

# Transatlantic Relations in the Age of Donald Trump

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**ABSTRACT** *While the future of the transatlantic relations has been a serious question of concern since the end of the Cold War, the institutionalized security partnerships, complex economic relations, and common threat perceptions in the U.S. and the EU helped these international actors work together and continue the working relationship that they had established decades earlier. However, in recent years, the relationship has been exposed to serious difficulties and challenges. Trump's critical rhetoric and statements about various European countries have been an irritant in transatlantic relations, and unpredictability is now considered the defining characteristic of the U.S. attitude toward Europe.*

## A Reluctant Ally?

**R**elations between the U.S. and its allies have been a hot issue in recent years for scholars of international relations. The changing nature and transformation of U.S. foreign policy in its relations with allies have serious implications for different regions around the world, as well as the broader international system. Although this debate has reached a heightened level with the presidency of Donald Trump, the process of U.S. disentanglement from its allies was visible in previous administrations. The unilateralism of the George W. Bush Presidency and the Obama Administration's disregard for allies

both generated a serious crisis in the United States' alliance network. Many started to argue that the U.S. was becoming a "reluctant"<sup>1</sup> or an "unreliable" ally.<sup>2</sup> In a recent study, Jakub J. Gyrgiel and A. Wess Mitchell, who is currently serving as the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, described the current state of affairs between U.S. and allies as an 'advanced crisis.' According to them,

Many long-standing U.S. allies believe that the United States, for reasons of either decline or disinterest, is in the process of pulling back from decades-long commitments and inaugurating a multiregional diplomatic and military retrench-

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ment... [A] steady succession of U.S. actions –cancellations of regionally deployed U.S. weapon systems, reductions in forward-deployed U.S. combat units, lessening of U.S. diplomatic support for traditional allies, participation in tacit bilateral bargaining with large authoritarian states, a much-touted but under-resourced Asian “pivot”– have seemed to confirm their suspicions.<sup>3</sup>

This change in the alliance behavior of the United States is generating serious repercussions in different parts of the world. In Asia, for instance, U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea are increasingly anxious over how committed the U.S. is to the security agreements it has made with them. In the Middle East, the traditional allies of the U.S. felt abandoned because of the U.S.’ disregard for the stability of the region and the security of its allies. In particular, President Obama’s

2013 “red line” statement on Syria and his subsequent decision not to fulfill his commitment without informing U.S. allies resulted in one of the most significant credibility problems for the U.S. In Europe as well, the situation was not so different. President Obama’s decision to halt the installation of a U.S. missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic generated the same form of anxiety and concern about the future direction of U.S. policy.<sup>4</sup> Obama went so far as to refer to U.S. allies as “free riders” in one of his highly publicized interviews.<sup>5</sup> The unilateralist military interventions of George W. Bush years had been replaced by the unilateral inaction of the Obama Administration. In both cases, the concerns and priorities of U.S. allies were ignored, and many felt that the U.S. had abandoned these countries in a critical juncture of history. Partly in response to these concerns, in both the 2012<sup>6</sup> and 2016 elections, many candidates for the U.S. presidency asserted that the U.S. had abandoned its allies and isolated itself in international relations.

The election of Donald Trump, who ran his campaign promoting economic protectionism and international isolationism, has vaulted this trend to new heights. President Trump’s “Make America Great Again” discourse has underlined the prioritization of the U.S. and placed less emphasis on the security of U.S. allies. As a candidate, Trump’s foreign policy platform was not very promising for the future of alliance networks. He criticized U.S. allies in NATO for not contributing suf-



ficiently to the organization and refused to openly commit to defending the Baltic States against an invasion by Russia.<sup>7</sup> He also accused U.S. allies in Asia, such as Japan and South Korea, of burdening the U.S. with high economic costs.<sup>8</sup> After his inauguration, President Trump started to make these arguments more forcefully, while at the same time trying to win the hearts and minds of some of the “traditional allies” in the Middle East; this generated deep suspicion and concern in different parts of the world and made it harder for U.S. allies to manage their relationship with the U.S. Trump’s withdrawal from multilateral arrangements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Climate Accord, and the Iranian Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), and his unwillingness to be part of multilateral agreements have been emulated by different allies around the world.

Tensions have also risen between the U.S. and the European Union and its NAFTA partners, Canada and Mexico, due to disagreements over trade.

In this time of deteriorating alliances, one of the most critical relationships is the one between the United States and the European Union. While the future of the transatlantic relations has been a serious question of concern since the end of the Cold War, the institutionalized security partnerships, complex economic relations, and common threat perceptions in the U.S. and the EU, such as Russia and terrorism, helped these international actors work together and continue the relationship they had established decades earlier. However, in recent years, the relationship has been exposed to serious difficulties and challenges. Especially in the last two years since President Trump’s inau-

A family photo of the NATO leaders during the summit in Brussels on July 11-12, 2018. Getty Images

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guration, the relationship has become harder to manage. In the aftermath of Trump's election, the concerns of European leaders about him have become clear in their statements expressing concerns about the future of U.S. foreign policy. President Trump's critical rhetoric and scathing statements about various European countries have been an irritant in transatlantic relations, and unpredictability is now considered the defining characteristic of the U.S. attitude towards Europe. Most reports written on the future of transatlantic relations have highlighted uncertainty and unpredictability as the most important feature of the relations.<sup>9</sup>

This unpredictability and uncertainty in U.S. foreign policy is not the only reason behind the instability of transatlantic relations. The EU is also facing other significant problems that could derail transatlantic relations during this period. In terms of foreign policy, EU countries have demon-

strated a serious weakness against Russian activities and failed to handle the migration crisis. The UK's decision to leave the EU has generated significant doubts about the future stability of the Union. Domestically, the rise of right wing parties and the difficulties that traditional European parties face in forming coalition governments are generating significant governability problems for the EU as a whole. The failure of European countries to develop a common foreign and security policy is reflected in their relations with the United States. There has been significant division within the EU in regard to the convergence or divergence of interests with the U.S. in several major foreign policy issue areas.

Under these circumstances, it is hard to predict the future trajectory of relations between the EU and the U.S. However, the critical issue areas between Europe and the U.S. are easy to pinpoint and have only become more apparent over the past two years of the Trump Administration. There are several immediate and long-term challenges that the EU and the U.S. must take into consideration in the coming period. In the rest of this commentary these challenges will be discussed.

## **Challenges Facing EU-U.S. Relations**

### ***Trust Issues***

The first significant challenge for the transatlantic relation is the increasing skepticism with which decision

makers on both sides of the Atlantic view each other. As mentioned above, although the instability in U.S. foreign policy in recent years is the primary reason for this trust problem, there are also institutional and structural causes of this challenge stemming from problems within the European Union. President Trump not only called NATO 'obsolete' while running for office, but also expressed his indifference to the fate of the European integration process, both of which were considered serious ruptures from traditional U.S. policy towards Europe and transatlantic relations.<sup>10</sup> These statements, and the close rapport between some members of the Trump team and far right and anti-EU groups in European Union countries, have generated huge concerns for some European countries over the trajectory of their political and security ties with the U.S.<sup>11</sup> President Trump continued his public criticism of European allies, specifically Germany, for various reasons, including its "not sufficient" contributions to NATO, and because of the U.S. trade deficit with Germany. He even tweeted, "We [the U.S.] have a massive trade deficit with Germany, plus they pay for less than they should on NATO and military. Very bad for the U.S. This will change."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after Trump's election, some policymakers in Europe, including German Chancellor Merkel, stated that the Europeans need to take responsibility for their future, signaling a potential change in relations between EU and U.S.<sup>13</sup> A few months after this statement, Merkel made yet another speech where she reiterated that it may be a new era for

the transatlantic relationship between the EU and the U.S. She stated that "The era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent... That's what I experienced over the past several days," referring to the G7 meeting in which President Trump harshly criticized NATO members, especially Germany. She also said, "We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands –naturally in friendship with the United States of America, in friendship with Great Britain, as good neighbors with whoever, also with Russia and other countries. But we have to know that we Europeans must fight for our own future and destiny."<sup>14</sup> Although the relations, at least at the personal level, were later fixed with some leaders of Europe and the United States, such as the Macron-Trump rapprochement, at the policy level interpersonal contacts have failed to mend the damage caused by different perspectives toward transatlantic relations. The discord and divergence in foreign policy issues have also contributed to this problem, particularly, in the early days of Trump's presidency, his approach towards Russia and later his withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal (JCPOA). The latest steel tariffs and growing protectionism in Trump's economic policies, which could endanger the multilateral trade system, may further increase skepticism and lack of trust between the U.S. and the EU. In the short term, this trust issue is likely to be difficult to resolve.

### ***Iran***

In addition to the trust problem, which seems to be more conjectural,

the foreign policy divergences between the U.S. and European countries are straining ties in transatlantic alliances. As the U.S. began to act unilaterally on international initiatives, the U.S. and the EU found themselves on different sides in regard to key issues such as the JCPOA. Since Trump became president, the U.S. and its European allies began to diverge first at the discursive level and then at the policy level and the U.S. began to act in contradiction to the interests and priorities of its allies. Since its inception, EU member states considered JCPOA to be an opportunity and achievement, whereas the new U.S. administration labeled the agreement a major failure and a threat to the U.S. Studies focusing on the rhetoric of these positions have demonstrated that the EU's willingness and insistence on engagement with Iran does not reverberate on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>15</sup> Despite the attempts of European leaders, including Theresa May, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, to persuade the Trump Administration not to withdraw from the nuclear deal, Trump decided to do otherwise. Following this decision, U.S. sanctions –and secondary sanctions against companies that continues to do business with the state of Iran– may generate another major rift in relations. European leaders reacted immediately after the declaration by stating, “Together, we emphasize our continuing commitment to the (deal). This agreement remains important for our shared security.”<sup>16</sup>

Some experts have termed this rupture the worst crisis in relations



After the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal, the Secretary of State Pompeo gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation on May 21, regarding Trump's Iran strategy.

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since the Iraq War in 2003.<sup>17</sup> Some others even suggested, “For the first time arguably since the Suez crisis, the United States and key European powers will be actively seeking to undermine each other in a region they consider central to their foreign policies.”<sup>18</sup> The repercussions of the withdrawal of the U.S. from the nuclear deal are yet to be seen. Both the leaders of individual European countries and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini have expressed their criticisms and regrets about the decision. But the decision about the nuclear deal will not be the end of the story here. The relationship may face more tests in regards to Iran. The recent declaration of a new Iran strategy by the United States will be an-

other important determinant of the future of relations between the U.S. and Europe. Two weeks after Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced an extremely hawkish new strategy for Iran. The strategy involves increasing financial pressure against Iran together with a laundry list of demands to Iran in regard to its nuclear program, ballistic missile program, regional actions, and the security of its neighbors. While asking for the support of the European Union in pressuring Iran, Secretary Pompeo also threatened to sanction European companies that do business with Iran. This new strategy, if pursued and operationalized by the United States, may increase tensions between the EU and the U.S.

### ***Russia***

U.S.-EU relations have also been impacted by differences over how to address Russia. The common front that the EU and U.S. had established following the invasion of Crimea by Russia started to crack following the election of Donald Trump. In most instances, in regard to Russia, the Trump Administration has provided inconsistent signals and messages to its European allies. In regard to the question of Ukrainian territorial integrity, the U.S. has been consistent; it did not change its position and has continued to support government forces. In regard to North Korea, the U.S. administration announced that the Russian government is not cooperating with U.S. attempts to isolate the Kim regime and force it to give up its nuclear weapon program. In re-

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gard to Syria, the U.S. administration criticized the Russian government for helping the Assad regime and being complicit in the slaughter of civilians. Moreover, the U.S. accused the Russian government of meddling in the internal politics of multiple countries in Europe and attempting to undermine Western institutions.<sup>19</sup> However, despite these criticisms of Russia, President Trump's unwillingness to criticize Vladimir Putin and the growing number of revelations from the Mueller probe about relations between members of Trump's campaign team and Russian businessmen with close relations to the Kremlin have generated concerns in the EU. Trump further raised question marks when he congratulated President Putin for winning the elections, despite the insistence of his advisors not to use that word.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in a tweet following the phone call, President Trump asserted that Russia and the U.S. can cooperate on issues including Syria, ISIS, North Korea, Iran, and even the arms race. He wrote, "Getting along with Russia (and others) is a good thing, not a bad thing."<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after these statements and tweets, however, President Trump joined with a number of European

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countries and expelled Russian diplomats from American soil following the poisoning of a former Russian spy in England with a military-grade nerve agent. But soon after this coordinated reaction to Russia, it was revealed that President Trump was a rather “reluctant hawk” in this effort. *The New York Times* reported that he was angered by the fact that the U.S. had expelled the largest number of diplomats despite his instruction that the U.S. should match the numbers of European countries but should not take the lead. Trump was reportedly, “furious that his administration was being portrayed in the media as taking by far the toughest stance on Russia.”<sup>22</sup> Although the U.S. and European countries acted together in Syria after the chemical attacks in 2018, President Trump again reiterated that Russia could be helpful in resolving this issue in his statement. There is thus a certain level of nervousness in European countries in regard to the U.S. commitment to work together with European countries to halt Russian aggression in Europe.

### **Trade**

Another important issue of contention between the U.S. and the EU involves trade disputes. First of all, the Transatlantic Trade and In-

vestment Partnership (TTIP) had been in negotiation for several years during the Obama Presidency. It was a long-discussed project to establish a free trade agreement between the two largest economies in the world. Despite the low trade barriers between the U.S. and EU, the two sides wanted to make trade easier and increase their access to different parts of the world through the agreement. The negotiations that started during Obama’s second term in power, however, stalled with the beginning of the Trump Presidency. Many have accused President Trump of stopping free trade negotiations with the EU and consider this decision as part of Trump’s “America First” approach in foreign economic policy.<sup>23</sup> However, the Trump Administration argued that it was not a finished agreement and had a lot of points to be discussed or argued. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross argued, “The EU has showed relatively limited interest in serious negotiation with us.”<sup>24</sup> This dispute reached new heights following disagreement between the two parties in regard to trade in the steel and aluminum industries, which the Trump Administration considered a high risk and regarded as a national security concern. Together with other major trade partners and trading blocs, the U.S. considered the EU to be a significant problem in this regard. In addition to steel and aluminum, the Trump Administration also emphasized the high tariff the EU places on U.S.-made cars and the trade deficit with the EU as important issues that need to be resolved. In 2017, the total trade deficit of the U.S.



Donald Trump talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, surrounded by other G7 leaders and their advisers during the G7 summit in Canada on June 9, 2018.

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with the EU reached 154 billion dollars.<sup>25</sup> Although Macron and Merkel tried to resolve these problems in their visits to Washington in April, they failed to reach an agreement with the Trump Administration. Following a month-long extension, President Trump announced new tariffs to goods from the EU that include a 25 percent tariff on steel and a 10 percent tariff on aluminum. The EU responded to these tariffs by labeling the action “pure protectionism” and “illegal.” The EU also opened a case against the U.S. at the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>26</sup> While the trade commissioner of the EU insisted that the situation was not a “trade war” for “psychological purposes,” they described the situation as “very dangerous.”<sup>27</sup> Although the EU does not yet have a final list of products to adopt for retaliatory purposes, there is a list of products from

the U.S. from which EU member countries will choose the goods to be targeted. For many analysts, this decision by the Trump Administration has generated the most significant rift in the transatlantic alliance to date, and with it, a trade war reminiscent of the 1930s.

So far nobody can predict what will be the final state of affairs between the EU and the U.S. In the EU, there is significant internal division over how to respond to these new tariffs by the U.S. Reportedly, countries such as France prefer to adopt punitive measures against the U.S. through the WTO, whereas Germany and others prefer to de-escalate the conflict before it reaches a full scale trade war.<sup>28</sup> The final decision, which will carry great importance for the future of the U.S.’ transatlantic relationship with the EU, will be a result of negotiations

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and discussions between these different parties.

### Conclusion

In the changing international system, the most significant pillars of the post-Cold War system could be its most important destabilizers. The EU and the U.S., whose alliance goes back to World War I, are facing serious disputes and disagreements over security and trade. President Trump and his administration have been getting the lion's share of responsibility for the destabilization of relations due to the increasing aggressiveness of the U.S. in trade related issues, its lack of consideration for the agreements designed and signed together by Western European allies, such as the Paris Climate Accord and JCPOA, and its unilateralism in foreign and security policy, such as in the case of Jerusalem. Since Trump's inauguration, European allies of the U.S. have also expressed concerns about U.S. relations

with Russia and felt unease about the lack of a U.S. ambassador to the EU for more than a year now. President Trump's "America First" approach is generally considered anathema to an alliance that was established in order to sustain the liberal international order. However, for their part, the European Union and major countries of Europe have failed to understand the U.S.' growing grievances over issues such as the lack of sufficient contributions from EU member states to NATO and the trade deficit between U.S. and EU. The lack of policy efficiency in the EU and increasing disagreements among member states also contribute to a lack of focus on resolving problems with the U.S. In fact, although many of these issues were considered by scholars as only conjectural and directly related to the presidency of Donald Trump, there has been a lack of mutual understanding and growing mistrust between the EU and the U.S. for some time.

For the future of relations, there are different scenarios provided by different observers. Those who believe that the crisis is due to the Trump Presidency expect a short term kerfuffle which will be fixed in the next administration. However, some of the problems between the two allies have demonstrated that they require more than a quick fix, and that some major revisions and re-tuning may be necessary in order to regenerate the partnership as it used to be. It is true that the alliance under NATO umbrella, the historical depth of the relations, the high volume of eco-

nomic interaction and the common external threat perception will keep the EU and U.S. tied to each other in multiple different realms. But the question for many is whether the EU and the U.S. can reach the level of cooperation they had in the past. The EU would request that the U.S.' foreign policy remain predictable and that it provide leadership in sustaining the global international system, whereas U.S. would ask the EU to share responsibility for sustaining the global order. The fulfillment of these requests will necessitate more time and energy, and the trust that has been broken for the last few years can only be restored in a longer time frame. Both of these initiatives would require determination and commitment from both sides. ■

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