



Transatlantic Relations in 2017

Written by [Stanley R. Sloan](#), This article is part of special inauguration series by [Dūcō](#) experts on major global issues in the Trump Administration.

As the United States enters the first 100 days of Donald Trump’s presidential term, transatlantic relations face greater uncertainty than at any time since the aftermath of the Second World War. Much of that uncertainty results from conflicting signals that have come from President Trump. But the outcome will likely be found in the interactions between future Trump administration policies, European political developments, and the external threats to transatlantic security and cohesion.

The bottom line question is whether illiberal political tendencies in America combined with similar tendencies in Europe, interacting with challenges posed by Russian revisionism and Islamic State threats, are now producing a perfect storm that could blow away the transatlantic alliance.

Political dynamics in Europe were already signaling trouble more than a year ago, when [it appeared that populist tendencies in many European countries](#) could undermine the European Union, NATO, and Western interests more generally. The British referendum that decided the UK should leave the EU – known popularly as the [“Brexit”](#) – last June reflected such tendencies in Great Britain. In 2017, the Brexit process seems likely to further raise the level of uncertainty about the entire future of the European project as well as of the UK’s place in the world and its “special relationship” with the United States.

Meanwhile, elections in core EU members France and Germany will test whether populist pressures in those two countries will challenge leadership by traditional parties. In France, the leader of the right-wing National Front, Marine le Pen, will compete strongly for the French presidency. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's return to power seems likely but reactions to her relatively permissive approach to Middle Eastern immigrants and those Germans who support a less confrontational approach to Moscow could weaken her ability to govern.

Against that stormy backdrop, the mysteries surrounding likely Trump administration policies toward transatlantic relations are the cause for greatest concern. During the U.S. presidential primaries, [Trump asserted](#) that the NATO allies were not paying their fair share for Western defense. This was not so exceptional, as other U.S. officials, including former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, had issued similar warnings in years past. However, Trump took it an unprecedented step further, arguing that the United States should not come to the defense of an ally if that ally had not "earned" the U.S. commitment. This position, never fully retracted by the president-elect, suggested abandonment of the key collective defense commitment (Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty) that has been the central operative provision of the treaty. Under Article 5, all allies agree to treat an attack on another ally as an attack on them all. This was precisely what all allies did [in response to the 9/11 attacks](#) on the United States.

The uncertainty concerning future U.S. commitments to NATO has been so unsettling that it has stimulated speculation about a [nuclear deterrence role for Germany](#), or some combination of French/British nuclear deterrents.

Trump's decision to nominate well-respected General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense suggested that his position might be softened by Mattis' support for traditional U.S. alliances. But Trump's obvious inclination to "do a deal" with Russian President Putin and his nomination of Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State strengthened speculation that Trump might direct Tillerson to negotiate a deal, [perhaps removing the sanctions imposed on Russia](#) for its 2014 aggression against Ukraine, including annexation of The Crimea.

One of the very big questions for 2017 therefore is whether or not President Trump will reaffirm Western interests and the values of "democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law" enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty and disavow previous statements weakening the U.S. commitment to collective defense. The future of the transatlantic alliance could rest on his choice.

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