Why America?
The US role in European defense and the European mind

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Jeremy Shapiro
European council on foreign relations, Etats-Unis

For geopolitical thinkers, Europe presents a sort of puzzle. Why does a rich, capable continent of 500 million people depend for its defense, the most sacred of national responsibilities on a faraway power of 300 million? The US role in Europe has become so normal that we often fail to notice how historically anomalous it is. But as the strategic autonomy debates now gripping Europe make clear the US role in Europe is about much more than just the number of US troops in Europe. The US security guarantee plays a central role in Europe defense, in European politics, and the European social consciousness. After 70 years, the American alliance is more than just a foreign policy, it is an ideology and even a way of life in many European countries.

To see this, let's take ourselves back to the May 2017 NATO Summit. We know that Donald Trump is not shy about self-promotion. So it shocked no one when he shoved aside Duško Marković, the prime minister of tiny Montenegro, to get to the front of the official photograph. It was perhaps more surprising that Markovic used the attention generated to "thank President Trump personally for his support" of Montenegro's entry into NATO, noting that "it is natural for the president of the United States to be in the first row."

But while Markovic's manhandling and his response is an unusually naked example, it nonetheless neatly encapsulates the nature of the transatlantic relationship. One side pushes and the other asserts that it wanted to be pushed all along.

This paradox is, for those who study the transatlantic relationship, not difficult to explain, even if it is considered rather rude to talk about it. The nations of Europe rely on America for its security and America does not rely on Europe. As George Orwell almost said, "Europeans who 'abjure' violence can only do so because Americans are committing violence on their behalf."

So, even as Europeans get push or complain or protest, they cannot call into question their relationship with America. This asymmetric dependence is the fundamental and seemingly permanent feature of the transatlantic relationship, the inconvenient fact at the base of decades of rhetoric about shared values and common history. And it means that most

European leaders believer they must find a way to live with President Donald Trump regardless of the threat he presents to European values or whom he shoves out of the way.

But, regardless of how used to this situation we all are, it is not clear that it can or should continue. Trump is the first postwar American president who does not believe in the value of the transatlantic alliance or European unity. And, even beyond the issues of Trump's policy, demographic and political trends in both the US and Europe make relying on the US for security an increasingly untenable proposition.

For all his radicalism, Trump, it turns out, is more a symptom of the rot in the relationship than a cause.

Trump's attack on the Alliance

Trump's policies could scarcely have been better designed to undermine the alliance had that been their objective. Trump started off his presidency by abandoning the Paris climate pact, signaling that the United States would refuse to cooperate on an issue that most Europeans see as an existential threat. He then made a habit of questioning NATO's Article 5 guarantee of mutual defense, the central pillar of European security for the past 70 years. The United States, he has declared, might not defend European allies that refuse to "pay their bills."

In May 2018, Trump pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal. Every country in Europe wanted to preserve it. Those that negotiated that deal—France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the EU—bent over backwards to meet Trump's demands that the arrangement be "fixed." But after months of negotiations, Trump pulled the plug anyway, threatening the United States' closest trading partners with sanctions. Later in May, Trump announced tariffs on European steel and aluminum. He has threatened to impose similar taxes on automobile imports, under the absurd pretext of the need to defend "national security."

In December, Trump sent Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Brussels to deliver a withering assault on the very concept of multilateralism. Speaking in the EU capital, Pompeo excluded the EU from the short list of multilateral organizations the United States considered effective, invoked Brexit as a healthy "wake-up call" for the bloc, and implied that "bureaucrats in Brussels" put their own interests ahead of those of their countries and citizens. Trying to put an intellectual framework around Trump's aggressive nationalism, Pompeo asserted the "central role of the nation-state" and described the United States' mission as to "reassert our sovereignty." Reminding his audience of principles that, when abused, once left their continent in flames was an odd way to rally European support for the "central leadership role in the world" to which he said the Trump administration was returning.

A few weeks later, as if to demonstrate what his version of sovereignty looked like, Trump suddenly announced plans to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria without consulting or even informing the United States' European partners in the fight against the Islamic State (or ISIS).

This sudden move took even Trump's top officials by surprise. But that did not prevent those same officials from later requesting that European countries replace U.S. forces and that they accept detained ISIS fighters whom the United States would not take. Recently Trump reversed course yet again, saying some U.S. troops might remain, but Europeans remain wary of joining them, unsure what the next tweet might say.

Trump, it has to be said, has maintained and even increased some elements of transatlantic cooperation. He implemented President Barack Obama's decision to deploy more U.S. defense assets to Eastern Europe, sent arms to Ukraine, and signed—grudgingly—legislation sanctioning Russia for interfering in U.S. elections and trying to assassinate a former spy in the United Kingdom. But these were all rearguard actions, engineered, sometimes against Trump's will, either by Congress or by people no longer in the administration. Now, having lost his majority in Congress and turning, as have many presidents before him, to foreign policy for political victories, Trump is acting more in line with his own instincts. **That is bad news for Europe**.

Europe's Lack of Reaction

Before the election, some European leaders felt able to declare Trump's candidacy dangerous in the most undiplomatic of terms. British prime minister, David Cameron, for example, called candidate Trump's proposal to ban Muslims from the US, "stupid, divisive, and wrong." Even for those who kept quiet, a large majority viewed a Trump presidency with a combination of incredulity and horror. ECFR research from that period showed that in nine countries, political elites expected that, if Trump won, the presidency, the US would become the most destabilising element in the international system.

But almost immediately after the election, these apocalyptic images evaporated, and were replaced by a mildly optimistic wait-and-see approach. The concept of most governments was (and often remains) that Trump himself was not the key element for understanding US foreign policy under his administration. What mattered were the people he appointed to key positions and the power balances between them.

In my travels across Europe after the election, this idea was so common that I took the opportunity of asking a slightly tipsy Italian official why, after so much ink was spilt over the importance of the US election, everyone so suddenly and fervently believed that Trump did not matter. His response was telling: "We have to believe it. We don't know what to do if it is not true." Another European official took a more sanguine view: "We made the decision that until we felt more comfortable with Putin than with Trump we would have to stick with the Americans. This admittedly was a low bar."

For the first two years of Trump's presidency, Europeans were desperate to preserve good relations at almost any cost. European leaders have so far behaved like abused spouses, mistreated but afraid to leave, hoping against hope that things would improve. Faced with overwhelming evidence that Trump did not believe in the concept of alliances and viewed

Europe more as a rival than a partner, they clung to the vain hope that the "adults in the room"—the experienced foreign policy advisers around Trump—would restrain his worst instincts. Some Americans buttressed this fantasy by imploring Europeans to pay more attention to Trump's policies than his tweets and to take comfort in the president's reassuring personnel choices, particularly that of Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

But now the "adults in the room" are gone. Rex Tillerson, the former secretary of state, H. R. McMaster, the former national security adviser, Mattis, and James Kelly, the former chief of staff, all had a traditional view of alliances and tried to show a degree of independence from the president; all have been forced out of the administration. With the departure of those officials, Trump is now surrounded by people, such as national security adviser John Bolton, who either share his preference for unilateralism or are willing to bury their own views to please their boss. It now appears that his administration is planning to charge allies for the privilege of hosting U.S. forces.

In Europe, reality is now setting in. Having watched Trump in action, only 27 percent of people in the United Kingdom, ten percent in Germany, nine percent in France, and seven percent in Spain have confidence in the U.S. president to do the right thing when it comes to global affairs. Majorities in France and Germany trust China and Russia more than they do the United States and favorable views of the United States are down by double digits across the continent. Even Atlanticist leaders such as Merkel have concluded that Europe "must take its destiny in its own hands," although neither she nor anyone else has yet figured out what that would entail.

One might think that having a U.S. President like Trump would establish a clear challenge and gives opponents political space to adopt new, radical solutions. As Martin Luther put it, "I feel much freer now that I am certain that the Pope is the Antichrist." But Europeans have so far done precious little to take advantage of the Trump effect. France, which has long stood out in its willingness to act independently of the US, is something of an exception to this rule; most others, particularly in the East have generally felt more dependent. Poland is actively seeking to entice a greater U.S. commitment to Europe, including by offering to name a new base after Trump

The Trump shock, as well as the worsening geopolitical situation, *has* led to some movement EU defense. ECFR surveys show that in 85 percent of countries, respondents thought their country should spend more on defence, to become independent from NATO or to invest in EU defence. Aided by economic recovery and a return to growth in defence budgets, new European defence initiatives, notably Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on defense, the European Defence Fund (EDF), and President Macron's European Intervention Initiative.

But as my ECFR colleague Nick Witney, has noted, "all this is promising – but it a good start rather than a job completed. As previous experience with European defence shows, what matters is less the new processes and political declarations than how member states decide, over time, to spend their defence budgets and prepare and deploy their armed forces." By thise measure, the progress is decidedly mixed; there is a gradual upward in defense spending. But,

despite Merkel's critiques, the biggest country Germany lags behind and recently admitted it would slow down the growth of its defense budget. More importantly, despite all the talk of growing European independence, European defense planning has not yet turned toward establishing any sort of autonomy. As a recent think tank report concluded, "EU strategic autonomy is limited to the lower end of the operational spectrum. The prospects for significant change are slim over the coming decade based on current government plans."

Clearly, America remains very central despite Trump. The current plan seems to be to hunker down and hope Trump doesn't get re-elected. As this is more of a hope than a plan, it is perhaps asking why do Europeans persist in believing in such a central role for America in European defense?

The Power of Disinterest: America's Meaning in Europe

For many, Europe's lack of reaction result presents no puzzle at all. Even tipsy Italians understand deep in their marrow that the nations of Europe depend on the US for their security. They need to maintain an effective relationship with America and whomever the American voters, in their infinite wisdom, see fit to put in the White House. ECFR surveys shows that that this effect remains as strong as ever. The member states in the east look to America for security against Russia; the member states in the west look to America for security against Islamist terrorism. And, in a new twist, Greece – traditionally the country in the EU with the most anti-American attitudes – now looks to America for protection against Germany.

To grasp understand why they think this way, one needs to understand the meaning of America and the American president in Europe. As in any longstanding relationship, the European idea of America is complex. Europeans alternately and variously love America, hate America, envy America, and look down on it. The constant in all these emotions is that America is important to Europe, a part of domestic politics on which everyone has an opinion.

The cultural impact of technology has made America even more present in Europe. First, television made Europeans aware not only of who the American president was, but also what it was like to be a single person trying to date in New York. More recently, a recurrent theme in our survey was the impact of companies such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Netflix. Europeans can now follow the life of the Manhattan single twenty-something minute by minute and order their clothes with next-day delivery.

This now also extends to former communist countries which were excluded from the postwar US influence. In Hungary, a growing start-up culture references the US, and new companies there set the US as their ultimate destination. Over the past ten years in Lithuania, English has overtaken Russian as the most important second language. In Slovakia, fast-food restaurants are now prestigious places to eat for the younger generations, and English expressions have started to enter the language.

In part for these reasons, the US president attracts a lot of attention in Europe. Indeed, the European obsession with the American presidency has become so routine that it is basically just accepted as part of the furniture. But it is extraordinary – even by January 2016 one survey showed that between 85-90 percent of Europeans could identify the two leading US presidential candidates. But after similar elections in France and Germany, only 38 percent of Americans were able to identify the winner of the French presidency and only 4 percent could identify the German chancellor. As if seeking approval from an aloof father whom they both deplore and rely on, Europeans have for decades obsessed over his every action. They seek his support in disputes with their siblings, crave his occasional visits, and rejoice in a casual mention of their role.

My understanding of the role of the US president for Europeans began in a fish restaurant. In fact, it was my favourite fish restaurant in Washington, which was why I accepted the lunch invitation from the Spanish embassy. But I knew the price in advance. It was 2010 and Spain held the rotating presidency of the EU. They desperately wanted Obama to attend the US-EU summit in Spain and they were pulling out all the stops. If they were willing to cough up for the seared tuna to talk to a low-level official like me, they had clearly reached a desperate state in that effort. Between bites, I explained again what they had already intuited: Obama would likely not go. As I ordered dessert, the Spanish officials did not bother to hide their deep disappointment. The US government offered a substitute. But without the American president the summit had no meaning at all. Despite the important outstanding issues in US-EU relations, the Spanish soon cancelled the summit altogether.

As commentators often note, Americans do not reciprocate this obsessive attention. No European official has ever eaten a fancy lunch on the slim hope that European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker will visit Washington. In Washington today, national security leaders, both inside and outside the government, are preoccupied with Trump's latest antics and are focused on US policy toward Russia and the Middle East. It is hard to even sustain a conversation on the future of the EU. For them, Europe is mostly a nice place to visit and to hold conferences on Middle East peace.

But Americans' lack of interest in Europe is not a bug – it is an important feature of the transatlantic relationship. Europeans want a protector whose own interests are remote from the internal struggles of Europe. They want a partner who will provide stability and security without posing a threat or taking a stand on the issues that divide Europe, such as immigration or fiscal policy. The Greek attitude towards Germany demonstrates the problem. Greece needs help. But because of the EU, and especially the euro, Germany is too involved in Greek domestic politics to trust as a security provider.

Even on foreign policy issues, as political scientist Ivan Krastev notes, "the external threats that the EU faces divide rather than unify the continent." Of course, many European states have differences with the US on a variety of foreign policy issues, particularly in the Middle East. But because America's main foreign policy interests are in other theatres, they either matter little to European domestic politics or European leaders can hope that they will change.

On the foreign policy issues that really matter to European security, principally Russia, terrorism, and stability in the southern and eastern European neighbourhoods, the US as a distant power has less fixed positions than the powerful European states do. On Russia, for example, US policy has fluctuated dramatically in the last three decades, from hostility to reset and back again. Trump's view offers the chance for another reset, but the opposition to it in Congress implies that deepening hostility is just as likely. European national positions on Russia, though they vary greatly across the continent, have stayed much more constant. They are largely fixed by geography and history.

America's disinterest and consequent flexibility mean that America is the wild card in European foreign policy debates. European leaders hope not so much for a neutral arbiter as for an ally in their internal struggles with other European states. For this reason, individual European member states have always been keen to maintain their individual bilateral relations with the US, even as they took measures to create a supposedly unified European foreign policy apparatus.

In the period after the creation of the office of EU high representative for foreign affairs in 2009, meetings with national European officials in the US State Department would typically begin with a plea for the US to accept that EU was a unified actor. But they would generally end with a plea for US support in some internal European struggle, such as keeping Germany off the UN Security Council. The message was clear: respect our unity except when our country needs your support.

ECFR surveys reveal that at least 11 EU member states believe that they have a special relationship with the US. A direct relationship with the American president is extremely valuable in asserting this special relationship, which is why it meant everything to the Spanish to try to bring Obama to their summit.

For Europeans, America means security and stability. But, more than that, it means disinterested security. Europeans certainly want protection from Russia and terrorism, but, working together, they could provide that themselves. The problem is that they also want political protection from each other. And only America can provide that.

The transatlantic continuity between Obama and Trump

Such is the transatlantic bargain that the madness of President Trump threatens to disrupt. For all its weirdness, that bargain has served both sides of the Atlantic well over the years. Foreign policy leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are keen to protect it. But they will only succeed if Trump is really the problem. And, even though Trump's ideology does represent a new threat to the alliance, there is ample reason to suppose the problems run deeper than one mercurial president.

American foreign policy has long included a desire for more equitable burden-sharing. But previous US efforts to bring this about accepted that America's best partners are democracies, that America's own prosperity rests on a broad global system of trade and investment that Europeans contribute to, and that Europe's security must be protected – by Europe if possible, and by the US if necessary.

Previous postwar American presidents have explicitly looked for a more equitable partnership with Europe, but they believed that Europe's security and prosperity were a core interest of the US. They have therefore been wary of abandoning Europe and leaving it to its own devices.

Trump, in contrast, believes in walls and in oceans. In this view, America can and should stand aside from problems in other regions. Unless it is radically reshaped, Trump claimed during the campaign, America will simply walk away from Europe, leaving it to deal with its problems on its own. Trump's new approach has increased American bargaining power in transatlantic disputes, but at the cost of putting at risk the entire alliance. A striking result from our surveys across Europe is that few in the EU want to see the end of this basic bargain. Most hope that it will survive Trump.

The problem is that Trump's radicalism, his profound ignorance of policy, and his bizarre antics obscure what has become a clear if a much more slow-paced trajectory in American policy. In fact, the US has been scaling down its global commitments, and particularly those in Europe, for several years. As of today, it has fewer troops stationed abroad than at any time since it started tracking such data in 1957.

Among its other lessons, the 2016 presidential election starkly revealed that a deep gulf had opened up between the American electorate and its foreign policy establishment. The establishment in both parties has long made the case that American global 'leadership' and American efforts in distant regions are necessary to sustain global stability. They thus ultimately serve American interests. In a world of new and rising powers, they seek to 'adapt American leadership' to the new context rather than find a new role for the US.

The American public has always been a somewhat disgruntled supporter of this leadership approach. Mostly they were too busy with other issues and too secure to really care. But as homeland security, trade and immigration have become more of salient and the costs of inconclusive foreign wars have increased in recent years, they have become less tolerant of America's traditional leadership role in Europe and the world. Fifty-seven percent of the American public now say that they want to reduce American commitments abroad and to focus on more strictly American needs. This is not isolationism, but it also does not accept that the abstract concepts of "leadership" and "regional stability" have direct payoffs for America.

Obama's foreign policy tried to compromise between the establishment and the public view. He understood and broadly accepted the need for American leadership, but insisted on reducing America's costs and commitments if he was to be able to sell an ever more expensive leadership to an increasingly self-interested public. This approach underpinned his efforts to

reduce American commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, to avoid US intervention in Syria, and to scale back the American presence in Europe.

Unfortunately, Obama's efforts at compromise meant that his own foreign policy apparatus largely did not understand or accept the political constraints that he felt so keenly on the campaign trail. The foreign policy establishment excoriated him for a lack of strength and leadership. His own national security officials, largely drawn from that establishment, constantly pushed for more US involvement abroad in, for example, Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. At times, his efforts to partially accommodate what one of his closest aides call the "blob" resulted in policy, as in Syria, for example, that dissatisfied all sides.

Hillary Clinton tried to represent this establishment foreign policy view on the campaign trail in 2016 but found little success with it. She soon de-emphasised that message in favour of domestic themes. By contrast, Clinton's primary opponent, Bernie Sanders, and Trump both generated enthusiasm through their rejection of the establishment and, in part, its traditional foreign policy.

Given Sanders's surprising strength in the Democratic primaries and Trump's even more surprising victory, at least one political lesson is very clear from the 2016. The foreign policy establishment lost. It was nearly completely unified in its opposition to Trump and yet it made no difference at all. Trump demonstrated that a president can be elected without paying any heed whatsoever to the "blob". The 2020 candidates have taken note and, even if they are more sober and globalist than Trump, they are not putting the case for continued American global leadership to the American public.

It's not surprising. At a time when new powers are rising and geo-political competition is increasing, there are increasing demands on scarce US resources. The disinterested nature of America's security relationship with Europe means that its commitment to the continent is usually first in line for the foreign policy chopping block. Why America should protect a relatively stable continent of rich democracies is particularly hard to explain to a public that wants to put America first. Trump has made a lot of rhetorical hay out of Europe's freeriding on America. Neither the American foreign policy establishment nor European allies have found an effective political counter-argument.

All of this creates a deep challenge for Europe. Europe has an intense strategic and psychological dependence on the US, yet Trump's America, and arguably any future America, is both uninterested in, and unable to fulfil, its traditional role in Europe. The states of Europe should be preparing for that day. But, as the mild reaction to the radical Trump presidency shows, internal divisions mean that by and large they are not. So what should Europeans do?

Towards a post-American politics in Europe

The geopolitical logic behind Europe reducing its dependence on the US is very strong. At the moment that Trump and the American political trends he represents are highlighting American unreliability, the Middle East is becoming ever more unstable, Russia is becoming ever more threatening, and Africa is becoming ever more crowded. Europe's inability to credibly deal with these issues is a key part of why its people have lost confidence in it. As Krastev reminds us, "the old continent has both lost its centrality in global politics and the confidence of Europeans themselves – the confidence that its political choices can shape the future of the world."

The problem is not the logic. It is that, when it comes to transatlantic relations, 'Europe' does not exist. The EU is not capable of agreeing on collective goals and strategies when it comes to the US. The member states own the security relationship with America and, as our survey implies, for most of them it does not "hurt" to depend on the US for security. Or at least it hurts less than the alternative of depending on other Europeans.

Any strategy for overcoming this collective action problem must start with the member states, not with a Europe that does not exist. And it must address the security needs and political fears of the individual member states, not simply imply that European dependence is a result of lack of effort. It must chart a path that describes why enough member states would choose to reduce their dependence on America for security (and why the rest would feel forced to do so.)

This means, for example, that independence is not simply a question of increasing defence spending. Collectively, European members of NATO already spend $265 billion on their armed forces, nearly four times what Russia spends. Even massive increases in spending would make little difference without a political commitment to achieve such independence.

As with much else in Europe these days, the answer must begin with Germany. In the Trump era, Germany has become the key swing state on transatlantic relations. More than most European leaders, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has since the start of Trump's administration been willing to criticise his policy on, for example, immigration, trade, and NATO, and has suggested that Germany can no longer rely on the US even if she has not done much about it.

This is perhaps because German officials are aware that America's position in Europe has always depended not just on power, but also on consensus. As the historian Geir Lundestad reminds us, "one reason America could achieve as much as it did [in postwar Europe] is that America's desires frequently coincided with those of Western Europe."

Germany's current problem is not that it lacks the power to replace America; it is that it lacks the consent. For reasons of history and national psychology, it cannot assume a more prominent leadership without partners. Greece's explicit call for protection from Germany is just the clearest example of widespread European discomfort with German power. And for all the second world war rhetoric that often accompanies complaints about Germany, this is not

just about history. Many countries view Germany's effort to lead Europe during the financial and immigration crises as harbingers of a self-interested approach to European problems. America, for all its self-absorption, is a lot farther away than Germany and its similar tendency to put its interests first creates fewer clashes with its European partners.

All of this means that Germany cannot just depend on Putin's aggressiveness and Trump's unreliability to make the case for a post-American security policy in Europe. It must forge a coalition of member states that see its leadership as benefiting them directly. It must also find a mechanism for exercising that leadership that will bind Germany and convince its European partners that it will not abuse its position.

This effort begins with here in France, as Macron has recognised. Recognising this leverage, Macron is explicitly trying to revive the old Franco-German bargain. In exchange for German indulgence on economic issues, Macron offers a close partnership with France that will help legitimate German power to the rest of Europe. But Germany remains reluctant. Its transatlantic instincts run deep. French officials report that the Germans seem more interested in using the effort to improve EU defence cooperation to spur further European integration rather than to create more capability for Europe to defend itself. Moreover, translating Franco-German partnership into confidence from Europe's smaller member states, especially those in the east, is a major challenge.

A post-American Europe along these lines is difficult, but possible. It is even a path that many in France, Germany, and elsewhere are advocating. But, of course, it will probably not happen. For all the upsetting changes in America and Russia; for all the crises that have rocked the EU in the last several years; and for all the destabilising developments in Europe's neighbourhood, the member states clearly prefer the old bargain that has served them so well. For the most part, they will cling to it until its demise becomes clearer than truth. During the presidential campaign, Trump boasted that "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." He might someday say the same thing about the transatlantic allies. In any case, no one will block his photo opportunity at the next NATO summit.