



Is America Changing the European Power Play?

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Facts & Statements

When at the NATO summit in Brussels, on 25 May 2017, president Donald Trump didn't say that one sentence committing America to continue standing by article 5 of the NATO Charter, he raised eyebrows across Europe. At that time, everyone remembered that candidate Donald Trump raised serious suspicions that his presidency might lead to the end of the West, as we knew it. Nevertheless, everyone who has ever believed in the strength of the Trans-Atlantic link and in the soft power of the Euro-Atlantic values secretly hoped that the end of *Pax Americana* in Europe wasn't that close.

Later, in that same year, when president Trump repeatedly noted in his keynote speech in Warsaw that the United States "has demonstrated not only with words, but with its actions, that it stands behind Article 5"ⁱ of the NATO treaty, Euro-Atlantic optimists applauded him with a sigh of relief. Indeed, over the next fall and winter,

the Trump administration and the US foreign policy establishment issued strategic policy documents apparently ignoring those past suspicions. They rather "shot" at Russia which "aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. [...] and views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats".ⁱⁱ Furthermore, in January 2018, the influential Council on Foreign Relations issued a Special Report which stated bluntly in its conclusions that "Indeed, because of Russian policies, the United States and its European treaty allies regrettably are now forced to adopt a policy of containment to protect the sovereignty, security, and democracy of all NATO members, because Moscow seeks to undermine all three."ⁱⁱⁱ

In spring 2018, Donald Trump decided the US should leave the Iranian nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action- JCPOA).

That happened against all pains taken by key European allies (France, Germany, and UK) to persuade him not to leave that deal. The subsequent debacle of the G7 summit in Canada, where president Trump scapegoated Canadian prime-minister Justin Trudeau for withdrawing his signature from the summit declaration, arose fears of another debacle at the upcoming NATO summit in Brussels, on 11-12 July 2018. Those fears turned into suspicions about the shifting American power play in Europe when the news of a Trump-Putin “historic summit” had been leaked to the international media^{iv}.

A New Narrative is Shaping

Even more worryingly than the news from president Trump’s spring 2018 decisions has been a plethora of very recent articles speculating over “The Post-War Order is Over”^v, “America’s Pivot from the West”^{vi}, “The United States and Russia Target Germany”^{vii}, “Trump’s America Does not Care”^{viii} or “Trump, Kissinger, and the Search for a New World Order”^{ix}. The overall narrative of those articles included the foregone conclusion that “the 75-year-old post-war order crafted by the United States after World War II was falling apart”^x. This was mainly why “The United States’ allies are about to find out what real unilateralism looks like and what the real exercise of U.S. hegemony feels like, because Trump’s America does not care. It is unencumbered by historical memory. It recognizes no moral, political or strategic commitments. It feels free to pursue objectives without regard to the effect on allies or, for that matter, the world”^{xi}. Consequently, the US would be “returning to a world where balance of power, not convergence, is responsible for guaranteeing order, and it sees itself as the holder of the balance. In such a system, the holder of the balance is by necessity

alone.”^{xii} The primary victim of this new strategic shift would be Germany who was targeted by a collusion of interests between the Trump administration and the Kremlin: “These interests are about dividing the EU. In the case of the United States, these policies undermine the transatlantic alliance and weaken the West’s projection of its values.”^{xiii} Overall, the old global order was under serious stress as “The United States remains inherently powerful but is no longer unrivalled. China is rapidly rising as a peer competitor to the United States while a weaker and wary Russia, enticed by the prospect of weakening the U.S.-led order, has strategically aligned itself (for now) with Beijing. Squeezed between these two poles, Europe finds itself too divided to play the role of an effective mediator.”^{xiv}

Analysis

What could we make of an unpredictable, if not perplexing, most recent American foreign and security policy? In theory, US policy suggested a new containment jointly with its Allies and partners against Russia and China. Meanwhile, president Trump’s practice: reflected the demise of the old world order; questioned the Trans-Atlantic relations in the name of the old Westphalian balance of power; ignored the legitimate interests of its Allies and partners, under the disguise of a nationalist slogan “America first”; and strived to undermine the unity of the European allies.

- 1) There seems to be lack of policy coordination between a new radical American policy, driven by president Trump’s slogan, decisions, and tweets with the help of his loyal advisors in the White House, and the US professional diplomats, civil servants, and military who must implement it. Since the inauguration of President Trump, in January 2017, the Congress supported by the FBI, the CIA

and the US justice system, have struggled to constrain the international policies, and decisions of the president by using both the inherent checks and balances, as well as other forms of pressure over the president. Absent the conditions for an impeachment of the president by the Congress, it seems to be just a matter of time until president Trump will enforce his political will over the Congress and the public service who would have to implement his radical policies on the international arena.

- 2) It seems that Donald Trump's international policy thinking is built upon the following tenets: the US global leadership promoted by his predecessors was not cost-effective for America; the system of alliances and partnerships just burdened the American budget and failed to provide the same strategic, economic, and geopolitical output they used to throughout the second half of the 20th century; multilateralism and international organizations and agreements uselessly constrain American power, and implicitly its freedom to exert it at the global and regional levels; issue-oriented ad-hoc, temporary arrangements are more profitable in meeting US national interests; the president is only accountable to his electorate, and he should therefore fulfil all his campaign promises; there are a number of states, including allies and partners, such as Germany, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, but also adversaries, like China and Russia, who took unfair advantage of American benign hegemony in the post-Cold War era, and they should be powerfully pushed back.
- 3) Since the US allies and partners have rejected the benign American global leadership and have favoured instead a multilateral world order, the US would be relieved by all unnecessary commitments of *Pax Americana*. In terms of security policy,

the way forward might consist of applying the *indirect warfare strategy* to various regions of the world, including Europe. This strategy had been first applied by president Obama in fall 2015 when he had tacitly acquiesced to Russian military involvement in Syria. At the time, it was meant to give up America's traditional post-Cold War role as the regional hegemon in the Middle East, in exchange for a perpetual balancing role of one or more regional powers. This implied for the US to share the task of counterbalancing the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East with its key regional allies: Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel. That could have been an enactment of what George Friedman called *indirect warfare*: "There are two varieties of indirect warfare. [...] The second is maintaining the balance of power among nations. We are seeing this form in the Middle East as the United States moves between the four major regional powers — Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey -supporting one then another in a perpetual balancing act."^{xv}.

- 4) *Indirect warfare* in Europe might build upon Halford Mackinder's "Theory of Heartland". According to Mackinder, the land surface of the Earth was divisible into: World-Island, comprising the interlinked continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa; Offshore Islands, including the British islands and Japan; the Outlying Islands, including the American continents and Australia. The Heartland laid at the centre of the World Island, stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic. He summarised his theory as: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world." By East Europe Mackinder understood the vast space separating

Germany from Russia of his times (beginning of the 20th century), that is what we would call today the area from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea or the Intermarium.

- 5) That might be why George Friedman, a self-declared NATO- and EU-sceptic (like president Donald Trump), suggested a strategy of *indirect engagement* in East Europe, which would combine economy of force and finance, and would limit the development of Russia and Germany as regional hegemonic powers, while exposing the US to limited and controlled risk. The key element of that strategy would consist of an *Intermarium Alliance*^{xvi}, consisting of countries on the Estonia to Azerbaijan line, which shared the primary interest of retaining their sovereignty, and the danger that the eventual fate of Ukraine could spread and directly affect their national security interests, including their internal stability. Given that the Baltics, Moldova and the Caucasus are the areas where the Russians could seek to compensate for their loss of influence in Ukraine, Friedman suggested that Poland, Romania and Azerbaijan should be the outposts around which the *Intermarium Alliance* was built. He saw this alliance not as an offensive force but rather as a force designed to deter Russian expansion. By supplying those countries with modern military equipment Washington might strengthen pro-U.S. political forces in each country and create a wall behind which foreign investment could take place.

Conclusion

Whether or not this analysis is accurate and realistic is still to be confirmed by president Trump's European power play. For now, he seems prepared to escalate the EU-US trade war he has recently started by imposing tariffs on steel and aluminium imported from the EU. Eventually, this is a process that it may take some time to complete, and it may start with signs of meltdown at NATO, followed by deepening cracks within the EU, and fresh efforts to reach out to Russia from both sides of the Atlantic. We should therefore watch with maximum attention the upcoming NATO summit, the way the EU handled the joint French-German proposals for EU reforms and the BREXIT, how the EU would respond to the breaches of democratic rules in Eastern European countries, as well as the next European and American contacts with president Putin. If America was indeed changing the rules of the European power play, then all European and Eurasian actors might need to rethink their positions and security strategies within the newly reshaped geopolitical context.

As a critic of the post-war world order has put it: "Trump threw a pebble at a global glass house. But that is not a morality tale about the power of pebbles, but rather about the easy shattering of cracked glass."^{xvii} Does this statement make a relevant point in today's Europe?

ⁱ Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty on 06 July 2017, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-europe-trip-poland-warsaw-visit/28597961.html>

ⁱⁱ National Security Strategy of the United States issued December 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Blackwill and Philipp Gordon - "Containing Russia. How to Respond to Moscow's Intervention in U.S. Democracy and Growing Geopolitical Challenge", Council on Foreign Relations, Council's Special Report No. 80, January 2018.

^{iv} Pavel Felgenhauer- "Putin-Trump: Another 'Historic Summit' in the Works After Singapore", in Eurasian Daily Monitor, Vol. 15, Issue 92, 14 June 2018.

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- ^v Victor Davis Hanson- “The Post-War Order is Over” in Geopolitical Monitor of 4 June 2018, from <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-post-war-order-is-over/>
- ^{vi} Bruno Macaes- “America’s Pivot from the West”, in The American Interest, of 8 June 2018, from <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/06/08/americas-pivot-from-the-west/>
- ^{vii} Judy Dempsey- “The United States and Russia Target Germany”, Carnegie Europe, 07 June 2018, from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/>.
- ^{viii} Robert Kagan- “Trump’s America does not care”, on Brookings, 17 June 2018, from <http://www.brookings.edu>
- ^{ix} Reva Goujon- “Trump, Kissinger, and the Search for a New World Order”, Stratfor Worldview, on 22 June 2018, from <https://worldview.stratfor.com/>.
- ^x Victor Davis Hanson- Op.cit.
- ^{xi} Robert Kagan- Op.cit.
- ^{xii} Bruno Macaes- Op. cit.
- ^{xiii} Judy Dempsey- Op.cit.
- ^{xiv} Reva Goujon- Op.cit.
- ^{xv} George Friedman- “*Coming to terms with the American Empire*”, 14 April 2015, from <http://www.stratfor.com>.
- ^{xvi} George Friedman – “From Estonia to Azerbaijan: American Strategy After Ukraine”, Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly, 25 March 2014, from <http://www.stratfor.com>.
- ^{xvii} Victor Davis Hanson- Op.cit.