

# Strategic Priorities of the New U.S. Administration and Implications for Europe

CERI-GMF-CEA Event - 12 October 2017

## REPORT

The objective of the seminar was to get a better understanding of the dynamics that guide U.S. foreign policy under the current administration, and to foster a transatlantic debate on issues of common interest for the U.S. and European allies.

### I. New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy: Rhetoric vs. Reality

A conversation with **Dr. Kim R. Holmes**, senior vice president for research, The Heritage Foundation; former assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs (2001-2004).

**For Holmes, the decision to decertify Iran** is only a break with the Obama position. The Republican Party has always been critical of the deal, and he argued that this is a difference between GOP and Europe and not Donald Trump and Europe.

He described **two dangers looming**:

1. **Iran could explode to a crisis and we are missing a European reaction.** This throws the issue of sanctions to the Congress. They have not been able to deliver anything in the last six months, possibly in the aim that nothing will be changed. This is a sell-out. The Senate could revoke it. If you are in favor of the agreement, don't panic because it is not over yet.
2. **President Trump's rhetoric is dangerous.** A President has never talked in this manner but Trump he has lived in the tabloid industry and this will not change. However:
  - a. One should separate the way Trump speaks from the ideas behind. An example of this is Trump's speech at the United Nations where he talked about sovereignty and "America first". "**Sovereignty**" and "**patriotism**" are not "dirty words" in the United States, and one should remember that the US does not have the same experience or remembrance of WWII as the Europeans do.
  - b. "**America's sovereignty**" as a concept was forged in wars. No international body set up rules they had to abide to, and respect for a country's sovereignty should be founded on the way a country treats its own people and neighbors: "Nations who mistreat their citizens and neighbors forfeit the right to sovereignty."
  - c. **Trump's rhetoric is actually unexceptional** from the standpoint of the party base; Europeans are not accustomed to these ideas because they are not popular in Washington.

**Institutionally**, Holmes portrayed U.S. foreign policy as a big ship, very slow to turn. Over decades now, the American foreign policy has been entrenched in international treaties and it is not easy to change overnight, despite Trump.

**Republicans** do not see the **European Union** (EU) as a model for the international order but it is nonetheless seen as a strategic asset for Washington. For Republican realists, the EU is not a political or a social project, but was built as a strategic bulwark against Russia. Moreover, most Republicans are free traders, they are dedicated to NATO and are suspicious of Russia. On human rights, we agree more than we disagree. On the **United Nations** (UN), Republicans do not want to leave it although they do not like it.

**Kim Holmes concluded by arguing that "we have survived the past and we can survive this"**. We are bound by our mutual interest in security, "never forget this as we are sailing through the brave new world of an American president with a Twitter account." He concluded that "**we have to understand**" the points of view of Trump supporters, or "we as experts will no longer be able to pretend that we understand what can/might happen in politics".

## II. Challenges and Opportunities for US Strategic Interests

*The Trump administration has proposed radical breaks with existing U.S. international engagement. How significant is the reassessment of U.S. policies, including nuclear posture, diplomacy and the use of military force? What potential opportunities or pitfalls may come with these changes in policy? How will the U.S. administration redefine or reorder U.S. strategic interests? Which threats to U.S. strategic interests are most important over the coming years?*

The speakers discussed the reassessment of U.S. policies - including nuclear posture, diplomacy and the use of military force – and the challenges and opportunities for U.S. strategic interests in the coming years.

Some panelists argued that there is no such thing as “Trumpism” and President Trump should not be seen as ideologue. Rather, Trump should be seen as an opportunist. They further argued that the only uniting factors of his rhetoric are nationalism and indignance.

One of the panelists strongly argued that **rhetoric matters in the short-term and long-term**, even if it does not change any policy in the short term. The rhetoric and the tweets actively impede the day-to-day function of the US government. This is exemplified by the partisan divide on the statement “NATO is relevant to American interests”. In 2015, 6% fewer Republicans agree than Democrats, whereas in 2016 post-election, 31% fewer Republicans agree than Democrats. This is the perfect example of politicising an issue that was not previously politicised, issues that used to be internal debates within institutions that did not take a political angle.

Some added that the **norms are the bedrock of the U.S. system**. The President has acquired immense powers over the course of our history, and the only thing truly preventing him from exercising these powers in a reckless way are norms. General Mattis and Kelly are in the administration at the invitation of the President. He can kick them out, and he doesn’t need to ask Congress first. We cannot base our hopes for a continuation of sane policy solely on their presence. **Norms and trust are also the bedrock of arms control**, and the Iran Deal is a great example. That agreement was made possible by the diplomatic credibility of the US.

**On a positive note, American institutions remain strong**, and the federal courts are the most important way to preserve American democracy. For instance, **the Senate has “taken Russia policy into their own hands”** to try to tie Trump’s hands and limit his Putin-friendly instincts.

**In regards to the European reactions**, French president Emmanuel Macron is trying to embrace Trump personally, while presenting his government and France in general as the “liberal internationalist alternative” to Trump/US leadership. **Macron has understood that you cannot influence US policy by just contradicting Trump**. The only leaders with influence are those who have been able to “sweet talk” him, such as **Macron, Xi, Abe, MBS**. Moreover, the French push for a stronger European defense is “hedging for a post-US world order”. As for the Nordics, they are “keeping their heads down and trying not to look at the sun”.

**In regards to transatlantic alliances, Trump’s approach** is 1) transactional, and in the purely financial sense and 2) personal, in that he cultivates alliances with leaders with whom he gets along. However alliances cannot rely solely on these two aspects as they rest on a convergence of interests. **As a hegemonic power**, the United States cannot conduct a transactional approach to diplomacy, because its power and credibility rest upon the assumption of broad interests beyond its borders. Remaining at the top of the international order means Washington has to take responsibility for that order’s function, which is expensive and time-consuming, but in the end benefits the hegemonic power.

**On free trade, some discussants argued that free trade is dead under this administration**. Trade is perhaps the one area where Trump’s rhetoric actually seems to set the policymaking agenda...probably because it was the one element of foreign policy which resonated most consistently with his base.

**As regards to North Korea**, the risk of war has always been high, but at the moment the risk of escalation to a nuclear conflict affecting the wider region and the Continental United States is higher

than ever before. The world has already been on the brink of conventional conflict for decades, but not this point of risk before.

**On the Iran deal**, one of the panelist argued that the issue has ceased to be a question of foreign policy, with the Congress involved. Three **key elements** were identified as worth discussing:

1. **The Iran deals fits into the “Trump Doctrine”:**
  - a. Step 1: to rail against anything Obama did
  - b. Step 2: to break the deal
  - c. Step 3: to pass on the issue to someone else, namely the Congress.
2. **Decertifying the deal without any evidence will mean that non-proliferation will be over.**
  - a. With Libya in 2011, the United States lost security guarantees as a means to make states give up nuclear weapons. Today, the United States will be abandoning sanctions relief and diplomacy too.
  - b. No state will willingly give up a nuclear program again.
  - c. Forcing Iran to accept Western terms in the event of future negotiations is now impossible because without credibility one has no leverage.
3. **Those who are advocating bringing an end to the Iran Deal are the same neoconservatives that defended the invasion of Iraq.**

### **III. Strategic Uncertainty for European Allies: Moving from Adaptation to Action**

*2016-17 has been a period of great uncertainty for European allies, as policymakers on the Continent await new priorities from Washington and the results of negotiations between London and Brussels. Will this fluid environment effect European strategic planning? What impact, if any, does America’s uncertain commitment to NATO have on EU common defense planning? Will Trump’s transactional view of international cooperation make him better at alliance building than his predecessors, or will it undermine transatlantic and multilateral cooperation?*

This session focused on the impact of this uncertainty for European allies, especially on EU common defense planning, and explored the ways in which European powers can adapt to this unpredictability. The panelists agreed that there is not *a European response* to Trump, rather *several European responses*. The participants agreed that “Trumpism” represents political currents which extend beyond Trump as an individual and his presidency, particularly around opposition to free trade.

#### **(1) The European reactions on Trump**

- The European countries varied in their reactions, the way they understand Trump statements: “if you are **optimistic**, trust *effect*; if you are **negative**, trust the *words*”.
- Countries like Norway or Germany have no credible conventional defense without the US. Germany is deeply worried and has opted for EU-level cooperation and integration as the answer to retake strategic autonomy. The Baltics feel very concerned. Others like Romania augmented their defense spending.
- For France - which has a nuclear deterrent, full-spectrum capabilities, and a strong defense industry - Trump doesn’t present as much of a strategic problem and may even represent an opportunity.

#### **(2) Trump pushes the EU to think more about defense**

**Trump’s uncertainty gives the issue of defense momentum in Europe.**

- The uncertainty over the “appropriate reaction” to Trump opens up all cleavages across Europe at once and the reaction to Trump reflects those reactions: Those who want to negotiate with Trump drag their feet in CFSP. The French push for further CFSP, while Germany is sitting on the fence and remaining very NATO-centric.
- A new awareness about defense is not only a product of Trump’s election: Brexit, ISIS, Russian assertiveness are all factors that pushed the EU to think more about the Continent’s own military capacity.

- The 2% goal should be thought about more, as it's an arbitrary number which many states simply will not politically or economically be able to reach. The more important result is military output, not financial input.
- *“Are we willing to give up our sovereignty?”* This kind of question is the debate Europeans need to be having about European defense integration, not discussions of details or institutional architectures.

### **(3) European defense would be different from CFSP**

**European defense is not CFSP.** CFSP focuses on limited missions with few lethal capabilities. The move towards European defense means the EU Commission and defense industry are now involved; bringing the Commission's significant financial resources in is a good first step.

**President Macron** made a clear point in Athens and at the Sorbonne: **European defense is more than the EU.** It cannot simply be the establishment of a new institution; it must concretely address real threats. It's more about pragmatic solutions, right tools at the right moment. The focus must therefore be on hard, conventional capabilities. In France, there is a two-fold approach: NATO needs to be compatible with EU defense initiatives and would require EU capabilities which can be used autonomously from American capabilities, and a common EU strategic *culture*: “In the area of defense, our aim needs to ensure EU's autonomous in complement to NATO”. The problem is that “strategic autonomy” of the EU could be seen as a challenge to NATO's role in European security, and more generally a challenge for the transatlantic relationship.

**On the political situation in the United States:** Pessimistic, deep and serious problems persist in the American system. This is not just a Republican problem, as a lot of the domestic questions in play would have been an issue even if Hillary Clinton would have been elected president. Both parties are failing to address the demands of their voters. Trump hijacked the Republican Party. A lot of his supporters were blue collar workers who were previously Democratic voters, or people who don't typically vote.

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**The US is going to be a less reliable partner for Europe going forward, acting more as a disrupter than as leader on global issues and within multilateral forums; European allies will have to find ways to turn this disruption into their advantage. This could translate in four complementary approaches:**

- **European governments should enhance their engagement with U.S. Congress on issues particularly relevant to European strategic interests (Iran, Russia, climate) and at the subnational level,** with U.S. governors, mayors, civil society representatives and think tanks to maintain and pursue transatlantic cooperation on issues where the White House's policies are contradicting European interests and values or where U.S. leadership is retreating.
- **At a time when U.S diplomatic power is diminished, France, along with Germany, will have to take the lead on the diplomatic scene** and engage with powers with which the U.S. has interrupted cooperation or deteriorating relationships, especially in the Middle East.
- **France, with the support of Germany and other European partners, will have to reinforce its cooperation with the United States in the areas where they already cooperate** and where US capabilities have proven to be indispensable (e.g. counterterrorism operations in the Sahel or intelligence-sharing), **while deepening European defense and security cooperation,** in particular in the field of crisis management. In this regard, the bilateral French-U.S. military cooperation has grown stronger since Trump's election and allows France to use it as leverage in other policy areas.
- **European governments should engage more actively with “difficult partners”, like China, Russia and Turkey,** who are acting as both spoilers and partners in many key policy areas where European interests are at stake, in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In this regard, France's mediation role in the Middle East or engagement with China on the climate issue, are two areas where European support will be increasingly needed.