

Rachel Rizzo

# THE COMING US PRESIDENT: WHAT TO EXPECT FOR TRANS- ATLANTIC SECURITY?

Since Donald Trump's election in the fall of 2016, the transatlantic relationship has been under immense pressure. The first three years of Trump's presidency have been marked with insults directed at US-European allies, questioning the value of US membership in NATO, an ongoing trade war, bungled Syria, Afghanistan and Iran policies directly implicating European allies, and a general disregard for the importance of the transatlantic partnership. At this point, it's become a cliché to say "the transatlantic relationship is in crisis" because it's such a common refrain.

Today, however, the hot-headedness driving so much of the US-European relationship over the past few years seems to have cooled, at least temporarily. There have been fewer errant outbursts from the US president directed toward Europe, and he even went so far as to defend NATO against controversial comments Emmanuel Macron made to the Economist magazine. After Macron said NATO was experiencing a "brain-death," among other things, Trump surprised everyone and said the comments were "nasty" and "very insulting";<sup>1</sup> somewhat ironic for a president who referred to NATO as "obsolete."

<sup>1</sup> Tamara Keith, "[From NATO Critic To Defender, Trump Calls Macron's Comments 'Nasty'](#)", NPR, December 3, 2019.

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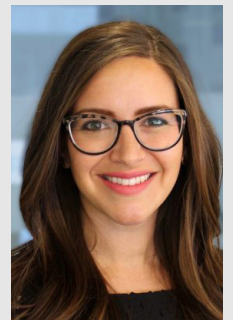


Admittedly, things might only *seem* better because Trump is distracted by ongoing impeachment proceedings and policies elsewhere in the world. Right now, Trump's eye isn't focused directly on Europe. But with potentially only one year left of the Trump presidency, the question now becomes, what comes next? *Who* comes next?

A second Trump Presidency is a very real possibility. While everyone learned in 2016 not to read too much into the polls, President Trump remains a highly competitive candidate in key battleground states even while suffering from low national ratings.<sup>2</sup> While it's important not to be too hyperbolic, the reality is that a second Trump term would answer many of the existential questions that experts,

<sup>2</sup> Nate Cohn, "[One Year from Election, Trump Trails Biden but Leads Warren in Battlegrounds](#)," The New York Times, November 4, 2019.

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citizens, and policymakers have been grappling with every day for three years: how did Trump get elected? Why did he get elected? And perhaps most importantly, was it an accident of history? A second term means no, Trump's election was not an accident; that even after his blatant racism, sexism, nationalism and errant behavior, he still has a solid base of support throughout the country. In turn, this would reinforce Trump's belief in his "America first" slogan, making him bolder in following his worst impulses.

## Europe and a Second Trump Term

What, exactly, would a second term mean for the Transatlantic relationship? First, there would undoubtedly be continuing problems with NATO. Although Trump's harsh rhetoric toward the alliance has somewhat halted given that he's taken personal credit for recent defense spending increases amongst NATO allies, it's no secret that he is not a fan of the alliance. In fact, he's said the United States is the country that benefits the least from membership.<sup>3</sup> He is also the only president who has suggested that US article V commitments could be contingent upon whether or not countries meet their 2 percent of GDP defense spending targets. A second term could very likely go beyond just simple language like this. An empowered Trump could easily feel comfortable saying, "this alliance isn't serving US needs anymore, we are out." Of course, any such move would hit immediate Congressional roadblocks, and so the likelihood that it would actually result in a US withdrawal is slim. Still, the signals it would send could be catastrophic.

In addition to creating issues with NATO, Trump in his second term might feel emboldened to fuel populist language on both sides of the Atlantic, cozing up to populist and authoritarian leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Brexiteer-in-chief, Nigel Farage. Without the pressure of an election ahead of him, the US president would have to worry even less about optics than

<sup>3</sup> Alex Ward, "Trump thinks NATO is good now — after French President Macron criticized it", Vox News, December 3, 2019.

he does today. Additionally, the US-German relationship could be in a precarious position; of course, it depends largely on who succeeds Angela Merkel, and how Germany does with its efforts to increase defense spending. However, a second Trump term combined with continuously low German defense spending could easily lead to a near-total breakdown of the relationship.

Lastly, it would also be unsurprising to see Trump make further cuts to the European Deterrence Initiative. EDI currently hovers around \$6 billion, which is a 57% increase from the Obama administration's peak funding of \$3.4 billion during fiscal year 2017.<sup>4</sup> Decreasing EDI is not, counter to what one often hears in Washington, a disastrous policy decision. It is other, less tangible problems that a second Trump term would cause for the Transatlantic relationship that should be much more concerning.

## The Transatlantic Relationship and a New Democratic President

A new Democratic president would likely make repairing the US-European relationship a keystone of their foreign policy strategy. However, the current top three contenders would have different approaches. Bernie Sanders, for example, probably wouldn't place as much emphasis on Europe. Although his approach would undoubtedly be less confrontational, he would likely be just as skeptical as Trump regarding current US military commitments to and within Europe. Elizabeth Warren, on the other hand, has explicitly talked about the importance of the US-European relationship, and is relatively mainstream when it comes to her support for NATO and the United States' global allies. She recently said that as president she would recommit to US alliances and reaffirm the United States' "rock-solid commitment to NATO's article 5 provisions."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> David Welna, "Under Trump, NATO Nations Get More US Troops and Military Spending," NPR, December 3, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Warren, "Donald Trump has Destroyed American Leadership—I'll Restore It," The Guardian, December 8, 2019.

Finally, Joe Biden has a proven track-record of being pro-Europe. For example, in his Munich Security Conference speech in 2019, he said, “the America I see does not wish to turn our back on the world or our closest allies.” He added, “this too shall pass ... we will be back. We will be back.”<sup>6</sup> However, when it comes to the US relationship with Europe, what does “we will be back” really mean? Even under a new Democratic president in the United States, the transatlantic partners must come to terms with the fact that the US-European relationship will look fundamentally different going forward.

If a new president does take the reins in 2020, there are a couple of things they must understand to begin rebuilding the Transatlantic partnership. First, the United States must inevitably accept a more independent Europe. Instead of pushing back on European-wide efforts to strengthen its own defense capabilities, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF), the US should actively support them. The Trump administration has had harsh words for Europeans regarding these efforts, voicing concerns that PESCO will undermine NATO and become a protectionist vehicle for the European defense industry.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, this is not a new phenomenon—multiple US administrations have been highly critical of European efforts to increase capabilities outside the confines of NATO, but it’s especially ironic for the Trump administration to double down on this line given how hard they have pushed Europeans to do more in terms of defense. A new US president should reverse course, and actively encourage Europe to take more responsibility for its own defense and foreign policy.

Second, a new US president must also understand that encouraging a stronger, more autonomous Europe may ultimately mean more disagreements between the two continents. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. As Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad argued, “that is the price one pays for having serious, reliable allies. It is unrealistic to imagine that after asking a partner to take on a larger portion of its own security, your interests will magically align.”<sup>8</sup> A more independent Europe, one that isn’t subversive to the United States, means that the United States must become more used to push-back from Europe in response to decisions that negatively affect its own interests. Europe’s creation of INSTEX, a special purpose vehicle meant to sidestep US sanctions of Iran, is a perfect example. As Polyakova and Haddad stated, ‘although such endeavors are largely symbolic at this stage, they could lead to a more ambitious attempt to promote the euro as an alternative reserve currency, reducing Europeans’ dependence on the U.S. dollar and the U.S. financial system.’<sup>9</sup>

At this point, it is impossible to know who might come next in terms of US leadership. It will be undoubtedly difficult for US-European relations to improve under a second Trump term given the animosity brewing for the last three years. A new president, however, could use the opportunity for a clean slate. As long as whomever enters office is comfortable with and supportive of Europe’s quest for greater independence, there will be ample opportunities to rebuild damaged relations and create even stronger ties in the future.

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6 Arlette Saenz, “[Biden Says US Should Remain Committed to its Allies Abroad](#),” CNN, February 16, 2019.

7 Steven Erlanger, “[U.S. Revives Concerns About European Defense Plans, Rattling NATO Allies](#),” The New York Times, February 18, 2018.

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8 Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad, “[Europe Alone: What Comes After the Transatlantic Alliance](#),” Foreign Affairs, July/August 2019.

9 Ibid.