

# Europe in the Age of Trump: A more uncertain and unstable continent

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*Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election will have clear implications for Europe, NATO, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. **Effie G. H. Pedaliu** states that a major repositioning of US foreign policy under Trump could lead to a rise in uncertainty and instability across Europe, while his victory itself could increase the likelihood of further blows to the status quo in the upcoming Italian referendum and French and German elections.*



Trump Tower in Chicago, Credit: [Giuseppe Milo \(CC-BY-SA-2.0\)](#)

The election of Donald Trump as President was a slap across the face of professional politicians, the pollsters, and the media, as well as a blow to gender equality, established etiquette, and the campaigning rules and niceties of the post WWII liberal order. It is a reminder, too, that the shockwaves of the 2007 financial crisis are still influencing events, almost a decade down the line.

The day that America's European allies hoped would never come is here. The elevation of Trump to the position of President-elect has made the world a less stable and more uncertain place. Until the full implications of his victory are absorbed and Republican foreign policy strategists codify US foreign policy, à la Trump, his election is likely to spark a series of crises around the globe.

Europe is already dealing with the deep uncertainty generated by the Brexit vote in the UK. The EU economy is not showing signs of improvement and many Eurozone countries are suffering under austerity. It is in this climate that the Italian referendum next month and the French and German elections in 2017 will take place. Trump will cast a shadow over these electoral contests. He has shown that unrestrained rhetoric, narcissism and attacks on the weakest sections of society can be the most profitable electioneering tools.

The concern is that his victory may legitimise such tactics. Furthermore, such a political strategy indicates that, to many voters, narrow horizons, isolationism and protectionism are preferable to altruism, compassion and open-mindedness. Let us be under no illusions here, Trump's victory is a triumph over social inclusion and economic and political liberalism – it is the revenge of a languishing petit-bourgeoisie over the educated middle and upper middle

classes.

European stability is likely to be tested by Trump's attitude toward NATO, a military alliance that only last summer, he described as 'obsolete'. From today, European NATO allies would be wise to accept that the future of the alliance will be in a state of flux. It is not so much that Trump will not wish to continue US engagement with NATO, but rather, as he put it: 'You can't forget the bills... They have an obligation to make payments. Many NATO nations are not making payments, are not making what they're supposed to make'.

Under President Trump the Europeans will have to pay their full due, around 2% of GDP, for American protection. If they do not want to undermine NATO, they had better start reviewing their defence budgets as soon as possible and step up their commitments. NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, will have to show himself to be the equal of Manlio Brosio in his diplomatic skills to prevent the US and its European NATO allies from reopening a set of mutual recriminations that have not been voiced since the mid-1960s over the Vietnam war. In the Trump era, NATO's article 5, activated in the event of an attack on a member state, may be less automatic than it was previously thought to be.

President Putin appears to be one of the few leaders genuinely pleased with the result of the American presidential election and he has declared his willingness to restore Russo-American relations to a friendlier footing from their currently poor shape over the war in Syria. If one accepts Trump's stated willingness to cooperate with Putin over Syria, then Europe is facing the spectre of a Trump/Putin world in 2017.

As America has now taken a more authoritarian turn, Chancellor Merkel's message of congratulations to Trump was replete with sub-text. She stressed to him that Germany's close cooperation with the US would be dependent on commitments to democracy and to equality of rights for all. Merkel's concerns over a Trump/Putin world stem not just from her own problems with the populist and xenophobic movements that have emerged in Germany over recent years, but also from Trump's statement in an interview that he may not be willing to provide military assistance to the Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – if they come under threat. The interview brought to the surface concerns over regional instability and questions over NATO, especially since Estonia is one of the few European NATO member states paying its full dues to the alliance.

More shocks to Europe may emerge as well if President Trump decides on an accommodation with Russia over Syria, or if he acts on his publicly declared 'number one priority' to 'dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran'. The Middle East is on tenterhooks. War in Syria is destabilising Turkey and Lebanon. Issues such as security, terrorism and the mass movement of populations dominate all debates on the region. The search for regional stability here seems more forlorn than ever and Trump's assurances that he has a secret plan to 'knock the hell out of ISIS' do not lessen these insecurities.

An America First policy on environmental issues is certain to lead to a clash with European states. The Paris Treaty and its ambitious environmental security provisions, a centrepiece of President Obama's legacy, are certain to be challenged by a die-hard climate change denier such as Trump.

At a moment when America needed someone like Teddy Roosevelt to steer it safely through an increasingly chaotic world replete with complex threats, Americans voted in The Donald. One thing is sure though, the US will be moving towards a major repositioning of its foreign policy. The blueprint is not clear right now and may not even exist apart from what is in Trump's head. A lot will depend on his ability to lure back to his foreign policy team all those extremely capable Republican foreign policy experts who deserted him in droves in the run up to the election and who vowed never to work for him or with him. In the meantime, until the contours of Trump's foreign policy are detailed clearly, the world, and Europe in particular, will exist in an uncertain and unstable environment.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor*

of the London School of Economics.

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### **About the author**

#### **Effie G. H. Pedaliu – LSE**

Effie G. H. Pedaliu is a Visiting Fellow at LSE IDEAS having previously held posts at LSE, KCL and UWE. She is a co-editor of the Palgrave/Macmillan book series, *Security Conflict and Cooperation in the Contemporary World* and a member of the AHRC peer review college. A list of some of her most recent publications is available [here](#).

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