

Five minutes with Peter Trubowitz: “Presidents usually stay out of British politics, but this is no ordinary president”



This week President Trump will visit the UK for the first time following his attendance at a NATO summit in Brussels. In this short interview, US Center Director, Professor [Peter Trubowitz](#), talks on how Trump may try to get concessions on trade from NATO members and how he might further complicate the UK's current Brexit crisis.

What is Trump's agenda at the NATO summit?

The big question is, Which Mr. Trump will show up in Brussels? Will it be the one who [wrote](#) to Western leaders saying that all he wants is for America's allies to pay their fair share of the common defense, or will it be the Trump who has questioned NATO's very relevance in today's world? Given the choice, America's allies would be relieved to see the former show up in Brussels, but if they are wise, they will plan for the latter. Mr. Trump is currently looking for negotiating leverage — leverage on trade matters with the EU. What better way to get it than raise the specter of a less than full-throated American commitment to European security: if Europe wants to avoid such an outcome on security matters, it will need to concede ground on trade. This, for Trump, is the “art of the deal.”

Will Trump wade into British politics later this week?

UK Prime Minister Theresa May will have her hands full with Donald Trump's visit on Friday, especially given her precarious position at home in the wake of resignations by Foreign and Brexit Secretaries Boris Johnson and David Davis. Trump remains unpopular among many UK voters, so there are risks for May of being seen as too eager to please the president. Yet a clear signal from Trump about a possible US-UK trade deal would be welcomed by many in the UK, and could strengthen the Prime Minister's hand in negotiations with Brussels. I look for her to try to thread this political needle. Of course, much will depend on how Trump responds to the protests over his visit and on Brexiters' claims that May's proposed plan is too weak. Presidents usually stay out of British politics, but this is no ordinary president and it is not hard to imagine Trump signaling support for Johnson and others looking for a quick exit from the EU.

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Peter Trubowitz, Director of the LSE US Centre, talks on President Trump's visit to the UK.

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Where is Trump's trade war headed?

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There is every reason to think that things will get worse on the trade front before they get better. In the face of mounting international resistance, Trump has shown little interest in climbing down. His working assumption is that America’s trading partners need the US more than America needs them. He may be right, but his approach also assumes that Americans are willing to accept a good deal of economic pain to achieve his trade agenda. Indeed, there are already signs of restlessness, even among voters in Trump’s core strongholds in the Midwest and South. And their concerns are likely to deepen. A new Brookings Institution [study](#) shows that most of those who will be hit hardest by Trump’s trade war come from districts that voted for him in the 2016 presidential election. That’s because Beijing’s retaliatory tariffs are strategically targeted against Trump’s base in the rural and industrial districts that backed him.

How will historians view Mr. Trump’s foreign policy?

When historians look back on this period, they are likely to describe it as an era of American retreat. Instead of pressing America’s geopolitical advantages in Europe and Asia, Mr. Trump appears content to concede them, by rolling back TPP and TTIP and raising doubts about the credibility of America’s commitment to NATO. The question is whether Mr. Trump’s retreat is a *strategic* retreat — that is, a realignment aimed at strengthening America’s geopolitical position down the road. Perhaps, but at a time when China is investing heavily in extending its reach across the Eurasian landmass through its Belt and Road Initiative, the White House is conceding a lot of ground without a clear plan on how to regain the initiative.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the interviewee



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Peter Trubowitz is Professor and Head of International Relations, and Director of the LSE’s US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America’s changing place in the world.