

Coping with a Transatlantic Relationship in Flux

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There is a lot of uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship today. President Donald Trump raised doubts about the U.S. commitment to NATO early in his administration. He has made clear since then, in both word and in deed, that the U.S. will indeed stand by its commitments and its promises. But still a residue of mistrust persists.

At the same time the criticism of President Trump from Europe has been highly emotional. Early on German chancellor Angela Merkel distanced herself from President Trump, and the reaction to Trump's presidency from much of the European political class and media has been sharply negative. Relations have stabilized since these early days, as French president Emmanuel Macron welcomed Trump to Paris, and as Chancellor Merkel developed a better personal relationship with the U.S. president.

And yet the mistrust persists.

In helping Americans and Europeans to cope with this new uncertainty in transatlantic relations, I offer some observations and suggestions:

Much of the unease in Europe focuses on President Trump's style and rhetoric, making the criticism of him highly personal. Doubtlessly his style is new and even intentionally disruptive. But it would be a mistake to attribute all the difficulties in transatlantic relations today solely to President Trump's unique approach to the presidency.

Once you discount the novelty of his rhetoric, much of Trump's transatlantic agenda is standard fare for



the Republican Party. His questioning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, for example, is a long-standing position of the Republican Party. Europe had clearly grown accustomed to President Obama's more liberal approach to international affairs, and now that a Republican president is reversing course – as Democratic and Republican presidents have done repeatedly in the past – there is an urgent sense in Europe that the United States is now doing something radically new. He is even accused of challenging the entire international order. The charge of unilateralism, so familiar to those with a memory of the Iraq War and other transatlantic disagreements going back to the Reagan Era, has resurfaced and is once again being leveled at the United States.

I would counsel caution in drawing these conclusions. Not only has Trump demonstrated his commitment to Europe through support for military deployments in the Baltic States. He also made a major public commitment to Article Five in a speech in Poland. His national security team (McMaster, Mattis, and Tillerson) are known in Europe for their sober and stable leadership.

As mentioned before, Trump's desire to change the JCPOA is a longstanding Republican position. It is important to remember a couple of facts about how the Iran nuclear agreement was approved in the Senate. President Obama quite intentionally refused to submit the agreement as a treaty for ratification because he knew it would not be approved. A majority of the Senate actually opposed the nuclear deal. Fifty-eight senators, including current Democratic leader Senator Chuck Schumer, voted to advance a resolution of disapproval. The Democrats filibustered the measure and prevented the resolution from coming to a vote. They won the political vote, but the substance of the agreement was actually never put before the Senate for a vote. Thus, not only is the JCPOA not legally binding. It has the dubious reputation of being "approved" without a positive vote on its actual terms.

No one should be surprised, then, that President Trump and the Republicans are challenging the agreement. It was a strictly partisan maneuver intended to bypass Republican objections. Republicans believe the agreement to be one sided. Republican Senators repeatedly warned European leaders that a Republican president would challenge and possibly overturn the agreement.

Second, Republicans generally have a different view of the world order than many Europeans, especially West Europeans. U.S. global interests are always broader and more militarily focused than in Europe. Sovereignty is not a dirty word in the United States. Republicans have always been highly skeptical of the United Nations, particularly of its social and economic agendas. Republicans support the European Union as a strategic project, but they do not believe its brand of transnationalism should be applied to the United States, or even to the global order for that matter. Frankly, much of the misperception of a transatlantic crisis stems from the mistaken assumption in Europe that history had somehow ended with Barack Obama, that his progressive liberal approach to international affairs was irreversible. Just as Reagan reversed Jimmy Carter's policies, and George W. Bush did

the same with Bill Clinton's, Donald Trump is doing a similar course correction that nearly always happens after the White House changes parties.

As far as "coping" with this uncertainty is concerned, I would respectfully suggest that Europeans give President Trump the benefit of the doubt. That's what President Macron did when he welcomed Trump to Paris. Basically, I'm counseling not to panic. Changing the Iran deal will be a challenge to transatlantic relations, but frankly President Trump's decision to decertify and turn the issue over to Congress is a middle way. He could have just pulled the U.S. out of the agreement. He could still do so, but at this point my hunch is that he would settle for changes to toughen it up, rather than kill it outright.

Second, I would see this current challenge as an opportunity for Europe. Europeans have been talking about doing more for their own defense for decades. Now is the time to step up and do something serious. The British exit from the European Union will make it easier to integrate some of your defense structures and systems. And you will find less testiness from a Trump administration about European defense integration than you would from a more establishment GOP president.

Finally, I would strongly urge Europeans not to adopt the advice they are hearing from some former Obama officials and supporters – namely, to hunker down and resist Trump's policies in the hopes that a friendlier Obama-like leader will reemerge in the future. Doing so will not only backfire but likely cause even greater tensions in relations. It would also ignore the larger social and political trends that led to Trump's rise in the first place. Trump rode a wave of protest that has social and economic dimensions that exist not only in the U.S., but in Europe. We should try to understand the causes of these protests, and not to dismiss them with tendentious and ideological political arguments. It would be far smarter to understand why voters are behaving the way they are, and to try to come up with a political program that satisfies their concerns.