

## Euro-Atlantic Security under the New US Administration: Will Trump Destroy the International Security Architecture?

Jun 16, 2017 by [Julia Berghofer](#)

If there is such a thing as a European or even global security architecture, the new US president is in the process of changing it fundamentally, if not to destroying it altogether. In his first five months in office, Donald Trump made it perfectly clear that his presidency will be no laughing matter, neither for the Americans nor for the Europeans, even if we have got used to US moves and legislation which look as if they are grotesque mistakes. *Foreign Policy* reflected in a recent [article](#) about the 'country's growing acceptance of the unacceptable', with 'the unacceptable' referring to the president's 'insanity'.

We may console ourselves with Alec Baldwin's hilarious Trump imitations, or we can make fun of Trump's North Korea 'armada' sailing in the wrong direction. But we should not disregard the terrifying résumé of these first months and the potential future impact that Trump's 'insanity' may have on the Euro-Atlantic relationship. He not only slammed NATO and the European Union, he also questioned the Iran deal and talked so light-heartedly about nuclear weapons as if they were just another powerful conventional bomb. He reacted in an immature manner to Kim Jong-un's acts of provocation (which were predictable, insofar as Trump raised the issue of a nuclear 'first strike' option during his election campaign), and he dropped the 'mother of all bombs' on Afghanistan and gained obscene plaudits from large parts of the international community.

Indeed, we live in scary times, times of deep uncertainty, and it would be of paramount importance to have forward-looking politics, wise leadership as well as strong and reliable Euro-Atlantic ties. At the moment, this is unfortunately wishful thinking. The three examples to be discussed in this article clearly show Mr Trump's inability to fix Euro-Atlantic relations, which could contribute to a further erosion of vital pillars of the international security architecture. The first point is how Trump's thoughtless statements could harm NATO as such or at least certain European member states. Secondly, the obscure relations between the US and Russia could lead to a breakdown of the most important arms control structures, and thirdly, under the new administration, the Iran deal stands on very shaky ground and could possibly fail if the US does not take steps to enhance transparency in reporting.

### NATO: from 'obsolete' to very important?

One of President Trump's first 'official' acts in office was to scare his NATO partners by mentioning the possibility that the alliance could be 'obsolete'. It never became 100 percent clear why he thought NATO could be obsolete, but from a European perspective, it seemed to be undeniable that doomsday was near. In Germany, some journalists and experts started a knee-jerk debate about whether we need European nuclear forces and how we could ensure [nuclear deterrence against Russia](#) and North Korea or any other potential adversary, in case the US is no longer willing to protect us with its nuclear umbrella. As a response, this premature debate which was already over before it started led internationally to a raft of alarming yet absurd headlines such as: 'If Germany Goes Nuclear, Blame Trump Before Putin' (*Foreign Policy*), 'Germans are debating getting their own nuclear weapon' (*The Economist*) and 'Thinking the unthinkable on Germany going nuclear' (*Financial Times*).

At the same time in Germany, officials from the Foreign Office, Bundestag and Chancellor's Office resolutely rejected the idea of a European or even a German nuclear weapon. Though admittedly this topic is causing most of them a real headache, because Germany finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having some 20 US nuclear warheads on its soil, which it wants to keep in order to have a say on nuclear issues in NATO. Since approval for nuclear

weapons could hardly be lower in Germany (according to a recent opinion poll, 85 percent would like to see the American bombs being removed from the military base in Büchel), they prefer not to have a broad public debate about a 'German bomb'.

The debate about European nuclear weapons might seem odd and unrealistic, but it becomes more understandable if you look at the fact that Trump is able and willing to erode one of NATO's key features: its credibility. No matter if you support or oppose the concept of nuclear deterrence, it is obvious that deterrence only works if it is credible. And there is no credible deterrence if the US questions the persistence of the nuclear umbrella for its non-nuclear partners. Instead of reassuring them of US assistance, the new US president openly suggested that more countries (including Japan and South Korea) should have nuclear weapons, which would not only mean a breach of the NPT obligations but could also lead to a new nuclear arms race in Asia.

A second wake-up call for most NATO member states must have been the awkward encounter of senior US politicians and Europe's political elite during this year's Munich Security Conference in February. Vice-president Mike Pence delivered greetings from Trump along with an ultimatum regarding the two percent goal which the NATO states agreed on in 2014. This rule set out that NATO members should at least try to spend two percent of their respective GDP on military defence. Up until now, apart from the US (3.61%), only Greece (2.38%), the UK (2.21%), Estonia (2.16%) and Poland (2%) meet this criterion. Others like Canada (0.99%), Germany (1.19%) or Belgium (0.85%), [are falling short](#).

The two percent debate is nothing new. President Obama urged his European allies on several occasions to spend more on defence. At the end of his term in office, he particularly commended Greece's ability to meet the two percent goal even in difficult economic times. Also the debate about the Alliance's future strategic concept and its nuclear posture is inevitable and, given the aggravated international security environment, NATO urgently needs to reposition itself in order to guarantee its preparedness to meet emerging challenges like terrorist, cyber security and energy security threats.

But the way Trump has confronted the other NATO states with the two percent ultimatum can be understood as an unspoken menace to those countries that are not able or willing to raise their military spending, suggesting that they might not be eligible to benefit from the US military assistance as long as they do not pay their 'fair share'. He did not say this explicitly but when he refers to an 'unfair' situation, he indicates that the security assurances which the US provided in the past might become a privilege which is only available if something is given in return. In a worst case scenario, we could see the emergence of a two-class system in Europe: one group will consist of countries that meet NATO's obligations regarding military spending and thus can further rely on US nuclear deterrence and military support. The other group refuses to raise its defence expenditures and as a consequence will have to live with a deep uncertainty about whether the core mechanism of the Alliance – common assistance in case of a military attack – will still be in place, should it come to it.

A careful observer of Trumpian drama might point out that most recently, Trump and NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg had a fairly conciliatory encounter, during which the president admitted that NATO is 'no longer obsolete', since it is now able to adequately address terrorism (though in fact it has not changed its strategic concept since January). These words are worth nothing. It is a key characteristic of Trump to insult and offend people and institutions one day and to praise them the next. There is simply no guarantee that he will not change his mind or that he would not let the NATO partners down without hesitation.

### **The US and Russia: good friends, bad deals**

Trump's relationship with Russia, in particular Russia's president Vladimir Putin, is more than dubious. In January, former US vice-president Joe Biden raised concerns over the new

administration's close ties to Russia. The department of justice started an inquiry into relations between Trump's election campaign and Russia after he fired FBI director James Comey. Indeed, there is an urgent need for investigation, but nevertheless this question upstaged far more pressing issues, like for example the unsolved problem how the Western countries should handle Russia, the illegal annexation of Crimea and possible Russian nuclear threats against Eastern Europe or the Baltic countries. In recent decades, the balance of nuclear deterrence, non-proliferation and strategic dialogue over the perseverance of key arms control treaties formed an obvious and inevitable focus of US-Russian relations. These treaties and the dialogue were vital for security and strategic stability, not least in Europe.

Back in 2014, mutual accusations concerning a possible violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty between the US and Russia started. High-ranking officials and experts from the EU, US and Russia agree today that the 'problem of attribution' is still not solved and that it is getting even worse. At the same time, the expiration of the New START agreement is looming on the horizon. Bringing about the entry-into-force of New START was an outstanding achievement during Barack Obama's presidency, given the fact that two of its planned successors – START II and START III – have never been signed or never entered into effect, respectively.

In exchange for Republican approval for New START in the Senate, Obama raised the US' spending on nuclear modernisation. In the final year of his presidency it became clear that America will spend [a lot more on new weapons than on non-proliferation](#). Nonetheless, New START, which aims at reducing Russian and US overall strategic nuclear forces, is a well-functioning and trust building agreement. In a recent [publication](#), arms control expert Hans Kristensen highlighted that '[the] ongoing implementation of the New START treaty is one of the only remaining bright spots on the otherwise tense and deteriorating relationship between Russia and the United States.' This is true for the moment, but yet, there is no guarantee that both parties will engage in negotiations over an extension of the treaty after its expiration date in 2021 or about a new treaty which could replace New START. An extension of the agreement could be concluded for another five years beyond 2012, by mutual agreement.

Currently there are two major obstacles which are likely to hinder negotiations on this important treaty. First, the resolution of concerns about the compliance with the INF treaty would be a prerequisite for further arms control talks and agreements between the US and Russia. Only little reason for hope remains, since both the Russians and the Americans deny that they are breaching their INF obligations, and from a technical standpoint it is difficult to prove. To this point, political discussions at expert or senior level have not led to a resolution of the compliance dispute. The Arms Control Association [stated](#) that 'neither side had sought to use the dispute resolution mechanisms' allowed by the treaty, the so-called Special Verification Commission. From the US side, as long as the INF dispute remains unresolved, chances are little that Republicans in congress would support a new nuclear arms agreement with Russia or an extension of the New START, even though Democrats tend to be more interested in arms control talks with Russia.

A second critical point is that Trump already rejected the extension of New START in a phone call with Putin in February. According to [Reuters](#), he denounced the Obama-era arms control agreement as favouring Russia. US officials, who had knowledge of the call, said that when Putin raised the possibility of extending the deal, Trump paused to ask his aid what the treaty was and then refused. The phone call with Putin not only shows that the US president is not adequately prepared for discussions with foreign leaders, but added to concerns that there will be no substantial arms control relationship between the US and Russia in the near future. This implies not only the vanishing of an elementary point of American nuclear strategy but it could lead to a situation where the two biggest nuclear powers would be free from any nuclear weapons limitations, potentially setting the stage for a new arms race.

For Europe, a breakdown of these two pillars of nuclear arms control would not only mean that the relations between the US and Russia are getting worse and therefore also the relationship between Europe and Russia, since Europeans are America's closest allies. It also means that European politicians will have virtually no say in nuclear issues, since there are no legal aspects which could serve as leverage to remind the US and Russia of their disarmament obligations.

### **Iran: Trump flip-flops over the 'worst deal ever'**

Trump's disdain for the Iran deal is just as big as his despise of New START. He once called the landmark nuclear accord between Iran and the 'P5+1' (the US, Russia, China, France, UK plus Germany) 'the worst deal ever'. Back in December 2016, the European Union, who acted as a third party mediator in the negotiations with Iran, warned the incoming US administration not to destroy the Iran deal. As a response, the US president [tweeted in February](#): 'Iran is playing with fire – they don't appreciate how "kind" President Obama was to them. Not me!' Contrary to the president's rude criticism and his vows to tear up the deal, the White House has renewed the sanctions relief for Iran in May. At the same time, the US Treasury imposed a couple of new and more targeted sanction on specific Iranian officials. If things carry on like this, the survival of the Iran deal appears to stand on shaky ground, also because Trump does not stop confusing his political allies.

But it would be a one-sided view if one does not look at the flaws of the nuclear accord. The implementation of the Iran deal was a prominent issue during the Non-Proliferation Treaty conference (NPT PrepCom 2017) which took place in the first two weeks of May at the UN Headquarters in Vienna. During a side event organised by the Vienna Centre for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, Valerie Lincy, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control noted that the core problem of the Iran deal was its substantial lack of transparency. Lincy calls it a 'paradox' that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that is in charge of reporting on and inspections of Iran's nuclear activities, is collecting more information than in the past, but its reporting pursuant to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) [actually contains less information](#).

The IAEA regularly reports on Iran's nuclear material stockpiles, centrifuge operations and certain research and development activities. Lincy believes that the problem lies in the interpretation of related UN Security Council and IAEA Board of Governors resolutions, and therefore an adjustment of this interpretation was urgently needed in order to ensure the survival of the deal. Without overall transparency, she noted, there is no chance to determine whether the deal is being successfully implemented or not. Given this situation, the US administration should be careful to criticise the agreement and rather seek to improve it, for example it could ask the JCPOA's decision-making body, the Joint Commission, to change its rules governing confidentiality. It should also closely coordinate its actions regarding Iran with the EU and the other states who were involved in the negotiations.

What we now witness is quite the opposite. We see that diplomatic ties between the US and Iran are eroding and even though the US has for the moment agreed on the survival of the deal, there is no guarantee that this is a final decision. Thereby, the successful implementation of the nuclear accord is not only in Iran's economic interest but is also important for the EU and the whole system of international arms control and non-proliferation. This deal is an excellent example for the impact of targeted sanctions and the strength of diplomatic talks. In times where disarmament efforts are stalled by stalemate and North Korea keeps reminding us that non-proliferation measures do not work with absolute certainty, the Iran deal is a positive example which has to be upheld by the negotiating parties. This applies particularly for the EU, since its Member States ceased to seek for a consensus on nuclear disarmament and arms control due to high tensions over this issue. It

therefore shows that the EU is at least able to intervene as a mediator to influence non-proliferation measures.

## Conclusion

Trump is someone who very quickly understood that he receives much praise when he carries out chaotic and unnecessary brute military action, even though he recently started to promote 'peace and love' in the Arab countries. His overall political flip-flop approach and his tendency to completely confuse his allies and foes alike, lead to a political mood where the next war-scale escalation seems to be only one tweet away. As I noted at the beginning of this article, we now need strong transatlantic ties and reliable international structures. This in particular includes dialogue and cooperation with Russia.

For Europe, this could remain a pious wish in the near future, insofar as the hitherto stable Euro-Atlantic ties erode with every step the US president is heading in the wrong direction. Every time he is chumming up with Erdogan or Putin, every time he is wooing Saudi-Arabia with enormous weapon deals, refuses to shake hands with Angela Merkel, rudely pushes aside Montenegro's prime minister, or sends 'messages' to North Korea, he keeps his promise to follow an unpredictable foreign policy. It is not surprising that Merkel recently made a statement in which she admitted that 'times in which we completely rely on others are somewhat over.' From a European perspective, the US, once a reasonable and reliable partner, turned into an emotion-driven, spontaneously acting irrational actor whose head believes that international relations are part of a real-time strategy game.

In today's world, in light of an uncomfortable mixture of international multilevel crises, a US president has, indeed, to carry a heavy load. If Europe and the US stood closely together (even more closer than they did before), if they adjusted the focus of NATO to emerging challenges like in South East Asia and sought common ground with Russia, there would be a chance to tackle at least some of the crises. But Trump will never turn into a wise leader with diplomatic finesse and political understanding. As long as he is president, Europeans have to be realistic about one depressing fact: Trump is likely to seriously disturb the international and thus the European security structure – be it intentionally or by accident.

There is no other option for Europe than to finally create its own strong and stable security architecture, one that also works in case the US lets us down.