



How Europe Views Transatlantic Relations Ahead of the 2020 U.S. Election

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Note: Between October 2019 and January 2020, the authors interviewed several European ambassadors and deputy ambassadors based in Washington, DC, from more than half of the members states of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The interviews (not for attribution) included subjects from a geographically representative sample and a mix of large and small countries.

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INTRODUCTION

With ballots already cast in the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary, this year's U.S. presidential election is attracting an unusual level of interest from European observers (and even some trepidation). These Europeans recognize that no matter who wins in November, they need to be well-prepared to handle the consequences. The lesson they learned from 2016 is still fresh.

Back then, U.S. President Donald Trump's win took many in Europe by surprise. For European diplomats in Washington, DC, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and her team were known commodities, whereas the personalities and policy positions of Trump and his team were mostly unknown. This forced many Europeans to scramble to develop contacts



with members of the incoming administration and to understand its priorities. They are determined not to repeat this mistake and are striving to do more strategic planning about the election's possible implications. So how do European ambassadors and deputy ambassadors in Washington privately view the current state of transatlantic relations? And what do they think will be the consequences for Europe and transatlantic ties if Trump is reelected or, conversely, if a Democrat wins?

THE STATE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

According to most of these Washington-based European ambassadors, the transatlantic relationship is in a worse state under the Trump administration than at any other point in recent history, including after the United States' contentious decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003. Some admit that Europe has struggled to handle the Trump administration well and that some European rhetoric and approaches may have even been counterproductive. But they still squarely put the blame on the administration for the current state of the relationship. This negative European outlook is shaped by at least six different drivers.

First, many European ambassadors acknowledge the common perception that there are the many serious policy disagreements between European governments and the Trump administration. These include notable clashes over tariffs, defense spending, and the unilateral U.S. withdrawals from the Paris climate accords and the nuclear deal with Iran. Other issues where the two sides have diverged include sanctions against Cuba and Iran, digital taxation, and the relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem as well as the Middle East peace process more generally. Frequent European complaints also are directed at the Trump administration's tendency to weaponize extraterritorial sanctions (which impact European companies trading with Iran or participating in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline) and

the president's preference for linking trade and national security issues (as he has done by [threatening](#) to hit the European Union with tariffs on cars unless it shifts its policy on Iran).

Second, many interviewees report an unprecedented sense of ideological drift between the transatlantic allies. Whereas previous U.S. administrations have had policy differences with Europe too, today the two sides have also drifted apart ideologically. In particular, Trump's antagonism toward multilateralism represents a philosophical difference between Washington and European capitals. Moreover, Trump leads the first U.S. administration in modern times to oppose European integration. Many Europeans view the president as holding an ideological aversion to the EU, as evidenced by his repeated "disparaging" comments about it, his support for a [hard Brexit](#), and his embrace of [euroskeptical nationalist governments](#). His criticism of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also "shows a blatant disregard for the shared values that have underpinned the transatlantic alliance for decades," as one diplomat put it. As a result, European leaders' trust in U.S. leadership has been severely diminished since 2017, with some diplomats questioning whether the United States even wants to remain an influential actor in Europe anymore.

Third, European diplomats overwhelmingly balk at the "basic lack of decorum" in U.S. diplomacy toward Europe. They especially perceive Trump's repeated [comments](#) about the EU [being](#) a "foe" or a "competitor" as "offensive" on the other side of the Atlantic. Other specific U.S. actions directed against Europe, such as imposing Section 232 national security tariffs on European steel and aluminum producers, are also highly insulting. The president's negative comments have targeted individual member states too. For example, he [has referred](#) to [Germany](#) as "very bad," a "captive of Russia," and "crime-ridden" due to [immigration](#). The administration's divisive rhetoric against Europe extends beyond the president, as senior

officials such as Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) and former national security adviser [John Bolton](#) have also offended European leaders on occasion. At the same time, European diplomats appreciate the recent change in tone from Pompeo about [wanting](#) a “reset” with the new EU leadership, although most of them doubt whether there is any actual substance behind it.

Fourth, several of the interviewees say that they still struggle with navigating the Trump administration. Many of them describe the president as “impulsive” and “unpredictable.” Recent examples of this behavior include his decisions to unilaterally withdraw U.S. forces from Syria in [December 2019](#) or to launch a drone strike against a senior Iranian military official without first consulting U.S. allies. Diplomats worry that Trump could easily “turn on a dime” on other issues. Though they recognize the importance of forging strong relationships with Trump, they do not always consider personal exchanges between the president and senior European leaders helpful or, in some cases, even productive. One ambassador said that “more than 90 percent of countries are worse off after a meeting with Trump than they were beforehand.” Some European embassies have even resorted to sidestepping relations with the White House in favor of boosting ties with members of Congress and state leaders instead. One ambassador bluntly described this strategy in this way: “stay away from the person in the White House and invest in the country.”

Fifth, many of the senior European diplomats point to the challenges posed by the “frequent mismatch between the president’s rhetoric and that of the foreign policy professionals in his administration.” This often forces European counterparts to second-guess what the actual U.S. policy position is on a given issue. The Trump administration’s policy toward Russia is one notable example. The administration’s high volume of personnel turnover makes it even harder for European diplomats to know whom to engage with to shape U.S. foreign policy. Although their relationships with

U.S. interlocutors at the working level are generally productive, some European diplomats report that many of “these conversations are not moving up the chain like they should” and that the U.S. foreign policy machinery “is broken.” This situation has worsened over the course of Trump’s presidency, especially since the departures of many of the so-called “adults in the room” whom Europe initially relied on, such as former secretary of defense Jim Mattis or former senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council, Fiona Hill.

Finally, European diplomats express concerns that U.S. engagement with Europe under the Trump administration is overly siloed and transactional. They complain that, instead of pursuing a broad, shared strategic agenda, the White House engages only to achieve short-term goals, such as reducing the trade deficit and urging other NATO members to hit the 2 percent defense-spending goal. Even on issues where deeper transatlantic cooperation should be possible, such as on China, Trump [has declined](#) to join hands with the EU and even [has referred](#) to the bloc as “worse than China” on trade. Similarly, European diplomats lament the strong U.S. emphasis on bilateral diplomacy, including a tendency to try to play EU member states off against each other to gain leverage on key issues involving technology and security. As a result, they have adjusted their approach, compartmentalizing issues and resorting to transactionalism to get results. This mentality has been more successful for some countries than for others. Smaller European countries feel they have been able to “fly under the radar,” avoiding becoming the targets of presidential tweets or outbursts, whereas larger ones, like Germany (with whom the United States has a notable [trade deficit](#)—a top White House concern), are more constantly in the spotlight.

Despite this downbeat assessment, European views of the transatlantic relationship today are not entirely negative. Some diplomats acknowledge that their respective countries’ bilateral relationships with the



Trump administration are better behind closed doors. Many countries, especially those in Northern or Central and Eastern Europe, readily point out that bilateral security relations with the United States have improved and that [U.S. military spending](#) in Europe has increased since 2017. Diplomats also stress that cooperation on issues that fall below Trump's radar tends to remain more effective than on topics the president is personally involved in. Positive examples of recent U.S.-European engagement under Trump include energy security, security cooperation in Africa, the Ukraine conflict, and the Western Balkans. Even on certain issues on which the United States and the EU have initially had differences, such as regime change in Venezuela or the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, more productive transatlantic cooperation has gradually taken shape.

Ultimately, European diplomats are skeptical that transatlantic relations will significantly improve during the remainder of Trump's first term. Although most of them are keeping their heads down for now to see if he will be a one-term president, they also reject the notion that they can simply "wait out" Trump, and they say that continued engagement with the administration where possible is necessary. The [new EU leadership](#) has also signaled an intention to focus on improving transatlantic ties in 2020, though few European envoys in Washington expect that this will actually happen.

WHAT WOULD EUROPEANS EXPECT FROM A SECOND-TERM TRUMP ADMINISTRATION?

Many European diplomats have mixed feelings about the prospect of a second-term Trump administration. On the one hand, they broadly expect that transatlantic tensions would increase if the president gets four more years in office, particularly on already contentious issues like trade, climate change, and defense spending. As one commented, "the fear is that we have not hit rock bottom yet." Many fear that a reelected Trump

would feel emboldened to double down on his "America First" instincts, including possibly by "tearing down multilateral institutions" or "ganging up with authoritarian strongmen around the world like Russian President Vladimir Putin," as one ambassador put it.

Some ambassadors express particular concern about the future of NATO, including questioning whether Trump, if reelected, would even maintain U.S. membership or commitment to Article 5. As one senior interviewee said, "things Trump has mentioned in passing, such as whether NATO membership is serving the United States, could come to the fore again and not just be raised behind closed doors" during a second term. To cope with this risk, European diplomats acknowledge the need for their countries to do even more to demonstrate why NATO works and to increase strategic discussions in NATO on [China](#) and [terrorism](#) in the Middle East, issues on which Trump wants the alliance to do more. On the trade front, they are particularly worried about the prospect of further tariffs on the EU (including the [looming threat](#) of car tariffs), a complete breakdown of the World Trade Organization system, more U.S. overreliance on the use of extraterritorial sanctions, and an intensification of economic decoupling between the United States and China.

In general, many of the ambassadors expect that the president's adversarial discourse toward Europe would continue, and perhaps even worsen, during a second term. As for U.S. foreign policy more widely, European diplomats expect that U.S. isolationism and retrenchment would grow under a second-term Trump administration. Some also fear that adversaries such as Russia and China would step in to fill the vacuums such U.S. withdrawals would create or that an international crisis could erupt in Asia or the Middle East as a result of Trump's uncertain leadership.

At the same time, some diplomats express a hope that the transatlantic relationship could improve at the margins under a second-term Trump administration given that the president would no longer need to

secure reelection and so could conceivably afford to take more compromising stances on at least some issues. However, few actually expect this to transpire. Issues on which European diplomats do see potential for more fruitful cooperation during a second Trump term include arms control, China, 5G, energy security, counterterrorism, and the protection of religious minorities.

European envoys in Washington largely expect that the reelection of Trump would likely prompt European countries to continue to seek to compartmentalize relations with the United States, work more closely in some areas than others, and engage more with members of Congress as well as governors and mayors around the country. Many European diplomats also acknowledge they are prepared to adopt a more transactional and hard-nosed approach with Washington, “to push back more firmly against the United States” on issues of disagreement, and to pursue a more unified European agenda. The EU would seek to develop more strategic autonomy by, for instance, taking on additional responsibilities for security tasks in the Balkans and North Africa and further strengthening intra-European defense cooperation outside of NATO. That said, many ambassadors privately doubt that Europe could actually do more on its own since politicians back home are unwilling to spend on defense and since many European citizens are skeptical of Europe taking on greater global responsibilities.

Either way, some ambassadors are concerned that the reelection of Trump would lead some countries in Europe to conclude that they could no longer rely on the United States and, as such, begin to draw a “moral equivalence” between great powers and look for a new “European middle way” between the United States, Russia, and China. Another related concern is that further erosion of transatlantic ties during a second Trump term could fuel anti-Americanism in Europe, making it even harder for European leaders to make the case for the relationship. The implications for the transatlantic alliance would be significant.

WHAT WOULD EUROPEANS EXPECT FROM A DEMOCRATIC ADMINISTRATION?

The general sentiment among European ambassadors in Washington is that a Democratic win in 2020 would be met with “much relief” on the other side of the Atlantic. Trump’s immense unpopularity in Europe means that any new occupant of the White House would immediately enjoy “lots of goodwill” from day one. They hope that a new administration would prioritize working more closely with allies and partners to “reaffirm NATO,” to “reassert values in transatlantic relations,” to “reduce negative rhetoric” toward the EU, and to begin to “treat Europe as a strategic partner” again. Even in the absence of any immediate policy changes, they admit they would still be keen to give a new administration “the benefit of the doubt.”

As to specific policies, European diplomats would expect more positive engagement with a Democratic administration on climate change and particular security issues. On climate change, they expect that the United States would return to the Paris accords and that new forms of cooperation would be possible around environmental issues such as clean technology, green growth, and the circular economy. On NATO, European diplomats hope that a Democratic president would quickly restate the U.S. commitment to Article 5 and be more supportive of [security and defense cooperation](#) with the EU.

More widely, Europeans would look to a Democratic administration to reaffirm the value of multilateralism including by reengaging with bodies such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization and by rejoining the nuclear deal with Iran (or at least be open to trying to renegotiate its terms). They would also expect a Democratic administration to be more willing to collaborate with Europe on issues such as development aid, democracy promotion and human rights, and the Middle East peace process. On trade, European diplomats hope that a Democratic



administration would remove U.S. tariffs on the EU and collaborate on reforming and preserving the global trading order. Additionally, they would hope to work with a Democratic president on reinventing the transatlantic agenda to better address emerging issues such as cybersecurity, data privacy, 5G, artificial intelligence, and China.

At the same time, European diplomats are not naïve about the potential difficulties they might face under a Democratic administration. Many European ambassadors privately express concerns that expectations in European capitals for an incoming Democratic administration would be too high, inevitably leaving Europeans “disappointed.” Many of the current transatlantic differences—such as those on defense spending, trade, and China—would remain under Democratic leadership in the White House, which would fuel further disillusionment in Europe. Some comment that Europe could find a more progressive or populist Democratic administration as difficult as the Trump administration, or possibly even more difficult, on some of these issues. Some Central European countries that enjoy strong ties with the Trump administration worry that a Democratic administration, especially that of a more left-leaning president, could be less reliable on security cooperation by either cutting U.S. defense spending or military deployments in Europe.

Despite these potential policy disagreements, European diplomats expect that any Democratic administration would still be “easier to work with because [it] would be better run with proper decision-making structures,” stop the “negative rhetoric,” and include “more familiar faces.” However, some ambassadors admit that Europeans have not yet developed a coherent strategy for how to prepare for—and how to be able to influence—an incoming Democratic administration. Several recall the central lesson after former president Barack Obama’s election in 2008 that Europe must more actively engage with a new administration from day one rather than look for Washington to take the initiative. An added challenge in this respect is the impression among some European

envoys that the Democratic presidential campaigns have reduced contacts with foreign emissaries that were normal during previous elections, due to concerns about foreign interference in the last election.

NO GOING BACK TO NORMAL IN 2021

Overall, whether Trump is reelected or a Democrat wins in November, the United States’ European allies and partners surveyed are agnostic at best, and downbeat at worst, about the prospects for a significant improvement in the transatlantic relationship over the medium term. Most expect the underlying structural sources of the current transatlantic malaise to remain no matter who occupies the White House for the next four years. They expect that a Democratic administration would be more conducive to cooperation with Europe in terms of rhetoric and policymaking style, would likely share European concerns over issues like climate change and multilateralism, and would probably agree on the wider benefits of transatlantic cooperation. But the two sides would continue to face difficulties over managing some key issues such as China, trade, and defense spending.

In addition, Europeans increasingly see the Trump administration’s focus on isolationism, protectionism, and burden sharing as emblematic of wider changes under way in the views of many Americans about their country’s role in the world—not as a four-year aberration from traditional U.S. foreign policy. As a result, European diplomats say they have increasingly lost faith in the U.S. political system itself. They are concerned that political polarization in the United States will not abate and will constrain whoever occupies the Oval Office in January 2021. They believe it is no longer possible to turn back the clock to the pre-2016 transatlantic relationship and that European trust in long-term U.S. global leadership has been damaged.

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NOTES

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