

Trump's Foreign Policy: the Catalyst the European Union Needed?

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Much political and media attention is currently focused on the likely consequences of a Trump presidency for US foreign policy and the USA's European allies. Leiden University Lecturer [Maxine David](#) examines the reactions of key European leaders and argues that doubts over Trump's foreign policy direction might be the spur that the Europeans needed to reassert their own values base and to take on the burden of responsibility for their own security.



As the world adjusts to the idea of President Donald Trump, all conversations are focused heavily on one particular policy area: what US foreign policy will look like. The consensus is that we really do not know, but that there is much to worry about. This is fair; after all, the campaign trail is never a reliable indicator of actual policy outcomes and that is probably most true in the case of a complete political novice such as we have in Trump. However, policy, and especially Foreign Policy, is always as much about how it is perceived as much as what is intended and it is certainly an area of exchange and interaction. Where one party (the US President-Elect) has given few reliable clues, others are already filling the gaps. As a result, we are far clearer on how US foreign policy under a Trump administration will be received and what the concerns are than we are about what will emerge from the White House itself. At the same time, the US will itself be forced to respond to events and concerns and, given the high level of agreement about what the challenges are in Europe at least, we can expect much on the Europe-US political agenda to be set by Europeans.

In her response to Trump's election, German Chancellor, [Angela Merkel](#), delivered a sober and unambiguous message that spoke of "confrontations" in the campaign "that were difficult to stomach", of her "trepidation" while watching the results come in. In acknowledging the bonds that tie Germany and the USA, she sent a carefully crafted message that revealed her doubts, as well as her hopes. The reference to shared values were standard fare; the specifics less so, as she cited those values as consisting of "respect of people regardless of their origin, the colour of their skin, their religion, gender, sexual orientation or their political beliefs". It is not without reason that Twitter has been rife with suggestions that the mantle of leader of the free world has shifted from the USA to Germany. Between Brexit and Trump, we should expect Germany to continue asserting itself more in relation to EU foreign policy.

The [French President's statement](#) was hardly more reassuring about European perceptions of the world under a Trump presidency. François Hollande spoke of a "period of uncertainty" opening, of multiple serious challenges, but of a refusal to compromise on European values either. In a diplomacy-lite moment, the French Ambassador to the US, Gérard Araud, sent a [tweet](#) that spoke of "the end of an epoch", of "the world crumbling in front of our eyes"; a tweet quickly deleted, it is [reported](#).

All the talk of values reflects the understanding that Trump is not a man of principle, unless that principle is one of transactionalism. Meanwhile, Europe as a continent faces an abyss carved from several separate, deep crises – and losing the anchor at the other end of the rope. Both France and Germany face elections in 2017, of course, with Hollande at least unlikely to survive in office. However, regardless of changes in Paris and possibly Berlin, Trump in the White House should give momentum to calls for Europe to take on more responsibility for its own security, and we can expect discussions over a European Army to move up the EU's political agenda once the results of French and German elections are known. Simultaneously, Trump's advisors should be warning that if the EU proceeds much further down the road of disintegration, the US will suffer. Donald Trump will therefore be forced to rethink US commitment to Europe, whatever his own preferences. It is a point reinforced by the NATO response. Its Secretary

General, [Jens Stoltenberg](#), was less pointed than other Europeans but clear nevertheless. After congratulating Trump, he moved quickly to a reference to current security threats and a reiteration of the place of the US in NATO and of the need for strength and the benefits that strength brings not only to Europe but also the USA. Given the nature of the threats, it is undoubtedly extraordinary that NATO would have to underline to Washington their existence.

Unsurprisingly, it is from the European Union that we get a real sense of the very deep fears felt by Europeans about the security of the continent and beyond. The [statement](#) of the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, was a case in point, especially in his mention of the need for “the right mix of responsibility, restraint and leadership”. Clearly, questions over the suitability of Trump’s temperament reverberate in Brussels as well as Washington. The doubts felt about the Trump administration’s commitment to Europe echo in Schulz’s final words about the centrality of EU-US relations to stability in the world: “The EU is committed to maintain this relationship. We hope the same holds true for the future US President”.

The President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, was no less downbeat, as might be expected from a Polish national under these circumstances. But his perceptions of Trump provided strong clues as to future European Council agendas, worked through preferably with the USA but, undoubtedly, without them if need be. He spoke of the need to “remember the strength of the Western community”, of the need to heed clear warnings such that “we should finally get our act together and bring back a sense of direction, bring back confidence, bring back a sense of order”.

Perversely then, as this first week of realisation begins to draw to a close, there is some reason for optimism about a positive direction of travel for Europe. Where the EU’s various crises have not served as the catalyst for strong leadership to emerge, the perception of unreliable, unpredictable leadership in the USA has.

Russia, however, should not go without mention. Much has been made, of course, of Russia’s role in the US elections. These are overstated and dangerous in that they let the US, in the form of successive governments and ill-informed voters, off the hook, and deepen a disturbing and inaccurate narrative of a strong Russia. In fact, a walk through the [reactions in Russia](#) of more than just Vladimir Putin reminds us that no matter who is in the White House, we can expect Russia to remain suspicious and we can expect to see it continue its assault on US hegemony. Trump will not be the first western leader to begin relations with the Kremlin on a friendly footing. Given Russian motivations and Trump’s inexperience, he will not be the first to *maintain* those friendly relations over the duration of his term in office. In that sense, little changes for the EU.

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