


Will Trump matter for the EU's policy priorities?

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The reaction in the EU to Donald Trump's election was largely negative, as several political figures expressed concern at the consequences of a Trump presidency for Europe. [Hrant Kostanyan](#) and [Mikkel Barslund](#) provide a comprehensive overview of Trump's potential impact on the EU's policy priorities. They argue that the fundamental international challenges Europe faces will only be marginally affected by Trump's administration, and that many of these challenges, such as climate change, trade, the refugee crisis and security, are likely to remain after his departure.



In Europe, as in much of the rest of the world including large parts of the United States, Donald Trump's election conjured up a plethora of doomsday scenarios. It was quickly assumed, for example, that the US would pull out of the COP21 Paris Agreement. Bolstering EU defence capabilities was suddenly proclaimed an urgent priority in light of the uncertain continued commitment the new US administration could be expected to show towards NATO. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) was also declared dead and parallels with Brexit were drawn. And finally there were fears that the migration crisis would be exacerbated by Trump's pledge to block Syrian (Muslim) refugees from entering the US, including from Europe.

Now, two months after Trump's election, it is time for Europe to recover from its initial state of shock and assess the possible implications of a Trump presidency on EU policy priorities. Trump's election might have profound effects on the US, and indeed the world, but it is not likely to dramatically alter the EU's international priorities (and may even,

as recently argued by [Daniel Gros](#), have a positive impact on the European Monetary Union). Looking at areas such as trade, climate change, the refugee crisis, Brexit and defence, the fact of the matter is that, at least as things now appear to stand, Trump's election should have only a marginal impact on the EU's policy priorities. To demonstrate why, we consider in turn each of these five important policy areas.

TTIP

For all practical purposes, TTIP is dead as an ambitious trade agreement. Trump did not focus on TTIP in his campaign and it is not clear whether he will allow technical negotiations to continue. In fact, the US election merely pounded the final nail in the coffin. Prominent politicians in Germany and France as well as the Austrian ruling coalition have voiced strong opposition to the trade pact and declared it dead. Indeed, it is highly conceivable that the EU would have cancelled many parts of a TTIP deal – with or without Trump's help.

The Trump administration might well pose a risk for EU trade policy going beyond TTIP. If global trade in general becomes less free because of potential US protectionist practices, it is likely to have a [negative effect](#) on the EU because of its high dependence on trade. But the EU could actually counter Trump's anti-trade policies by seeking ambitious and at the same time fair trade deals with other nations. Yet judging by the [debacle](#) of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the EU is struggling to make trade agreements acceptable to the vast majority of its own citizens, entirely independent of Trump's presidency.

Climate policy

Climate policy is the most immediate area on which Trump signalled throughout the presidential campaign that he would inflict the most damage internationally. He famously tweeted: “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” While it is clear that the US election presents a setback for international efforts to combat climate change, it is yet not evident how much damage will be done. President Trump is constrained by the fact that much climate policy in the US is done at the state level. More than 30 states as well as many cities have their own climate policy including action plans for emissions reduction. For example, the most populous state – California – has had an ambitious climate policy in place for many years.

Moreover, President-elect Trump may be moved on this issue. He has recently said that he is considering the Paris Agreement very carefully and for the first time acknowledged that “there is some connectivity” between human activity and climate change. In fact, even if Trump decides to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, technically this would only happen close to the end of his first term. However, Trump can harm international cooperation by not implementing the agreement.

In this context, the EU cannot do much more than rally behind other partners such as China and India to keep their commitments – something the EU should do in any case. In a pessimistic scenario, the US non-implementation of the Paris Agreement might trigger other countries to abandon their commitments. Apart from exerting political pressure (via its oft-touted ‘soft power’), the EU cannot do much in this area. Whatever the outcome, the EU must keep in mind that tackling climate change is a long-term struggle.

Refugee crisis

The key to avoiding a repeat of the refugee and migration crisis of 2015 and indeed to ensuring a viable solution has two important ingredients: *i)* stability and growth in the wider Middle East and Africa and *ii)* the EU's return migration deal with Turkey. The EU-Turkey deal is strictly bilateral and US influence on Turkey, if anything, is fragile. Moreover, the EU has taken several initiatives to halt migration flows to Europe including negotiating migration deals with a number of African countries and an expulsion agreement with Afghanistan.

During the campaign, Trump pledged not to allow Muslim refugees into the US. But, the number of Muslim refugees arriving in the US in 2015, at around 40,000, was rather small. Thus, in terms of sheer numbers, the US contribution

to handling the refugee flow is quite modest and hardly a game changer. The EU might end up paying more to the UNHCR if Trump decides to cut the 1.5 billion USD contribution that the US currently makes, which is the biggest among the donors.

Whether the Trump administration will bring more or less stability to Syria and Iraq is anyone's guess. Trump has identified destroying ISIS as a priority. Yet, destroying ISIS is not a guarantee for stability in Syria and Iraq. In point of fact, there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. More important is the fact that the EU has not been at the core of the solutions in Syria. The EU was sidelined when the US and Russia negotiated bilaterally.

True, the EU has to get its act together when it comes to civil wars and proxy wars in its own neighbourhood, but this observation is not prompted by the US election. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that both the causes of the refugee crisis and the resulting refugee policy crisis were there long before Trump's election.

Brexit

Brexit has its own dynamics. Will Trump come to 'the rescue' of the UK offering an ambitious bilateral trade deal? We have to admit, that we would not be entirely surprised. But, first of all, one has to keep in mind that the competence of the President in trade policy is limited. Any new US UK trade agreement would need to be ratified by Congress.

Moreover, the remaining EU-27 is the destination of 14.4% of US exports, whereas the UK alone accounts for only 3.7%. For the UK this would also be small comfort: around 50% of the UK's exports go to the EU, the comparable number for the US is around 13%. The UK and the EU need to agree on a transitional agreement following the two-year negotiation period regardless of who is the US president. That such an agreement will materialise is far from certain, but who occupies the White House hardly matters in this context.

Security and defence

Security and defence policy has always been the weakest link of EU integration. Europe has traditionally depended on NATO for security assurances, but Trump's comments about NATO and his positive view of President Putin have caused concern among some European states. Trump has yet to formulate any concrete policies behind this rhetoric, but it is already clear that he is communicating the long-standing US frustration with European allies that free ride behind NATO. This sentiment has been expressed by many former officials in US administrations, including Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates in a [farewell speech](#) in 2011.

Treating Trump's election as a wake-up call for European defence is a seriously delayed reaction to say the least. Only in the last few years have Russia's annexation of Crimea and the [ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine](#) and the EU's virtual absence in the resolution of the Syrian conflict made a rethink of European security and defence policy an imperative. If these events on the EU's borders did not constitute wake-up calls, then Trump's election certainly does not either.

It is therefore unsurprising that although Europe's rhetoric on Trump's election has been overwhelming, the EU's actual response in terms of security and defence has remained underwhelming. Based on the High Representative's implementation plan of the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, EU foreign and defence ministers met on 14 November to discuss the possibility of creating a common military headquarters and reinforcing cooperation in common security and defence policy (CSDP) through permanent structured cooperation (PESCO). The ministers also addressed the enhancement of the capabilities and responsiveness of civilian crisis management.

Creating military headquarters in the EEAS is simply a bureaucratic exercise that the EU might be able to conduct. Yet putting PESCO in place, which has been under discussion since 2002 in the context of the Convention of the Future of Europe and provided for in the Lisbon Treaty, remains a highly contested project. It is the fundamental

differences among the EU member states – and not Trump’s arrival on the political scene – that continue to plague the EU’s security and defence policy.

Challenges ahead

Given the role that the EU plays on the international scene, no US presidential election will leave the EU, and indeed the world, unaffected. However, the fundamental international challenges Europe faces and thus the priorities of the EU in the areas we have analysed predated his election – and are likely to only be marginally influenced by his administration. Many of these challenges, such as climate change, trade, the refugee crisis and security, are likely to remain after his departure.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Donald J. Trump at Marriott Marquis NYC, September 2016. Credits: Michael Vadon (CC BY-SA 4.0).

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