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[Looking West](#)

The Fast-Forward President

How Donald Trump Accelerates Long-Term Trends

Paul Linnarz

Hopes that Western allies would be able to better assert themselves following US mid-term elections are unfounded; preparations for the current political position begun long ago. However, new agreements remain possible. Within the US, resistance to President Trump's position is growing.

More than two years after his assumption of office, Donald Trump can confidently be regarded as unique in his style of communication. His statements on-camera and via Twitter annoy, affront, and even shock not only political opponents in his own country, but also allies abroad. Those who hoped that Trump would strike a more conciliatory tone after the US mid-term elections on 6 November, and try to find common ground with his allies abroad, were disabused of this notion in the weeks that followed.

In early January, the US president said at a cabinet meeting, "I don't care about Europe. I'm not elected by Europeans."¹ Only days later, it became known that the US government, as of 2018, is no longer officially treating the EU delegation in Washington as an embassy, but merely as representatives of an international organisation. The downgrade had apparently not been coordinated with Brussels.

To journalists, Trump expressed sympathy for the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, saying, "Terrorists were going into Russia. They [the Soviet Union] were right to be there." At the same time, he said, the conflict triggered the collapse of the Soviet Union: "Afghanistan made [the Soviet Union] Russia because [the Soviet Union] went bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan."² The Afghan government was outraged at this justification of the invasion and requested immediate clarification from Washington. Meanwhile, Vice President Mike Pence confirmed at least a partial withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

Shortly before Christmas, Donald Trump had announced his intention to withdraw troops from Syria. "We have defeated ISIS in Syria," the President tweeted, "my only reason for being

there during the Trump Presidency."³ European allies reacted to this decision with astonishment and concern; the move was also met with incomprehension among members of Congress and the administration. One day after the president's announcement, Secretary of Defense James Mattis submitted his letter of resignation.

Fundamentally, however, these controversial positions held by the US president are far from new. For one thing, Trump continues to hold fast to demands that he formulated for the most part even before taking office in January 2017: Europe: Okay! Trade: Sure! NATO: Gladly! But only as long as these things are "fair" from an American point of view. But more decisively, despite the great differences in style and tone, certain positions and tendencies of US policy can be traced back for years and sometimes decades.

Foreign Policy Has Seen it all Before

When Washington announced in mid-2017 that it was leaving the Paris Agreement, the fact that the US had refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol back in 2001 under President George W. Bush seemed almost forgotten. Economic policy considerations prompted Bush to reject maximum limits for carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. At a campaign rally in October 2018, Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) with Russia, waking memories of 2002, when the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM).

Donald Trump's term of office is not the first time that Iran has been accused of supporting terrorists in the Middle East. Former President Bush added Tehran to the "Axis of Evil" in 2002

based on just such accusations. Trump made the same accusation (“The Iranian regime is the leading state sponsor of terror”) in May 2018, at the beginning of his announcement that the US would withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA).⁴

And then comes the matter of trade: In this area, tariffs on steel and aluminium imports were not invented by the current administration, either. Back in 2002, President Bush considered such tariffs a suitable means of supporting an ailing US metal-processing industry. Unlike today’s White House, however, Bush did not justify his actions by citing “the effects on national security”. Instead, he said during a visit to Egypt, “[...] we’re a free-trading nation and in order to remain a free-trading nation we must enforce [the] law. And that’s exactly what I did. I decided that imports were severely affecting our industry – an important industry [...] And therefore [tariffs of up to 30 per cent] provide temporary relief so that the industry can restructure itself.”⁵ His predecessor, Bill Clinton, had accused Bush of doing too little to protect workers from cheap imports – during a period in which “free trade” was one of the core principles of Republican policy. Incidentally, the steel workers’ union and leading Democrats then criticised the Republican president in 2002 for not raising the tariffs to at least 40 per cent.

However, in face of the fact that steel imports were declining anyway, few economic experts were surprised when the World Trade Organisation (WTO) declared the tariffs illegal at the end of 2003.⁶ This example shows why Washington is still either sceptical of binding multilateral arbitration or rejects it altogether. In August, Donald Trump described the founding of the WTO two and a half decades ago as “the single worst trade deal ever made”. The organisation had treated the US “very badly”, he said. “If they don’t shape up, I would withdraw from the WTO.”⁷

Then there is NATO: The members of the alliance had agreed in a 2002 Prague meeting that they would allocate sufficient resources

to defence. The reference point that was stipulated was two per cent of each country’s gross domestic product. At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, the two per cent benchmark was confirmed: “Allies whose current proportion of GDP spent on defence is below this level will: halt any decline in defence expenditure; aim to increase defence expenditure in real terms as GDP grows; aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets and filling NATO’s capability shortfalls.”⁸ In sum, as the website of Germany’s Federal Ministry of





Faded glory: Trump supporters associate his presidency with the hope for the old times to return. [Source: © Joshua Lott, Reuters.](#)

Defence somewhat more succinctly notes, it is intended “that by 2024 at the latest, all NATO allies will spend two per cent of their national gross domestic products on defence measures.”⁹

Of course, in his countless tweets, Donald Trump does not keep up with the very carefully crafted diplomatic formulations used in the NATO decision such as “aim... to move towards”; in essence, however, he is attacking an open flank with his repeated demands for greater defence spending on the part of allies. During President George W. Bush’s first

term, the public debate about greater financial expenditures was largely overshadowed by the withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol. The fear of unilateral US actions grew among allies when the White House announced in 2001 that the US Senate would not take up ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The willingness of the US to act unilaterally in the “War on Terror” also exacerbated disputes within NATO at the time.

Stanley R. Sloan considers that “the stimulus for the crisis was provided by failure of European

states to build sufficient military capabilities to make significant contributions to post-Cold War security problems and the resulting loss of US confidence in the extent to which it could count on its European allies.” In his 2008 analysis, Sloan said that, in future, the George W. Bush administration “may [...] be seen either as the main cause of the crisis or simply as the igniter of a fire that had been waiting to happen, as allies on both sides of the Atlantic tried to adjust their perceptions and priorities to new strategic realities that emerged following the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union.”¹⁰ Even though the public discussion today, a good ten years after Sloan published his article, has been largely reduced to what financial demands President Trump will make via Twitter, there is much to suggest that the process of adaptation to new strategic realities on both sides of the Atlantic that Sloan postulated is either still incomplete, or has long faced new challenges in the form of other fields of conflict (Crimea crisis, the Asia-Pacific region, migration, and cyberspace).

Despite their obvious differences, the rhetorical distance between Obama’s call for “Nation-Building at Home” and Trump’s “Make America Great Again” is fairly small.

And – again, despite all obvious differences – Barack Obama, too, pushed this process in the direction it is now headed. In 2014, during his term of office, the two per cent target was confirmed at the NATO summit in Wales. But after the gruelling experience of the bloody, and costly war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Democratic former president had already told US citizens in 2011, “America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home.”¹¹ In retrospect, even commentators who are critical of Trump must concede that the rhetorical

distance between Obama’s statement – and its associated political implications, which included the idea that the US, formerly a global stabilising power, would withdraw incrementally from the Middle East conflict – and Trump’s mantra-like “Make America Great Again” is rather small. The global reactions to Donald Trump’s statement shortly before Christmas 2018 that “The United States cannot continue to be the policeman of the world”¹² should not disregard the fact that his predecessor addressed the American people with practically the same formulation in 2013.

In short, the expectations and points of contention with which the trans-Atlantic relationship is now occupied at the highest political level almost all have a long history. There is really nothing that indicates that the US government will heed the requests of partners abroad and either initiate a course change or take the pressure down a notch. On the contrary, as a KAS country report already stated in July 2018, many administration officials are working under the assumption that Donald Trump has merely pressed the fast-forward button.¹³ This is also true of US domestic policy.

Polarisation Is a Double-Edged Sword

The impression that the president is tackling long-standing grievances more consistently than all of his predecessors is assiduously cultivated among his base. For instance, he uncompromisingly maintains his campaign promise to build a wall along the Mexican border. Yet this project did not fundamentally originate with this administration, either. Bill Clinton laid the foundation for it, although the scope was much more modest. Via Operation Safeguard and Operation Hold the Line, the former president approved the financing of border fences in Texas and Arizona in the mid-1990s. Under his Republican successor, George W. Bush, the Secure Fence Act to further expand the barriers was passed in 2006. The Act was supported by 64 Democrats in the House of Representatives, and 26 Democrats in the Senate. Among the latter were Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Today, however, the construction of a wall along

the Mexican border symbolises everything that the Democrats deeply reject about Donald Trump. While they bitterly oppose the billion-dollar plan, an AP VoteCast poll¹⁴ showed that around 90 per cent of Republicans favour it. Almost 80 per cent of Republicans also believe that illegal immigrants must be deported, while only 19 per cent of Democratic voters hold this view. The political camps are equally divided in other key areas of domestic policy.

While, during the mid-term elections, a majority of both Republican (63 per cent) and Democratic (75 per cent) voters thought that the health system should be comprehensively reformed, only eight per cent of Democratic voters thought that President Obama's Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, should be repealed. In contrast, 90 per cent of Republican voters are in favour of repealing the law. Just over 90 per cent of Republican voters strongly support the 2017 tax reform, against only eight per cent of Democratic voters. Even the economic situation is assessed very differently by both sides: it is thought to be good to excellent by 61 per cent of Republicans, while 78 per cent of Democrats think that it is not that good or even bad. The divide could scarcely be greater. Accordingly, during the mid-term elections, only nine per cent of all voters stated that the US is strongly united, while 76 per cent thought that US society is moving apart. The thesis put forward by Robert Kagan in 2003 in "Of Paradise and Power" that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus", in a figurative sense also describes the political realities within the US today.

The US president did not trigger this increasing split, but in the first half of his term of office, Trump has pushed forward societal polarisation more than any of his predecessors. Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election thanks to his confrontational strategy; continuing and sometimes hair-raising attacks against his opponents in politics and the media; and the mobilisation of his base ("Trump Gets Negative Ratings for Many Personal Traits, but Most Say He Stands Up for His Beliefs"¹⁵) with slogans

and formulations that made even some moderate Republicans break out in a cold sweat. From August 2018 until the elections, Trump conducted 30 campaign rallies in important rural states with high percentages of white residents. In other words, the same method saved the Republicans from a worse defeat in the House of Representatives in the November mid-terms, and contributed to a slight expansion of their slim majority in the Senate. Since the beginning of January, the House of Representatives has been made up of 235 Democrats and 199 Republicans. In the Senate, there are 53 Republicans, 45 Democrats, and two independents. The independents vote with the Democrats. Almost one quarter of seats in the House of Representatives are now filled by freshman congressmen; 1992 and 2010 were the only elections in the last four decades that saw greater turnover.

The result of the elections was, in itself, neither surprising nor unusual. Although the president does not face re-election during the mid-terms, they are nevertheless traditionally viewed as a referendum on the job he is doing. The loss of a majority in at least one of the houses of Congress in the mid-term elections is the rule rather than the exception. What was atypical, however, was that the Republicans lost their majority in the House of Representatives, but were able to slightly expand their majority in the Senate. Nevertheless, the Republican strategy has, of course, worked only partially. Donald Trump was both a blessing and a curse to them in the mid-terms.

Trump's confrontational style mobilised the entire electorate, across parties and age-groups.

Certainly, the president was able to repeat his performance of very effectively mobilising his base. Among this population group, he still enjoys extremely high approval ratings of 80 to 90 per cent. Trump's confrontational style and tone also mobilised his political opponents in

November. As a result, voter turnout was just over 49 per cent, higher than any other mid-term elections in the last 50 years. 1966, the turbulent high-water mark of the Civil Rights Movement, saw a mid-term turnout of 48.7 per cent. In some voting districts, almost as many votes were cast last year as in presidential election years, and in others even more (presidential elections since 2000 have seen an average voter turnout of 55 per cent). In Ohio, voter turnout was a good 40 per cent higher than in 2014, in Florida 33 per cent, and in Texas the increase was as high as 90 per cent. These mid-terms

were also unusual because more young voters (aged between 18 and 29) participated. Voter turnout among this demographic was just over 30 per cent, higher than any mid-terms in the last 25 years. Overall, young voters accounted for 13 per cent of all ballots cast.

Professor Michael McDonald, who heads the University of Florida's United States Election Project, thinks that there is a simple explanation for the comparatively high voter turnout: "Clearly, something has changed here in our politics. The only logical explanation for the thing



The white block: More than 100 female Representatives were newly seated in the congress due to the last mid-terms, including African-Americans, Latinas, two Muslims, and descendants of Native Americans. [Source:](#) © Jonathan Ernst, Reuters.

that has changed is Donald Trump.”¹⁶ This assessment is supported by the fact that 60 per cent of all registered voters who participated in an October Gallup poll¹⁷ stated that they wanted, by means of their vote in the mid-term elections, to send a clear message of approval or rejection to the president. Since 1998, those wanting to send a message to the incumbent president with their vote averaged only 47 per cent. Donald Trump was thus more firmly the focus in 2018 than his predecessors have been in previous mid-terms.

In the sparsely populated rural areas of many states, Republican candidates were able to score points with the president as their figurehead. Most metropolises and the hotly contested suburbs fell to the Democrats, even those away from the coasts. These urban centres have been growing continuously for years. In Texas, for instance, 43 per cent of all ballots cast statewide were from the five metropolitan districts. The result was that the Republicans only came away with a narrow majority. The president’s confrontational, polarising style is also off-putting, especially to women voters. Their proportion of all votes in the mid-terms was 52 per cent. Almost 60 per cent of women throughout the country voted for Democratic candidates – almost 13 per cent more than men. Republican Senator John Cornyn therefore described the mid-terms as a “wake-up call” for his party. The question now is whether Donald Trump will take these currents in public opinion and the changed sensitivities within his own party into consideration. At first, it seemed as though he would.

Confrontation with an Uncertain Outcome

“Hopefully,” said Trump the day after the November mid-terms, “we can all work together next year to continue delivering for the American people, including on economic growth, infrastructure, trade, lowering the cost of prescription drugs. These are some of things that the Democrats do want to work on, and I really believe we’ll be able to do that. I think we’re going to have a lot of reason to do it.” Trump even included environmental protection in his

statement: “We want crystal-clean water. We want beautiful, perfect air. Air and water, it has to be perfect. At the same time, we don’t want to put ourselves at a disadvantage to other countries who are very competitive with us and who don’t abide by the rules at all. We don’t want to hurt our jobs. We don’t want to hurt our factories. We don’t want companies leaving [the US]. We want to be totally competitive, and we are.”¹⁸ The limits of bipartisan cooperation would, however, be reached for this president if the Democrats – as one journalist put it in his question – hit Trump “with a blizzard of subpoenas on everything from the Russia investigation [...] to your tax returns”. “If that happens,” Trump said, “then we’re going to do the same thing and government comes to a halt.” In that case, the Democrats would be at fault, the president said.¹⁹

The political conflict regarding the wall construction project led to the longest government shutdown so far.

A standstill followed almost at once. But not because of the Russia investigation. In December, a dispute broke out over the billion-dollar project to build a wall along the Mexican border. The bitter political conflict led to the longest government shutdown in the history of the United States, and is an eloquent testimony to how deep the rift in American society has become in slightly over a decade since the Secure Fence Act, and not just on this question.

As has been mentioned, Trump is not the first US President whose party has lost the majority in at least one house of Congress during his first mid-terms. Bill Clinton still won re-election two years later, as did Barack Obama. So it is quite possible that Donald Trump will continue to confront the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives – where, for the first time, more than 100 female Representatives were seated in January, including African-Americans,

Latinas, two Muslims, and descendants of Native Americans – and that he will also pursue a tough confrontational course in other political fields, as well. This strategy for re-election was already successfully pursued by Harry Truman after he lost the majority in both houses of Congress to the Republicans in the mid-terms.

The president would be assisted in such efforts by the American electoral system. The president is not elected directly, but through the electoral college made up of representatives from all federal states. Critics argue that the composition of the electoral college favours rural states with whiter, older populations (demographics that favour Trump) over more urban states, which are younger, better educated, and more diverse (demographics that tend to be critical of Trump).

It is not at all certain whether the strategy of polarisation and mobilisation will work in the 2020 presidential election, when Trump and his Vice President, Mike Pence, are up for re-election. In any case, the power struggle over the wall shows how much the November mid-terms weakened the president. While the Democrats know that a lengthy or repeated government shutdown will hurt them in the long term, Democrats in Congress, especially women and minorities, do not give the impression that they will either settle for what Donald Trump is offering, or allow him to reduce the checks and balances within the system, without a fight. At the same time, Trump is increasingly facing criticism from within his own party. Shortly before entering the Senate, former presidential candidate Mitt Romney wrote in an op-ed piece that “the Trump presidency made a deep descent in December.” The president’s “conduct over the past two years, particularly his actions last month, is evidence that the president has not risen to the mantle of the office. [...] With the nation so divided, resentful, and angry, presidential leadership in qualities of character is indispensable. And it is in this province where the incumbent’s shortfall has been most glaring,” Romney went on.²⁰ His fellow Republicans in the Senate were somewhat stunned by

this public criticism of Donald Trump. But it was essentially the starting gun for the 2020 presidential election.

-translated from German-

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