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Will the EU-US relationship ever be the same again?

On yearning for life without Donald Trump

On 9 November 2016, the unthinkable happened: Donald Trump was elected 45th President of the United States of America. Since then the US has not only lived up to the worst anti-American clichés touted by the extremes of Left and Right – it has surpassed them. A year of 'America First' has put a serious strain on ties between the US and its European allies. But is the relationship really in crisis?

Let's start with the positives. The US president may have offended numerous heads of state and government, but he hasn't (yet) provoked a war. At home, Trump has only managed to push two major projects through Congress: a long-anticipated tax overhaul and the appointment of the conservative Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court.

Otherwise, it seems America's famed system of 'checks and balances' is still functioning pretty well – especially when compared with the creeping authoritarianism we see in some EU member states such as Hungary and Poland. It's no Russia or China either.

Following Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, a number of US states created a 'Climate Alliance' committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Several American cities are offering refuge and support to immigrants from Latin America facing deportation. US courts have blocked plans preventing transsexuals from joining the military, and knocked down three attempts to ban Muslims from certain countries from entering the US. (The Supreme Court has since reinstated the ban.)

Trump's efforts to do away with ex-president Barack Obama's healthcare reforms have failed. Plans to build a wall along the Mexican border have also come to nothing. Encouragingly, the US Department of Justice appointed Robert Mueller to oversee an FBI investigation into the president's Russian connections and those of his entourage. So despite countless presidential tweets attacking the system, the separation of powers is still working.

Please turn out the lights...

Hopes, however, that Trump would leave the day-to-day business of government to a team of 'sensible' technocrats have proved unfounded. The Department of State has seen its staff leave in droves. It is likely only a matter of time before Secretary of State Rex Tillerson – one of the last remaining 'rational' government officials – is replaced by a US military officer.

Trump has backed out of negotiations on the US-EU trade agreement TTIP; he pulled out of the Paris climate accord; he has slashed the State Department's budget by 30 per cent; and he has repeatedly questioned America's role in NATO. Trump has jeopardised the nuclear agreement with Iran and has forced the United Nations to cut its peacekeeping budget by $600 million. At present, Trump's government truly is more a security risk than a guarantee.

If Trump's election achieved anything, it has united Europeans in lamentation over the US' demise. Thanks to Donald Trump's leadership, the US is no longer leading the free world, but working against it. A temperamental narcissist has taken a wrecking ball to the foundations of the West's shared values. When it comes to dealing with this situation, however, a number of differences have emerged.

United in adversity

In one corner, a small contingent of increasingly bitter atlanticists continues to emphasise the importance and relevance of close cooperation between western Europe and the US. For this group, loosening ties between the US and its western allies solely on account of Donald Trump is unthinkable – especially given the EU's current parlous state.

In the other corner we have a broad alliance of EU advocates; left- and right-ringers who reject American hegemony; and disillusioned former atlanticists, many of whom now wish to 'emancipate' Europe from its unpredictable 'big brother'.

The US President is hardly making things easy for adherents of atlanticism – a policy of close cooperation between European powers and the US, with strong support for NATO. A man who threatens North Korea with 'fire and fury like the world has never seen' has control over the US' nuclear arsenal. The main political threat to the 'Atlantic community of shared values' doesn't come from Moscow or Beijing, but from Washington.

Many atlanticists are in one of the four phases people go through during a break-up: denial, anger, depression and acceptance. But they also believe that Europeans need to tend and care for the relationship, precisely because it's going through such a rocky patch. They insist, too, that Europe should act as a stronger counterweight to faulty US policy, but that this strength must develop within a partnership with America, not in isolation.

You reap what you sow

For many of America's critics, Trump is not an accident of history, but the inevitable result of decades of political blindness, increasingly entrenched social inequality, the arrogance of the powerful, and the self-righteous hubris of American global power post-1989. Since the illegal Iraq War the country has lost much of its soft power – its cultural and values-based appeal in the period since the end of the Second World War. Donald Trump has wrenched away that mask, say the critics, revealing the true face of a world power that will always protect its own interests, however ruthlessly.

Indeed, some European leftists, including Germany's Die Linke, dream of a continental European security block including Russia that would stand in opposition to the Anglo-American powers. How former Soviet satellite states in Eastern and Central Europe feel about such a plan is of little importance to them.

Others see in Trump's election victory the culmination of developments already taking place under Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama: the end of America's commitment to collective defence, demands for fairer 'burden sharing' and a reorientation towards the Pacific region. NATO may still guarantee the security of Europe in theory, but Trump's fickle stance towards the 'obsolete' alliance means Europeans can no longer put their entire trust in it, especially since the security interests of NATO and the EU were never identical in the first place. One of the few positive side-effects of Brexit is that the British can no longer prevent military collaboration within the EU. Indeed, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin have spurred the new defence alliance along: by questioning the US' commitment to collective defence and creating uncertainty in the east respectively.

Doubling down on defence

When it comes to defence, the EU needs to start standing on its own two

feet. The block currently spends only a third of what the US does on defence. Worse, it achieves only 10 to 15 per cent of the American capability with that money.

Spend a lot, get a little: this is what <link regions europe article show a-new-dawn-for-european-defence-2459>PESCO (short for 'permanent structured cooperation') – a new defence union between 25 EU member states – aims to change. The pact was signed a month ago by its member countries' foreign and defence ministers, and the first projects (among them a field hospital unit, a logistics hub and joint officers' colleges) are due to be approved before year's end.

A joint European security and defence policy is long overdue, and PESCO is just the latest in a long list of initiatives and experiments. As we have seen, Europe is highly inefficient when it comes to defence spending. Much work is needlessly repeated: the EU has 17 types of tank, 29 types of frigates and destroyers, and 20 types of fighter jets. Procedures for joint missions are complex, the financing arrangements risky.

PESCO is a first step in the right direction. It doesn't herald the 'mega-army' some have predicted. Rather it puts forward an ambitious aim of cooperating intelligently and boosting military capabilities by avoiding unnecessary duplication and using limited resources more effectively.

This includes the establishment of a joint European Defence Fund (EDF) of €500 million; the European Defence Agency, founded in 2004; and the creation of smaller EU battlegroups (military units) to respond to and prevent crises. If successful, PESCO will represent a first step towards greater European independence in the area of security policy.

The old has passed away

2016 was a landmark year: Brexit; the attempted coup in Turkey; and Trump's election to the White House represent a farewell to the old order, and the dawn of a new kind of global politics. China and Russia, as authoritarian states, are keen to become exemplary models on the global stage.

There is no point in wallowing in nostalgia for a golden era that wasn't as harmonious as we like to pretend. Instead, the 'West' or that which remains of it, must consider how it intends to handle the enormous challenges we face on both sides of the Atlantic. With Donald Trump as US president, the liberal international order – based on international law and the doctrine of the equality of states, whose goal is to contain and limit power through law and regulation – has come under additional

pressure. This presents democratic countries (and not only European ones) with serious challenges. They must ensure the US president does not do permanent damage to liberal norms and rule-based institutions.

We must not forget, however, that whilst the US may no longer be Europe's most reliable partner, it is still our most important one. When it comes to security, the EU remains dependent on continued close cooperation with Washington. However, in those areas where American policy goes against our interests and values, Europe must stand firm. This applies to issues as diverse as climate change, free trade, the Iran nuclear deal and the North Korea crisis.

We should also take care to ensure justified criticism of Trump does not lead to defeatism, cynicism, self-righteousness or anti-Americanism. European countries have no other option but to continue working with the Trump administration as best they can, whilst seeking to maintain contact with Congress and work with American politicians who take an interest in Europe, as well as with NGOs and think tanks.

We must do everything in our power to ensure that not only is there life after Donald Trump, but that the project of the 'West' still exists. It is also important that the EU, when there is disagreement, stands in unity against Britain and America, the former leading powers on each side of the Atlantic.

We need both: more Europe and more democracy on the one hand, and the preservation of transatlantic foundations for the post-Trump era on the other. Democracies must respond to the advance of authoritarian structures and individuals by democratising their security policy, because democracy and peace are inextricably linked.

We must observe and enforce rules and standards, and we need credible sanctions against those who break them. We need to expand international (criminal) jurisdiction and to strengthen international organisations and the rights of national parliaments and civil society at home and abroad. If Europe is to overcome the significant challenges facing our world, it must involve the authoritarian superpowers of China and Russia. However, that cannot replace a newly-aligned transatlantic partnership, where Europe and the US stand on an equal footing. Trump is not America and he will not be in power forever. The goal must be to ensure that the next American president does not take office with the western world in ruins.



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