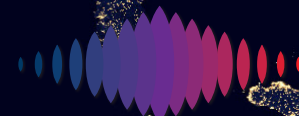


# NORMAL IS OVER

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Trump era is an anomaly. But  
the transatlantic divide has  
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CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Year one of the Trump administration has been uniquely unnerving. Yet the trans-Atlantic security community has also been breathing a sigh of relief, because many of their worst expectations seem to have been averted: trade wars, an attack on North Korea, the end of NATO. The conventional wisdom in Washington, DC and many European capitals today is that—despite a president who continues to defy conventions—U.S.-European relations have largely normalized. As a result, most Europeans are attempting to ride out what they believe to be a temporary aberration of American politics with a mixture of hugging and hedging. There is certainly evidence for a normalization of U.S. foreign policy, not least in the president’s formal endorsement of NATO’s mutual defense clause, and the reinforcement of American contributions to reassurance and deterrence in Eastern Europe. There are also many signs that the past year has re-energized American civil society, belying determinist critics in Europe. But Trumpism needs to be recognized as a massive discontinuity. Trump is the first postwar American president to question the liberal order as such. In its purest form, the “America First” doctrine has implications for the EU and some of its member states (especially Germany) that should be of intense concern to Europeans. Europeans should worry even more, however, about its fundamentalist critique of globalization (which it refers to as globalism) as a quasi-adversarial ideology. The globalization-globalism dichotomy, unlike all previous trans-Atlantic disagreements, is a dispute about the nature of the world we live in. And it is a wedge that could drive the United States and Europe apart. America could attempt (at immense cost to itself) to decouple from the liberal world order and the global economy. But for Europe to do so would be suicidal. This flips the existing logic of the trans-Atlantic alliance on its head: it is Europe now that has the greater—and for it, existential—interest in preserving an international order that safeguards peace and globalization.

## INTRODUCTION: THE TRANS-ATLANTICISTS BREATHE A SIGH OF RELIEF

One of the rare points of international consensus about the first year of the Trump administration is that it has been uniquely unnerving, at home and abroad. Nonetheless, the trans-Atlantic security policy community is also breathing a discreet sigh of relief, for in its field, the worst seems to have been averted. Contrary to the most breathless predictions of impending doom—or so practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic point out—the world has *not* yet seen the United States trigger trade wars with Europe or China, pull out of NATO, or attack North Korea. The conventional wisdom in Washington and many European capitals is that despite a president who continues to defy the conventions of the office, American foreign policy, and therefore U.S.-European relations, have largely “normalized,” not least because the U.S. bureaucracy has been scrambling to guide and contain their commander-in-chief.

But have they really?

This first part of this essay describes the reactions of key European actors to the Trump administration, and the different national routes they have taken to arrive at the assumption that they can ride out what they believe to be a temporal aberration of American politics with a policy mix of hugging and hedging. The second section reviews the evidence for the “normalization” theory. It concludes that while this picture of American foreign and security policy in the age of Trump is not inaccurate, it is also incomplete. The third part argues that in fact we may be seeing a profound and durable shift in U.S. foreign policy and that disagreements between the two partners of the alliance have never been so elemental. (The fact that this polarization also exists *within* America and Europe is an additional source of confusion and friction.) Profound shifts are underway on both sides of the Atlantic that



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require a reassessment and rebalancing of the trans-Atlantic alliance if it is to continue to flourish.

The new fault line in the alliance is neither geographic nor between the left and right sides of the ideological spectrum: it is between the defenders of a liberal, peaceful

international order based on globalization (and liberal, open societies at home), and its adversaries. All indications suggest that this new divide is structural and permanent rather than superficial and transitory; and it runs through our societies as well, pitting traditional elites against a new populist mood.

In other words, it is not about Trump. The fundamental issue will not go away if the president stops tweeting—or if there is another president or party in the White House. And it is not just an American phenomenon.

## EUROPEAN REACTIONS: HUGGING AND HEDGING

As is well known, most Europeans failed to predict the outcome of the 2016 American election—with the exception of those who wanted it to happen because they, too, see themselves as disrupters opposing a “globalist establishment.” That establishment, at any rate, was unprepared for the Trump victory; this even though the campaign, and specifically the Republican convention, had provided a number of “teachable moments” illustrating the changes in American politics. The shock of November 8, 2016, was deep; it continues to this day.

For in rhetoric at least, the Trump presidency has been revolutionary. From his extraordinary “American carnage” inaugural speech on January 20, 2017,<sup>1</sup> onward, the president has appalled and mesmerized global public opinion by insulting democratic leaders and their countries, and by praising or appeasing populists, authoritarians, and strongmen. Trump has expressed disdain for multilateral institutions, treaties, and international law, as well as for America’s postwar stewardship of a peaceful world order. He has made clear his contempt for the liberal Western values underpinning the trans-Atlantic relationship. Diplomats, analysts, and journalists worldwide have become queasily addicted to his Twitter feed.

Yet the most startling new development of the past year has been that overt zero-sum thinking appears to be making a comeback, not just in the president’s tweets, but in American strategy; and not just in dealings with adversaries or challengers, but even in relations with traditional allies like the Europeans.

All of this has made President Trump less than popular in Europe—less so, indeed, than Russian President Vladimir Putin.<sup>2</sup> After his victory in November 2016, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a committed Atlanticist, sent a congratulatory telegram that David Frum of *The Atlantic* magazine described as “a coolly diffident pledge of cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> By the following May, a chancellor in election campaign mode stood in a Bavarian beer tent and said “The times in which we could totally rely on others are to some extent over ... we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands.”<sup>4</sup> A prominent German weekly paper, *DIE ZEIT*, has been insistently ringing the death knell for Atlanticism ever since the U.S. election.<sup>5</sup>

At the European Union’s headquarters in Brussels, the alarm over the new American president’s incendiary language found its most trenchant expression in the January 31, 2017 letter written by EU Council President Donald Tusk to the heads of government of the 27 member states, in which he suggested that the new administration presented a threat on a par with Russian aggression, Chinese assertiveness, and strife in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> The EU’s recent defense reform package, which aims to increase European self-reliance, was conceived as a response to Russian aggression and turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East, but it was given added impetus by the new American administration.

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1 Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

2 Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter, and Janell Fetterolf, “U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around the World Question Trump’s Leadership,” *Pew Research Center*, June 26, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>.

3 David Frum, “America’s Friendship With Europe Has Been Horribly Damaged,” *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/trump-merkel-germany-europe/507773/>.

4 Giulia Paravicini, “Angela Merkel: Europe Must Take ‘Our Fate’ Into Own Hands,” *Politico*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-europe-cdu-must-take-its-fate-into-its-own-hands-elections-2017/>. Less than two weeks later, the foreign minister of Canada, Chrystia Freeland, echoed Merkel’s remarks: “The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course. For Canada, that course must be the renewal, indeed the strengthening of the postwar multilateral order.” See Chrystia Freeland, “Address by Minister Freeland on Canada’s Foreign Policy Priorities,” (speech, Ottawa, June 6, 2017), <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address-by-ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html>.

5 See for example, Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich, “Something New in the West,” *DIE ZEIT*, October 15, 2017, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/2017-10/foreign-policy-germany-atlanticism-relationships-values>. (The article originally appeared in German and is part of a series on the future of Atlanticism begun after the 2016 U.S. election.) Full disclosure: the author of this paper was an editor and writer in the political section of *DIE ZEIT* from 1994 to 2005.

6 Donald Tusk, “‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall’: letter by President Donald Tusk to the 27 EU heads of state or government on the future of the EU before the Malta summit,” January 31, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31/tusk-letter-future-europe/>.

Widespread as the consternation in Europe is, there are important differences of tone and substance from one country to another.<sup>7</sup>

**Germany** has been the epicenter of the Trump-quake in Europe because its postwar relationship with the United States is singularly intertwined and emotionally complex. It is a potent mixture of (occasionally resentful) co-dependency born out of liberation in 1945, gratitude for America’s role in bringing about reunification in 1990, and confidence in continuing American engagement because huge U.S. troop bases like Ramstein and others



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are key hubs for American deployments to Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The United States is Germany’s largest export market and Germany is America’s largest trading partner in Europe; the two economies are deeply interdependent through direct investment and jobs.

German public opinion has traditionally vacillated between pro- and anti-Americanism.<sup>8</sup> But German security elites have been used to decades of close collaboration, despite and indeed during some searing public disagreements (on Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011). When George H.W. Bush offered “partnership in leadership” in 1989, Germany politely yet firmly demurred. Over the course of the Obama administration, and with the hardening prospect of a “Brexit,” Germany increasingly slid into the role of the White House’s favored interlocutor in Europe—not always to its comfort. The relationship between Barack Obama and Angela Merkel, mutually cool and skeptical at first, saw real and deep disagreements over the handling of the eurozone crisis, Germany’s current account surplus, its defense spending, as well as NSA spying (and accusations of German counter-spying). Nonetheless, it turned into the most co-equal relationship a German chancellor has ever had with an American president. This was most obviously visible in Obama’s deference to Merkel on the management of the Ukraine-Russia conflict (notably including a refusal to ship lethal weapons to Kiev, against significant bipartisan pressure in Washington). With Germany increasingly treated as Europe’s leader by default, and shaken by Russian aggression, Berlin’s security elites had been stirred into crafting a more responsible and forward-leaning strategic posture in the all-but-certain expectation of continued cordial cooperation with a President Hillary Clinton.

The awakening on the morning after the election was rough. All the more because it swiftly became clear that the president and some of his hard-line nationalist advisers (Stephen Bannon, Stephen Miller, and trade adviser Peter Navarro) harbored a special antipathy against “bad, bad Germany.”<sup>9</sup> The president himself described the EU as “basically a

7 Jeremy Shapiro and Dina Pardijs, “The Transatlantic Meaning of Donald Trump: A U.S.-EU Power Audit,” (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2017), <http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the-transatlantic-meaning-of-donald-trump-a-us-eu-power-audit7229>. Shapiro and Pardijs usefully (and entertainingly) class EU member state responses into three groups: The Regency Effect (the adults will contain Trump), The Messiah Effect (Trump is our savior), and The Antichrist Effect (Trump must be countered by a “European reformation”).

8 In the December 2017 poll of the Körber Foundation, a staggering 88 percent of respondents agreed that Germany should privilege its European partners over the United States as defense partners. See “Einmischen oder zurückhalten?,” (Berlin: Körber Foundation, 2017), [https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/handlungsfeld\\_internationale-verstaendigung/pdf/2017/Einmischen-oder-zurueckhalten-2017-deutsch.pdf](https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/handlungsfeld_internationale-verstaendigung/pdf/2017/Einmischen-oder-zurueckhalten-2017-deutsch.pdf).

9 Peter Müller, “The Germans are Bad, Very Bad,” *Spiegel Online*, May 26, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/trump-in-brussels-the-germans-are-bad-very-bad-a-1149330.html>. On the role of the president’s advisers, see Michael Crowley, “Trump’s Nationalists Triumphant After Europe Trip,” *Politico*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-stephen-bannon-g20-warsaw-nationalists-triumphant-after-europe-trip/>.

vehicle for Germany,” and has complained about Germany’s trade deficit as well as its NATO contributions on social media.<sup>10</sup>

Berlin reacted to the fall from grace with shock. It then had to scramble to find creative ways to engage with the new administration—such as inviting Ivanka Trump to speak on a stage in Berlin with the chancellor and IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde. Germany’s Foreign Ministry, which has habitually treated the alliance with America as one of the lodestars of the country’s foreign policy, is discussing the need for an “America strategy” for the first time in its postwar history.<sup>11</sup> But in the historically unprecedented political turmoil following the country’s September 24, 2017, elections, Germans may be too preoccupied trying to chart a course to a new government to have much bandwidth for external affairs.<sup>12</sup>

For **France**, the shift from Obama to Trump was far less traumatic; if anything, it appears to have had a backbone-stiffening effect. Nuclear weapons, a seat in the U.N. Security Council, a high-level defense and intelligence relationship with the United States, a vibrant trade and research exchange, an important role in the fight against ISIS: all of these, regardless of who happens to sit in the Oval Office, guarantee France a special standing in Washington that among Western democracies is on a par only with the British; and even that, French experts would argue, has become questionable because of Brexit. Paris appreciates NATO as an indispensable leverage point of French military influence, and a guarantee of American support for Europe’s defense. Yet its security elites have taken a dim view (and said so) of American interventions in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Northern Africa. But, *bof*: failure and disappointment take *les Américains* down a notch, thereby equalizing the relationship a little further.

Still, the government of François Hollande and the Obama administration had gotten along very well—with the notable exception of U.S. Syria policy, which dismayed Paris. America’s first black president had been remarkably popular in France. Conversely, the admiration expressed by the American far right, and by the U.S. president himself, for the extreme right-wing Front National’s leader Marine le Pen during France’s spring 2017 presidential campaign outraged most French citizens. Also—and in stark contrast to the critique of globalization coming out of the Trump White House—France’s new President Emmanuel Macron had run his campaign on a roaring endorsement of the European Union as a *preserver* of French sovereignty and influence in the world, effectively turning the anti-globalization critique on its head. This has enabled Macron to stand up to Trump, while taking the lead on pushing for deeper European integration in the management of the eurozone and in defense.<sup>13</sup> Notably, French foreign policy elites insist that the European Union’s defense reforms should aim not just for greater burden-sharing or self-reliance, but “strategic autonomy.”

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10 Michael Gove and Kai Diekmann, “Full transcript of interview with Donald Trump,” *The Times*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/full-transcript-of-interview-with-donald-trump-5d39sr09d>. See also a tweet from the president himself: Donald Trump, “We have a MASSIVE trade deficit with Germany, plus they pay FAR LESS than they should on NATO & military. Very bad for U.S. This will change,” Twitter, May 30, 2017, <https://mobile.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/869503804307275776>.

11 Sigmar Gabriel, “Europa in einer unbequemen Welt,” (speech, Körber Foundation Forum Aussenpolitik, Berlin, December 5, 2017), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/berliner-forum-aussenpolitik/746464>. The English version of the speech is available here: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/Newsroom/berliner-forum-aussenpolitik/909376>.

12 Stefan Theil, “Berlin’s Balancing Act: Merkel Needs Trump—but Also Needs to Keep Her Distance,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October 2017): 9-16, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/germany/2017-08-15/berlins-balancing-act>.

13 Nathalie Nougayrède, “France’s Gamble: As America Retreats, Macron Steps Up,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October 2017): 2-8, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2017-08-15/frances-gamble>.

Of Europe's Big Three powers, the **United Kingdom's** reaction to Trump is the most muddled—this despite its close defense and intelligence relationship with the U.S., which is unmatched by any other Western partner. (This is perhaps not so surprising after all: the closely-knit Anglo-American security castes, who prize calm, rationality, and responsibility, currently find themselves on the defensive against the strident political mood and invectives on both sides of the Atlantic.) In principle, of course, things ought to have gone swimmingly between President Trump and Prime Minister Theresa May, because the U.S.-U.K. axis had been in some disrepair when she took over from her predecessor David Cameron. The previous U.S. administration, and Barack Obama personally, had gone out of their way to emphasize to Cameron that Brexit was a terrible idea. Rather than reinforcing the special relationship, it would dilute it—or so the White House pleaded—because Britain would no longer be useful to Washington as a moderating voice of Atlanticism at the EU table. These warnings were not well received in Whitehall (except in the Remain camp), and the relationship soured.

So Trump's emphasis on "America First," sovereignty, and "taking back control," as well as his promises of a quick U.S.-U.K. bilateral trade deal—all of it an uncanny echo of the rallying cries of the Brexiteers—seemed to usher in a more favorable reset. Yet May's valiant efforts to reclaim Britain's distinctive status as Washington's key European ally (and to ignore U.K. Independence Party [UKIP] leader Nigel Farage's even more special status as a friend and adviser of the president's) have petered out as it has become clear that there can be no bilateral agreements before the U.K. leaves the EU. In late November 2017, May had to resist calls to rescind her invitation to the U.S. president to come to Britain on a state visit after a national furor over his attacks on the mayor of London and (even more) his retweeting anti-Muslim images from a U.K. ultranationalist group. Moreover—as my Brookings colleague Thomas Wright has noted—the Trump administration's approach to Britain's departure from the EU, while supportive in rhetoric, has been "predatory" in practice, "designed to take immediate economic advantage of the dislocations and vulnerabilities created for the U.K. by the Brexit process."<sup>14</sup>

As a result, the British government has ended up adopting a far more cautious approach after all—logical because May for now appears to be trying to avoid the kind of sharp break with the EU favored in the past by Trump's more hard-line advisers. But the British prime minister remains under acute threat from the no-deal Brexit faction in her own party, led by Jacob Rees-Mogg and John Redwood. Should they prevail, the Washington-London axis might become more effective again than it is now. Then again, the next elections might return a Labour Party government under Jeremy Corbyn—in which case the special relationship could see the worst crisis in its history.<sup>15</sup>

The governments of most other EU member states align somewhere with either Germany, France, or Britain in their reactions to the Trump administration. The notable exceptions are **Poland** and **Hungary**, which enthusiastically welcomed the new U.S. president, seconded by the Czech Republic's President Miloš Zeman. Both the government of then-Prime Minister Beata Szydło in Warsaw and that of her counterpart Viktor Orbán in Budapest had been on the receiving end of blunt criticism from the Obama White House

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14 Thomas Wright, "Brexit: A Negotiation Update," (testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, Washington, DC, December 6, 2017), p. 4, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/wright-house-fa-committee-brexit-testimony-dec-6-final1.pdf>.

15 David Goodhart, "The United Kingdom's Trump Trap: How Special a Relationship?," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October 2017): 17-20, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-kingdom/2017-08-15/united-kingdoms-trump-trap>.

for their overt efforts to rewrite their domestic constitutional systems in order to make them less pluralist and more authoritarian. Polish and Hungarian leaders were delighted to recognize in Donald Trump a kindred spirit, and an ally against liberalism and “political correctness.”

Yet despite a carefully staged and scripted presidential visit to Warsaw in May 2017, the new U.S. administration has proved to be only a limited boon for Eastern Europe’s illiberal leaders. Orbán has been criticized by the State Department for his attempts to close down the Central European University in Budapest, his persecution of NGOs, and his anti-Semitic campaign against Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros. And while the Pentagon has reinforced the American contribution to NATO’s reassurance and deterrence effort at the alliance’s eastern borders, other Polish requests (e.g., for permanent U.S. bases) remain unfulfilled. Overall, the hope that President Trump would be the friend and advocate of Europe’s right-wing populists has so far remained unrequited.

It might even be argued that the Trump effect on Europe has been exactly the opposite. Throughout 2017, populist parties in Europe, emboldened by the outcome of the U.S. election (and in some cases supported by the U.S. alt-right and its media outlets, as well as by Kremlin information operations), threw

off all pretense of moderation and reverted to red-in-claw-and-fang extremism. This was particularly true of France’s Front National and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).<sup>16</sup> But it didn’t work. Instead, voters in the Netherlands, Austria, France, and finally in Germany appeared to hew to the mean and elected centrist parties.

Nonetheless, the situation is far from stable. Europe’s radical right-wing populists, which command between 15 and 25 percent of the vote in much of the continent, have not been routed, contained, or silenced.<sup>17</sup> There are exceptions: in Finland and Norway, the populists moderated their views in government. But in Germany, the AfD captured 12.6 percent of the vote by siphoning off voters from all parties, thereby limiting coalition options for Merkel, and presaging an extended period of unpredictability in German seven-party politics; the 92-strong AfD parliamentary group is clearly bent on using its moment for maximum disruption. In the Netherlands, the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders came in second; and Prime Minister Mark Rutte won re-election by adapting some of the Freedom Party’s rhetoric and positions. In France, the Front National appears to be a spent force and Macron’s popularity ratings have stabilized, but he has yet to prove that he can govern and reform France, and he now has a new challenger on the right in the form of Laurent Wauquiez, recently-elected president of The Republicans. In Austria’s October 2017 parliamentary elections, Sebastian Kurz won on (or despite) a promise of forming a coalition with the hard-line populist right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) of Heinz-Christian Strache, which also came in second. And the March 2018 Italian elections might see a return in force of several right-wing populist parties, including Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the Lega Nord, as well as of the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement.

**Polish and Hungarian leaders were delighted to recognize in Donald Trump a kindred spirit, and an ally against liberalism and “political correctness.”**



16 Ivan Krastev, “How Donald Trump Might Save the E.U.,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/opinion/how-donald-trump-might-save-the-eu.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/opinion/how-donald-trump-might-save-the-eu.html?_r=0).

17 “Europe’s Unfinished Fight to Stem the Populist Tide,” *Financial Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/35999ece-e400-11e7-97e2-916d4fbac0da>.



More generally, centrist European governments are finding their analytical and operational bandwidth stretched to the limit by an exceptional combination of domestic and external crises, leading to a defensiveness that is compounded by a public mood whipsawing between unrealistic expectations, fear, and anger. This volatility remains fertile ground for mischief-making, be it by extremists or foreign governments. And it makes for limited options when dealing with the new American uncertainty.

Over the course of 2017, most EU member states have gingerly squared up to the new U.S. administration with variations of a two-pronged approach—a combination of hugging and hedging.

The hugging takes a variety of forms. Europeans are carefully engaging their professional counterparts (such as there are, given the many vacant positions) on policy issues. At the same time, they are discreetly appeasing the hardliners by documenting that they are already helping to Make America Great Again: through investment by French companies in the U.S. economy, or through the jobs training German companies provide for their American labor force. They are also reaching out beyond Washington to new allies—states and cities—on issues of mutual concern like renewable energy or climate change. They have defended each other and the European project when necessary: for example, when Theresa May told President Trump on her first visit to the White House that a breakup of the EU would not be in Britain’s interest. On matters of strategic importance to all of Europe—such as the Trump administration’s threat to cancel the Iran nuclear deal, a step broadly opposed in the EU—senior diplomats from Berlin, Paris, and London closed ranks and lobbied decisionmakers in Washington together.

As for the hedging, its most visible form is the new momentum for European security and defense cooperation: an EU fund for defense research, as well as new options for states to push ahead in a smaller group to deeper mutual defense integration.<sup>18</sup> Unlike earlier EU defense reform initiatives, after the wars in Yugoslavia or Iraq, these efforts are more realistic because they are only directed at providing the European Union with the ability to act more independently in small-to-medium crisis management scenarios. They are not motivated by a (in any case delusional) wish to create a European “counter-hegemon” or counterweight to the U.S., nor by a desire to push out NATO and replace it with a new European security architecture. Most Western foreign policy elites urgently hope to preserve the Western liberal order, and to stop a Trump-led America from turning its back on it. They understand that the partnership with America is indispensable to European security.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are also voices who want precisely that. For example, the German weekly paper *DIE ZEIT*’s influential deputy editor, Bernd Ulrich, has been calling for Germany and Europe to “liberate themselves from Atlanticism” and from the alliance with an America that has “forfeited all moral, military, and political claim to leadership.”<sup>20</sup> The policy speech given by Germany’s Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at a conference in Berlin in early December 2017—a highly deliberate provocation and trial balloon—is another

18 Steven Erlanger, “E.U. Moves Closer to a Joint Military Force,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/world/europe/eu-military-force.html>.

19 Hans Kundnani and Jana Puglierin, “Atlanticist and ‘Post-Atlanticist’ Wishful Thinking,” *German Marshall Fund*, January 3, 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/atlanticist-and-post-atlanticist-wishful-thinking>.

20 Bernd Ulrich, “Ganz unten...aber nicht am Ende,” *DIE ZEIT*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/2016/47/donald-trump-wahlsieg-europa-werte>; Bernd Ulrich and Jörg Lau, “Something New in the West.” An extended version of the argument can be found in his book: *Bernd Ulrich, Guten Morgen, Abendland: Der Westen am Beginn einer neuen Epoche. Ein Weckruf* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2017).

case in point.<sup>21</sup> Its messages are layered, contradictory, and try to cover all possible bases at the same time: both pro-Western and post-Western; pro-alliance yet post-NATO; pro-American and post-American; pro-European and pro-German national interests; pro-power and post-power; and with some distinct nods to China and Russia, which in the end amount to some quite old-fashioned Social Democratic equidistancing. The speech received deserved criticism,<sup>22</sup> but it is also worth reading soberly as an articulation of the conflicting forces pulling at Germany (and other Europeans). And there are of course other, quieter discussions in European capitals, including Berlin, where it is argued that Europe, or even Germany alone, ought to re-examine its principled opposition to Russian aggression for the sake of its business interests, or to mitigate its strategic vulnerability by cooperating more closely with China.

## THE CASE FOR NORMALIZATION

So, following the first year of the Trump administration, Europeans are still mostly treading a fine line between pragmatism and opportunism, as well as between cautious engagement and a kind of dread-filled passivity. Macron-style arm-wrestling moments have been few, and they have a limited impact on shaping policy anyway. More importantly, Europeans have been loath to directly confront the ideology (and the ideologues) informing Trumpism. Governments and policymakers, at least in public, are firmly embracing the proposition that the Trump bark is far worse than the bite.

You could call it the “Normalization Wins” theory. It points—albeit with a somewhat wobbly finger—to the fact that the president himself has backtracked on a number of strident judgments about individual European leaders, NATO, and even the EU. It takes (immense) relief from the fact that some

of the most egregiously polarizing “disrupters” (Stephen Bannon, Sebastian Gorka, Michael Flynn) have left or been removed from White House positions. Even more importantly, key policymaking positions are now occupied by foreign and security policy professionals or experienced practitioners, such as White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis. They are seconded by a phalanx of seasoned political appointees like Fiona Hill, senior director for European and Russian Affairs at the National Security Council; A. Wess Mitchell, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs; and Ambassador Kurt Volker, U.S. special representative for Ukraine, all of whom are known to believe that continued U.S. support for European security and cohesion is in line with America’s values and interests. They are respected and trusted figures in Europe.

**Governments and policymakers, at least in public, are firmly embracing the proposition that the Trump bark is far worse than the bite.**



21 Sigmar Gabriel, “Europa in einer unbequemen Welt.”

22 Ralf Fücks, “Gabriels Abschied von der normativen Außenpolitik,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, December 6, 2017, <https://causa.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ist-eine-neuausrichtung-der-deutschen-aussenpolitik-notwendig/gabriels-abschied-vonbspder-normativen-aussenpolitik.html>; Thorsten Benner, “Der Weg zu neuen Strategien,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, December 22, 2017, <https://causa.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ist-eine-neuausrichtung-der-deutschen-aussenpolitik-notwendig/gabriels-abschied-vonbspder-normativen-aussenpolitik.html>.

## NORMAL IS OVER

The bureaucracies, or so this reading goes, are working hard to preserve America's international commitments—and to reassure Europeans. Some Washingtonians argue that there has been an *increase* of U.S. engagement. Exhibit A: Mattis persuading the president, whose speechwriter Stephen Miller had removed an explicit reference to the mutual defense guarantee in Article 5 of the NATO treaty from the president's May 2017 speech at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels,<sup>23</sup> to endorse it formally in his Warsaw speech in July.<sup>24</sup> Exhibit B: the reinforcement of American contributions to reassurance and deterrence in Eastern Europe—amounting to \$4.8 billion in FY 2018 alone. At a recent security conference in the U.S. capital, Ian Brzezinski, a Republican former senior Pentagon official who had criticized Trump's campaign statements regarding NATO and Europe, recited a list of policy areas to support his theory that U.S. commitment to trans-Atlantic security is undergoing “sustained reanimation”<sup>25</sup>:

- Trade: no trade or currency wars with Germany (or China).
- Russia: repeated references to Russian aggression, new unilateral sanctions, no new strategic (or even transactional) relationship with Russia.
- Ukraine: no grand bargain with Moscow, appointment of Kurt Volker as new U.S. representative, and the decision to send lethal assistance to Kyiv.
- Georgia: sale of Javelin anti-armor missiles authorized.
- Afghanistan: no pullout, but new U.S. troop commitments.
- Iraq: U.S. forces still engaged in recapturing terrain from ISIS.
- Syria: “eliminated doubts about the hesitancy to use force” (referring to the April 6, 2017, air strikes on a Syrian government air base in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Bashar Assad regime).
- Personal diplomacy: several trips to Europe by the president and the vice president.

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23 Greg Miller, Greg Jaffe, and Philip Rucker, “Doubting the Intelligence, Trump Pursues Putin and Leaves a Russian Threat Unchecked,” *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/donald-trump-pursues-vladimir-putin-russian-election-hacking/?utm\\_term=.900dbeece862](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/donald-trump-pursues-vladimir-putin-russian-election-hacking/?utm_term=.900dbeece862).

24 Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland,” (speech, Krasiński Square, Warsaw, July 6, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/>. The president had made a more informal endorsement at a press conference with the visiting Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in the White House Rose Garden. See Peter Baker, “Trump Commits United States to Defending NATO Nations,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/europe/trump-nato-defense-article-5.html>.

25 The discussion was off the record, but Ian Brzezinski gave me permission to quote him. Similar points are made by Jacob Heilbrunn, “Is Trump Really a Foreign-Policy Populist?,” *The National Interest*, November 30, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-really-foreign-policy-populist-23432>; Walter Russell Mead, “Trump Brings Foreign Policy Back to Earth,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-brings-foreign-policy-back-to-earth-1511825878>; Elliot Abrams, “Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July/August 2017): 10-16, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-06-13/trump-traditionalist>; Matthew Kroenig, “The Case for Trump's Foreign Policy: The Right People, the Right Positions,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (May/June 2017): 30-34, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-04-17/case-trump-s-foreign-policy>; Jamie Fly, “The Truth About Trump in Europe,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-truth-about-trump-in-europe-1496173068>; Stephen Walt, “In Praise of a Transatlantic Divorce,” *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/30/in-praise-of-a-transatlantic-divorce-trump-merkel-europe-nato/>; and Trevor Thrall and John Glaser, “America First? Not so Fast! What We've Learned from 100 Days of Trump Foreign Policy,” *War on the Rocks*, April 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/america-first-not-so-fast-what-weve-learned-from-100-days-of-trump-foreign-policy/>. Not the least reason to take this line of argument seriously is that most of these writers are quite frank about the reservations they harbor about the 45th president.

That said, there are few cases in which the formidably competent U.S. federal bureaucracy (denigrated by its enemies as the “deep state” or the “swamp”) can claim to have successfully restored the status quo. Mostly, its victories these days seem to consist of achieving less bad outcomes (which more often than not means preventing or dissuading the president from following his own worst instincts)<sup>26</sup>: limiting protectionist language in G-7 or G-20 communiqués; not enacting punitive tariffs on European or Chinese imports; shunting review of the Iran nuclear deal over to Congress instead of tearing it up; the U.S. not yet leaving the Paris climate accords or NAFTA; not lifting sanctions against Russia, or not making a deal with Moscow at Ukraine’s expense.

Even so, the last weeks of 2017 saw something of a concerted charm offensive directed at European allies by the administration. In a speech intended as a curtain-raiser for a December trip to Europe, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told his listeners: “Under President Trump, the United States remains committed to our enduring relationship with Europe. Our security commitments to European allies are iron-clad.” In his subsequent remarks, he went to considerable lengths to emphasize policy commonalities between the United States and its European partners.<sup>27</sup> Senior diplomats and national security policymakers went out of their way to echo these sentiments at a number of workshops and conferences in the capital, and in meetings with their counterparts.

More generally, the “normalization” theory takes comfort from the fact that the remaining disrupters in this administration have proven to be weak on execution. Robust resistance from institutions, the courts, and civil society was able to stop some early high-profile projects in their tracks (such as the travel ban on citizens from certain Muslim-majority countries, or the wall between the United States and Mexico), or to force the implementation of a watered-down version. It points to the failure of the Republicans in Congress, despite a majority in both houses, to achieve consensus on healthcare and infrastructure reform, and other major legislative projects, exposing deep divisions within the party.

The much-maligned “mainstream media,” from traditional publishing outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to newer arrivals like *Vox* or *Buzzfeed*, and blogs like *War on the Rocks* or *Lawfare*, far from withering away under the volcanic fumes of *Breitbart*, *Prisonplanet*, or *Infowars*, have attracted large and devoted new audiences for their coverage and analysis of the Trump era. One of the finer ironies of this era of trans-Atlantic estrangement is that thanks to the internet and social media, U.S. coverage of domestic politics, from the legislative process and the battle for the courts to investigations into Russia’s role in the 2016 election, has acquired a fascinated real-time following in Europe as well. So have academic debates about the constitutional ins and outs of impeachment, the emoluments clause, or the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Trump phenomenon has tangibly re-energized American civil society, belying the determinist critics in Europe: from mayors and governors determined to observe the Paris climate commitments to the #MeToo women’s movement, the victory of a Democrat in the Alabama Senate election, and a surge of new candidates for the 2018

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26 Hal Brands, “The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump,” *Survival* 59, no. 6 (December 2017-January 2018): 7-40, <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2017-579b/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-december-2017-january-2018-a19c/59-6-02-brands-9797>.

27 Rex Tillerson, “The U.S. and Europe: Strengthening Western Alliances,” (speech, the Wilson Center, Washington, DC, November 28, 2017), <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/11/276002.htm>.

mid-term elections. There is a vibrant and self-critical national conversation about the cultural, economic, and structural causes for the country's current political polarization. The president's approval ratings, meanwhile, are historically low,<sup>28</sup> whereas a recent poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs suggests that Americans, if anything, are more convinced than ever of the value of alliances, U.S. engagement abroad, and international trade; they appear to be far less persuaded of the threat of large-scale immigration, and much more concerned about climate change. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said NATO continued to be essential to U.S. security—including 54 percent of “core Trump supporters.” Only 38 percent agreed with the proposition that the U.S. should withhold its commitment to defend NATO members until they spend more on defense (among the Trump supporters, however, that number shot up to 60 percent).<sup>29</sup>

So far, so persuasive? Many Europeans think so—or at least want to. The ruling school of Trump exegesis in Europe still worries about the confusion, volatility, and uncertainty caused by the marked contrast between the flood-of-consciousness utterances of the president and the 24/7 levee-building efforts by his mainstream advisers. This often glaring divergence, its members acknowledge, limits reliability and trust, and carries a considerable risk of misreading or miscalculation by America's partners and rivals alike. They also invest (although no European official would ever say this point-blank, much less in public) no small hope in the prospect of the Trump era ending before its allotted time is up, due to some form of judicial or legislative intervention. Yet even if this never happens, the proponents of the “normalization” theory expect the content and style of U.S. foreign policy to become more conventional, as the more ideological elements of this administration are neutralized over time.

But what if this view is wrong? At the very least, it is based on a selective vision of reality that *The Economist* recently called “wishful thinking.”<sup>30</sup>

## TRUMPISM IS A MASSIVE DISCONTINUITY

One problem with the “normalization” theory is that it is rather too fixated on the short term. In the long run, the hardliners may well learn how to execute their ideas: the U.S. Supreme Court permitted the third version of the travel ban to go into effect on December 4, 2017. Institutions and civil society have been standing up for American values magnificently, but it is not unimaginable that over time they might be co-opted, bullied, or exhausted. Congress has been acting as a check on presidential power, but the GOP leadership as well as the Democrats appear to be struggling to find resolve and purpose.

Experience teaches that extreme voices can force moderates into the defensive, or into adaptation, even from outside of government; this has been the impact of the Tea Party on conservative politics in the U.S., it was the price that Dutch Prime Minister

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28 For continuously updated and aggregated poll data, see Aaron Bycoffe, Dhruvil Mehta, and Nate Silver, “How Popular is Donald Trump?,” *Fivethirtyeight*, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/>.

29 Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, “What Americans Think of America First: Results of the 2017 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy,” (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2017) 13-14, [https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2017\\_what\\_americans\\_think\\_about\\_america\\_first.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2017_what_americans_think_about_america_first.pdf).

30 “Endangered: America's global influence has dwindled under Donald Trump,” *The Economist*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21731132-presidential-tour-asia-cannot-hide-fact-america-has-turned-inward-hurting-itself>.

Mark Rutte paid for re-election in March 2017, and the AfD hopes to replicate the effect in Germany. And on both sides of the Atlantic, the grinding of huge tectonic plates can be felt, heralding shifts that might imply a much more lasting and deeply corrosive dysfunctionality: deep political polarization, the erosion of the middle class, dramatic impending changes to the labor market through automation—and a growing questioning of representative democracy, pluralism, and diversity, as well as America’s guardianship of the liberal international order.

Moreover, the labors of the many professionals who made an honorable choice to join the Trump administration are doomed to remain tactical and piecemeal in the absence of a coherent larger purpose. More simply put, there often is no zig to the zag. The U.S. punishes the Assad regime for the use of chemical weapons against its own citizens with cruise missile strikes, but this does not engender a follow-on. At least not by the United States.

What this administration lacks in coherence, however, it more than compensates for with attitude(s), and a will to disrupt for disruption’s sake.<sup>31</sup> Much of this radiates from the president, his beliefs, his interviews, and his Twitter account. But to focus only on the man and his style risks missing the fact that the substance of this singular presidency is revolutionary as well—and that this phenomenon extends well beyond the current holder of the office.<sup>32</sup> Or, to quote *Politico*’s Susan Glasser: “When it comes to Trump and the rest of the world, it’s not better than you think. It’s worse.”<sup>33</sup>

Granted, unilateralism, skepticism about foreign entanglements, and protectionism are all time-honored American traditions. In the double helix of U.S. foreign policy, these variations of aloofness from the world have formed the counter-spiral to American multilateralism, interventionism, and commitment to free trade since the beginning of the Republic. Robert Kagan may also be right with his premonition that the internationalist bent that led the United States to create and safeguard a peaceful liberal order after World War II might in retrospect prove to have been a historical anomaly. Yes, Vietnam, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the first and second Gulf Wars, and the invasion of Iraq all generated huge trans-Atlantic conflicts. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, all three of Trump’s predecessors presided over the enlargement of NATO and the EU, but also made serious attempts to limit U.S. engagement in Europe by reducing American troops, diplomatic commitments, and attention. Hillary Clinton herself, during the Democratic primary, pivoted to adopt some of her opponent’s protectionist views on trade.

But Trumpism is not merely the latest episode in these serial continuities, the newest twist of the spiral. It needs to be recognized as exactly what it is: a massive

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31 Hal Brands rightly points out that “a president may not be interested in grand strategy, as Leon Trotsky might have said, but grand strategy will be interested in him.” See Hal Brands, “The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump,” *Survival* 59, no. 6 (December 2017-January 2018): 7-40, <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2017-579b/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-december-2017-january-2018-a19c/59-6-02-brands-9797>.

32 My Brookings colleague Thomas Wright has shown convincingly that Trump’s statements, far from being the random expression of uncurbed impulses, reflect a coherent and consistent worldview that he has been articulating in public for the past 30 years. See Thomas Wright, “Donald Trump’s 19th Century Foreign Policy,” *Politico Magazine*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>.

33 Susan Glasser, “Donald Trump’s Year of Living Dangerously,” *Politico Magazine*, January/February 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/02/donald-trump-foreign-policy-analysis-dangerous-216202>.

discontinuity. It is, as Robert Zoellick notes, “about breaking things.”<sup>34</sup> Trump is the first postwar American president to question the liberal international order *as such*. That is not to say that his ideas are novel or original. His distinctly pre-20th century preferences for raw power, sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and “control,” or the notion that military victors are entitled to exact tribute from those they have vanquished (“we should have kept the oil”<sup>35</sup>) are the credo of strongmen from Moscow to Manila.

And Trump is by no means alone in the White House. Stephen Bannon may be cast into limbo by his precipitate departure from *Breitbart*; yet self-professed disrupters like the president’s Senior Adviser for Policy and Speechwriter Stephen Miller, or the National Security Council’s Director of Strategic Communications Michael Anton, remain in positions of some authority and influence.<sup>36</sup> Nor are all of the experienced professionals in the administration the torch-bearers for traditional U.S. internationalism that many European policymakers wish them to be. Some, in fact, reinforce his visceral impulses deliberately.<sup>37</sup>

That became clear when the president’s national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, together with Gary Cohn, president of the National Economic Council, wrote an op-ed together to limit the fallout from the president’s unfortunate first visit to Europe.<sup>38</sup> Until almost the end of 2017 and the publication of the new National Security Strategy (NSS), it stood as the first and most authoritative articulation of the Trump doctrine. The two senior advisers made it clear that the “America First” precepts asserted on the trip represented a “strategic shift” and added: “the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations ... engage and compete. ... Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.” As for alliances, the authors make it clear that these will be strictly conditional, temporal, and transactional: “*Where our interests align*, we are open to working together to solve problems and explore opportunities” (emphasis is mine). Shared values, a collective commitment to a purpose that is larger than our common interests—the bedrock of the NATO alliance until now—are not mentioned.

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34 Robert B. Zoellick, “The Perils of Trump’s Populist Foreign Policy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-peril-of-trumps-populist-foreign-policy-1511912230>. Another forceful articulation of this position can be found in Eliot A. Cohen, “How Trump is Ending the American Era,” *The Atlantic*, October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/is-trump-ending-the-american-era/537888/>.

35 Eugene Scott, “Donald Trump: Had we taken the oil, you wouldn’t have ISIS,” *CNN*, January 26, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/26/politics/trump-oil-isis-iraq/index.html>.

36 On Miller’s beliefs and role, see Matt Flegenheimer, “Stephen Miller, the Powerful Survivor on the President’s Right Flank,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/us/politics/stephen-miller-trump-white-house.html?smid=pl-share>. His voice is most clearly heard in the president’s speeches, with their distinctive employment of dogwhistling at right-wing narratives—for example in the July 6, 2017, Warsaw speech and its vision of a West engaged in mortal combat. Michael Anton’s seminal text is “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-flight-93-election/>; see also his “America and the Liberal International Order,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 113-25, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/02/america-liberal-international-order/>. For information on the roots of intellectual Trumpism in the West Coast Straussianism cultivated at Claremont McKenna College in California, see Jacob Heilbrunn, “Donald Trump’s Brains,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/12/21/donald-trump-brains/>.

37 White House Chief of Staff John Kelly caused an uproar with a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of the Civil War. See Philip Bump, “Historians Respond to John F. Kelly’s Civil War Remarks: ‘Strange,’ ‘Sad,’ ‘Wrong,’” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/10/31/historians-respond-to-john-kellys-civil-war-remarks-strange-sad-wrong/?utm\\_term=.065585bb9419](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/10/31/historians-respond-to-john-kellys-civil-war-remarks-strange-sad-wrong/?utm_term=.065585bb9419). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, for his part, has come under a barrage of criticism for his leadership of the State Department. See Dexter Filkins, “How Rex Tillerson Wrecked the State Department,” *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-rex-tillerson-wrecked-the-state-department>.

38 H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>.

To put it more plainly: if the ultimate purpose of U.S. national strategy shifts from stewardship of a liberal world order (in combination with, granted, American pre-dominance) to preserving the United States' status as the strongest actor in a zero-sum world, *the mutual defense guarantee in Article 5 loses much of its meaning and credibility for America's allies, regardless of whether it is affirmed or not*. Reassurance sounds different.

Under these circumstances, the publication of the Trump administration's first NSS in late December 2017 was anticipated with somewhat more than the customary lukewarm interest.<sup>39</sup> Yet, rather

**Borders over order: This is what the tribalization of American power looks like.**



than resolving the tug-of-war between the

normalizers and the radicals, the document enshrines it. On the one hand, the strategy paper makes 78 references to partners and 31 to allies, and it is remarkably insistent on the importance of domestic democratic resilience against political interference by foreign powers, including Russia and China. On the other hand, it breaks with its recent predecessors by emphatically reinforcing McMaster and Cohn's key point: "America First" rests on the assumption that the paradigm of American power in the era of Trump is one of zero-sum competition rather than of collaboration, in which allies are valued mainly because they "magnify U.S. power and extend U.S. influence."<sup>40</sup> A text search for the word "order" retrieves 38 matches—yet 24 of these come with the prefix "b." Borders over order: This is what the tribalization of American power looks like.<sup>41</sup>

Any doubt over the possible outcome of the contest between the two competing impulses in this administration was settled by the president himself when he chose to launch the strategy document with a dark speech that "laid bare the vast gulf between his worldview and that of his team"<sup>42</sup>—from Trump's harping on the threats from multilateral trade deals, allies, and immigrants, to his praising American intelligence cooperation with Vladimir Putin.

As for Europe, the NSS avows that "A strong and free Europe is of vital importance to the United States."<sup>43</sup> It explicitly repeats the U.S. commitment to Article 5, but it cites a depressingly desiccated and narrowly self-interested rationale for America's continued support for the alliance—"the NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is

39 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America: December 2017," *The White House*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

40 For critiques of the National Security Strategy, see Kori Schake, "How to Grade Trump's National Security Strategy on a Curve," *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/19/how-to-grade-trumps-national-security-strategy-on-a-curve/>; Thomas Wright, "The National Security Strategy Papers Over a Crisis," *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/trump-national-security-strategy/548756/>; "The Trouble With Trump's New National Security Strategy," *The Economist*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21732810-turning-its-back-decades-foreign-policy-it-magnifies-small-threats-and-minimises-big>.

41 At the risk of pedantry: the combinations "international order" and "world order" appear once each; "post-war order" is used twice; otherwise, "order" appears with the prefix "social," "economic," or "regional," or in the phrase "in order to." Nowhere is it used in combination with "liberal," or "rules-based." Meanwhile, the word "sovereign" (or "sovereignty")—a vital term for the nationalists—appears 27 times (as opposed to twice and three times, respectively, in the National Security Strategies published by the George W. Bush administration in 2002 and then in 2006).

42 Thomas Wright, "The National Security Strategy Papers Over a Crisis." For the text of President Trump's speech, see Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump on the Administration's National Security Strategy," (speech, Washington, DC, December 18, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

43 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America: December 2017," 57.



one of our great advantages over our competitors.”<sup>44</sup> The European Union, meanwhile, is mentioned only twice: once as an entity perceived as a threat by Russia, and once as a trade partner to the United States. The president, notwithstanding his own harsh earlier criticism, has more recently claimed that he is “in favor” of the EU.<sup>45</sup> But it is likewise accurate that shortly after his first year in office, key European policy positions in Washington remain vacant, as do most ambassadorial posts in Europe—including at the U.S. mission to the EU.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, the attitudes to Europe that are to be found in the more hardline expressions of the “America First” doctrine ought to be of intense concern to Europeans, for it is no exaggeration to summarize this thinking as a triple narrative of coming wars of destiny for America: (1) civilizational or ethno-religious wars between (white) Christianity and Islam (and other races); (2) economic or trade wars for the restoration of national growth; and (3) actual, kinetic wars with rivals for superpower status, like China, or adversaries, like North Korea. The EU finds itself at or near the core of all three narratives, regularly depicted as an actor that is intrinsically incompatible with American interests and values, or even harmful to them.<sup>47</sup>

Even more disconcertingly for Berlin, Germany appears in the crosshairs of all of these narratives as the puppet master pulling the strings of the EU, or using it as a front for ruthless national self-interest. It is central to the culture war narrative, because Merkel letting in Syrian refugees is judged to have undermined the security of European Christians. It is central to the trade war narrative because it supposedly uses the EU as a front for its national self-interest (defending the German current account and trade surpluses or its handling of the eurozone crisis).<sup>48</sup> And it is central to the security narrative, because it is blamed for fettering America to less urgent security concerns in the European theater by egregiously failing to keep up its side of trans-Atlantic defense burden sharing.

Obviously, there is a plausible reproach inherent in all of these charges. Few Europeans or even Germans would dispute that the German government’s handling of the refugee crisis was, even if driven by a praiseworthy humanitarian impulse, flawed in execution. Berlin’s current account and trade surpluses and its eurozone crisis management—particularly with regard to the treatment of Greece—is criticized by many in the German strategic community who worry that it harms and alienates Southern Europe at a time

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44 Ibid., 58.

45 Cynthia Kroet, “Donald Trump: EU is ‘wonderful,’” *Politico*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-eu-is-wonderful/>.

46 “Political Appointee Tracker,” Partnership for Public Service, updated January 25, 2018, <https://ourpublicservice.org/issues/presidential-transition/political-appointee-tracker.php>; “Tracker: Current U.S. Ambassadors,” American Foreign Service Association, updated January 24, 2018, <http://www.afsa.org/list-ambassadorial-appointments>.

47 Michael Crowley, “The Man Who Wants to Unmake the West,” *Politico Magazine*, March/April 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/trump-steve-bannon-destroy-eu-european-union-214889>; Theodore Bromund, Luke Coffey, and Daniel Kochis, “Recommitting the U.S. to European Security and Prosperity: Five Steps for the Incoming Administration,” (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, January 12, 2017), <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/recommitting-the-united-states-european-security-and-prosperity-five-steps-the>. The authors criticize the EU for “distorting European immigration policies,” “preventing genuine transatlantic free trade areas,” and “harming transatlantic security.” See also John Fonte, “The EU’s Soft Utopia,” Hudson Institute, April 27, 2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12452-the-eu-s-soft-utopia>; and Nils Gilman and Steven Weber, “Back in the USSR: Is the European Union Heading for a Soviet-Style Collapse?,” *The American Interest* 12, no. 3 (December 12, 2016), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/12/12/back-in-the-ussr/>.

48 Walter Russell Mead, “The Real Trade Challenge is Germany, Not China,” *The American Interest*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/03/06/the-real-trade-challenge-is-germany-not-china/>.

when political bridge-building is urgently needed.<sup>49</sup> And there is a broad consensus among mainstream German security experts that their country needs to spend more on defense.

Yet the real thrust of the anti-EU (and anti-Germany) narrative goes far beyond such reasonable criticism. Its most starkly hostile version, in fact, is implausible both as theory and as critique of state practice. Bluntly put, much of it sounds—with its emphasis on the fundamental nefariousness of the EU, the need for a recovery of national sovereignty, trade “balance,” cultural identity or homogeneity, and its overt espousal of competition and war—as though it were taken straight out of the UKIP playbook. Admittedly, this pure strain of America Firstism has few open advocates in the administration. But the toxic effect of its mere existence should not be underestimated. And it has left distinct traces in some of the president’s speeches, most obviously in his July 2017 remarks in Warsaw.<sup>50</sup> A larger or more effective amplifier would be hard to find.

Even the less radical variant of the anti-EU story blames the European Union for what are in reality often failings of the member states. It refuses to even contemplate that the set of institutions and rules that make up the EU provide real public goods for Europeans, not least by harnessing large states like Germany and giving substantial leverage to smaller ones. It attributes far greater relative power to Germany than it actually possesses. It assumes that the main political divide within the European Union sets Germany against the other 27. In reality, there are at least three or more fault lines (geopolitical threat perceptions, Eurozone management, and immigration), with Germany more often than not playing a moderating or consensus-brokering role on key issues; and other EU member states bandwagon with or coalition against Germany in highly variable coalitions. It ignores the EU’s complementary role to NATO as a provider of political, economic, and social security and resilience. It fails to see the importance of the EU as a framework for organizing and maintaining political unity (on Russia sanctions, or against Chinese plays for influence)—something that U.S. military officers and diplomats with European experience would be the first to confirm. And in so doing, it fails to comprehend just how many core U.S. national interests are served by the existence of the EU.

Lastly, it seems to assume that the EU is like a treaty association, or a country club, where termination of membership implies no more pain than writing a letter of resignation and possibly forfeiting the rest of the annual fee as well as membership benefits. In fact, Brexit is currently teaching Britons and the rest of Europe that the process is rather more like the removal of a bodily organ through vivisection, with potentially grim consequences for the organ as well as the body.

But criticism of Europe, however badly-intentioned or ill-founded, is not what should disturb Europeans most about the world view that informs the “America First” doctrine. Its glowing core is its fundamentalist critique of globalization. Tellingly, Trumpians prefer the term “globalism,” which is clearly meant as a pejorative. “Globalization,” in normal

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49 By way of example, see “Towards a Euro Union,” *Glienicke Group*, October 17, 2013, <http://glienickergruppe.eu/en/towards-a-euro-union>. The paper, written by 17 German political scientists, economists, and lawyers (including the author), argues that Germany should make greater concessions to the southern member states, address the structural causes of the eurocrisis, and push for deeper EU integration.

50 Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland”; Iskander Rehman, “Rise of the Reactionaries: The American Far Right and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 29-48, [https://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/twq.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/TWQ\\_Winter%202018\\_Rehman.pdf](https://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/twq.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/TWQ_Winter%202018_Rehman.pdf).

usage, refers to a real-life phenomenon (also known as a fact): the connectedness of the world's economies, and the worldwide mobility of people, goods, data, and ideas. The term "globalism," in contrast, appears intended to suggest an erroneous world view, a reprehensible ideology, or a wrong consciousness—something to be recanted, regretted, or atoned for.<sup>51</sup> Trump himself inveighed on the campaign trail against "the false song of globalism."<sup>52</sup>

In essence, the globalization-globalism dichotomy pits *fact against (dis)belief*. Unlike all previous trans-Atlantic disagreements, it is not a dispute about a policy or practice—say, the right to use force, or to wiretap your ally. It is a dispute about the nature of the world around us, and our ability (or lack of it) to subject it to our will. The implication of this divide is profound: it is the wedge that could truly drive the United States and Europe apart, and break up the West.

Arguably, it was neither wars in Europe nor the September 11 attacks on America that provided the ultimate proof of how globalization has changed the trans-Atlantic relationship, but the global financial crisis of 2008. It demonstrated that the trans-Atlantic economies are joined at the hip—but also that shocks in one economy can cross borders and even the Atlantic with ease. It showed the intimate linkage between political dysfunctionality and economic vulnerability. The security implications of this were clear and serious.

Globalization and integration have added new layers of opportunity and risk in the trans-Atlantic relationship. The former, because they create new mutual connectivity and potential for innovation and growth; and the latter, because they increase mutual exposure and vulnerability. They have also changed the nature of power, because they limit the sovereignty of states—even of superpowers—to control people, goods, data, and territory. One of the reasons why Merkel and Obama developed a genuine personal rapport was likely the shared insight that this shift requires a different kind of politics: less decisionist and fixated on control, and instead more flexible and focused on risk management.

Yet—and in stark contrast to hyper-optimistic predictions about the universal benefits of globalization—this new trans-Atlantic connection, and the risk manager style of politics, have also produced friction, anger, and alienation. They have exposed the failure of politicians and policymakers to recognize that in fact globalization's benefits are very unequally distributed, and demonstrated their inability to protect the losers. All of this has left citizens feeling exposed and vulnerable, and fueled populism and extremism.<sup>53</sup>

But only one country in the world has the natural barriers, strategic resources, huge internal market, research and innovation capability, population reproduction rate, and, yes, the confidence that might allow it to seek refuge from these epochal changes, to uncouple and retreat from the liberal international order and the global economy,

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51 The most interesting articulation of this negative take on globalization is to be found in Michael Doran and Peter Rough, "Return of the Nation-State: Transatlantic Ties in a Populist Era," *The American Interest* 12, no. 6 (May 4, 2017), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/04/transatlantic-ties-in-a-populist-era/>.

52 Julian Hattem, "Trump Warns Against the False Song of Globalism," *The Hill*, April 27, 2016, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/277879-trump-warns-against-false-song-of-globalism>.

53 The most trenchant critic of "hyper-globalization" has been Dani Rodrik; see "Put Globalization to Work for Democracies," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/opinion/sunday/put-globalization-to-work-for-democracies.html>.

and seek autarky: America. (Any sane economist could demonstrate that the costs of such an abdication to the U.S. and to the rest of the world would be huge,<sup>54</sup> but sane economists get short shrift in the land of Trump. A psychologist might gently point out that the shrillness of the anti-globalization critique, the belligerent isolationism, and the harping on “control” signal a deeper malaise: a coping defense against complexity and overstretch, perhaps?)

Not so Europe. With its indefensible borders, its negative demographic trends, and its utter dependence on trade and imported natural resources, pulling up the draw-bridges would be suicidal.<sup>55</sup> Delinking, for Europe, is not an option; its best hope is containing and mitigating the negative aspects of globalization while at the same time building resilience—stronger institutions, markets, and societies.

The deepest divide between the thinking of the new American ideologues and mainstream Europeans, therefore, is not so much over attitudes to the EU (or individual member states) but over our relationship with the rest of the world: Connected, or not? Open, or closed? Plural, or homogeneous? Of course, this divide also runs through our countries, putting the traditional mediators between state and citizens—elites, experts, and media—on the defensive against the populists claiming the sole right to speak on behalf of those who live in the shadow of globalization.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR EUROPE

It has not escaped the cultural commentators that there is something, well, not *normal* about our current preoccupation with normality. Nitsuh Abebe, in *The New York Times Magazine*, wrote of a documentary on Russia by the British filmmaker Adam Curtis, whose title borrows a word coined in 2005 by the Russian anthropologist Alexei Yurchak—“hypernormalisation”—to describe the public mood in the last years of the Soviet Union. The film’s voiceover says Russia “became a society where everyone knew that what their leaders said was not real ... but everybody had to play along and pretend that it was real, because no one could imagine any alternative.”<sup>56</sup> There is more than a little of today’s Washington in that description.

Meanwhile in Europe, the Bulgarian intellectual Ivan Krastev recounted a dreadful incident that occurred in Warsaw in October 2017, when Piotr Szczesny, a father of two, set himself on fire in front of the Palace of Culture to protest against the politics of the far-right Law and Justice party (PiS) government. Krastev was reminded of the self-immolation of the Czech student Jan Palach in 1969, in an effort to “protest the Soviet Union’s occupation of his country and draw attention to the authorities’ attempts to normalize Czechoslovak life afterward.” Yet “unlike the Communists of the 1970’s, today’s populists are not seeking normalization—they fear it. After many months of protests in Poland, support for the government has only increased. The ruling party

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54 Richard Haass, “America and the Great Abdication,” *The Atlantic*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/america-abidcation-trump-foreign-policy/549296/>.

55 The scenarios developed in the latest *Global Trends* report are very helpful in illustrating this fundamental difference. “Global Trends: The Paradox of Progress,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/global-trends/>.

56 Nitsuh Abebe, “Extra Ordinary,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/magazine/what-if-our-current-state-of-affairs-is-actually-normal.html>.

wants to keep society highly polarized.”<sup>57</sup> This, too, seems eerily familiar. The last thing the disrupters on both sides of the Atlantic want is the normality of a stable political equilibrium. For them, permanent polarization is both a tool and an end in itself.<sup>58</sup> And the disrupter-in-chief is the president of the United States.

At the beginning of year two of the Trump era, it may still be too early to judge either that it is an aberration from the American mean, or that the “normal” phase of American foreign policy is over. In fact, it is entirely possible that elements of both “normal” and “normal is over” will continue to coexist simultaneously in American (and European) politics. Much of “America First” may never amount to more than words or tweets. But even if some of the signaling from Washington is never followed up with actions, it is worth remembering that in international relations words have their own weight and market—all the more in an overall climate of risk and uncertainty, and in the absence of U.S. leadership and a discernible strategy.



**It is Europe that now has the greater—and for it, existential—interest in preserving an international order that safeguards peace and globalization.**

For example: If a senior U.S. official in Washington tells his European counterparts that the Iran nuclear agreement’s days are numbered, and that “every day brings us closer to war with North Korea,” it should be assumed that they will attempt to hedge against

these predictions coming true; these words are already being priced into the European policy marketplace. Conversely, if nothing happens, that will be priced in too—as a markdown on the effectiveness, credibility, and legitimacy of American power. Meanwhile, the leadership vacuum is being filled, for example by Russia claiming to broker an end to the Syrian war together with Turkey and Iran. Or by the prospective members of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) on trade deciding to go ahead without the United States at the table.

The obsessive focus on the “normality” in America’s relations with Europe may be obstructing a profoundly important (and possibly too-big-to-process) insight: the shift in the trans-Atlantic friction point from defense contributions or trade surpluses to *globalization as such* flips the logic of the trans-Atlantic alliance on its head. America can partially retrench; Europe cannot. On the contrary, globalization is the tissue on which Europe lives. Consequently, it is Europe that now has the greater—and for it, existential—interest in preserving an international order that safeguards peace and globalization.

57 Ivan Krastev, “What’s a Bigger Threat: ‘Normalization’ or Alarmism?,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/opinion/whats-a-bigger-threat-normalization-or-alarmism.html>.

58 For a stark reminder of how deep the polarization of political views in the U.S. is, see Pew Research Center, “Partisans Have Starkly Different Opinions About How the World Views the U.S.,” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 9, 2017), <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/11/09135826/11-09-17-Foreign-policy-release.pdf>.

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