

What will the US presidential election mean for Europe?

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Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are now in the final week of campaigning before the US presidential election on 8 November. Simon Reich examines what the result of the election could mean for Europe. He writes that although Clinton has far more support among Europeans, both candidates may well continue the trend of pivoting away from Europe in their efforts to shape global foreign policy.



There are only a few days to go before the outcome of what has been an interminable, fraught and often embarrassing US presidential election campaign. The seemingly predictable selection of Hillary Clinton as President has been thrown into disarray by FBI Director James Comey's announcement that it will re-open the investigation into her emails. The political implications are, as yet, unclear. The smart money suggests that she will still win the election, if only because of the vagaries of the US electoral system. But, even if true, the [effect on voting for US Senators](#) – what Americans refer to as “down-ballot voting” – could be significant.

Faced with this continuously raucous process, relatively few Americans – beyond each candidate’s transition teams – have spent much time contemplating what will happen on 9 November. And most of that discussion in the media has focused on Donald Trump’s toying over the question of whether he will accept the results or if his supporters will (at best) peacefully protest or (at worst) violently protest in the election’s aftermath. Comparatively little media space has been given to the question of the actual policy consequences for both America and the rest of the world.

Europe’s support for Clinton

Europeans have generally oscillated between incredulity, anxiety, consternation and apprehension when commenting on the consequences of the election. There has been a steady stream of puzzled comments on American television from both elite policymakers and locals interviewed on the streets of Europe’s major capitals. Not surprisingly, an oft-asked question is ‘how could Americans elect Donald Trump?’ It is a reasonable question. But, Americans ask, how could the British Choose Brexit? Or how could the Italians have chosen Berlusconi? Or the French choose....? That is the trouble with democracy – everyone gets a vote.

Naturally, Europe’s leaders see fundamental differences between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Europeans historically favour Democrats, and this election is no exception. Indeed, despite his occasional missteps and occasional reticence to be more engaged in European affairs, a Pew survey reports that President Obama continues to enjoy a very high degree of popularity in Europe.

And that popularity is reflected in views toward US policy. As the authors [note](#), “Across the 10 EU nations polled, a median of 77% have confidence in Obama to do the right thing in world affairs, including more than eight-in-ten in Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and France.” A comparable degree of confidence largely, although not quite as extensively, extends to Hillary Clinton. Seventy-seven percent of respondents expressed confidence in Obama this summer (he has always scored above 70% on this measure) while 59% said the same about Clinton.

This is not particularly surprising. First, by all measures, Clinton was highly regarded as Obama’s Secretary of State, both at home and abroad. Working through the process of multilateral consensus building, she deferred to Obama when necessary and listened to the views of Europe’s leaders on key issues (such as the invasion of Libya). She attempted to [implement a strategy](#) built on her avowed principle of ‘smart power’: utilising both ‘hard’ (military) and ‘soft’ (diplomatic) tools in various combinations, according to the circumstances.

Second, Clinton has pinned her electoral campaign on the theme of continuity – extending Obama’s policies and

consolidating his legacy. And that is a politically savvy position, with Gallup [reporting](#) that Obama's domestic approval percentage ratings are presently standing healthily in the mid-50s as the election approaches.

Donald Trump represents a striking, potentially frightening, contrast for Europe's leaders. He has explicitly discussed rapprochement with Russia, a renegotiation of NATO's budget, and encouraged the possibility of nuclear proliferation. His general propensity to regard foreign policy as transactional, rather than built on a foundation of trust and institutional relationships, creates the spectre of a Europe cast asunder from an American commitment that has been resolute, indeed iron-clad, since 1945. Not surprisingly, that same Pew poll of Europeans revealed that 85% of those surveyed expressed a lack of confidence in Trump as President.

It therefore isn't surprising that many European leaders yearn for Clinton's election. Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's Secretary General, has been less than subtle in [repeatedly expressing](#) his gratitude for Obama's "strong US leadership", and only last week he [reiterated](#) the unwavering commitment between the US and Europe enshrined in NATO's Article 5 concerning mutual defense. The EU's response has notably contrasted with NATO's position. Alarmed by both the outcome of the Brexit vote and a possible US military disengagement from Europe, Frederica Mogherini has again [floated](#) the idea of an EU army that would act as an autonomous force from NATO.

The political, budgetary and operational obstacles to creating such an army are significant – indeed, critics argue insurmountable. But the ambition may at least have merit in recognising that a new reality is taking shape. That is because, regardless of the outcome of the presidential election, American policy toward Europe is clearly evolving in one direction: Poll after poll reveals that Americans are tired of bearing the financial burden for Europe's defense. President Obama made that point [explicitly clear](#) in the run up to the NATO Summit in Warsaw. So when someone who many Europeans regard as their resolute supporter suggests that it is time for them to stop being complacent and increase their spending, it is pretty clear that both Clinton and Trump (albeit to varying degrees) will tell them to do the same.

And the American scholarly debate parallels the political discussion. There, international relations academics have been engaged in a healthy exchange over whether the United States should continue what its advocates characterise as a strategy of 'deep engagement' or conversely embark of a policy of 'restraint' that would slash America's military expenditure in Europe. There is no doubt that proponents of the latter have gained momentum over the last few years. And the combination of domestic intolerance for European recalcitrance and an explicit intellectual agenda built on 'American first' will further influence the thinking of the new administration, regardless of who is elected.

Trump and Clinton's policies on Europe

So how will this backdrop play out in terms of future policy? It is difficult to read Donald Trump because he is so vague when it comes to the specifics of his policies. But I am a believer in the assumption that you should take what politicians say seriously when there is no track record against which to evaluate their behaviour – and there are three key areas where we are likely to see marked differences between the candidates.

First, Trump has expressed a desire for a more collaborative relationship with Russia. This is where the contrast with Clinton may be at its starker. The Obama administration's initial efforts to reset America's relationship with Russia was rebuffed. And Clinton, as Secretary of State, found life negotiating with Putin and his staff to be as frustrating as her successor John Kerry. Scarred by that experience, she has been resolute in expressing a willingness to support NATO in resurrecting a (symbolic, if not necessary operationally effective) defense in Eastern Europe. That mutual hostility between Clinton and Putin has found a conduit through the Ecuadorian embassy in London where 'transparency' has been sacrificed in favour of partisan expediency.

Second, Clinton may have expressed a healthy scepticism about free trade in attempting to embrace Bernie Sanders' supporters. But her track record demonstrates that she is a proponent of its virtues. The signing of Europe's CETA free trade deal with Canada has set a precedent for the resurrection of the TTIP agreement between

Europe and the United States. No doubt the negotiations would be arduous and even quarrelsome given both America's and Europe's effectively federal systems. But there would be renewed ambition if CETA was used as a model. Trump, in contrast, has courted a constituency of voters that are so unquestionably hostile to free trade that they make Belgium's Walloons look like avowed liberals.

Finally, and partially dependent on the outcome of the first two factors, the European Union will itself continue its own course of retrenchment. Despite the EU's June publication of its [Global Strategy](#) report, it has steadily embarked on being less of a global player in the course of the last three years. Pressured by Russian belligerence and unprecedented migration flows, the EU has slowly but perceptibly abandoned its 'out-of-area' commitments in favour of guarding its borders on land and at sea. An engaged Clinton presidency might slow that process. A Trump one will surely hasten it.

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