe: National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger's anger at early attempts to coordinate European foreign policy during the 1970s was bitterly resented, as were George W. Bush's apparent divide-and-rule tactics in the run up to the 2003 Second Gulf War.¹⁰

The prospect of a U.S. President who welcomed 'Brexit', posed for photos in Trump Tower with Nigel Farage, the former leader of the UK Independence Party, and used his first major interview with European newspapers to denounce the EU as "a vehicle for Germany," was hence nightmarish for European countries whose foreign policies since the early 1950s have been built upon the twin pillars of Atlantic alignment and European integration.¹¹ For so long as the U.S. has strongly supported the latter, Germany and other European countries have been able to have their cake and eat it, staying close to the Western superpower but also building ever-closer links to their neighbours. With Trump in the White House, however, an agonising choice between the two priorities might have to be made. And this at a time when the UK's imminent departure from the EU and the lingering effects of both the migration crisis and the single currency's woes mean that European self-confidence was already severely dented. Little wonder, then, that Tusk, Merkel and multiple other European leaders were so discomforted by Trump's verbal hand-grenades – and admitted as much publicly albeit in the semi-coded language of Tusk's letter cited above.

⁸ For the original story, Rebecca Flood, "Donald Trump printed out fake £300 bn Nato invoice and handed it to Angela Merkel," *The Independent*, 26 March 2017; for the denials, Arjun Kharpal, Javier E. David, White House denies report that Trump handed Merkel a bill for NATO services, *CNBC*, 26 March 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/26/donald-trump-angela-merkel-germany-nato-bill.html>.

⁹ Geir Lundestad, *"Empire" by Integration: The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ For the former, Daniel Möckli, *European Foreign Policy during the Cold War: Heath, Brandt, Pompidou and the Dream of Political Unity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 140–183; for the latter, Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 366–373.

¹¹ "Full transcript of interview with Donald Trump," *The Times* (16 January 2017), <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/full-transcript-of-interview-with-donald-trump-5d39sr09d>

Also profoundly disturbing to most on the European side of the Atlantic is the incoming President's apparent disdain for multilateralism more generally. For the EU is not just the epitome of multilateral relations in its internal operation; it is also an international actor whose whole approach to a globalizing world is rooted in the creation of multilateral rules and regimes. This is true in the field of trade, but also that of climate change, human rights, the fight against drugs, development etc. Europe, to put it differently, has been both one of the greatest beneficiaries of, but also advocates for, the system of embedded liberalism created by the United States after World War II. To see such embedded liberalism denounced by the very power that created it was hence profoundly unwelcome and alarming. Europe's collective memory of a previous occasion when it had been left the prime defender of multilateralism in the face of a temporary US desertion, namely the run up to the Copenhagen Climate summit of 2009, was not a happy one and few European leaders were keen to see a return to such a pattern, this time potentially over a range of policy areas extending far beyond the fight against global warming.¹²

A fourth contributory factor to European alarm at Trump's election is the way in which his unexpected triumph was widely read as part of a broader lurch into populism and political instability that was also apparent in the outcome of the UK's referendum on EU membership.¹³ Neither Brexit nor Trump's victory had been foreseen by most commentators or by opinion polls; each was highly unwelcome in and of itself to the European political elite. But both would be infinitely worse were they harbingers of a more general turn against internationalism and the liberal order that might also emerge in national elections in Austria, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Italy. If these contests too went the way of Trump and the Brexiteers, then the structures of the post-1945 international order really would be teetering. Five months into 2017 admittedly, such anxieties are beginning to ebb. Neither the Austrian nor the Dutch elections were won by the populists, and the *Alternativ für Deutschland* has faded badly in the most recent German opinion polls. Even more importantly, Emmanuel Macron's decisive victory over Marine Le Pen in the French presidential election has offered further evidence of Europe's resistance to the populist wave. But even after such encouraging signs, a degree of anxiety about the underlying discontents that underpinned the Brexit vote and Trump's victory has not dissipated entirely.¹⁴

Finally and perhaps most profoundly, most European leaders and much of the European public are profoundly uncomfortable with Trump's sheer unpredictability. Alliances, after all, are built on trust, especially alliances between democracies where the easy and constant exchange of information between governments has been the life-blood of co-existence, and where there has normally been a profound sense that even while tactics might vary from one country to another, or between one government and the next, the deeper aims and goals of the partners were fundamentally similar. Such easy assumptions currently look rather hollow. Indeed even the administration's volte-face on NATO mentioned above, while welcome in and of itself, suggests a degree of unpredictability, of unreliability, that undermines remaining notions of U.S. leadership. European governments will, and must, continue to do business with the U.S., and will doubtless strike deals and compromises on trade, on burden sharing and much else. But the damage to the underlying

¹² "Why did Copenhagen fail to deliver a climate deal?", *BBC News Online*, 22 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8426835.stm>

¹³ See for instance "Dutch vote in test of far-right populism in Europe," *Financial Times*, 15 March 2017.

¹⁴ 'Macron's win earns Europe a reprieve from the forces of populism', *Financial Times*, 9 May 2017.

trust within the Atlantic Alliance is already profound and will be hard to undo—even if Trump now decides that it is an alliance that has a purpose and a significance after all.

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