

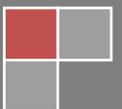
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FRAYED FRIENDSHIPS: EXPLORING US-EUROPE RELATIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA

Dr. Brad Nelson, Saint Xavier University



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Dr. Brad Nelson is President and co-founder of Center for World Conflict and Peace (CWCP), an independent, non-partisan think tank that focuses on international politics and security, and an adjunct professor of political science at Saint Xavier University. He received a PhD in political science from The Ohio State University (2008), with specializations in international security and foreign policy studies. Dr. Nelson's work has been published by The National Interest, Global Asia, E-IR, The Wall Street Journal, The Diplomat, Global Risk Insights, and Strategic Review, among other places. Additionally, he writes for and manages a blog for CWCP. Dr. Nelson's research interests include American foreign policy, great power politics, order in international relations, and political conflict and violence. His latest work has explored the impact of Donald Trump's foreign policy on global politics.



Frayed Friendships: Exploring US-Europe Relations in the Trump Era

Brad Nelson, PhD

Adjunct Professor of Political Science, Saint Xavier University
President and Co-Founder, Center for World Conflict and Peace
Email: bnelson@sxu.edu.

Introduction

US President Donald Trump has taken a metaphorical wrecking ball to America's relations with EU/NATO member nations.¹ He has criticized the EU, NATO, European governments, and various European leaders, including Theresa May, Emmanuel Macron, and Angela Merkel. Trump has repeatedly complained that European countries are not contributing a “fair share” to their NATO partnership with the US and that NATO is increasingly “obsolete.”² He has openly questioned whether upholding Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is in America’s interest.³ Trump imposed tariffs on European steel and aluminium in 2018, and further tariffs could be on the way.⁴ Trump disparaged Denmark and cancelled a visit there after Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen refused to sell Greenland to the US.⁵ And there have been widespread and deep policy disagreements on climate change, Iran, Brexit, and protectionism, among other things.

These developments have alarmed politicians, scholars, and analysts in Europe and the US, causing them to grapple with what has happened in transatlantic ties since 2017. It is easy to view the swift and consequential changes in this relationship as solely a product of the

¹ For the sake of clarity, when I refer to Europe, I am thinking explicitly about those countries in Europe that are tethered to the western alliances with the US and are integrated within the broader liberal world order. So, in short, I am referring to EU/NATO member states. While Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus, among others, are indeed European nations, for the purposes of this paper, I consider them to fit in a different category: members of Russia’s sphere of influence.

² Stanley R. Sloan, “Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-historic President,” in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane N. Labrosse eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), chapter 17.

³ Elieen Sullivan, “Trump Questions the Core of NATO: Mutual Defense, Including Montenegro,” *The New York Times* (18 July 2018). Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/world/europe/trump-nato-self-defense-montenegro.html>.

⁴ Hans Von Der Burchard, “Europe Braces for Trump Trade War,” *Politico Europe*, (21 July 2019). Accessed at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-braces-for-trump-trade-war/>.

⁵ Annie Karni, “Trump Scraps Visit to Denmark, as Greenland Is Not for Sale,” *The New York Times*, (20 August 2019). Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/us/politics/trump-cancels-greenland-trip.html>.

egotistical, capricious Donald Trump. To be sure, Trump is part of the problem. But the whole story of the Europe-US fissures is larger and more complex than the rise of one singular populist leader in the US. Moreover, equally complicated is Europe's response to Trump and his machinations. At this moment, EU/NATO nations are wrestling with the monumental decision to alter how they relate to and interact with the US. Hence, the foreign policy status quo on both sides, for Europe and the US, is tenuous, buckling under the weight of various internal and external pressures.

At bottom, there are three issues here. First, does the US still maintain a high level of commitment and importance to Europe? Second, should EU/NATO countries begin to prepare for the day when America no longer has their back? Third, what might restore the coherence and tranquillity of the transatlantic alliance? These three questions are at the heart of contemporary US-European relations and drive this paper's analytical focus.

Strategic Autonomy

One major story in international relations nowadays is that EU/NATO states have begun to question and reassess the broad and thorny issue of their global strategic alignment. And Trump has played a major role in this ongoing debate.

At first, during the early days of the Trump presidency, it appeared that EU/NATO nations were content to wait out Trump, desperately hoping he would be a one-term US president, until a more globally engaged president rose to power in Washington once again.⁶ In general, European capitals have quietly simmered, taking care not to irritate further the petulant Trump. Sure, Trump's visits to Europe have not gone especially well, as they have been pockmarked with flubs and faux pas and the occasional deferential offering to Vladimir Putin, and Europeans have taken to the streets to protest Trump and his policies. Still, European leaders have preferred to let Trump believe they like him, that US relations with their home countries are strong, and that he has been a net positive force in the transatlantic relationship.

European leaders have figured it is best to play nice with Trump, mostly because they are unwilling to scrap entirely or even reduce significantly their commitments to the alliance with the US. And for good reasons. Europe needs the military might of America, the number one military power in the world, according to any reputable survey. Right now, and for the foreseeable future, Europe lacks the money, military capabilities, battlefield readiness, and continental-wide unity to field a strong European defense force to substitute effectively for the security umbrella currently provided by the Americans, no matter how shaky Washington's security commitments are at the moment. Complete "strategic autonomy would take decades of 'post-Atlanticist' investment and political evolution."⁷

⁶ Willis Sparks, "Waiting Out Trump," *G-Zero Media*, (9 November 2018). Accessed at: <https://www.gzeromedia.com/read/waiting-out-trump>.

⁷ Jeremy Cliff, "In Europe's McCainland. The Baltics fear European strategic autonomy" *The Economist* (6 October 2018), p. 51.

A full-fledged rupture in US-Europe ties leaves EU/NATO nations vulnerable to the whims and military muscle of Russian ambition. While Western Europe is probably safe, the security of western-oriented European countries on or near Russia's doorstep is far less certain. For instance, a revanchist Russia, under Putin or his successor, could make a play for the Baltic states—either by seizing or destabilizing them via military, economic, or cyber means. And it is not far-fetched, in my view, to think that Central European nations like Poland or Hungary, parts of the old Soviet bloc, could be vulnerable one day to Russian adventurism without adequate American backing. Put simply, it is not wise for Europe to go its own way anytime soon—something that Europeans of almost all political persuasions realize.

But do not be fooled. EU/NATO European capitals are in the early stages of embarking on partial strategic autonomy. The pursuit is a classic goldilocks dilemma. Too much strategic distance between Europe and the US could invite increased external hostility and aggression, while too little distance relegates Europe to a pawn of America's fickle president. Instead, Europe is seeking a degree of strategic independence from the US on security matters to give it the flexibility to fill in the gaps that might appear if Washington is weak or slow to act in its best interests. It is a common sense method of balancing their displeasure with and concern about the US with the need to address real and vital security imperatives.

Statements from German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and French President Emmanuel Macron, respectively, show that they believe it is not sufficient to wait out Trump, that a new European policy is needed, and that a stronger, more united, more autonomous was the answer. Some of this has already been in motion. "A broader rethinking of European capabilities, capacities, and readiness is already taking place with the framework of the EU-launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which will better pool resources for acquisition and R&D, the creation of the European Defense Fund, and Macron's proposed European Intervention Initiative, which aims to create a common European strategic culture through joint planning and exchange of troops."⁸

But in 2018, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, frustrated by the Trump administration and concerned about Putin's Russia, upped the ante by endorsing the idea to create an EU army. Macron argued that "we must have a Europe that can defend itself on its own without relying only on the United States."⁹ And while Merkel carefully explained that such an army would be complementary to NATO, rather than an army against NATO, she also noted that this nascent plan was necessary because of questions about America's reliability. According to Merkel, "The times when we could rely on others are over. This means nothing less than for us Europeans to

⁸ Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova, "Is Going It Alone the Best Way Forward For Europe?" *Foreign Affairs*: Snapshot (October 17, 2018).

⁹ "Macron Pushes for 'True European Army,'" *BBC* (6 November 2018). Accessed at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46108633>.

take our destiny in our own hands if we want to survive as a Union. This means, in the long run, Europe has to become more capable to act.”¹⁰

These rumblings of seeking greater strategic autonomy are growing louder and spreading. In fact, a rethinking of Europe-US ties is not just vocalized by government and EU leaders, but by intellectuals too. “In Berlin, Brussels, and Paris it is becoming vogue to advocate ‘post-Atlanticist’ foreign and defence policies making Europe more independent from America.”¹¹

To be sure, the idea of a more autonomous Europe is not uniformly embraced across the continent. The Baltic nations, in particular, are wary of any distancing from the US.¹² Scared to death about a resurgent Russia next door and the impact of that on their existence, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia seek a tight political, economic, and security relationship with Washington. And of course, the Euroskeptics are aghast at the prospect of further European integration. Still, the momentum is clear. The divide between Europe and the US is real and growing, and there is a concerted effort by Europeans to act more united and independently from the US on security issues.

Foreign Policy Trends in America

The push to rethink the transatlantic relationship and to strengthen European integration is good one, particularly when we consider the political trends in the US. First, as Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova point out, the untethering of Europe-US ties has been an ongoing phenomenon over the last twenty years.¹³ Emboldened by the lack of a peer competitor, the US, standing at the apex of its global power, repeatedly ignored or dismissed European interests and concerns. George W. Bush waged an unpopular war in Iraq, failed to ratify the Kyoto treaty, and presided over America’s Wild West economy of the 2000s, which contributed mightily to the global financial crisis—a catastrophe that kneecapped most of Europe. But Bush wasn’t alone.

Despite Barack Obama’s pro-Europe positions and friendly rapport with European leaders, even he could not avoid trampling on Europe at times. Indeed, Obama, foreshadowing the Trump era, bitterly complained about Europe’s “free riding” behavior, and called for NATO members to pay their “fair share” to individual defense spending.¹⁴ And his much hyped, though oft-critiqued, “Pivot to Asia” was meant to transition the away from the dusty old disputes and regions of the world (Middle East and Europe) and toward the new, hip location, Asia, where money, power,

¹⁰ Maia De La Baume and David M. Herszenhorn, “Merkel joins Macron in calling for EU army to complement NATO,” *Politico Europe* (13 November 2018). Accessed at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-emmanuel-macron-eu-army-to-complement-nato/>.

¹¹ Jeremy Cliff, “In Europe’s McCainland,” *The Economist* (6 October 2018), p. 51.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova, “Is Going It Alone the Best Way Forward For Europe?” *Foreign Affairs: Snapshot* (October 17, 2018).

¹⁴ William R. Keylor, “The Future of the Atlantic Alliance Under President Trump,” Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane N. Labrosse eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Columbia University Press (2018), chapter 24.

influence are expected to flow.¹⁵ And Asia, in particular, is where scholars and analysts foresee the world's most consequential hotspots (South China Sea, Taiwan, North Korea, India-China, Japan-South Korea) in the coming years. In sum, power politics in the 21st century will be played out and determined not in Europe, but elsewhere.

Second, keep in mind that Trump might well win another term in office. Yes, there are twenty plus contenders, some of whom are very qualified and highly credentialed, looking to unseat Trump from the US presidency. And undoubtedly, Trump and his tenure have been problematic on a number of levels. His personal boorishness, various domestic scandals, thousands of documented lies, very unpresidential Twitter page, strong flirtations with racism and xenophobia, and chaotic leadership and governance style are but a few of the stains on his personal and political reputation, the US presidency, and America itself. That said, with the US economy in relatively good shape (stock market is at an all-time high, unemployment under four percent), despite Trump's trade wars and murmurs of an impending economic downturn, Trump is likely still in the driver's seat to win re-election in November 2020.¹⁶ Which then means another four years of Trump and his minions kicking Europe around.

Third, even if Trump is defeated by his democratic challenger at the polls, the political mood that gave rise to Trump in the first place will probably remain. American retrenchment, foreign policy restraint, and zero-sum hypernationalism—arguably, the pillars of Trump's America First doctrine—are popular with US citizens.¹⁷ That probably will not change much, even if Trump is no longer the president. Indeed, even the current batch of contenders for the Democratic nomination—on the campaign trail, in debates, and in other appearances and speeches—on many of the big issues, largely echo a softer, more moderate version of Trump's America First program.¹⁸ Clearly, all of the Democrats have adopted various pro-Europe positions (pro-Atlantic relations, pro-NATO, pro-EU, pro-multilateralism, attentive to climate change, etc.), but they also champion a policy that is very inward-focused (on US domestic needs), abhors foreign wars, and seeks a light military footprint worldwide—all of which are mostly consistent current US foreign policy under Trump.

All of the above point to some sobering conclusions. America's commitment to Europe is no longer as firm and credible—both to Europe's adversaries and to Europe—as it used to be. As a result, European security is vulnerable to external threats and opportunists. Furthermore, there are strong reasons to think that America's inward tilt is not just a passing fad; it might well be

¹⁵ John Ford, "The Pivot Was Obama's Biggest Mistake," *The Diplomat*, (21 January 2017). Accessed at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/>.

¹⁶ Zack Jones, "Trump 2020 Presidential Reelection Odds Highest Ever Following Democratic Debate," *Forbes.com* (29 June 2019), Accessed at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackjones/2019/06/29/trump-2020-presidential-reelection-odds-highest-ever-following-democratic-debate/#4ec46e7d10f8>.

¹⁷ Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), chapter 3.

¹⁸ Perry Bacon Jr., "Democratic Candidates Answer Yes-Or-No Questions About Foreign Policy," *FiveThirtyEight*, (19 August 2019). Accessed at: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-2020-democratic-field-is-more-anti-war-than-obama-was/>.

here to stay for a while. Consequently, it makes perfect sense for European leaders and institutions to start making serious plans for life with a reduced American presence.

Structural Shifts

Is there anything that might wake the US up from its America First slumber? The good news is that there is. The bad news, though, is that this would mean a renewal of cold war-style international politics.

Successors to the Trump presidency will very likely be much more pro-Europe. The problem, however, is that they could be restrained from fully reenergizing the relationship by isolationist and unilateral sentiments among Americans. It will probably take a severe, existential threat to the US to restore relationship fully. I hypothesize that China's rise to peer competitor status will eventually shake the US out of its shell. And when it does, the US will come calling to Europe. The logic is simple.

In a struggle for power and influence between a declining hegemon (the US) and a rising challenger (China), with so much at stake, each side will compete hard, in many different ways.¹⁹ One such way is by searching for new allies, maintaining good relations with existing allies, and even bolstering and tightening ties to new and old allies. After all, allies are key elements of ensuring a regional and systemic balance of power favorable to one of the world's poles. During the cold war, the US supported the revitalization of Western Europe and the construction of an array of new institutions, which helped to prevent a westward communist advance and also deepened US and European ties.

In a future intense rivalry with China, the US will act very similarly. The US will do everything it can to ensure that much of Europe remains united, vibrant, and in its orbit. And it will look to make Europe a bulwark against deep Chinese penetration and influence. On a positive note, Europe is already gradually moving toward America's position on China, as it is beginning to see clearly the depth and scope of the challenges—to the world, yes, but also to itself—presented by China's economic might, technological prowess, and rising political influence on the continent.²⁰

Keeping the US Engaged

What happens in the meantime? Because Trump is a revisionist president who is seemingly bent on weakening, if not outright dismantling, so many things at the heart of good US-Europe relations, it is difficult to envisage America taking the lead on repairing the transatlantic relationship. Maybe a second term of Trump administration would take a softer position toward

¹⁹ This competition between the two leading great powers, a declining hegemon and a rising challenger, for systemic leadership and primacy is often referred to as the "Thucydides Trap." For more on this trap and how it might play out in the future between the US and China, please see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

²⁰ Julianne Smith and Torrey Taussig, "The Old World and the Middle Kingdom," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (September/October 2019).

Europe, but it will not radically change its stripes. Hence, it is likely up to Europe to keep the transatlantic alliance onward and steady.

With that in mind, Europe should aim to prevent the current US-Europe divide from becoming wider and deeper. To accomplish this objective, the key is to work with Trump when he is agreeable and pursuing common interests and around Trump but with the US other times. Such an approach ensures that the various formal and informal networks and channels between America and Europe—the lifeblood of the relationship that routinizes and instantiates cooperation—remain robust. For instance, European leaders, diplomats, and bureaucrats can work with the American Congress and local state governments, strengthen contacts with US universities and think tanks, maintain relationships with out of office US politicians and bureaucrats, and seek out non-profit organizations that are sympathetic to European interests. Some of this, no doubt, is already being done. But more effort is needed, given that the current US president is such a disruptive force.

On the plus side, there is a significant contingent of Americans (liberals, Never Trump conservatives, and libertarians), in and out of the broader US government, who desperately want the US to have a strong partnership with NATO, the EU, and European governments. The other bit of good news is that the US and Europe have a host of common interests on a number of policy issues and countless shared values. EU/NATO nations have to tap into all of these elements. If they do, no matter if Trump is still in the White House, the fundamentals of the transatlantic relationship can be stabilized.

Conclusion

US-Europe relations are on a downward swing during the Trump era. Trump's anti-Europe policies and worldview, along with his constant critiques of European economics, politics, and security institutions, are major sources of tension in the longstanding transatlantic alliance. And his narcissism has led Trump to take credit for disruptive events like Brexit and the rise of populist parties in European governments and the European parliament.²¹ At the same time, Europe's big wigs have created a stir about their intentions to rely less on America's security commitments, given its current unpredictable president. It seems bleak. Do not despair, however. The realities of the relationship say something much different: both the US and Europe need each other.²² The US might think it can get just fine by without support from its political brothers and sisters across the Atlantic. Those attitudes are simply a product of war weariness and economic malaise in certain corners of America. The era of deep international engagement and militarism, so prominent for the first two decades of the post-cold war era, has given way to isolationism and global distrust. This is a temporary respite. The US will wake up and return to the world, and to Europe in particular.

²¹ Mark Landler and Maggie Haberman, "As Trump Dangles Post-Brexit Trade Deal, Some Britons See Opportunism," *The New York Times*, (4 June 2019). Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/world/europe/brexit-trump-theresa-may.html>.

²² Andrew A. Michta, "The United States and Europe Need Each Other," *The American Interest*, (25 October 2016). Accessed at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/10/25/the-united-states-and-europe-need-each-other/>.

What I am describing is a pattern that has repeatedly manifested itself in US foreign policy. First, the US engages in a prolonged war, which triggers domestic malaise and weariness and a foreign policy shift to either full or neo-isolationism. Next, after a brief period of keeping the world at bay, the US is shaken by a global event or unfolding situation, and that provokes an internal reassessment of US foreign policy. Lastly, the pro-internationalists win the policy debate, prompting the US to reengage with the international community. This multi-stage cycle of events illustrates the course of US foreign policy after WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and we are seeing it again today in the waning days of the dual Iraq/Afghan Wars.

Now, the external shock that I predict will draw Washington out of its shell is China's rise to co-equal great power status with the US. Certainly, China will place America's position in Asia in jeopardy, and it will also attempt to challenge America's supremacy globally. (Arguably, this is already happening today.) To have a chance to win that great power competition, the US will need a strong, engaged Europe, one that is roughly in sync with American foreign and defense policy. I am optimistic that will happen. But in the meantime, Europe has to find a way to work with and around the Trump administration. It is what is best for Europe in the short-run, at least until a more friendly transatlantic partner wins the White House.

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