

## Essay: The US-EU relation in a Trump Administration

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"As you go forward, you can be confident that your greatest ally and friend, the United States of America, stands with you, shoulder-to-shoulder, now and forever. Because a united Europe remains the hope of the many and a necessity for us all."<sup>1</sup> With those unequivocal words, President Obama concluded his "Address to the People of Europe" delivered in Berlin, April 25, 2016; a few months later, the 44th President addressed once again —and for the last time as a President— a gesture of friendship and consideration to his European partners, as he chose the Old Continent for his farewell foreign tour, visiting Germany and Greece. The relations between the Obama Administration and its European counterparts, although consistently cordial, had nevertheless not always been as warm as they were in 2016; in particular, as he stepped into the Oval Office, some policies of the former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs, such as the "Russian Reset" and the "Pivot to Asia," indeed made the European leaders fear an American disinterest in the century-old American-European alliance. Yet, those tensions and worries were to be short-lived, as President Obama demonstrated on many occasions that he was willing to work in close cooperation with the European heads of states and the EU leadership on decisive issues like, to name but a few, the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the Iran nuclear deal, and the fight against global warming, culminating in the Paris Agreement. What is more, President Obama had consistently expressed, throughout both of his terms, his support for a strong and integrated European Union, to the point of getting occasionally involved in the EU internal affairs. He notably visited London a couple of months before the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, and strongly warned the British people against a potential Brexit. "The European Union doesn't moderate British influence; it magnifies it," he declared,<sup>2</sup> before stressing as a conclusion of his speech the exceptional ties which have bound and still bind the Atlantic partners, stating "together, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have turned centuries of war in Europe into decades of peace, and worked as one to make this world a safer, better place."<sup>3</sup> Yet, it seems that the transition from the Obama to the Trump Administration will trigger— and actually has already triggered— a radical shift in US-EU relations.

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There is indeed strong evidence that indicates that President Trump will not keep the same policy of close cooperation and publicly expressed sympathy towards the EU. First of all, and this is a key element in

the understanding of the issue, President Trump seems not to believe in multilateral diplomacy. Fundamentally shaped by his business-career, his vision of diplomacy — whose only end is to serve his "America-First" pledge — is based on transactional negotiations, more easily pursued in the framework of bilateral relations.<sup>4</sup> His approach is therefore downplaying — not to say rejecting — the importance of multilateralism, of regional systems and of their institutions; hence he ordered the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), only three days after being sworn in, and has repeatedly stated his intention to renegotiate NAFTA.<sup>5</sup>

The same reasoning applies to the President's appreciation of the European Union. Donald Trump does not see the EU as a 28-state intergovernmental organization, working in a collective endeavor to promote peace and prosperity for the entire continent and to a larger extent for the world; but rather, as he declared in an interview, he sees it as a "vehicle for Germany," and in any event, as an unfair economic competitor for the US.<sup>6</sup> In the same interview, he also praised the UK for leaving the EU, said that he expected other countries to leave in the future, and declared that he was indifferent to the fate of the EU.<sup>7</sup> But President Trump did not limit his open criticism of the EU to this already damaging interview, which alarmed most of the European heads of state. Two days earlier, on January 13, the outgoing U.S. ambassador to the EU Anthony Gardner had declared that officials from Trump's transition team had called EU leaders to ask which EU country would be "leaving next."<sup>8</sup>

In February, as Vice-President Pence met with European Council President Donald Tusk to reassure the US European partners, another bombshell came from the White House; while the Vice-President had just reaffirmed "the strong commitment of the United States to continued cooperation and partnership with the European Union," White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon was reported to have expressed skepticism about the EU and pledged to focus more on bilateral relations with the European states, at the occasion of a meeting with German Ambassador to the United States, Peter Wittig.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, the nomination of the next US ambassador to the EU has been another important concern for Brussels and the European governments, and the least we could say is that the Trump Administration has not sent reassuring signals in that respect either. A name in particular has worried the Old Continent's capitals — Ted Malloch, who was considered President Trump's favorite candidate for this key diplomatic position.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Malloch, a fierce eurosceptic, had signed on February 14 an op-ed entitled "The U.S. View of European Integration," in which he explicitly made the case for breaking up the EU, which he considers

of no interest for the US.<sup>11</sup> According to the *Washington Post* correspondents in Belgium, "E.U. officials took the highly unusual step of ordering a review to outline how they might reject an ambassador," in response to the eventual appointment of Ted Malloch as US ambassador in Brussels. The US-EU relations have therefore entered under the Trump presidency in an unprecedented climate of tension, if not of mistrust and conflict. Could then the US President compensate for his Administration's difficult relationship with the EU by maintaining good relations with some European key players, through the bilateral framework he seems to favor over multilateralism?

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If there is one central actor in Europe, it is unquestionably Germany. But it seems that the German-American relationship under the Trump Administration will also undergo a fundamental shift, and certainly not for the better. The first evidence in that direction is the above-mentioned interview that Donald Trump, then President-elect, gave to the most widely read German newspaper, *Das Bild*. Besides accusing Germany of having turned the EU into a platform for the German economy, Donald Trump expressed his reservations concerning Mrs. Merkel's policy and their future relationship. He notably described the German Chancellor's decision to admit more than a million migrants as "one very catastrophic mistake" ; although he declared that he would "start off trusting Mrs Merkel" on taking office, he added that he would "see how long that lasts."<sup>12</sup> The Trump Administration's apparent hostility towards Germany was eventually clearly expressed when the new National Trade Council Director Peter Navarro accused Berlin of manipulating a "grossly undervalued" euro to gain trade advantages over its other European partners, and, even worse, over the United States.<sup>13</sup> For President Trump, who has made the fight against unfair — that is, detrimental to the US — economic and trade policies his new hobbyhorse, Germany's external surplus of 8% of its GDP (\$270.05 billion),<sup>14</sup> and in particular the large US trade deficit with Germany (\$ -64 billion)<sup>15</sup> constitute indisputable evidence that Germany is manipulating the euro so as to foster its exports. President Trump has thus clearly stated that he planned to fight Germany's export surplus, in particular through the implementation of new regulations on imports.<sup>16</sup> The tension between the two countries crystallized publicly when President Trump refused to shake hands with Chancellor Merkel in the Oval Office.<sup>17</sup>

What is more, Germany is not the only major European power which President Trump has publicly denigrated. On the occasion of the Conservative Political Action Conference in February, the American President indeed questioned the European leaders' political wisdom and capacity to keep their citizens safe,

linking the series of terrorist attacks on the continent to Europe's border policy. He particularly pointed the finger at France — which President Obama considered the US "oldest ally"<sup>18</sup>— as he deemed that "Paris is no longer Paris."<sup>19</sup> François Hollande, the usually accommodating and mild-mannered French President, answered flatly that "it's never a good idea to show the least disapproval with respect to an ally," and added that he "wouldn't do that to an ally and would ask that the American president not do that with regard to France."<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it seems that the Trump Administration is not interested either in developing its relationship with Europe through bilateral relations with European key players. Although Vice-President Pence or Defense Secretary Mattis have sent some positive signals regarding the US collaboration with the EU or the future of the NATO alliance, the overall White House's communication towards Europe remains essentially negative, and in any event unsuitable for the continuation of the trusting cooperation that had marked the transatlantic relations for decades. It remains now to consider the potential consequences of such a distancing from Europe.

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The Trump Administration's hostile stance towards the EU —and in particular towards leading states such as Germany and France— might prove very risky, and in the end, counterproductive. First, if President Trump wants Europe to rely less on the US and contribute more to the international security and economic stability, he needs a strong France and a strong Germany that can provide leadership for their continent, not a divided Europe which would not be able to step up on the international scene to share the burden with the US.<sup>21</sup>

Second, by repeatedly blaming Germany in the way that we have described above, the US would alienate its most precious diplomatic partner in Europe. As Charles A. Kupchan, former National Security Council's senior director for European affairs, described the transatlantic decision-taking process on important diplomatic issues, "[President Obama was] able to fashion a consensus with Berlin, and then Chancellor Merkel [was in turn] able to work the issue within the EU;" thus, without Germany on its side, the US diplomacy would sharply reduce its influence in Europe and its ability to reach agreements with the European states, which, once again, are essential if President Trump wants to share the international leadership burden. The same is also true for France, which had played an important role in the Iran nuclear deal negotiations and, of course, in the achievement of the Paris Agreement. At a time when the most threatening issues have become

transnational — climate change, refugee flows and migration, terrorism, etc — Europe is more than ever an indispensable partner, which President Trump seems nevertheless ready to ignore, and worse, to alienate.

And third, the Trump Administration's position might prove economically very damaging. Germany remains the fourth-largest economy in the world, while France is the sixth, and the EU as a whole is by far the first economic power on the international scene. It would certainly not be a harmless enemy if the Trump Administration chose to trigger a trade war. The member states' governments and the EU leadership are actually already taking the necessary steps to face such a transatlantic trade war.<sup>22</sup> The US would actually have much to lose from undermining its economic ties with Europe. In 2015, the US received 34,5% of the EU external foreign direct investment, that is nearly €2 trillion, and the figure has been constantly increasing since 2011.<sup>23</sup> Although the EU enjoys a €115 billion trade surplus with the US, the US exports to the EU amounted in 2016 to \$270 billion; the Union is thus the first customer of American goods, before Canada and Mexico.<sup>24</sup> What is more, a trade imbalance does not necessarily mean that the EU economy undermines the American one, or that it destroys jobs in the US. A figure is particularly telling in that regard; a report from the German Ministry for Economics Affairs shows that German car companies — which play a big role in generating the large German external surplus— now manufacture more automobiles in the US than they export to the US from Germany, thus generating thousands of jobs in America.<sup>25</sup>

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The Trump Administration's stance towards the EU marks therefore a dramatic shift in comparison to the Obama Administration, and more generally to the post-war US Atlantic policy. By sending sometimes contradictory but overall negative signals to Europe, the White House has gradually alienated its European allies, both at the European supra-national level with the EU and at the national level, with worsening bilateral relations with key players such as Germany and France. Yet, Europe should be more in the eyes of the 45th President of the US than a trade cheater damaging the US economy or NATO's free rider; Europe, and the EU in particular, have a major role to play, alongside the US, in a century whose challenges and threats have become transnational. World terrorism, intensifying refugee and migration flows, climate change, and potential economic crises are issues that neither the US nor the EU can tackle alone in an effective manner. In an era of interconnectedness and interdependence, President Trump's inclination toward a loosened transatlantic relationship seems thus to come at the worst possible time; but Donald Trump has also proved that he was capable of changing course and making pragmatic decisions.

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- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Ellen Laipson, "Why Trump's Bilateral Approach to Foreign Policy Is Necessary but Not Sufficient", *The World Politics Review*, February 28, 2017  
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- <sup>23</sup> Eurostat report,  
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