

**Aspen European Strategy Group Conference  
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**How should Europe work with the new U.S. administration of  
President Donald Trump?**

**Introduction**

The Aspen European Strategy Group met on March 27-28, 2017 to discuss how Europe should engage with the new Trump administration, how to make an effective case for its priorities, and what compromises it is willing to make.

The presidency of Donald Trump signals to significantly change the parameters within which European countries have acted for the past 70 years. Trump's mixed messages about NATO, his admiration for President Vladimir Putin, his praise for Brexit, and his political agenda under the title of „America First“ have spread insecurity among European partners about America's future foreign and economic policies. The conference addressed pressing questions, such as how Europe should respond to such grave changes within the international political arena. It also explored whether the Trump presidency is an opportunity for Europe to regroup and redefine itself; what Europe should do to ensure its future security in the light of a potentially weaker transatlantic alliance; how the Trump administration might affect long-standing notions of multilateralism, and if bilateralism will instead become the preferred method of diplomacy.

## **1. The transatlantic alliance is still Europe's best option**

The United States under Trump has become a difficult ally for Europe. Europeans are deeply concerned about the President's views on NATO and even more so about his apparent desire to reverse more than seven decades of U.S. policy of fostering a strong and united Europe as a bastion of democracy and free trade in order to bolster U.S. security. Nevertheless, writing off the U.S. as the major European partner would be a mistake. And waiting out the current U.S. administration, hoping to go back to normal in 2020 is not an option.

Europe needs an active and engaged U.S. to keep NATO alive and capable to act, to help manage relations with Russia and to deal with growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, Europe needs nuclear deterrence if it does not want to become a battleground for other powers. Last but not least, it has a major interest in being involved in U.S.-Chinese relations, as peace in East Asia is vital for the European economy.

All these goals cannot be achieved without the U.S. or independently of the U.S. In the past, it was U.S. leadership that provided Europe with a framework in which it could prosper. Therefore, European leaders should emphasize their ambition for strong and close relations with the U.S.

One should also keep in mind that the majority of Americans did not vote for Trump. Europeans should cooperate with Americans who remain committed to preserving the transatlantic community of values. This includes members of the new administration who have voiced their unwavering support for the transatlantic partnership, not to mention Trump's opponents in Congress – Democrats and Republicans alike.

## **2. Europe needs to understand Trump's priorities and style**

Trump's presidency marks a landmark shift in U.S. foreign policy not seen since the end of the Second World War and is a major source of global uncertainty and instability. The President has made it no secret that established partnerships, alliances, rules, and protocols mean little to him. In his tweets, he rants about the media, attacks independent judges, targets individuals and companies, and belittles international organizations. His unpredictability, his flip-flopping, his shock-and-awe style of executive action designed to rattle Congress, catch his opponents unprepared, and incite his base to wage war on the establishment has significantly diminished trust and keeps Trump's allies and enemies alike on their toes.

Understanding the President's personality, his administration and the changes within U.S. politics and what has caused them, is vital for European leaders when developing strategies on how to engage with the Trump administration and how to best to protect peace, prosperity and political pluralism on their continent.

### **3. Europe must focus and spend more on its own defense**

With the new Trump administration, Europe can no longer rely on the United States for its security strategy in the same way as it has done in the past. President Trump has questioned the existence of NATO and suggested he will apply his transactional vision of diplomacy to his country's alliances. While Trump is far from being the first President to urge Europeans to fulfill their financial commitments to NATO he has introduced a new tone and threatened to make U.S. commitment contingent on fulfilling payments.

For Europe, it is key to increase its defense expenditure to secure American commitment as a strong, transatlantic security alliance is still essential, as well as to increase Europe's own capabilities, should the worst case happen. Although significant changes are under way, including increased integration of Europe's armed forces, the road toward a well-functioning European defense union is still long. In addition, Europe needs to make its defense spending more efficient. Funding should be spent wisely, for example on cyber security and high-end technology. In the field of cyber security for instance, Europe has also made significant advancements and could use its expert knowledge for prosperous cooperation with the U.S.

Another challenge looms on the horizon with Brexit. The UK currently spends the highest amounts on defense and possesses nuclear weapons. Once the UK has left, the 21 remaining EU member states, which are also NATO allies will provide less than 23 percent of NATO defense expenditure. Some fear that Brexit will create an Anglo-Euro divide, which could result in the breaking up of NATO. As a preventive measure, the EU could either focus on bilateral security agreements with the UK, or create a defense arm akin to the Western European Defense Union to formalize military cooperation with the UK.

As a European Army might not be a viable option in the foreseeable future discussions should rather focus on other options. Big institutional changes may be difficult to realize; therefore, Europe should focus on what is possible within the existing structures of the EU and NATO. However, to do this, it is important for the EU to gain broader support among their publics and to better explain why it should increase its defense spending, and why military missions may become necessary.

### **4. Europe needs to develop a common security strategy**

In the short and medium term, Europe cannot do without the U.S. security guarantee. Therefore, it should strive to convince the new Trump administration of the importance of a united and peaceful Europe.

Europe is currently facing a multitude of security threats: Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe, terrorism, cyber-attacks, and wars in the Middle East that have led to an unprecedented refugee crisis across the continent. The unstable international

context and the threat of further U.S. disengagement under Trump make it essential to further strengthen initiatives for greater European defense cooperation.

Boosting the European defense budgets is not sufficient, it is also necessary for Europe to increase its value as a security policy actor for which a common security strategy is key. In addition, more interoperability and standardization of national armies will make NATO more effective and enable Europe to be an attractive partner in surrounding regions.

The prerequisite for a more impactful collaboration would be a common foreign policy, as without the latter, it is hard to achieve the former. Although the development of a common EU foreign policy seems not very realistic in the foreseeable future, the Union can still successfully engage with the US by focusing on collective threats and creating common strategies to work together on a case by case basis.

## **5. Europe should focus on common threats**

So far, President Trump's foreign policy of "America first" has focused on American interests and American national security. For his concept "peace through strength," he has already announced his plan to raise military expenditures and to pursue 'aggressive joint and coalition military operations when necessary' in order to defeat 'ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups'. Joint and coalition military operations could also include NATO operations.

To keep the Trump administration invested in the transatlantic alliance and to show the benefits of multilateralism, Europe should focus on working together on common threats. Fighting terrorism and ISIS are clearly high priorities. Having a common strategy for Russia is also important, particularly in relation to Ukraine where escalation is still a possibility. Priority should be given to convincing the new administration to keep a common policy towards Russia. Making deals does not serve the security of Eastern Europe: creating regional zones of differing security conditions is neither in American nor European interests. Trust-building by military-to-military communication, diplomatic pressure to fulfill the Minsk agreement, reducing the risk of an arms race through transparency should be parts of a policy agenda that does not invite Putin to undertake further adventures.

There are also particular crisis areas in which Europe depends on the support of the U.S. Besides Ukraine, the Balkans, the Baltics and North Africa are of great importance. Other regions of shared interests include the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, Libya, North Korea and China. However, Europe and the U.S. administration currently have quite different approaches in their engagement with these countries that might hinder a common security strategy.

## **6. Europe must strengthen its cohesion**

A weak Europe will not be able to engage effectively with the U.S. or other partners. Therefore, the Trump presidency could be seen as a wakeup call to lay the foundations for a union that is strong, capable of taking action, and committed to Western values. From such a position, Europe would be able to assert key interests vis-à-vis the U.S with confidence.

The greatest challenge in 2017 for European integration is not coming from Trump's policies towards Europe, Russia or the Middle East, but from the populist and Eurosceptic movements inside EU countries. The wave of populism may not even have peaked yet and its destructive power should not be underestimated. Even a potential decrease in votes for populist parties should not be understood prematurely as a victory against political extremism. Rather, European leaders and elites must gain an understanding for the circumstances that initially allowed for the rise of populism, and actively reach out to those who are not convinced by the European project. Europe should place strong emphasis on solving the Euro crisis, focus on internal and external security, and address the refugee crisis.

One viable way to solve ongoing internal disputes is seen in the idea of a 'multi-speed' approach, which takes into account that the EU is a fairly heterogeneous group with varying capacities. On the other hand, such a 'multi-speed' approach is met with resistance by several member states who fear to be left behind.

## **7. Europe should speak with a unified voice**

So far, President Trump has shown neither appreciation nor interest in European unity or the European project. He believes in the nation state and has no appetite for any forms of multilateral or multinational institutions as they would weaken national identity and will of the people. He praised Brexit and encouraged other countries to follow.

In order to contain Trump's hostility towards the EU and to neutralize potential damage he can inflict, Europeans should shape a unified European voice to make Trump and his administration understand that the EU can be a robust partner in tackling the challenges that both sides are confronted with, and convince the new White House that multilateral cooperation is the best tool to deal with the hegemonic ambitions of rising powers and bring stability to fragile countries.

While in the past Europe has mostly relied on the U.S. for strong strategic leadership, the current gap would need to be filled by leaders from Europe. Obvious choices would be France and Germany who both have appeared to be rather reluctant to take on such role. This could possibly change depending on the election results in France which offer the chance of renewed German-French leadership.

## **8. Europe should keep promoting multilateralism over bilateralism?**

The Trump administration's 'America first' approach questions long-held beliefs of diplomacy through multilateral negotiation and consensus. Trump sees the world as a competitive arena in which nations either dominate or are dominated. In this scenario, he imagines the U.S. as the ultimate dominator making "fair deals". For the foreseeable future, the United States would be the stronger party, even in comparison to China. However, history has shown that states which try to dominate others inevitably inspire resistance. When after World War II the postwar world was built, its American architects anticipated this danger and sought to avert it. They designed trade and treaty systems governed by rules, rules to which the United States would submit, even though it was the strongest party.

Trump needs to understand that securing American greatness will not succeed without the United States' best allies, many of whom are now concerned about America's future foreign policy. For Europe, an American preference for bilateral agreements would undermine a unified Europe. Therefore, Europe needs to engage with Trump and his administration and argue that a reformed transatlantic alliance—based on trust—is in the best economic and security interest of both sides. Apart from security, Europe needs to be more proactive and develop concrete proposals on what it can offer the U.S. It still can rely on important advocates within the U.S. administration, and especially in Congress to help its cause.

## **9. Europe should develop more trade partnerships with other liberal democracies and partners**

Trump's "America first" approach favors protectionist measures promising the stimulation of the economy. The President perceives the EU as economic competitors who must be beaten and views especially Germany, with its high trade surplus, as the root of the problem. With simplistic slogans such as "buy American, hire American" and promises to create new taxes and tariffs, he pretends to turn back the U.S. trade deficit.

The fact that Europe is the U.S.'s biggest trading partner, is Europe's strongest asset and should be used as leverage. Europe also needs to make clear that the transatlantic relationship has not been a matter of the United States providing unilateral support to a fledgling Europe; but that Europe has supported American economic growth and that the resulting stability has provided security in areas of prime U.S. interest for decades. As such, EU officials should be treated and present themselves as equals.

On the other hand, Europe needs to recognize that it is no longer the sole key partner to the U.S. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. shifted its focus away from Europe towards Asia, to further expand its trade partnerships. Given the continuous level of uncertainty within current U.S. politics, Europe should try to also increase its cooperation with Asian countries and seek new coalitions of the willing; countries

that act together to achieve common goals. In addition, Europe should also develop more trade partnerships with other liberal democracies to prevent a potentially protectionist U.S. from dominating the trade arena.

## **10. Europe needs to do more and more on all levels**

A key theme throughout the conference was that Europe needs to do more, and it needs to do more at all levels: at the EU level, nation-state level and the local level. The Trump administration does threaten to destabilize Europe but there are ways to mitigate this threat. These include strengthening EU institutions, investing more effectively and efficiently in defense, identifying common threats and developing strategies to address these, leverage its strong position in trade and form new partnerships. One of the key priorities for Europe though must be to stabilize the Union from within, to communicate more effectively with the general public about the benefits of the European project and of cooperation and solidarity.

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