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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Tomáš Valášek**

Episode 87: What Do Trump's Views on Europe  
Mean for China?

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**Haenle:** My colleagues and I at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center were delighted to host Tomáš Valášek, the director of Carnegie Europe, for the final panel in our fourth annual Carnegie Global Dialogue series, here in Beijing. Before joining Carnegie as the director of Carnegie Europe, Tomáš served as the permanent representative of the Slovak Republic to NATO. Prior to that, Tomáš was president of the Central European Policy Institute in Bratislava, and director of foreign policy and defense at the Center for European Reform in London. Tomáš has also served as acting political director and head of the security and defense policy division at the Slovak Ministry of Defense. We were delighted to have Tomáš at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center to share his views on what the Trump administration means for the future of the Transatlantic Alliance and the European Union, especially when it comes to NATO.

During our conversation, Tomáš and I discussed the major messages that President Trump has sent so far about U.S. policy towards Europe and whether we should expect any major changes in the U.S. approach to NATO during his presidency. Tomáš also shared his insights on the European perspective of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and how Brexit could provide China with an opportunity to invest in Eastern and Central Europe. Thank you very much for listening to our China in the World podcast, and I hope you enjoy the discussion.

Tomáš, welcome to Beijing, it's great to have you here in China with our Carnegie Global Dialogue. It's the final episode of our annual Carnegie Global Dialogue series. You just took over as director of Carnegie Europe Center a month ago, and so we're really honored to have you come up this week. Thank you.

**Valášek:** It's a pleasure to be here.

**Haenle:** As I said, you just joined the Carnegie Europe Center as the director, previous to that you spent four years at NATO as the permanent representative from Slovakia. I want to talk about the Trump administration a little bit, and its approach to NATO. You know out here in China, we watched President Trump during the campaign. It wasn't entirely surprising that he attacked China in the campaign, previous presidential candidates have done that. But it was surprising that he was attacking the allies—Japan and Korea. This is something that had not been done since the end of World War II. But of course, he attacked NATO too, and you were in NATO at the time as the permanent representative from Slovakia. [Trump] said during the campaign that NATO was obsolete, now he's come around, as of late, and said he doesn't believe that anymore. But could you give our listeners a sense of, you know, what you have seen in terms of the transition of Donald Trump and how that's played out?

**Valášek:** Well, you won't be surprised, Paul, to hear that the first reaction in NATO to the election was, you know, a bit of a shock and horror. The things he seems to believe about alliances don't appear to be so temporary or passing. He has been fairly consistent over the past 30 years in believing that alliances are basically a net drain on the U.S. economy, and a net loss to U.S. security. He has written in these terms as far back as the 1980s, and this is not a belief that extends only to the European allies. This applied quite broadly to alliances in general, so it would apply to Japan, South Korea, and the Middle Eastern allies of the United States. So, unsurprisingly, when he was elected there was real apprehension in NATO—would he actually honor Article 5, the mutual defense clause? If one of the allies was attacked, would the United States, under Donald Trump's leadership, come to an ally's aid, if he believes alliances to be a burden?

**Haenle:** In listening to Donald Trump talking about the NATO alliance, what did you take in as his main complaints about the alliance? What were legitimate, if any, and what were not legitimate?

**Valášek:** Look, he has legitimate points, and there are simply no two ways about the fact that the European allies are not spending enough on defense, period. He's right.

**Haenle:** Of course, previous Presidents have pushed out the same message.

**Valášek:** This has been a story in NATO literally from the day the organization was founded. As far back as 1960s, a former representative of the United States to NATO described the alliance as an "organized argument over who is going to contribute towards it and how much." This is an old story.

**Haenle:** But there are rules that specify it, right?

**Valášek:** There are rules that have been chronically ignored. The rule [that] was actually codified at the Wales Summit in 2014 in an agreement that all heads of states, all 28 allies, have signed on to. The deal is [that] by 2024, all allies should aim to raise their defense spending to 2 percent of their GDP. So that's the magic mark. It's moved up and down, it used to be 3 percent during the Cold War years. Basically, the rule that's in force, and again codified by the heads of states in 2014, is to get [military spending to 2 percent].

**Haenle:** And how much are we at today?

**Valášek:** Of the NATO allies, only three have [met that goal] at present—that's Greece, Great Britain, and Estonia. A number of others are moving up, so within the next few years you will see Romania, Poland, and the Baltic countries getting up to that level as well. So the overall numbers are improving.

**Haenle:** And the United States.

**Valášek:** And the United States has been [too]. I'm counting of course the non-U.S. allies. The United States has been constantly above 2 percent, though dropping. The United States basically 10 years ago would have been around 4 percent of GDP, under the previous administration, it's gone down to about 2.2 percent. But of course, it's going back up. That's one of the key points of President Trump's platform.

**Haenle:** So this point was fairly legitimate, but again as a point other, previous Presidents have also pushed that. Were there other, sort of, broader points that he was making that you could understand. Where does this come from, in your sense?

**Valášek:** So there's a fundamental difference in how President Trump regards the world that sets him apart from all previous Presidents. My sense is that the President takes a very narrow view of U.S. interests, and basically he seems to believe that the United States derives very little benefit from the global commons—from the global trade, and from the fact that Europe, Asia and other

countries in other continents are at peace. See, the long-standing U.S. belief—and as a former U.S. general, you know this better than I—has been that there is a virtuous relationship between the peace and well-being of other continents, and the peace and prosperity of the United States. If Europe and Asia are at peace, that means that they grow, that means that they trade more with the United States, that means the United States grows richer, and that means that the United States doesn't have to fight wars in those continents, which is of course a happy situation for everybody.

You know, President Trump doesn't seem to believe that trade is a good thing, he has been fairly consistent about the United States being a loser of global trade. He seems to believe that it's not the United States' business to be engaged, to have to police Europe, or to have to police other parts of the world. And if you take that viewpoint, then it is logical that you don't see much value in the alliances, because if you believe the United States should have no business keeping peace in Europe and if the United States doesn't care if a war breaks out there, and it doesn't really have an interest in prosperity in Europe either, because prosperity simply means that American jobs migrate to Europe—well, if you believe that, then it follows logically that the alliances are basically a complete waste of money, if not worse.

**Haenle:** And this, he's been talking about, a point you made this week, for 20 plus years.

**Valášek:** Indeed, this is not something that he discovered on the campaign trail. This is the [common thread] found in his writings and speeches dating as far as the 1980s.

**Haenle:** And during the campaign, you were in NATO as a Slovak representative. Hearing the messages and [the news of Trump's victory] what were the reactions?

**Valášek:** Well, of course, to be honest, we weren't taking it seriously, because the possibility that candidate Trump might actually become President one day were seen as extremely unlikely until literally the moment it happened.

**Haenle:** And what it happened, what was the reaction?

**Valášek:** Shock. I mean, nothing short of shock. First of all, we were taken aback that the polls could be so completely off. But also, you know, there was fairly little in one's diplomatic experience that prepares one for this sort of a moment. How do you relate to an ally that has a fundamentally negative, zero-sum view on the alliance? We've had difficult relationship as Europe and the United States, right? We had massive disagreements over the Iraq war in 2003, where the alliance had basically a near-death experience because of the depth of feeling in France and Germany, Belgium, and elsewhere that the Iraq war was a complete disaster. The feeling was so strong, that entire Americanism went rampant. There was at some point a warrant out to arrest U.S. Secretary of State—you may remember we nearly had a NATO Foreign Minister meeting cancelled because there was a real possibility that Colin Powell might actually be arrested when he touches down in Brussels. So NATO has been through very rough moments before, but these were disagreements among allies on [the] execution of policy, but nobody has ever question the fundamental deal, the fundamental bargain at the heart of the alliance, which is that it is important for the United States and Europe to be engaged globally and internationally, that it's important to get out there early and to counter threats where they happen and when they happen; and that it is always better to be doing these things with allies and that you have no better allies, frankly, than

each other—the United States and Europeans. So these three principles at the heart of the alliance have never been questioned—that the alliance as such is a good thing, that differences to the moment of arrival of Donald Trump were about the execution of that policy. But now you're dealing with fundamental disagreement about the value of the alliance, and that's new.

**Haenle:** So, he was inaugurated on January 20, and it's now coming up on the four-month mark in office. During that time, the NATO Secretary General visited Washington D.C., met with President Donald Trump—what kind of transition have you seen, and now how do you see the situation?

**Valášek:** Well, the biggest, most visible change of course is the personalities that surround the President, and that shape U.S. foreign and defense policy. The selection of those personalities, in the two to three months we've seen since the inauguration, has been very encouraging. That fact that the new Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, is not just an experienced former general, but actually a former commander of one of the NATO commands. He used to lead something called the NATO Transformation Command based in Norfolk, Virginia. So he's someone who is very familiar with NATO, and someone that the NATO community is very familiar with. We've also taken heart, speaking of European allies, from the appointments of Rex Tillerson, who seems to be of course wise in the ways of the world, National Security Adviser McMaster, very sober also on the gravity and the extent of the challenge that Russia poses to European security. And there were also the lower ranking appointments, the senior teams at the White House that deal with Russia and European issues. These are all people we know, we feel comfortable with their service.

**Haenle:** They understand the importance of the alliance, they're traditional in their approach, and more international, too.

**Valášek:** Very much so. [These are] people who have been out in Europe and have deep experience with NATO. So this is a summary statement in the alliances, [which brings] greater comfort and ease with the White House now in the North Atlantic Council.

**Haenle:** But of course, Steve Bannon has not gone away.

**Valášek:** But he no longer plays the influence and the role that he has played earlier, so the fact that he's been removed...

**Haenle:** How has he been seen in the NATO context?

**Valášek:** Well, he has, of course, sort of an unrelenting focus on the threat of Islamic terrorism, which he sees in almost existential, catastrophic terms. So, the assumption was that if he had greater influence, he would have been pushing NATO in a direction of a greater focus on counter-terrorism, which is not necessarily unwelcome. I mean, NATO already plays a role in helping build up the Iraqi security defense sector, so that the day after the fight against ISIS, Iraq can take better care of its own security. This is a role with which the alliance is comfortable, but [Bannon's] influence and his worldviews led to great unease about what relationship NATO and the United States will have with Russia. Of course, he was being associated with the view that the United States and Russia need to strike an alliance, and form an alliance to fight ...

**Heanle:** The grand bargain...

**Valášek:** The grand bargain, yes. Of course, there's nothing per se in closer U.S.-Russian cooperation on fighting terrorism—it makes a lot of sense. The fear in Europe was that this may come at the expense of granting Russia sort of a privileged sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, which would not only run counter to all of the sort of values and principles that the alliance espouses, but might actually put the security of the allies on the eastern rim of the alliance in danger, because Russia might conclude, “we now have a free hand.”

**Haenle:** So, since the inauguration, he's surrounded by people who have quite a bit of experience, more traditional in their approach, more international, the likes of people like Steve Bannon seem to be losing influence—anything else during the transition that's happened with respect to NATO and Donald Trump's views?

**Valášek:** Two other important factors: one, President Trump has continued, in practice, policies put in place by President Obama and most importantly, he has continued the reinforcement of U.S. military presence in Europe, and specifically in Eastern Europe. This is seen in NATO as very important. It is really the key pillar in a NATO response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The allies think it is very important for the purposes of deterring Russia to have a small, but nevertheless more than a symbolic, a real, substance presence in the Baltic countries. The message we're trying to send to Moscow is, “look, if you cross the border—if you as much as think of crossing the border—you should count on running into organized resistance from all 28 allies from day 1.” And that is important, there's a big difference between having to deal with all of NATO as opposed to dealing with one ally; and the idea is, again, to deter Russia from even trying. President Trump has continued reinforcing U.S. military presence in the region. That's been very encouraging.

**Heanle:** And then, there's the third factor you mentioned...

**Valášek:** The third factor is, perhaps counter-intuitively and doesn't strike one as related directly, but with the Tomahawk strikes on Syria. There is a relationship in the sense that, remember the real fear in NATO about President Trump is that he takes a very narrow view of U.S. interests, and he would therefore only use force in situations where U.S. lives, or very narrowly defined U.S. interests, are at stake. If that's the mindset, then why would you fight on behalf of an ally? If that's the mindset, the alliance is meaningless. However, his first use of force, the strike that followed the chemical attack, was actually not on behalf of any sort of narrow U.S. interest, it was to uphold an international rule that says, “Thou shall not use chemical weapons.” And that's been noted positively in the alliance, because it led to a view—right or wrong—that perhaps President Trump is willing to take a broad view of U.S. interests, that he's clearly used force not to retaliate against any attack on the United States, but he used force to uphold an international norm, and that is quite different from what candidate Trump seemed to be saying.

**Haenle:** People within the NATO community don't see his decision to use force as purely political, for at home, but rather for the purposes of reinforcing international rules and norms...

**Valášek:** There is never one reason for using force.

**Haenle:** Sure.

**Valášek:** You always have two, as you've said—the domestic politics and foreign policy always have to meet, and work [together]. So of course, the domestic implications have not been lost on us; there's the assumption that a big part of the reason, if not the biggest part of the reason for this strike, is the desire to do something different, and perhaps the opposite from what President Obama had done when presented with the same dilemma. But the fact remains: this was explained in terms of upholding an international norm, and this is actually encouraging. It's not what one would have expected from Trump.

**Haenle:** So, almost four months into the administration, he now says NATO is obsolete. Do we now have a president of the United States that is fully supportive of NATO going forward, should we not worry about this issue?

**Valášek:** Stay tuned is my response. Look, the president has changed minds on a number of issues before. It's not just NATO; it's China, which was a "currency manipulator," a "bad guy," if you will, until early into the administration when it turned essentially into an ally in jointly countering the nuclear threat from North Korea. So, the president is capable of changing his mind again.

**Haenle:** I agree with you. We've seen a very similar dynamic here in Asia, especially with respect to China, as you point out. He's gone from, during the campaign and in the transition, a very hostile confrontational, zero-sum game kind of approach, and over the course of four months, once he's come into office, as you said, he hasn't labeled China a "currency manipulator." He said he wasn't going to abide by the One China policy, and he climbed down from that [too]. You know, unfortunately, he said the other day, but I think just to point it out as showing the shift that he's made, somebody asked him if he would take a call from the Taiwan president again, and he made the unfortunate comment that he would have to check with China first. So, I only use that as an example of how much he's actually shifted on China, very much, I think, in the same way as you've described the dynamics with respect to NATO.

**Valášek:** Absolutely.

**Haenle:** And I would agree with you. When it comes to China, we're not necessarily out of the woods yet. You know, it's just four months in, he's seen a proclivity to change and go back and forth, a large part of it depends on who he's talked to last, and what the domestic political conditions are.

**Valášek:** That's right.

**Haenle:** So I'm struck by the similarities and dynamics, actually, that's we've seen.

**Valášek:** Ultimately, I think the real test of the real U.S. policy will come when a crisis hits. This is not a particularly original observation, but it's true that U.S. foreign policy isn't shaped through policy statements or grand strategies. It's shaped by the individual reactions to specific, concrete problems—crises. President Bush, the 43<sup>rd</sup>, did not come to the office intending to lead the greatest expansion of U.S. military commitment to the Middle East ever. In fact, he came to the

office intending to roll back U.S. commitment. That was the platform that Condoleezza Rice articulated on his behalf before his election. But 9/11 forced him to do something completely different. The president before, Bill Clinton, did not come to the office intending to espouse a brand new doctrine, responsibility to protect and to lead a military intervention in the Balkans. He came to the office intending to focus on domestic policy, because “it’s the economy, stupid,” right? That was his slogan.

So the real matter, the real test, that will come when the first crisis hits. My concern, to be truthful, is that in time of crisis, it is one’s instincts that come through, rather than some sort of formulation of policies or even best advice from your advisers. So if and when President Trump defaults to his old instincts, this could spell trouble for the alliance, because I don’t think instinctually that he is a friend of the alliances. I believe, and this has been supported again by his statements over the years, that he regards alliances and commitments as a burden. So I take some encouragement from the fact that he has been surrounded by people who believe otherwise, but I’m 100 percent reassured.

**Haenle:** As you said, stay tuned. Before we wrap up, Tomáš, I wanted to talk a little bit about the Belt and Road Initiative. You’ve been here now for three days, and in all of our engagements, you’ve heard from our Chinese interlocutors about the Belt and Road Initiative. I think clearly, in three days, you can get a sense [of] how important this Initiative is here in China, and especially to the Chinese leadership, [and] to Xi Jinping. How is the Belt and Road Initiative seen from Europe?

**Valášek:** To be honest, it’s underappreciated in Europe. One doesn’t hear much about it. You get the sense that the government in Beijing hasn’t really made an effort to reach out to Western European counterparts, and [to] make the case for the Initiative. Physically, it actually ends halfway through Europe. The 16 members of the 16 + 1 initiative, they’re all in Central and Eastern Europe. So there isn’t a physical reach into Western European countries, and therefore less interest.

**Haenle:** Is there a difference in Eastern Europe? People know about the Belt and Road Initiative there, I presume.

**Valášek:** They do, and you’ve seen the Czech President Miloš Zeman visiting and saying very flattering things [about] the Initiative. There’s genuine interest in the investments that might be available, because the infrastructural needs in Eastern Europe are much bigger than in the West of the continent. There are many more roads, railroads, harbors, and ports to be developed; there have been very significant EU investments into infrastructure, but a lot more [needs] to be done, so if there is new Chinese money available, that would be greatly welcome.

**Heanle:** You mentioned the EU investments in some of these areas in Eastern Europe that need infrastructure. With the UK leaving the EU over the next two years, will this have an impact on how much investment funds are available, and what would that mean?

**Valášek:** [The impact will be] huge. The UK contributes 10 percent of the overall budget. If the UK leaves, it is fairly clear that not all of the 10 percent will be filled by others. Frankly, that would mean that Germany would have to greatly increase its contributions, and while Germany



has been willing to pay an awful lot to keep the European Union united and prosperous, you know, there is a limit to its generosity, and there is a limit to the political support for the European project in Germany itself. So, the assumption is that the European Union's budget will shrink, and one of the biggest losers will likely be countries of Central Europe [which] may lose out on the so-called structural funds. This is the part of the EU budget that pays for the roads, bridges, railroads, and other big constructions.

**Haenle:** And Chinese infrastructure through the Belt and Road will help fill that gap...

**Valášek:** That's right. There's a potential that about two or three years down the road, if and when the amount of money that flows to Eastern Europe from the EU dries up—well, it'll never dry up, but it'll significantly decrease—that the interest in Chinese financing might go up. So you may see interest—the already strong interest in Central and Eastern Europe in Chinese investments—you may see it going up over time.

**Haenle:** Now, one of the things you've heard this week from Chinese interlocutors is that this is not a strategy; this is an initiative. It is really about infrastructure development and economic assistance. It is not about geopolitics. China wants to stay above the fray and not get into the politics. Thinking about Europe, and, you know, the politics throughout the region, how difficult will this be for China to avoid the politics?

**Valášek:** Impossible. I mean, China may want to stay above the fray, but that's not the way things will work out, simply because the other countries will have a different view. And I hear stories, just to offer an anecdote, I hear stories of Chinese goods arriving by train to Poland, offloading a cargo of...

**Haenle:** ... from China...

**Valášek:** From China—Chinese trains from China arriving in Poland, offloading a cargo of mobile phones and other high-tech equipment, and Poland loading apples for the return trip back to China. Now this may sound innocuous, but there's a huge political symbolism.

**Haenle:** With apples?

**Valášek:** With apples, because what happened in 2014 when Russia invaded Ukraine, is that EU imposed sanctions on Russia. Russia responded with counter-sanctions, among other things, on Polish apples.

**Haenle:** Did Poland export a lot of apples?

**Valášek:** Poland used to export a lot of apples to Russia. The loss of the Russian market was a blow for the Polish economy, and Poland has made a political point out of distributing so-called “freedom apples” at various EU and NATO meetings to make a point: “we don't need Russia,” you know, “we can compensate for the loss of the Russian market by giving away apples at the European market.” So for Poland to load the trains full of apples to China is a signal to Russia; “we don't need Russia, we have this Chinese ally out there; we have alternatives.” So, right there...

**Haenle:** So even if China didn't intend to do this, or know the background of that, they potentially stumbled into an issue...

**Valášek:** And that's the danger Paul, as you have rightly identified. I've no reason to doubt Chinese declarations that there is no broader political point to be made, but other countries will use the Initiative to make political points of their own.

**Haenle:** Fascinating. Well, it's been a pleasure to have you on the podcast, and to have you out here in Beijing. We hope that, in your new capacity as director of the Carnegie Europe Center, we can have you out here often.

**Valášek:** I'd be delighted to, Paul, it's been a real pleasure.

**Haenle:** Thank you very much.

**Valášek:** Gladly, thanks.

**Haenle:** That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our site, see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, thanks for listening and be sure to tune in next time.