



[Looking West](#)

“America First”

Transatlantic Relations in the Trump Era

[Benjamin Fricke / Nils Wörmer](#)

Contrary to all the isolationist noise Trump made during the campaign, America's foreign policy continues to be one that is more focused on global involvement and is strongly unilateral in nature. Whereas the political culture and style as well as the forms of international relations, even with allies, have radically changed, the essential elements of Trump's foreign and security policy tend to be in line with those of the two previous US presidents.

The primary features of US foreign and security policy in President Trump's first two years were a combination of essential elements from his predecessors, Obama and Bush, but in exaggerated form. Not only have we witnessed the adoption of the Bush administration's strongly unilateral orientation, it was also pursued further, such that the US has left existing central multilateral formats, announced that it would leave others, and been vocal in its criticism of multilateralism in some areas. The Bush administration often acted unilaterally, but not like Trump, who attempts a radical break with all that came before him. A partial withdrawal from the Middle East and Europe was a key concern of Obama's policy; he announced that he would pursue "Nation-Building at Home". Trump's overstated motto, "America first", links seamlessly to Obama's sentiments. What the two presidents have in common is that they were forced to abandon their military and political withdrawals from Europe and the Middle East, and even reverse them, for reasons of Realpolitik.

President Trump's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty on 4 December 2018, and the US government agenda for the next two years as laid out by Secretary of State Pompeo in a speech later the same day, indicate that the US foreign and security policy faces a fundamental paradigm change. While, in theory, Trump is still giving the Russian government a chance to salvage the INF Treaty in a 60-day ultimatum, his Secretary of State has announced nothing less than the radical withdrawal from

the global security architecture whose basic principles have developed since 1945 and 1990. A little later, on 19 December,¹ Trump announced via Twitter that all US forces would be withdrawn from Syria and about half from Afghanistan. It was a complete surprise to European allies and even to his own cabinet. Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, and the US envoy to the global coalition fighting the Islamic State, Brett McGurk, both considered staunch supporters of transatlantic relations, resigned from their offices as a result.

The European Security Situation at the Beginning of the Trump Era

Three events had already shaken the European security architecture and fundamentally changed the determinants of foreign policy action on the part of European states prior to the inauguration of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States on 20 January 2017. These were as follows:

1. The Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula on 21 March 2014 in violation of international law not only heightened the looming Ukraine crisis, but also dispelled Europeans' illusions that, in 21st century Europe, borders could no longer be changed through violence. The relationship between the NATO member states and Russia has since been characterised by a new symmetrical trial of strength in Central Eastern Europe – the sanction policy against Moscow and Russian hybrid warfare.

2. The rise of IS, which conquered large parts of Iraq and Syria that same year (2014), equally threatened the existence of the Middle East system of states and European countries' internal security. The refugee and migration crisis of 2015 and 2016, greatly exacerbated by the chaos in Iraq and Syria, once again revealed that the EU has very limited foreign and security policy capabilities. Even more serious than this were the cracks appearing in the EU community of values as it was forced to receive, distribute, and deal with the hundreds of thousands of refugees that reached Europe at this stage.
3. That the majority of British citizens voted against remaining in the EU during the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016, not only plunged the EU into political chaos, it also seriously weakens Europe as a security policy player over the long-term. While it is often postulated that the European process of reaching a joint foreign and security policy would be quicker without the British, who resist integration, it is clear that the EU is a defence policy lightweight without the United Kingdom. This verdict has been underscored by the fact that in the two and a half years since the referendum, it has become clear that France will be unable and Germany unwilling to compensate for the loss of the United Kingdom's contribution to security and defence policy.

Against this background, many European politicians quickly perceived the results of the US presidential election on 8 November 2016 as a kind of turning point in transatlantic relations. In its security policy core, the relationship between the US and Europe has for decades been characterised by the assurance that European NATO members could seek protection from their transatlantic ally if a threat arose or an adversary was attacked. Even when dealing with security policy challenges in their immediate vicinity, such as the Balkan conflicts of the early 1990s and, for decades, problems in North Africa and the Middle East, Europeans have almost always surrendered the initiative to the

US and been content to play a subordinate role to Washington. These framework conditions no longer seem certain since Donald Trump's election – at the very time when Europe is facing more security policy challenges than has been the case since 1989.

NATO and the Protection of Europe

During the 2016 US presidential election campaign, candidate Donald Trump called NATO “obsolete” and fundamentally questioned justification for the organisation's existence. In light of the more recent Russian foreign policy, which most European NATO members perceive as a threat, and numerous global crises, this led to unprecedented levels of irritation and insecurity on this side of the Atlantic. Despite the European Reassurance Initiative introduced by President Obama, it was unclear in 2016 how Trump would behave. Candidate Trump's open expressions of admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and hints at rapprochement in Russian-American relations exacerbated the loss of confidence in his transatlantic focus.

However, after his inauguration, it quickly became clear that the president's rhetoric often diverges greatly from his actual behaviour. While maintaining his vehement criticism of an unequal burden sharing within the alliance, in a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in April 2017, Trump emphasised that the alliance was not obsolete and enjoyed the full support of the US.² Moreover, the US president even expanded his country's commitment to Europe by upgrading the European Reassurance Initiative to the European Deterrence Initiative through signing the National Defense Authorization Act of 2017. This Act was an implicit recognition by the US administration of the threats perceived by its European allies with respect to Russia. It completed a shift from mere reassurance to deterrence measures. The focus of the recent US activities in Europe is on

- increased troop presence,
- joint training and exercises,
- infrastructure improvement,
- pre-positioned weapons and equipment, and
- expansion of partner capacities.³

The National Defense Authorization Act of June 2017 also calls for expanded US military presence and greater assistance to Ukraine.

Trump complains of an unfair burden sharing within NATO while emphasising that the alliance has the full support of the US.

With a total of 716 billion US dollars, the US defence budget earmarks 82 billion US dollars more than the 2017 budget.⁴ The US president considers a large proportion of these expenses to be a significant contribution towards transatlantic cooperation and support for Europe, whose security the US guarantees with its enormous military might. Trump repeatedly insisted that this service must be paid for and primarily alluded to Germany when demanding, “that these very rich countries either pay the United States for its great military protection, or protect themselves”.⁵ In doing so, he perpetuated a debate that his predecessors George W. Bush and Barack Obama had engaged in with Europe before him, albeit in a more radical manner.⁶ Media reports from January 2019⁷ alleging that Trump had seriously considered withdrawing the US from NATO during his first two years, and could only be prevented from doing so by his closest security policy advisors, indicate that this issue is likely to remain a sword of Damocles hanging over transatlantic security cooperation for the remainder of the term.

Abandoning Multilateralism: Climate Agreement, Nuclear Deal, and INF Treaty

Besides the verbal attacks on NATO, the EU, and the United Nations, the actual and threatened termination of international agreements represents a sticking point with a security policy dimension in the transatlantic relationship. With media-savvy staging and a mixture of domestic policy calculation and foreign policy intimidation scenarios, the US president emphasised his dislike for multilateral formats when he announced that his country would withdraw from the Paris Agreement on 1 June 2017, the nuclear agreement with Iran on 8 May 2018, and, conditionally, the INF Treaty on 4 December 2018.

The termination of the climate agreement, reached only one and a half years before, resulted in fierce reactions from states and civil society in Europe and even in the US, including calls for Trump not to completely shut the door on climate protection. Ultimately, the US president has remained true to his hard line so far, justifying his actions by referring to the ineffectiveness of the climate agreement⁸ and his duty to protect and strengthen the American economy and finally arguing that the Paris agreements were a vehicle for Chinese economic interests. The result is that Europe feels betrayed by the US withdrawal, while the latter accuses the agreement’s supporters of hypocrisy. Climate policy has thus become a great strain on transatlantic trust and in turn to security policy as well.

The US withdrawal on 8 May 2018 from the nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), which was reached after a negotiation marathon between Iran and five permanent UN Security Council members as well as Germany, constitutes a further serious strain on the current transatlantic relationship.⁹ To date, the American allies Israel and Saudi Arabia, including the US itself, have failed to provide proof that Iran is violating the agreement.¹⁰ Trump’s argument that the deal was not working, therefore refers to the hope, as also





Going astray: The possible withdrawal of the US from NATO is likely to remain a sword of Damocles hanging over transatlantic security cooperation in the coming two years. Source: © Reinhard Krause, Reuters.

cherished by Europeans, that the agreement could be used by the international community as a starting point to cooperate with Iran in other areas of conflict. Especially Tehran's expanded missile programme, which is not covered in the JCPOA, and the expansionary policy pursued by Iran in the Middle East since 2015 with the help of non-state agents of violence¹¹, make it clear that no such development has taken place. This made the Iran agreement a "bad deal" according to the US president, and withdrawal therefore only logical. The European approach of adhering to the JCPOA even though it is not perfect, because it represents a hard-fought partial diplomatic success, is diametrically opposed to this line of thinking.

While the European parties to the agreement, including Russia, attempt to salvage the deal

and proceed without the US, Washington has already switched to a hard line towards Tehran, applying political, economic, and military pressure. As a marginal note from a European point of view, it is important to highlight that Trump's approach also fulfilled a central campaign promise, and the president was willing to maintain his Iran policy even against resistance within his own cabinet. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, two supporters of the deal, ultimately found themselves replaced by two outspoken opponents of it in Mike Pompeo and John Bolton.

A further international bombshell was the termination of the 1987 bilateral treaty (the Washington Treaty) on intermediate-range nuclear systems. This treaty bans all land-based

short- and intermediate-range missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. The Obama administration became aware of Russian violations of the treaty as early as 2014. The Putin government is evidently building intermediate-range missiles in contravention of the INF Treaty. These missiles are tracked under the NATO code name SSC-8,¹² and the US government tried in vain to persuade Russia to comply with the treaty. Another factor leading to the treaty's termination is its non-binding nature with respect to China. For some time, the People's Republic has built and placed ballistic DF-26 missiles, also called "Guam killers".¹³ These missiles can target Guam, one of the most important US bases in the Pacific, and US aircraft carriers. The INF Treaty prevents the US from developing land-based short- and intermediate-range missiles. Its only remaining option is the Tomahawk cruise missiles, which are both costly and complex.¹⁴ Terminating the INF Treaty is therefore, from the point of view of the US government, the natural consequence of ongoing treaty violations on the part of Russia, of new geopolitical realities in the Pacific region, and of increased Chinese weapon system capabilities. The current US administration's fundamental strategic defence and arms policy agenda was illustrated by the US president's announcement on 18 June 2018 on the formation of the US Space Force as a separate branch of the US military, joining the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard on equal footing, and, on 17 January 2019, of the introduction of an initiative for constructing a missile defence system, some of which will be space-based, indicates the current US administration's fundamental strategic defence and arms policy agenda.

Trump's Relationship with Russia

Probably the most difficult and complex bilateral relationships for the Trump administration are those with Russia and Vladimir Putin, and this is partly due to the domestic policy dimension of this relationship. The accusations of Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election severely strains the Russian-American

relationship, and the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into potential collusion by the US president has cast a shadow over his term of office. Moreover, Russia's policy in almost all areas of conflict in Europe and the Middle East has long been opposed to US interests. In Syria, Moscow used military means to secure the survival of its traditional Middle East ally, Assad, who the US had been working to topple since 2011. In the conflicts with Ukraine and Georgia, Russia and the US have fundamentally divergent ideas, as testified by Washington's financial and military commitments in the Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Poland.¹⁵

These regional conflicts strain the important renegotiation of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II), which expires in 2021 and limits the number of nuclear warheads to 1,550 and delivery systems to 700 on each side.¹⁶ There is a danger that START II will be terminated similar to the INF Treaty. A further difficulty in Russian-American relations is hybrid warfare and attempts at covert influence by Russian agencies in Europe. For instance, the US government clearly took the British side in the case of a nerve gas attack on former Russian agent Skripal in Salisbury, England. In sum, despite Trump's verbal overtures at the beginning of his presidency, Trump's term of office marks the lowest point for Russian-American relations since the end of the Cold War.¹⁷

Trump's Middle East and Syria Policy

The Jerusalem Embassy Act, passed by both houses of Congress back in 1995,¹⁸ prepared the ground for relocating the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The move never took place because President Clinton signed a waiver preventing the implementation, and American Presidents continued to do so for the next 23 years.¹⁹ Despite massive protests, it was President Trump who finally ordered the move²⁰ on 6 December 2017.²¹ A further source of conflict was the closing of the US Consulate General for Palestinian affairs in East Jerusalem and its merging with the new US embassy in Jerusalem.²² The decision to move the embassy from

Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognising the latter as Israel's capital, was criticised and rejected by many European countries, including Germany. While the Israeli government welcomed this step as recognition on the part of the US of the right of Israel and the Jewish people to exist that could only be expressed in this form, President Trump's announcement around one year later, on 19 December 2018, that US troops would be withdrawn from neighbouring Syria, sent shock waves through Israel.

Trump's announcement that the US would withdraw from Syria sent a shock wave through Israel.

In Syria, Trump was at first committed to abandoning the policy of his predecessor, who had initially decided to intervene in the conflict in 2013 by declaring the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime a "red line" for the US government. Only much later did Trump begin to criticise Obama's inconsistency on the "red line" Obama had himself drawn; Trump has gone as far as repeatedly reiterating the ultimatum, most recently in early 2019²³ via his National Security Advisor, John Bolton. In light of the different rhetoric during the election campaign, the first of two big military actions by the Trump administration came as a complete surprise to many observers. On 7 April 2017, US forces carried out a unilateral cruise missile attack on the Syrian air base in Shayrat in the western part of the country, following alleged use of poison gas by the regime. One year later, on 14 April 2018, in reaction to another obvious use of chemical weapons by the regime, there was a more comprehensive attack, in which France and the United Kingdom participated, against Syrian chemical weapons programme facilities. In retrospect, both attacks were punishment for Assad's use of chemical weapons and not intended to fundamentally alter the balance of power in the Syrian conflict.

Regardless of these two military actions, it is important to examine the use of American Special Forces in eastern Syria. These forces were once again expanded under Trump to 3,000, deployed largely in Syria's northeast and along the Iraq border. In terms of deconflicting alone, the presence of these forces on Syrian soil led to ongoing dialogue between Washington and Moscow about the two countries' military activities in Syria; whereby it was possible to counterbalance Russian dominance to some extent. What is more, the presence of US forces in Syria's northeast and east also held Turkish and Iranian interventions in the country in check. The withdrawal of these forces, as initiated in early 2019, means that the US is not only losing central access to information resulting from having troops on the ground, but also one of the few trump cards they have to play in discussions over Syria's future. This explains much of the discontent and perplexity on the part of many European politicians regarding the de facto withdrawal of the US from the Syrian conflict. Scarcely any European government would deny having fundamental interests in Syria: regional stability, the stemming of refugee flows, and the continued containment of terrorist groups. The US withdrawal from Syria gives the European allies a foretaste of what it means to be abandoned in the face of conflicts and adversaries that pose a greater threat to Europe than to the US.

Afghanistan and the "War on Terror"

What is likely one of the most difficult tasks of US foreign policy is successfully ending the Afghanistan mission, which has been ongoing since 2001. As presidential candidate, Trump promised voters a quick withdrawal of troops from the Hindu Kush. He repeatedly demonised the policy of his predecessor, saying that it was a waste of money and resources. Nevertheless, as president, in August 2017 he announced a new strategy for Afghanistan that called for a slight rise in the number of troops there. This strategy essentially intended to greatly strengthen Afghan Special Forces and advance the development of Afghan air power, especially air transport and close air support.

The Afghan Special Forces are to assume the primary burden of combat in the future, supported from the air. Regular army units are to function as security forces and consolidate the success of the Special Forces, while the Afghan police are to return to their actual task of fighting crime. Given the strategic deadlock between the government and the Taliban, the Pentagon linked this approach to the expectation of a positive trend in the course of 2018 and the recovery of five to ten per cent of the territory controlled or contested by the Taliban. This was to revive the peace process and allow negotiations with the Taliban to proceed from a position of strength. In November 2018, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General, Joseph Dunford, admitted that the strategy had not been as successful as hoped.

Trump's announcement on 19 December 2018, that the number of US troops in Afghanistan would be halved within the near future, was met with surprise and concern both among allies and in US security circles alike; despite the fact that no specific order to draw down troops has been issued, as it has in Syria. From a German point of view, the continued civil-military effort focused on Afghanistan's northern provinces is greatly dependent on the American contribution elsewhere in the country. Moreover, the Afghanistan policy is also one of the few security policy areas in which Berlin and Washington have had virtually no differences over the last few years. The continuation of US forces' anti-terror mission, in which there is no German involvement and is separate from NATO's Resolute Support mission, is obviously unquestioned. The future of the stabilising mission in Afghanistan, on the other hand, seems less clear than ever in view of the fact that the US is considering withdrawal. There are many reasons why a European initiative is unlikely without the US.

Conclusion

Trump's rhetorical excesses and escapades while investigations are conducted into his affairs and those of his closest advisors, are a part of the new American reality. Contrary to

all the isolationist noises Trump made during the campaign, America's foreign policy continues to be one that is more focused on global involvement than on isolationist policies, and is strongly unilateral in nature. Whereas the political culture and style as well as the forms of international relations, even with allies, have radically changed, the essential elements of Trump's foreign and security policy tend to be in line with those of the two previous US presidents. The extent to which this might change following the mid-term elections and in view of a possible total US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, as announced by Secretary of State Pompeo, remains to be seen.

The clear positioning of the US Congress and the political actions of the president since early 2017 have greatly contributed to dispelling European concerns about Trump's susceptibility to Russian influence and manipulation. Moreover, the US President has declared himself willing to answer all of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's questions through his attorney, Rudolph Giuliani. How the investigation pans out and which domestic policy consequences result from this, also remain to be seen. Trump continues to maintain that Russia had no influence on the result of the 2016 US presidential election, but admits that Russia did attempt to manipulate that election.²⁴

The US withdrawal from the climate agreement, which, at its core, requires signatories to put the interests of the international community before their own, is a first-class reflection of Trump's "America first" attitude. The US government's behaviour with respect to the Iran nuclear agreement and the INF Treaty with Russia follows an entirely different logic. The concern here is America's own perception of threats in connection with the conviction that the country's own strength is all that is needed to bring about acceptable treaty results and ultimately peaceful solutions. The doctrine of "peace through strength" introduced by Trump's first National Security Advisor, Flynn, on 10 January 2017, implied the (conditional) threat or use of military force towards adversaries. In the



case of Russia, this means that the US will meet attempts to change the balance of ballistic missiles and undermine American deterrence by upgrading the American arsenal.

While the overlap in identical political goals, joint solution approaches to international challenges, and uniform strategies in conflict management has definitely shrunk, NATO remains by far the most important common project for transatlantic relations. This is not only because the alliance appears to be the only international

organisation that President Trump considers relatively useful for his country. Germany and the European NATO members have begun to recognise that this US administration takes the issue of even distribution of costs very seriously, and it will not be fobbed off when it comes to contractually agreed alliance obligations.

While European experts squabble about whether a European army and “strategic autonomy” from the US are merely visions and illusions,



Retreat? Trump's announcement, that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan would be halved within the near future, was met with worldwide surprise and concern. Source: © Carlos Barria, Reuters.

one fact is clear: At present – and foreseeably for years to come – the United States will remain the only nation capable of and, under certain conditions, willing to effectively protect Germany and its European allies against all conceivable threats. This includes symmetrical, asymmetrical, and hybrid threats in all five warfare dimensions (land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace) in equal measure. The EU will remain unable to guarantee this degree of security for the foreseeable future and has a limited capability of defending Germany and its European allies on its own.

Developing an autonomous European defence capability will be a very long process, even assuming that the necessary political framework conditions can be put in place over the short-term. Currently this process is being hampered by the structural challenges and Europe’s technological deficits, especially in the areas of technical security agency intelligence work and defensive and offensive cyber warfare, and most notably by the attitudes of Germany and the United Kingdom. Brexit strips the EU of the most powerful and willing security policy player on the European continent. Germany has lost its status as the guarantor and backbone of Europe’s conventional defence and is a long way from regaining it. What is more, it must also compensate for the loss of the defence policy capabilities of the United Kingdom.

Germany and its allies should therefore make it clear that recent efforts to achieve “more Europe” in security and defence policy are not aimed against the US, but, on the contrary, seek to distribute the burden within NATO more evenly by strengthening the alliance’s European pillar.

–translated from German–

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- 23 Cf. Hewitt, Hugh 2019: The red line in Syria is still there. In fact, it's a darker red., The Denver Post, 6 Jan 2019, in: <https://dpo.st/2HoyJGj> [22 Jan 2019].
- 24 However, Trump's rhetorical excesses and the ongoing investigations against the president are only one part of the new American reality. Despite all Trump's isolationist rhetoric during the election campaign, the new American foreign policy style is more unilateral than isolationist.