

Tough Choices Ahead for European Security

By Benjamin Rhode



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The International Security Forum convened by the Center for Advanced Security, Strategic, and Integrations Studies and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in early October 2019 featured several important discussions concerning the role of the European Union and its constituent states in a world increasingly marked by the exercise of “hard power,” and whether the EU’s non-military strengths could serve as a substitute for its continuing ineffectiveness in the military domain. One participant employed an imaginative and thought-provoking paleontological metaphor: while the EU was, in essence, a herbivore dinosaur, could it make itself sufficiently large and intimidating, as the brontosaurus did, so that it could remain secure in a world dominated by carnivores? Unfortunately, Europe’s continued security in recent decades has not been a result of its development of a novel paradigm in which it is able to fend off or deter predators despite being largely ineffective as a military actor. Rather, it has in practice been guarded by an extremely potent carnivore – the United States – which is now in the process of resiling from its former commitments.

Since the Forum took place, several events have confirmed the pressing nature of these questions and the predicament in which European states find themselves. Ongoing revelations about U.S. president Donald Trump’s dealings with Ukraine suggested that he was willing to jeopardize the security of a European partner – albeit one that was not a NATO member – in the hope of securing its assistance in a defamatory campaign against a domestic political opponent. In the Middle East, Trump’s abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria highlighted his administration’s determination to shed itself of existing military commitments, whether or not this involved the abandonment of its allies. While they did not suffer the catastrophic consequences experienced by America’s Kurdish partners, Trump’s announcement caught Washington’s European allies off guard. Moreover, Turkey’s invasion of Syria shortly afterward illustrated and exacerbated longstanding divisions within NATO. During tensions between the United States and Iran in January 2020, which many feared could produce a major conflagration, the extent to which European states had little to no meaningful influence over events that affected their national interests was striking. More generally, U.S. policy toward Iran since 2018 and the collapse of the JCPOA have demonstrated the futility of European states’ hopes that they could pursue an independent policy toward Tehran.



Trump's startling announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria was one of several challenges to NATO that French president Emmanuel Macron discussed in his interview with *The Economist* in autumn 2019. While this interview attracted widespread coverage – and a fair amount of indignation at Macron's outspoken remarks, especially that NATO was “brain dead” – it is noteworthy that many critiques focused less on the substance of Macron's commentary and more on its apparent indiscretion. Macron's ominous prognostications about the future of NATO's Article V were condemned for themselves undermining NATO's credibility; yet he was reflecting broadly held concerns over whether the Trump administration would honor its commitments to defend European allies, heightened by Trump's open musings over whether Washington would protect states such as Montenegro.

In his dealings with allies in the Middle East and Asia, President Trump has repeatedly demonstrated a narrow interpretation of the national interest, typically identified in financial terms. For example, he has repeatedly threatened to withdraw U.S. forces from Japan and South Korea unless those states increase their financial payments to Washington dramatically; and he has recently claimed that the United States has received large payments from Middle Eastern allies in return for military protection. Whether these claims are in fact correct, these declarations are illustrative of a firmly-held worldview that scorns traditional alliances, and they validate concerns voiced privately and publicly by European states about the extent to which they can continue to depend on the United States for their security. Events over the past six months or so, moreover, have undermined the consoling narrative that President Trump's alarming announcements were

mediated by his officials and could for the most part be safely ignored. Trump has repeatedly demonstrated that his views are the primary determinant of U.S. foreign policy, with officials scrambling to create post hoc rationalizations for his often-impulsive decisions.

Although their diminishing global influence is increasingly apparent, European states have not experienced a direct and severe threat to their security since Trump's accession to the presidency. That would change were Trump to announce Washington's withdrawal from NATO. It has been widely reported that aides had to dissuade him from doing so at his 2019 State of the Union address. There remains a strong possibility that in 2020 the president will both be acquitted of impeachment charges and re-elected to the presidency, which he would interpret as validation and legitimization of his policies at home and abroad. It is likely that a second Trump administration would continue to retrench from Washington's global commitments and undermine traditional alliances – but much more dramatically than before. While the U.S. Congress has sought to employ legislative means to forestall American withdrawal from NATO without its approval, the stubborn fact remains that a presidential declaration that Washington would not respond to an invocation of Article V with military support would itself deal a devastating blow to the Alliance's credibility.

European states are well-aware of the scale of the threat that these developments pose to their security. The UK defense secretary has recently made public his concerns that London's assumption since at least 2010 that any future war involving British forces would see them fighting alongside U.S. allies may be misplaced. Paris and Berlin are also conscious of the changing strategic landscape shaped by U.S. retrenchment. Yet there remains an apparent division between the views of Macron and his advisors that Trump represents a broader shift in U.S. attitudes requiring a commensurately dramatic European response, and the implicit hopes of many within German diplomatic and political circles that, were a Democrat to defeat Trump in the 2020 election, the figurative storm would pass, and they could return to the comfortable status quo ante in which Washington bore the cost and responsibility for defending Europe. Events over the next year or so may reveal which of these assumptions are correct.