

## The Trump Administration and Europe

*Robert Pfaltzgraff*

### Executive Summary

- President Trump's policy agenda is based on essentially three conceptual pillars: (1) strong defense/national security; (2) economic nationalism; and (3) dismantling the regulatory state.
- Far from retreating into isolationism, the Trump Administration has begun to use the instruments of national power (military, diplomatic, economic) in support of clearly articulated foreign policy goals.
- Alliances, including NATO, remain vitally important, provided they serve twenty-first-century US interests, and allies bear their fair share of the defense burden.
- The Administration took early steps, as evidenced not only in its senior national security appointments, but also in sending them on visits to Europe to reassure NATO-European allies about the continuing US transatlantic commitment.
- Like many of its predecessors, the Administration already confronts the necessity of adapting to a world not of its own making, which imposes constraints and unanticipated challenges that must be addressed.

On 8 November 2016, Donald Trump was unexpectedly elected President of the United States, winning a total of 306 electoral college votes while losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by more than 2 million. Since then, the Republican Party controls not only the Presidency, but also both Houses of Congress, having picked up seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Furthermore, Republican control is

also expressed through a preponderance of governorships.

Despite these political advantages, the Administration failed in its first big legislative initiative to repeal and replace Obamacare as a result of divisions within the Republican House of Representatives majority as well as the inability to attract votes from the Democrat side. Generally, the Administration faces a highly charged, politically divisive setting that casts a shadow across other parts of its agenda, for example, in the area of tax reform on which there are also divisions within Republican Congressional ranks as well as with the Democrat minority.

A few months into its term, the basic contours of the Trump Administration's domestic and foreign policies have begun to emerge. Many have ramifications for Europe in general and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in particular. In its first weeks, the Administration moved forward with an array of initiatives—some more controversial than others—based for the most part on the fulfilment of promises made during the long and acrimonious presidential campaign. As his supporters and critics alike would agree, Donald Trump said what he meant and meant what he said, to judge from his actions since taking office. The result is an increasingly polarized debate.

This policy brief considers the Trump Administration's key conceptual pillars regarding foreign policy and how they play out with regard to Europe and the EU, focussing on security relations and the relations with Russia.

### Uncertainties and Caveats

Any projection based on such preliminary information, however, is subject to important caveats and qualifications. Most obvious is the possibility, and even the likelihood, that unforeseen events will intervene – as 9/11 did in the case of the George W. Bush Administration – to alter dramatically and swiftly even

the most carefully calculated priorities and strategies. Arguably, the world of 2017 is no less disorderly than that of the beginning of this new century that featured the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Circumstances may conspire to make either Europe more important, or of lower priority, in the Administration's global strategic calculations. The potential exists for upheavals and security challenges in each of the regions of strategic importance to the United States that would have ramifications for the relationship between the United States and Europe. No administration in memory has adequately foreseen the changes that challenged and often swept away the conceptual foundations of the foreign policy agenda with which it entered office. The issue is not whether there will be such challenges, but how they will be addressed.

### The Trump Administration's Conceptual Pillars

With such uncertainty in mind, it is nevertheless possible, based on its words and deeds thus far, to set forth and discuss three mutually reinforcing priorities that will guide the Trump Administration in its approach to Europe and the EU. These priorities can be stated as the basis for three key conceptual pillars:

- A *stronger national security capability* calling for more than 50 billion dollars to be added to the US defense budget, stepped-up efforts to defeat and destroy the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), and major efforts to better control US borders;
- *Economic nationalism* that does not reject free trade but instead calls for 'fair trade' and the growth of the American economy based on renegotiating international trade agreements and revising the tax code to encourage the repatriation of capital and greater investment in job creation in the United States; and
- The *dismantling of the regulatory state* in order to increase private-sector incentives and thereby unleash economic growth. Undoubtedly, the commitment to deregulation, together with greater decentralization, blends over to shape Trump's view of the EU and other international multilateral organizations whose bureaucracies and regulatory capabilities are perceived to intrude upon the nation-state.

Each of these three pillars favours certain initiatives and provides the basis for concrete policies that have implications for the others and will shape the new

Administration's approach to the transatlantic economic relationship in general and the EU in particular. For example, reducing the powers of the regulatory state is designed to stimulate economic growth, just as economic growth is intended to bolster national security by increasing resources available for a stronger military in support of US national interest. Moreover, Trump's focus on nationalism and national interest, with an emphasis on immigration policy and border security, cuts across the divide between foreign policy and domestic policy. Other Trump Administration priorities, linked to the second and third conceptual pillars, include a trade policy that contains a preference for bilateral agreements, together with a controversial border adjustment tax designed to stimulate exports and tax imports. The new Administration's defense policy features the rebuilding of US military capabilities and the rejuvenation of alliances alongside a greater sharing of defense burdens with allies. President Trump has rejected any notion that he is an isolationist, preferring instead to emphasize his commitment to international engagement based on the delineation of a clear US national interest and creating a more level playing field for US trade, as evidenced in its early actions against the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership.

In addressing these priorities, the Trump Administration faces a dilemma in moving forward with a comprehensive strategy based upon its 'Make America Great' slogan. In itself, this is a worthy effort to galvanize an American national spirit in support of the three priorities outlined above. However, during the presidential campaign, the idea of 'Make America Great Again' was understandably focused on domestic policy. Inevitably, this domestic policy emphasis cannot be addressed in isolation from its inextricably intertwined international implications and consequences, just as the reverse is equally true, given the ramifications of international events for the domestic setting. Cancellation of the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership, for example, is designed to have short-term domestic, political, and economic benefits that must be weighed against the prospect of ceding to China a greater role in Asia-Pacific economic relationships. By the same token, given the great importance of the transatlantic trade relationship, the future of the EU, including its continued cohesion and prosperity, has important consequences for the US economy. In short, American 'greatness' cannot be addressed or achieved except in a strategy that extends across the domestic and international domains. This is a reality that the new Administration is beginning to confront and address.

## National Security and the Transatlantic Relationship

While Barack Obama was sometimes called the first post-American president - referring to his globalist predilections - Trump's 'America First' slogan should not be confused with the movement of the same name that opposed US entry into World War II before Pearl Harbor. Instead, the Trump Administration seeks a more precisely defined basis for US overseas operations in keeping with a more narrowly considered conception of national interest, perhaps in the realist foreign policy tradition. Such an approach contrasts sharply with the isolationism to which some Americans once subscribed in earlier eras. President Trump's foreign policy concept, based first and foremost on US nationalism, translates into a Reaganesque belief that the basis for a more peaceful world is a stronger America, or as Reagan often put it himself, 'peace through strength', a theme echoed in the same words by President Trump. For him, the only viable basis for political order is the nation-state, to which mass loyalties are drawn, rather than a more abstract regionalism or globalism. It follows that such a perspective already shapes the Administration's attitudes toward such international entities as the EU and the UN.

Therefore, it is no accident that Trump resonates with those on both sides of the Atlantic who reject globalism based on people and trade moving ever more freely and uncontrollably across national frontiers, producing some winners and many losers, and resulting in a backlash against globalism and the global elites who he believes have been its principal beneficiaries. In practice, this means a greater US affinity with Brexit and sympathy with those who challenge the assumption that increasing international integration, whether in Europe or elsewhere, is welcome as a twenty-first-century manifestation of globalism.

In late February, the new Administration in a gesture undoubtedly intended to signal the continuing importance attached to transatlantic relations sent Vice-President Pence and Secretary of Defense Mattis to meet with NATO allies both in Brussels and at the Munich Security Conference. Vice-President Pence, speaking as he specifically pointed out on behalf of President Trump, expressed 'the strong commitment of the United States to continue cooperation and partnership with the European Union'. He further elaborated the need for greater coordination and intelligence-sharing in the global war against terrorism, together with the need both to hold Russia accountable and to search for 'new ways for new common ground

with Russia'. Both in Vice-President Pence's public statements and in those of Secretary of Defense Mattis, the Administration set forth themes that could have been stated by any of his predecessors: the commitment to a unified, peaceful, and prosperous Europe; the importance of NATO as 'the fundamental bedrock for keeping the peace and defending the freedoms we enjoy today'; and the 'rock-solid' US commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, in which an attack upon one is regarded as an attack upon all. Each of these themes has long been a part of transatlantic dialogue, therefore representing elements of continuity in US security policy toward NATO Europe. Another major theme is the recurring burden-sharing discussion, in which the United States for many decades has called for greater NATO-European contributions to the common defense. During the Cold War, it should be recalled, there was continuing discussion of the need for real increases of 3 percent of GDP for defense on the part of NATO-European members. Today the Trump Administration reiterates, and gives greater emphasis to, the calls of its predecessor for European contributions to NATO totaling 2 percent of GDP to defense.

In addition to the transatlantic trips by the Vice-President and Secretary of Defense, President Trump met in Washington, D.C., first with British Prime Minister Theresa May and subsequently with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Having already met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during the Presidential transition, Trump later hosted Abe at Mar-a-Lago in Florida. It can be plausibly argued that the Administration demonstrated a priority attachment to allies, not only by these early actions, but also by establishing a more cordial relationship with Egypt's President al-Sisi, who received a warm welcome at the White House in early April. Such early gestures, of which others could be cited, point to a reversal of the Obama Administration's policy of shunning Egypt out of concern for human rights issues despite Cairo's geopolitical importance to the United States in the Middle East. Presumably this means that the Trump Administration will reward allies and penalize adversaries. Emphasis will be placed on building partnerships with countries that align with US interests in place of strategies that give priority to building relationships with enemies. Furthermore, Secretary of State Tillerson's Asia-Pacific trip in March can be seen as an indication of the importance attached by the Administration to the looming crisis potential in the

Korean peninsula and South China Sea. In the Middle East, the Administration has stepped up its support for military operations designed to eradicate ISIS. This includes an increased US military presence in Syria and Iraq and undoubtedly an understanding that a longer-term US commitment will need to be made in order to assure future stability. Such concerns represent longstanding US policy priorities and key issues that have faced the United States for many years. Thus, in this sense there is great continuity in US national security policy. Of course, how the Asia-Pacific area and the Middle East play out in the months ahead will have important implications once again for transatlantic relations.

### Russia Policy

Another major set of issues shaping the transatlantic relationship flows inevitably from the Administration's evolving Russia policy. Paradoxically, the allegations of Russian interference during the 2016 Presidential campaign have driven Republicans and Democrats into a role reversal, with some but not all of Republicans, led by the President himself, initially seeking an improved relationship with Russia, and Democrats pressing for tougher policies to punish Moscow. How the US-Russia relationship unfolds, of course, will have important implications for transatlantic relations. For example, the signals that the Administration has sent to Moscow on issues of the Baltic states and Ukraine come immediately to mind, together with the role that the Administration envisages for Russia in other regional settings from the Asia-Pacific area to the Middle East and the war against ISIS. Ideally, the Administration would have wished to draw Russia into a more constructive relationship that would have detached the country from Tehran and Damascus. Clearly, this is not likely under present circumstances. Instead, the Administration has been compelled by events to take an increasingly tough line on such issues, as evidenced in its response to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in early April. Whatever expectations the Administration may have had for an improved relationship with Russia – a perennial hope on the part of incoming administrations since World War II – appear to have been dashed. Senior officials, including Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Mattis, Vice-President Pence, as well as President Trump himself, have denounced Russian policies in Ukraine and elsewhere. Furthermore, the

Administration's calls for increases in defense spending, including both the US defense budget and greater burden-sharing by Europeans within NATO, cannot be viewed favourably in Moscow. The Russia election-meddling investigation in Washington, together with the evolving geopolitical landscape, arguably only lead the Administration to a reaffirmation of basic security policies, including the transatlantic relationship as part of a broader global strategic architecture. This will remain a work in progress that necessarily will contain elements of continuity along with change as President Trump puts in his own unique imprimatur on US national security policy.

### Conclusion

Although the bold outline of the Administration's policy approach, including relations with Europe, is increasingly apparent, its details will only be worked out in the interplay between unfolding circumstances, constraints, and opportunities. In early April, the crises on the Korean peninsula and in the Middle East provided vivid evidence of this interplay. In the case of North Korea, the Administration's approach was to deploy military power as a signal of intent to Pyongyang alongside diplomatic efforts to enlist China to support US policy. In the case of Syria, having launched cruise missile strikes in response to Syrian use of chemical weapons, incidentally coinciding in time with a meeting with China's President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago, President Trump subsequently offered to work with China to resolve trade issues in return for Beijing's efforts to against North Korea. Furthermore, Secretary of State Tillerson's sharp tone in Moscow on Russia's role in Syria contrasted with President Trump's effort to entice China into a cooperative relationship on the Korean peninsula. Whatever else we may infer from such actions, they demonstrate a high level of political-diplomatic agility alongside a willingness possibly to link security and trade policies. If this is the case in a broader sense, it may bode well for transatlantic cooperation on a range of issues. For example, a greater willingness on the part of NATO-European countries to meet U.S. expectations on defense spending might open the way to a more accommodating transatlantic approach on trade and other issues of importance to the EU. Altogether, this points to the need for NATO-Europe and the EU to attempt to accommodate US interest as much as is politically possible and for the United States to take similar steps towards its European partners.

## Further Reading

Remarks by Secretary of Defense James Mattis at the Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2017 (available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/1087838/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-the-munich-security-conference-in-munich-germany>).

Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Munich Security Conference, 18 February 2017 (available at <https://nl.usembassy.gov/remarks-vice-president-pence-munich-security-conference-february-18/>).

Remarks by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson at the Meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, 31 March 2017 (available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269339.htm>).

Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a Joint Press Conference, *White House Press Release*, 12 April 12 2017 (available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/12/joint-press-conference-president-trump-and-nato-secretary-general>).

Speech by Senator John McCain at the Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2017 (available at <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/speeches?ID=32A7E7DD-8D76-4431-B1E7-8644FD71C49F>).

---

**This Policy Brief was written in the framework of the cooperation between the College of Europe and The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. Starting with the academic year 2017-2018, the two schools will offer a joint Master of Arts in Transatlantic Affairs (MATA). For more information on this joint degree, please consult the [website of the MATA programme](#).**

## About the Author

**Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr.**, is Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of International Security Studies, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and President of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis; and Chairman of the Independent Working Group on Missile Defense. Dr. Pfaltzgraff has published extensively on a range of topics, including international relations theory, strategy, national security, alliances, proliferation, crisis management, and foreign policy. He has advised key administration officials on military strategy, modernization, international terrorism, consequence management and counterproliferation issues, and missile defense options/policy.

**Views expressed in the College of Europe Policy Briefs are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect positions of either the series editors or the College of Europe. Free online subscription at [www.coleurope.eu/CEPOB](http://www.coleurope.eu/CEPOB).**