



[Looking West](#)

# Disenchantment

The European View of Transatlantic Relations

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The result of the US presidential elections in 2016 came as something of a surprise for political leaders in the EU. During the campaign, many of Europe's heads of state and government and also the heads of EU institutions had made it clear to a greater or lesser extent that they backed Hillary Clinton to be the next US president.<sup>1</sup> Now they had to adjust to an American president whose programme seemed to be a declaration of war against established European positions and interests in many respects.

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The initial shock that followed in the wake of the election has now given way to something that can best be described not as relief or horror but as disenchantment. While the Europeans' fears about certain issues (particularly concerning relations with Russia and NATO) have not yet been confirmed, in other areas (such as trade and climate policy) the Trump administration has proved to be the difficult partner that Europe expected it to be.

The uncertainty caused by the new transatlantic relationship has sparked a wide range of responses in Europe. On the one hand, there is the search for alternative partners in specific policy areas. At the same time, Europe is trying to keep the line of communication open with Washington. Internally, the EU has proved to be very stable – contrary to the hopes of the EU's opponents, Trump's election failed to trigger a process of disintegration in the EU. On the other hand, it has not (yet) led to decisive steps being taken towards creating strategic autonomy within the EU. We can observe initial, albeit rather tentative, approaches to an internal process of reflection on the EU's role in the world and the consequences for its trade, foreign, and defence policies. In short, the EU feels a sense of disenchantment. It has suffered a rude awakening from a transatlantic dream in which the USA is an eternally reliable, selfless partner that is prepared to relieve the Europeans of major burdens in their partnership and in global politics.

### **A New Transatlantic Unpredictability**

In many ways, from a European point of view, the first two years of the Trump presidency can best be described as an experience of a new transatlantic unpredictability. If we look beyond the issue of the new president's style and foreign policy preferences, one of the Europeans' biggest fears was that he would pull out of key international treaties and gradually reduce the US's commitment to multilateral international institutions. While some concerns relating to the transatlantic security partnership turned out to be, if not unfounded, then at least exaggerated (such as fears of a US deal with Russia over Ukraine and the consequent weakening of the Minsk negotiating format), other worries have been confirmed:

The relativisation of international institutions and agreements, and Trump's unpredictability at various summits (such as the G7) have been viewed with concern in Brussels and most EU capitals. A functioning multilateral order is vital for maintaining security and prosperity in Europe. Accordingly, it is not only the termination of international treaties (such as the climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal) and the threat posed by tariffs on steel and aluminium that are a cause for concern, but above all the very fundamental doubts about what the EU considers to be vital pillars of the multilateral world order, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The USA's attitude, which is perceived as confrontational, uncooperative and unpredictable, led to a sense of disillusionment that has

even permeated the most convinced supporters of trans-Atlanticism. Symbolic of this were the bitter words expressed by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, at a press conference on the fringes of a special European Council summit in Sofia in May 2018. He stated that “Looking at the latest decisions of Donald Trump, someone could even think: With friends like that, who needs enemies?” and “Thanks to him, we have got rid of all illusions. He has made us realise that if you need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of your arm.”<sup>2</sup> These comments did not just express his own personal opinion. At the subsequent Council summit, the vast majority of leaders privately welcomed Tusk’s unvarnished statements.

The often perceived as erratic style of the new American administration and especially the new US president has also caused considerable consternation. Several of the EU member states have coalition governments in party systems, which, despite all the changes, are still based more on compromise than conflict. Trump’s discourse, which is focused on polarisation, deals, and confrontation, resembles the anti-system discourse propagated by right-wing populist parties within their countries. The EU machinery was accustomed to weighing up different interests, but now it has had to switch to a negotiating partner who works on the basis of zero-sum games and deals.

### **The EU’s Response**

The EU has responded in a number of ways, including strengthening its own capabilities, searching for alternative partners, attempting to engage, and dissociating itself.

#### *1. Increased European Cooperation and Coordination on Security Policy*

Trump’s erratic foreign policy decisions and conditional support for European security structures have given renewed impetus to ongoing considerations about strengthening the Common Security and Defence Policy:<sup>3</sup> The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was

established in December 2017. This enables a group of particularly qualified member states to work together more closely on defence policy (interoperability, armaments, research). In addition, the European Defence Fund was set up, with the aim of supporting defence research and the development of capabilities. From 2021, each year, 500 million euros will flow into a defence research programme. In tandem, up



to one billion euros a year are to be mobilised in the long term to promote the joint development of capabilities. The objective is to avoid a widening of the already considerable gap with the United States in both these areas. What is more, the new European Peace Facility is to finance CSDP missions and support operations in third countries. In light of these dynamics, both representatives of the EU and member

states alike stress that more has happened in the CSDP in the last 15 months than in the last 15 years. Nevertheless, the EU remains light years away from the goal of “strategic autonomy” as formulated in the Global Strategy adopted in 2016. In the medium to long term, the steps adopted are likely to lead to an increase in Europe’s effectiveness in terms of security policy. In the short term, there is a question mark



Future and Past? When old alliances crumble, Europe must strive more to form new ones. Source: © Dan Kitwood, Reuters.

over its willingness to carry out high-intensity military operations in its own neighbourhood if it became necessary. However, the steps taken at least have the potential to make European countries better partners within the transatlantic alliance: a stronger CSDP will meaningfully complement the transatlantic security partnership, but it is not in a position to replace it in the foreseeable future. For the Baltic countries in particular, but also for Poland, NATO security guarantees remain a more important guarantee for their integrity than the still unclearly defined solidarity clause in the Lisbon Treaty. It is worth noting how a number of Central European countries responded to the US president's demand for an increase in defence spending with assurances that they would actually increase it to two per cent from 2018. In addition, opinions still differ on the purpose and direction of the CSDP. A strategic debate on how the EU plans to position itself in the emerging strategic competition and the future global situation is just beginning to take shape. There is no doubt that Trump's policy has led to increased momentum in European security and defence cooperation, but the numerous obstacles that have prevented cooperation in this sensitive policy area over recent decades still remain.

**In the area of trade policy, agreements have been successfully concluded with other countries, thus compensating for the withdrawal of the USA.**

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*2. Closer Collaboration with Like-Minded People at a Global Level*

In light of the United States' withdrawal from a number of multilateral formats and forums, there have been repeated attempts to build a "coalition of the willing" based on particular issues, i.e. closer cooperation with countries that regard the importance of multilateral institutions and

treaties as similarly important and that also share the European value system where possible.

In the area of trade policy, efforts to politically and economically compensate for the currently stalled TTIP, have been relatively successful: a free trade agreement has been signed with Japan, which, according to the parties involved, even the White House considers to be a notable success for Europe. Since April, there has also been an agreement in principle on a free trade agreement with Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Talks on free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand have been underway since May 2018. Negotiations with Mercosur have been tough but are now well advanced. In addition to these partners, negotiations on free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam have been finalised, too. The advantage here (especially when compared to security policy), is that trade policy is a common EU policy and the EU can negotiate as the single representative of a 500-million-strong bloc. Overall, the EU has demonstrated unity in its trade policy.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to climate policy, there has been a closing of ranks after the withdrawal of the US, at least based on the lowest common denominator. In response to the American president's announcement that he was pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, European heads of state and government reaffirmed their joint commitment to the Agreement.<sup>6</sup> In parallel, the EU came together with other key partners such as China, Japan, and Canada to reaffirm its commitment to upholding the terms of the Agreement and taking ambitious action to implement it. As things stand, the aim of maintaining a global consensus on the Agreement has been achieved despite the US withdrawal.<sup>7</sup>

*3. Europe Closes Ranks Towards the US*

The EU member states have maintained a remarkable degree of unity on some key issues: Attempts by the US to drive a wedge between Europeans on trade issues continue to be fruitless. Last May, there was a certain amount of disagreement about what price they were prepared to pay to avoid a possible trade war. The



European Commission, Germany, and the previous Italian government were particularly keen to explore the widest possible range of options for dialogue, while France and Spain were more intransigent. Ultimately, however, they succeeded in presenting a united front in this respect. Discussions followed a similar trajectory in other formats, such as at the G7. At the same time, the unpredictability of the Trump administration's policies has unintentionally led to a large question mark hanging over a key argument put forward by Brexit supporters. Under the slogan "Global Britain", many Brexiteers believed they would at least be able to compensate for the economic damage caused by leaving the EU. One of the main building blocks of this concept was forging closer ties with the United States. Hopes were also fuelled by the fact that the US president seemed to take a pro-Brexit stance. Yet, these hopes have now been severely dampened by his unpredictable and rather less sentimental "America First" policy.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Trump's election has weakened rather than strengthened centrifugal forces within the EU.

## Alternatives to the transatlantic partnership are thin on the ground.

### 4. *(Temporary) Lack of Alternatives to the USA as the Key Global Partner?*

This awakening from the transatlantic dream world is even more rude due to the sobering realisation that alternatives to the transatlantic partnership are thin on the ground.

This means that terminating the transatlantic alliance is not an option. Despite the many uncertainties in the transatlantic relationship, past calls from various quarters for a policy of equidistance between the US and Russia have tended to be faint and voiced on the political margins. Its role in the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts means that Russia has lost all credibility as an alternative partner in the eyes of many EU

politicians. Furthermore, despite a brief honeymoon period, which can probably be explained by China's adherence to the Climate Agreement, the majority of member states only have limited levels of trust in China. Their interests in other policy areas (such as trade and industry) are simply too different. However, it is possible that this could change over time: China is trying to gain a foothold in Europe by ramping up investment, particularly in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe, for example through the 16+1 initiative. Some EU member states are already considered particularly susceptible to Chinese influence.

### 5. *The Attempt to Integrate*

As things stand, in many areas there is no alternative to a close transatlantic partnership. The EU has thus been making every effort to reopen discussions on a number of issues, particularly in relation to global trade. It is keen to ensure the United States get involved in reforming the WTO in order to make this organisation remain fit for purpose. The same applies to ongoing efforts to at least hold talks about trade agreements, even if it is not possible to revive the frozen Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement.

The member states have adopted a variety of approaches towards the US administration in general and the president in particular. Several heads of government have made a conscious effort to build a personal relationship with the American president, often through gestures, such as the ceremonial reception afforded to Donald Trump in Paris by French President Emmanuel Macron. However, it is still generally difficult to assess the practical value of such gestures for actual policy. Some voices, including those around Commission President Juncker, point out that tough negotiations on this issue have paid off – more so than seeking to compromise at any price.

### 6. *Resonance in the Political Landscape*

The effect of the new US administration on Europe's political landscape needs to be considered in a nuanced way, and it is not yet possible to draw any final conclusions. It is certainly



worth noting how the political discourse in Europe has begun using concepts and symbols from the last American election campaign. For example, (new) populist figures in various member states are now often compared to the US president (“Czech Trump”, “Latvian Trump”, “Flemish Trump”). Many right-wing populist and conservative nationalist parties felt that Trump’s victory gave them a boost, while also giving greater encouragement to break taboos in their national political discourse. However, the picture is less clear (yet) when it comes to actual collaboration between political parties. Immediately after the election, the leaders of several right-wing populist movements in the EU claimed that Trump’s victory marked the start of right-wing populism’s triumph over the mainstream. UKIP leader Nigel Farage was one of the first to congratulate the American president on his election victory. Marine Le Pen was also quick off the mark, but went on to suffer a resounding defeat in the second round of the French presidential elections. In the Netherlands and France, centrists ultimately won the elections. It also quickly became clear that associating too closely with Trump was not necessarily popular with voters. The US ambassador to Germany attracted strong criticism when stating that one of his aims was to strengthen right-wing movements<sup>9</sup> in Europe. However, overly ostentatious displays of closeness are rather few and far between – the appearance of the *Front National*’s young star Marion Maréchal le Pen at a Republican party congress in February 2018 was the exception rather than the rule. The success of Stephen Bannon’s initiative *The Movement* has been rather modest thus far. At a press conference, launching their alliance for the upcoming European elections in October 2018, the leader of the Italian *Lega Nord*, Matteo Salvini, and Marine Le Pen both distanced

themselves from this movement. They were quoted as saying that Bannon was not a European and their own alliance would decide with whom they wanted to work.<sup>10</sup> So far, Bannon’s main ally is Mickael Modrikamen, leader of the Belgian French-speaking PP, which plays a very marginal role in Walloon politics and has little hope of gaining a seat in the European Parliament. Bannon’s visits to other politicians, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, caused a stir, but it remains to be seen whether the resulting cooperation will actually have much of an impact. Overall, it remains to be seen to what extent Bannon’s efforts will have an impact on the campaign, the outcome and the aftermath of the EP elections.<sup>11</sup>

The traditionally pro-transatlantic parties that belong to the European People’s Party (EPP) face a challenge with the current administration. On the one hand, they are committed to the transatlantic alliance, not only for economic and security policy reasons, but also based on shared values. They also have ties to the Republicans, which have been strengthened through their affiliation with the IDU (International Democratic Union) and many decades of interaction. On the other hand, there is now a president whose view of politics was ostentatiously denounced by quite a few EPP politicians shortly before the election; a president who called the EU an enemy and whose rhetoric is reminiscent of that of the *Front National*, UKIP or the Dutch PVV. In view of this dilemma, the EPP is trying out a more differentiated strategy:

1. Allow no doubts about the fundamental importance and priority of the transatlantic partnership to rise.
2. Establish and maintain contacts with like-minded voices outside the White House, especially in Congress and civil society.<sup>12</sup>
3. Treat the demands of the USA on a case-by-case basis: signal concessions in areas where criticism is perceived as justified (such as demands for a stronger commitment to security policy).

← Friend, partner, enemy: Calls for a policy of equidistance between the US and Russia have tended to be faint despite transatlantic unpredictability. Source: © Benoit Tessier, Reuters.



4. Object vigorously in word and deed whenever the EU or the idea of European integration is fundamentally attacked.

Nevertheless, the ideologically broad EPP family includes members with a wide range of attitudes towards the Trump administration. The parties with a Christian Democratic leaning or the keen advocates of multilateral institutions view Trump's policies, and above all his words and stance towards the EU, very critically. In addition, the EPP's leader Manfred Weber criticised Trump's decision to pull the US out of the Iran nuclear deal (calling it "a strategic mistake"), a view echoed by David McAllister, Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, the right wing of the EPP faction has more sympathy with Trump. Overall, there is a party-wide consensus that the close transatlantic relationship should not be fundamentally called into question, even despite Trump.

### Differences between Member States

There are many differences of opinion among the EU member states, and not everyone is concerned about the changes. Poland's PiS government, which was accused of having rather cool relations with President Obama, is very reliant on the US military presence. In September 2018, the Polish president declared that he wanted "Fort Trump" – in other words, a permanent US military base in Poland.

### Not all EU member states are disillusioned by the current changes.

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This is also reflected in the EU member states' public opinion of Donald Trump and his administration: Although mistrust of the American president is very pronounced across most of the EU (in a Gallup poll, the US president's approval rating fell from 44 per cent to 25 per cent between 2016 and 2017, whilst disapproval

ratings skyrocketed from 36 per cent to 56 per cent), there are also some pronounced differences. For instance, the president's approval rating declined particularly strongly in Western Europe, the Scandinavian countries and the Iberian Peninsula. In Sweden, Portugal, the Benelux countries, Denmark, Spain, France, Austria, and Germany, around two-thirds or more of respondents rated the American leadership negatively. Only four EU countries gave mainly positive ratings: Poland, Italy, Hungary, and Romania. In Poland (56 per cent approval), the president is more popular than his predecessor, unlike in the traditionally US-friendly Baltic states, for example.<sup>14</sup>

### Is this Disenchantment Long Overdue?

Many changes are closely linked to the current administration, such as fundamental doubts about the value of the transatlantic partnership and international institutions, but also questions about trade policy. However, some changes are of a structural nature and have been underway for many years. They have simply been highlighted by the current situation. This is the case when it comes to calls for Europe to play a more active role in foreign, security, and defence policy, and for increased partisanship (from the point of view of the United States) in relations with China and Iran. In many respects, the state of transatlantic relations is forcing the EU and its member states to engage in a strategic debate for which the EU has previously been inadequately prepared. The current situation is making this much clearer. While the USA are already developing strategies in anticipation of increased strategic competition with China, the EU is still a long way from developing a common strategy on China. The EU, its member states, but also its media audiences still live in a very Eurocentric world. In some cases, White House decisions on global politics are perceived as being anti-Europe, when in fact they are aimed at China or other major players. As far as Washington is concerned, the consequences for Europe are accepted side effects rather than the intended aim. Europe is only slowly beginning to define its interests and strategies for its

own neighbourhood and to furnish the necessary diplomatic and military means. The longer it takes to mobilise the tangible and intangible resources that are necessary to play an active regional and global role, the more Europe is in danger of getting left behind by the key global players, the USA and China, and becoming a pawn in their hands.

Thus, it was probably inevitable that the EU would have to wake up from its transatlantic dream, but the current US administration has made this awakening rather more abrupt than the EU would have liked. The main challenge for the EU is to make it clear, even to a more difficult transatlantic partner, that – moving beyond short-term deals – functioning international institutions and close transatlantic cooperation can be vital factors in strategic global competition and are, therefore, also in the interests of the USA.

*–translated from German–*

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- 1 Cf. i.a. Ariès, Quentin 2016: Jean-Claude Juncker supports ‘a female candidate’ as US president, Politico, 25 Jul 2016, in: <https://politi.co/2AOkEfl> [14 Jan 2019].
- 2 Baczyńska, Gabriela 2018: EU’s Tusk asks – ‘With friends like Trump, who needs enemies?’, Reuters, 16 May 2018, in: <https://reut.rs/2RNDhtY> [14 Jan 2019].
- 3 An overview of the key measures and their possible effects can be found here: Wientzek, Olaf 2018: Umsetzung statt Utopie – Ein erster Zwischenstand zur Reform der Gemeinsamen Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik, Analysen & Argumente 313, 08/2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2TTTrIyZ> [14 Jan 2019].
- 4 Cf. European Commission 2018: EU and Mexico reach new agreement on trade, press release, 21 Apr 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2HkBNTz> [14 Jan 2019].
- 5 On the discussions in the European Council see also: Ludlow, Peter 2018: March: challenges of the digital era, EMU present and future, trade policy, Russia, Turkey, migration policy and Brexit, European Council Briefing Note 2018/2, in: <https://bit.ly/2CmjIVg> [14 Jan 2019].
- 6 Cf. Europe Daily Bulletin 2017: In their reply to Mr Trump, European leaders reaffirm their strong commitment to Paris Agreement, Europe Daily Bulletin No. 11813, 21 Jun 2017, in: <https://bit.ly/2SVgREu> [14 Jan 2019].
- 7 Cf. Europe Daily Bulletin 2018: EU and Japan reaffirm commitment to ambitious action to implement Paris Agreement, Europe Daily Bulletin No. 12065, 18 Jul 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2FqjKdn> [14 Jan 2019]; Europe Daily Bulletin 2018: CETA – EU and Canada commit to work together to implement Paris Agreement, Europe Daily Bulletin No. 12105, 27 Sep 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2CkojC7> [14 Jan 2019].
- 8 Reference to article by Ulrich Speck, also Ludlow, Peter 2018: May 16–17 in Sofia: Innovation and Digital, Iran, Trade and the Western Balkans, European Council Briefing Note 2018/3, in: <https://bit.ly/2QN9LjA> [14 Jan 2019]; see also: Marshall, Adam 2018: Trump’s tariffs spell it out: Brexit Britain can’t rely on the US, The Guardian, 1 Jun 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2HbbTNh> [14 Jan 2019].
- 9 Although this term did not refer to right-wing populist movements only, but also to conservative parties.
- 10 Cf. Europe Daily Bulletin 2018: Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini promise to represent an alternative to European leadership, Europe Daily Bulletin No. 12112, 9 Oct 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2FyU1OZ> [14 Jan 2019].
- 11 For a generally critical look at the prospects of success for Bannon’s efforts in the EU see: MacShane, Denis 2018: Trump playbook won’t work for Europe’s right, Opinion, 21 Aug 2018, in: <https://politi.co/2wgh0bo> [14 Jan 2019].
- 12 See EVP Policy Paper 2017. See also: EURACTIV 2019: Weber: If Trump treats Europe as an enemy, we’ll defend our industry, EURACTIV.com, 3 Jan 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/2HaffVN> [14 Jan 2019].
- 13 Cf. Banks, Martin / Levy-Abegnoli, Julie 2018: EU urged to uphold Iran nuclear deal as Trump pulls out, The Parliament Magazine, 9 May 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2FZsjHJ> [14 Jan 2019].
- 14 Cf. Gallup 2018: World Leaders rating: 2018, The U.S. vs. Germany, China and Russia, Politico, in: <https://politi.co/2rBDQrE> [14 Jan 2019].