

# IF THE EU IS TRUMP'S FOE, THE EU SHOULD ADDRESS TRUMPISM WITHIN EUROPE



By Alexander Mattelaer (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/alexander-mattelaer/>)  
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Much is being made of the recent claim of the President of the United States that the European Union is “a foe (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-interview-cbs-news-european-union-is-a-foe-ahead-of-putin-meeting-in-helsinki-jeff-glor/>)”. The great paradox is that this statement is at the same time extravagant and nonetheless contains a kernel of truth. As Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans swiftly pointed out (<https://twitter.com/TimmermansEU/status/1018588386628702208>), Europeans and Americans are best friends who do not give up on one another. Yet it is also difficult to dispute that the EU stands for a different conception of international relations than the one Trump himself believes in, most notably that might does not make right. Yet should the EU allow itself to be drawn into another rhetorical brawl about the state of transatlantic relations? Perhaps it

would be far better to focus political energy on addressing the grievances of these who feel politically alienated within Europe, lest Trump-inspired revolutionary spirits destroy the Union from within.

*(Photo credit: Gage Skidmore, Flickr)*

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Being labelled a foe by the US President does not destroy the longstanding alliance between most European nations and the United States. These transatlantic partners have not only much history and shared values in common, but also face future challenges that are similar. Europeans and Americans have fought and died together in the cause of liberty on battlefields across the world. They remain fundamentally united in their attachment to democracy above autocracy. Last but not least, they will both struggle to adapt to the next era of international politics, in which the worldwide influence of Western nations is waning in relative terms. On both sides of the Atlantic, advanced and post-industrialised nations will need to strike a new balance of how to organise their relative wealth productively and at the same time maintain societal cohesion.

Yet when Trump labels the EU as a foe – at least as far as trade policy is concerned – he also helps turning it into one. After all, the Trump administration and the European institutions hold radically different views on the role played by international institutions in terms of ordering the world. As Brookings scholar Thomas Wright has convincingly argued (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>),

Trump is not just a notorious sceptic on the value of military alliances, but also fiercely critical of economic globalisation and sympathetic to political strongmen all over the world. As such, the EU does constitute the proverbial bane of Trump's political instincts, making it hard to refute the accusation on its own terms. To make matters worse, European Council President Donald Tusk lost little time in simultaneously denouncing and confirming Trump's words, namely by labelling them as "spreading fake news

(<https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1018511452242612224>)" and agreeing "to develop the EU-China strategic partnership further ([http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/07/16/remarks-by-president-donald-tusk-after-the-eu-china-summit/?utm\\_source=dsms-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Remarks+by+President+Donald+Tusk+after+the+EU-China+summit](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/07/16/remarks-by-president-donald-tusk-after-the-eu-china-summit/?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Remarks+by+President+Donald+Tusk+after+the+EU-China+summit))". Not to put too fine a point on it: cosyng up to China will not help convince Trump that the EU is not an adversary in international trade.

Instead of engaging in a futile dispute about words, EU leaders would do well to ponder what political forces brought Trump to power, and whether they are not at risk of being targeted by similar forces themselves. After all, Donald Trump was elected as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States because a large part of the US electorate rebelled against what mainstream politicians had to offer. This "Jacksonian revolt (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt>)", in the phrase of Walter Russell Mead, was only possible due to Democratic and Republican elites dramatically underestimating the backlash that had built up against their longstanding policy preferences. The South and Midwest of the US have largely borne the economic costs of globalisation embraced in past decades – with the benefits accumulating elsewhere. These states also paid the full price of the recent wars that US coastal elites had decided upon: not just in treasure, but also in blood and sacrifice. Throughout wide swathes of the US, the wish to see the end of worldwide engagement had become impossible to ignore. In the underbelly of the US body politic, only a candidate promising to deal with all foreign powers as potential rivals could win, whereas the alternative offer could only deepen the polarisation of US domestic politics.

Is it outside the realm of imagination that the EU is also at risk from a yawning gap between elites and citizens that risk being exploited by political forces promising to "make (fill in a nation of choice) great again"? Given that Trump himself seems keen to endorse such forces wherever he goes – even in the UK, the most stalwart American ally one can imagine – is it wise to ignore such a risk? If this is not the case, then the most urgent challenge for the EU is not to go about pretending it can reshape the world in its own image, but rather to focus on its own domestic politics. This means not to double down on the policy-preferences of the past, but rather to engage those European citizens that feel alienated and not represented by their own political classes. On contentious issues such as migration policy and economic austerity, the prudent course of action may be to pay greater heed to what populist forces are saying – not because

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these offer ready-made policy alternatives, but because ignoring sometimes well-founded criticism for too long risks breeding Trumpian revolt. If that were to happen within several EU member states, the survival of the Union will be at stake.

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