

Friends or Foes, Tensions or Ties – A US View on EU-Russian Relations

July 10, 2017 by [Hannah Thoburn](#)

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States (US) has meant the imposition of an uncomfortable and uncertain atmosphere in the realm of foreign affairs. Policies are unclear, officials release contradictory statements and key positions are left unfilled. What is crystal clear, however, is that to this point, Trump possesses only the very outlines of anything that could be called a foreign policy strategy or doctrine. Yet, one overarching instinct appears to be obvious: President Trump seems convinced that the strong US foreign policy positioning of the past has been bad for the American public, has led to the loss of jobs and been a bad deal for the United States.

This idea, while it may contain the seed of a larger philosophy, is not well developed and remains unelaborated.¹ In the meantime, most of Mr Trump's foreign policy choices and actions have been exactly that – individual choices that have little grounding. Thus, divining the current US administration's views on the future of relations between Russia and the European Union (EU) has become something of a parlour game in Washington.

The first months of the Trump administration have seen the president himself make several unexpected and unconventional foreign policy decisions and pronouncements, some of which directly contradict his campaign rhetoric. The most significant of these vacillations concern the questions of policy towards Russia and the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), both of which will be addressed later in this paper.

Related to this general lack of a guiding idea or strategy for the conduct of US foreign policy is the body of emerging evidence that the president's views on such topics are easily malleable. Conversations with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg seem to have convinced him that NATO is not 'obsolete',² and Trump himself remarked after a conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping about Korean history that 'After listening for 10 minutes, I realized it's not so easy'.³ While these anecdotes reveal that the new US president is willing to learn and is interested in topics of foreign affairs, it also indicates that his views as they currently stand are far more subject to change than have been those of previous presidents.

So as European embassies and Russian diplomats alike search to find interlocutors in the understaffed Trump diplomatic and national security apparatuses, the US foreign policy

¹ For more, see Thomas Wright's excellent articles on the topic, particularly: 'Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy,' *POLITICO*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trumpforeign-policy-213546?o=0>, and 'Trump's NATO Article 5 problem,' The Brookings Institution, May 17, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/17/trumps-nato-article-5-problem/>.

² Natasha Bertrand, 'Trump: I said NATO was obsolete "not knowing much about NATO",' *Business Insider UK*, April 24, 2017, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/trump-nato-obsolete-2017-4?r=UK&IR=T>.

³ Quoted in Wall Street Journal, Gerard Baker, Carol E. Lee and Michael C. Bender, 'Trump Says He Offered China Better Trade Terms in Exchange for Help on North Korea,' *The Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-offered-china-better-trade-terms-in-exchange-for-help-on-north-korea-1492027556>.

community remains frustrated at their country's lack of direction and have grown concerned that a Donald Trump-led United States will begin to retreat from global leadership. The US foreign policy elite largely disagree with the idea that the US should pull back from its international leadership role and have become interested in preventing that from occurring. At the same time, most of the American domestic policy conversation continues to centre around the accusations that President Trump, his companies and his campaign are or were involved with certain parts of the Russian government. As the president continues to talk publicly about the various investigations and Russia's role in them, it has become clear that the Russia question is one that will be exceedingly important for this administration and that the domestic political situation is likely to affect the White House's attitudes towards the EU-Russia relationship.

In examining the US attitudes on EU-Russian relations then, observers must pay attention to both the thoughts of those few individuals running policy in the White House as well as the foreign policy establishment that seeks to influence them. Both factions, for different reasons, are keen to see the European Union take on more responsibility for the problems in its neighbourhood.

Views on NATO

Among the many meanings that Trump's 'America First' campaign slogan seems to have, is that the United States will stop supporting NATO as much as it has in past decades. While President Obama was likewise vocal about his desire to see Europe contribute more to solving the world's problems, particularly in its own neighbourhood, President Trump's rhetoric has come as a shock to both Europeans and Americans alike. After his universally panned trip to Brussels and Italy in May 2017, it seems evident that Mr Trump either wilfully or intrinsically does not grasp the basic ideas behind either NATO or the transatlantic partnership.

He has repeatedly and vociferously demanded that the 23 NATO members that spend less than the pledged two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence must immediately reach that level.⁴ Particular opprobrium has been reserved for Germany, which he has insisted on several occasions must 'pay what they owe' for what he alleges the country has not 'paid' to NATO in past years – implying that the alliance is a kind of protection racket.⁵ He is also said to have presented Angela Merkel with a bill demanding back payment.⁶ These statements from Mr Trump reveal a lack of understanding of the manner in which NATO operates, and an unawareness that the two percent pledge, which was made only in 2014 and is considered to be a goal to be reached by 2024, is not a requirement for membership in the alliance.

For their part, the Washington policy community is generally horrified at Mr Trump's tone on these issues, and was apoplectic that he did not explicitly endorse Article 5 of the NATO Treaty – which commits all members to come to the aid of an attacked member of the alliance – in a speech at NATO headquarters in May 2017.⁷ That he flippantly did so some days later while

⁴ President Trump made these comments before a new member – Montenegro – was officially added to NATO. Montenegro does not currently spend two percent of its GDP on defense, which brings the current number of NATO members that do not meet that goal to 24.

⁵ 'Joint Press Conference with President Trump and German Chancellor Merkel,' The White House, March 17, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/17/joint-press-conference-president-trump-and-german-chancellor-merkel>.

⁶ Nicolas Vinocur, 'Trump handed Merkel "outrageous" NATO bill: report,' *POLITICO EU*, March 26, 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-handed-angela-merkel-outrageous-nato-bill-report/>.

⁷ See for example: Fred Kaplan, 'The Tussle in Brussels,' *Slate*, May 25, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2017/05/trump_creates_another_unnecessar

speaking at a press conference with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis did not quell concerns.⁸

Despite this rhetoric, President Trump has continued US participation in the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) that was implemented in 2015 ‘to reassure North Atlantic Treaty Organization Allies and partners of the US commitment to their security and territorial integrity’.⁹ The move came after Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in March 2014, and their military support of a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine led to a war that still continues. NATO’s newest members in central and eastern Europe – many of whom have a history of being controlled or occupied by the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union – specifically requested that NATO move some of its forces further east to make clear to Russia that further aggression in the region would not be tolerated.

The United States currently has around 4,000 soldiers on rotations largely in eastern Europe,¹⁰ which are working alongside the militaries of the region as well as troops from other NATO nations like Canada and Germany.¹¹ US Army Europe explains that ‘These multinational training and security cooperation activities are taking place in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary’ and are designed to ‘improve interoperability, strengthen relationships and trust among allied armies, contribute to regional stability, and demonstrate U.S. commitment to NATO.’¹² President Trump has shown no inclination to bring an end to US involvement in the ERI and has committed to visiting Poland in July 2017 – with a goal of reassuring those who were disturbed by his earlier remarks.¹³

In calling on Europeans to do more for their own defence and continuing to contribute to collaborative reassurance efforts in Europe, the Trump Administration is in relative agreement with the Washington foreign policy establishment and in fact echoes the policies of former US President Barack Obama and his administration. Though they may not agree with his oratory and are concerned that the United States under Trump may retreat entirely from international leadership, there is nonetheless some happiness that the supplications from both presidents have begun to see Europeans recognise the need to take up more responsibility for their defence and security. While many of these changes were already in the works long before Mr Trump took office, he is likely very glad to see creation of a European Union Defence Fund – though outside of the auspices of NATO – and to watch several NATO member nations creep

y_crisis_on_his_visit_to_nato.html, and ‘President Trump Fails NATO,’ *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/opinion/donald-trump-nato-russia.html?_r=0.

⁸ ‘After sowing doubts, Trump backs NATO mutual defense under charter,’ *Reuters*, June 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nato-idUSKBN1902U9>.

⁹ ‘European Reassurance Initiative: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2017,’ Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 2016, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_ERI_J-Book.pdf.

¹⁰ ‘ERI Fact Sheet - European Command’ U.S. European Command Public Affairs Office, January 5, 2017, https://www.eucom.mil%2Fmedia-library%2Fdocument%2F35544%2Feri-fact-sheet&usg=AFQjCNH05xnwrN3k9u0x3qeurPBJi9u7HA&sig2=wx6Ls5lamPt9x6IWT_e_Qg&cad=rja.

¹¹ ‘Operation REASSURANCE,’ National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad/nato-ee.page>.

¹² ‘Atlantic Resolve - What is Atlantic Resolve?,’ United States Army Europe, <http://www.eur.army.mil/AtlanticResolve/>.

¹³ Ben Kamisar, Trump will travel to Poland, affirm NATO alliance," *The Hill*, June 9, 2017, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/337187-trump-will-travel-to-poland-affirm-nato-alliance>.

closer to spending two percent of their GDP's on defence.¹⁴ He has already claimed responsibility for this uptick in spending, saying that 'Because of us, money is starting to pour into NATO.'¹⁵

Beyond the concerns about expenditures, there is one other important point of contention – the target of that spending. Mr Trump does not seem to see Russia in the same light as many in Central and Eastern Europe – as a serious potential threat – and is concerned far more about Islamic terrorism than any other security threat. He has said that, alongside the Russian threat and those on NATO's southern and eastern borders, 'the NATO of the future must include a great focus on terrorism and immigration.'¹⁶

This echoes his statements during his presidential campaign that 'NATO needs to change its focus and stop terrorism.'¹⁷ The question as to whether NATO should concentrate more on the threats within its own borders rather than on external threats as it was designed to do is a key one for the alliance. But Trump's insistence that NATO refocus on terrorism comes at a time when the threat from Russia is higher than it has been in many years. It remains to be seen if the central and eastern European nations that are on the front line of that threat can push Mr Trump to see the fundamental importance of both issues. They have certainly begun to try, but it will be a heavy lift to convince a Trump Administration whose domestic constituency is greatly concerned by Islamic terrorism, and sees accusations of Russian misconduct as a means of delegitimising Donald Trump's election as president.

Views on the European Union

In a manner similar to his statements about NATO and its funding, President Trump has continued to make blustering, sometimes confused remarks about his attitudes towards the European Union. The question of trade with European partners has taken on particular significance.

He has spoken about his hope to strike bilateral trade deals with individual EU countries that, because of their membership in the EU cannot sign up for such pacts,¹⁸ and has not seemed to understand that any trade deal would need to be negotiated between the United States and the European Union on behalf of its members.¹⁹ But he has continued to focus on individual countries and has been vocal about his concerns that some European nations have a trade

¹⁴ Jacopo Barigazzi, David M. Herszenhorn and Harry Cooper, 'After years of talk, EU plans defense spending spree,' *POLITICO EU*, June 6, 2017 <http://www.politico.eu/article/after-years-of-talk-eu-plans-defense-spending-spree/>.

¹⁵ Robbie Gramer, 'Trump Discovers Article 5 After Disastrous NATO Visit,' *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/trump-discovers-article-5-after-disastrous-nato-visit-brussels-visit-transatlantic-relationship-europe/>.

¹⁶ 'Remarks by President Trump at NATO Unveiling of the Article 5 and Berlin Wall Memorials - Brussels, Belgium,' The White House, May 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/25/remarks-president-trump-nato-unveiling-article-5-and-berlin-wall>.

¹⁷ Louis Nelson, 'Trump's terrorism address, fact-checked,' *POLITICO*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/donald-trump-orlando-terrorism-factcheck-224290>.

¹⁸ See: Peter Müller, 'Die Deutschen sind böse, sehr böse,' *Der Spiegel*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/donald-trump-bei-der-eu-die-deutschen-sind-boese-sehr-boese-a-1149282.html>.

¹⁹ Lucy Pasha-Robinson, 'Angela Merkel 'had to explain fundamentals of EU trade to Donald Trump 11 times',' *The Independent*, April 24, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/angela-merkel-donald-trump-explain-eu-trade-11-times-germany-chancellor-us-president-a7699591.html>.

surplus when it comes to their trade with the United States. Despite the fact that Germany-headquartered companies support 672,000 jobs in the United States and have \$255.5 billion invested in the US,²⁰ that country has again been attacked for having too large of a trade surplus – \$65 billion in 2016.²¹ That Trump has reportedly called Germany ‘bad, very bad’ for selling cars in the United States – when most of those cars are manufactured in the United States – has certainly not helped matters.²²

Similarly, he scoffed at European pleas that he not remove the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement. The financial journalist Ron Insana has written that ‘it appears the president is basing his decision-making on preconceived suspicions about multi-lateral agreements (Paris, NATO, NAFTA, WTO, TPP) and simply *guessing* that they all disadvantage the U.S. because they may, in part, benefit someone else. That is a ‘deal-maker’s’ mentality. Everything is a zero sum game. My gain is your loss and vice-versa.’²³

And so Trump sees the Paris Climate Accord as ‘simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries, leaving American workers... and taxpayers to absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production.’²⁴

This mentality is the exact opposite of Europe’s attitudes and ideas towards multi-lateral agreements and organisations. Although each of the member nations of the European Union has had to give up some small items that were important to them, they have done so because they recognize a larger benefit. They have chosen to sacrifice, for example, their sovereign right to regulate pillows and duvets, in exchange for the stability, peace and security that the European Union has brought to the continent. Donald Trump never would have made such choices and seems not to understand why Europeans have.

Neither can the European Union well fathom what they see as Mr Trump’s short-sighted view on multi-lateralism. In fact, the rhetoric emanating from Washington has seemed to coalesce European leaders into a kind of anti-Trump bloc. During his first trip to Europe in May 2017, Mr Trump did not make a good impression and European leaders have vocally criticized him and his early foreign policy moves. Whether this European criticism will influence Trump to change his policies or double down on them in anger is not yet evident.

In the meantime, the potential emergence of a strong Franco-German leadership tandem may have the effect of inducing the result that Trump – and Obama before him – wants to see: a Europe that takes more responsibility for its own issues. The election of Emmanuel Macron as

²⁰ ‘U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services – Germany,’ Bureau of Economic Affairs, <https://www.bea.gov/international/factsheet/factsheet.cfm?Area=308>.

²¹ The United States Census Bureau, ‘U.S. trade in goods with Germany 1985-2017,’ <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4280.html>.

²² Karen Gilchrist, ‘Trump calls Germans “very bad,” threatens to end German car sales,’ *CNBC*, May 26, 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/26/trump-calls-germans-very-bad-threatens-to-end-german-car-sales-reports.html>.

²³ Ron Insana, ‘Here’s what Trump is getting wrong about the Paris accord,’ *CNBC*, May 31, 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/31/trump-paris-decision-based-on-flawed-deal-maker-mentality-commentary.html>.

²⁴ President Donald J. Trump, ‘Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord,’ The White House, June 1, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/01/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord>.

French president and probable re-election of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in September 2017 may provide Europe with the kind of strong leadership it has been missing for some time.

Views on Russia

Like the several presidents who came before him, Donald Trump seems to believe that he can be the leader that will shepherd Russia and America to a friendly and fruitful relationship. As Dr Angela Stent notes in her book *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, successive US presidents have endeavoured to solve the various problems that bedevil the two countries' interactions by 'resetting' that relationship.²⁵ In a way, the US-Russia relationship has grown the same kind of attraction that has the Israel-Palestine problem: every American president and secretary of state wants to be the one to solve this intractable issue.

President Trump's policies on Russia have been affected by this desire to build a strong relationship with Russia, but have been equally influenced by a domestic necessity to not appear as weak as he so often accused President Obama of being on Russia, as well as by the multiple accusations that he, his aides, and campaign were or are working at the behest of Vladimir Putin's Kremlin. Together, these competing impulses have combined to make a general mess out of the Trump White House's actions towards Russia.

For example, President Trump's vehement campaign promises to build a strong relationship with Russia and to work with that country and its president Vladimir Putin on defeating ISIS's strongholds in Syria have not come to fruition. His March 2017 air strike on a Syrian air force base after evidence emerged that Syrian President Bashar Assad had used chemical weapons on his own citizens angered the same Russia that he has hoped to work with in Syria, as they have consolidated control over the area.

But that action was in line with his previous statements on the situation and seemed to many US commentators that it was done with the purpose of pointing out the differences between himself and former President Obama. That Mr. Trump was willing to thumb his nose at Moscow after so much praise for Mr. Putin was likewise a surprise for many on both sides of the Atlantic, but can clearly be seen as a result of the varying instincts mentioned above.

President Trump does not seem to view the problem of Russian aggression as a question for NATO. Neither does he see Russia's expansionist tendencies as a threat to Europe or the post-1945 world order. Rather, for him, Russia seems to hold promise as a huge, unexploited market with which the US and Europe should endeavour to build relations.

For their part, the vast majority of Washington's foreign policy – whether Republican or Democrat – are rather disturbed by the President's lack of concern towards both the Russian meddling in the US election and his disinterest in the military aggression that Russia has used in both Ukraine and Syria. Although the White House has insisted that: 'The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable, even as we search for new common ground, which, as you know, President Trump believes can be found,' doubts remain.²⁶

A few specific issues bear further exposition.

²⁵ Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, (Princeton; 2014).

²⁶ Vice President Michael Pence, 'Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference,' The White House, February 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/18/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>.

Sanctions on Russia

As set, the scene did not seem very promising. During the Obama administration, there was a not inconsiderable amount of anxiety about the degree to which the EU nations were truly united over maintaining the sanctions regime against Russia. As more and more countries – Italy, Hungary and Slovakia among them – began to voice their unhappiness at not being able to do business in or with Russia, those concerns only grew. That business-minded presidential candidate Donald Trump seemed to back them was even more worrisome to those who supported the sanctions regime. At the time of his election in November 2016 there were serious concerns that should he in fact remove the sanctions imposed on Russia for their annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern parts of Ukraine, that action would remove any reason for the European Union to maintain the admirable degree of unity that it has shown in maintaining the sanctions regime since it was first imposed in July 2014.

To this date, however, the Trump administration has not removed the sanctions on Russia and individual Russians and has continued to put new names on the existing sanctions lists as part of so-called ‘maintenance’ actions.^{27 28} Although there have been media reports that the Trump White House had begun steps to do remove the sanctions,²⁹ the domestic uproar about Russian meddling in the 2016 election and the connection of some in Trump’s inner circle to Russian government and business has made sanctions removal at this point politically difficult for Mr Trump. The ongoing investigations into Russia’s role in the election and the appointment of a special counsel to examine whether there was any connection between any members of the Trump campaign and the Russian government have only complicated matters. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that President Trump – who loves to call himself a great dealmaker – would give up such an important piece of leverage without gaining something in return.

Yet, American policymakers’ concerns about the swift and unilateral removal of the Russia sanctions remain. The US Senate, which had first considered, then tabled the introduction of a bill that would have enshrined the Russia sanctions in law, has now resurrected that idea. With near unanimity, it has passed a bill that makes permanent the current sanctions and introduces the potential for the implementation of new strictures on the Russian energy sector.³⁰ That bill has faced challenges in the House of Representatives and may be watered down somewhat as it moves through the lawmaking process. Though many in the Washington foreign policy elite of both parties do support sanctions, there is concern that if the United States strengthens sanctions on Russia that it will in fact weaken the EU-US accord and unity on that question.

The US foreign policy community is also content with the fact that the negativity generated by President Trump’s European debut seems to have engendered a European resolve to maintain its united front even if the Trump administration does eventually decide to unilaterally remove

²⁷ Because the sanctions on Russia were put into place by an executive order from President Obama, they can likewise be easily undone through a Trump executive order.

²⁸ Tracy Wilkinson, ‘Russia, angry over sanctions, cancels meeting with top U.S. official,’ *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-russia-angry-over-sanctions-abruptly-1498069279-htlmstory.html>.

²⁹ Michael Isikoff, ‘How the Trump administration’s secret efforts to ease Russia sanctions fell short’, *Yahoo! News*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/trump-administrations-secret-efforts-ease-russia-sanctions-fell-short-231301145.html>.

³⁰ U.S. Congress, ‘S.722 - Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017,’ 115th Congress, Amendment as modified June 13, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/115th-congress/senate-amendment/232/text>.

the sanctions. Reports that 'EU diplomats also said that Brussels had no intent of taking its cues from Washington on Russia policy' and have been vehement that 'we are not the puppets of Washington,' are greeted with relief.³¹

So the EU's reconfirmation of its sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea for another year was comforting.³² The growing opprobrium between the European nations and the Trump administration, as well as the Russian attempts to interfere in European politics, now means that where an American removal of sanctions on Russia may have earlier meant the complete collapse of the sanctions regime, the EU nations would now likely respond by assuming the mantle of leadership on the issue and remaining steadfast. Mr Trump may have entered office with the hope of removing sanctions on Russia to help jumpstart the construction of a new, better U.S.-Russian relationship, but the realities of such an action seem to have intervened – at least for the time being.

The war in Ukraine

American attitudes towards the Ukraine conflict, the Minsk II Agreements, and the Normandy negotiating format have yet to be fully clarified. Here again, the administration's policies on how to deal with Russia's aggressive military actions in Ukraine have been very slow to emerge and have found themselves subordinated to the battling forces of desire for rapprochement with Russia, domestic political constraints, and a need to be seen as strong. Statements by President Trump, Vice President Michael Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley have at times been contradictory and inconsistent.

For her part, Ambassador Haley has been vociferous in her condemnation of the continued fighting in the east of Ukraine, and Russia's ongoing occupation of Crimea.³³ And Vice President Pence has insisted that 'we must continue to hold Russia accountable and demand that they honour the Minsk Agreements, beginning by de-escalating the violence in eastern Ukraine'.³⁴ But there is a noticeable difference between that tone that they have taken and the tenor of remarks on the issue from President Trump and Secretary Tillerson.

Secretary Tillerson has several times confirmed that the sanctions on Russia will stay until Russia changes its behaviour in Ukraine, but he has also questioned the importance of solving the conflict, asking foreign ministers at a Group of Seven (G7) meeting in Italy: 'Why should US taxpayers be interested in Ukraine?'³⁵ Trump has also waffled on the issue. During his presidential campaign, President Trump seemed to suggest that he might be prepared to recognise Crimea as a part of Russia,³⁶ but then backtracked on that idea shortly after he

³¹ Jacopo Barigazzi, 'Russia sanctions to be extended, say EU diplomats,' *POLITICO EU*, May 10, 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/article/russia-sanctions-to-be-extended-say-eu-diplomats/>.

³² Rikard Jozwiak, 'EU Ambassadors Favor Extending Crimea Sanctions,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-ambassadors-extend-crimea-sanctions/28531701.html>.

³³ Nicole Gauette and Richard Roth, 'UN Ambassador Haley hits Russia hard on Ukraine,' *CNN*, February 2, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/02/politics/haley-russia-un/>.

³⁴ Vice President Michael Pence, 'Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference,' The White House, February 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/18/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>.

³⁵ Nick Fodham and John Follain, 'Tillerson Asks Why U.S. Taxpayers Should Care About Ukraine,' *Bloomberg*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-11/tillerson-asks-why-u-s-taxpayers-should-care-about-ukraine>.

³⁶ Tyler Pager, 'Trump to look at recognizing Crimea as Russian territory, lifting sanctions,' *POLITICO*, July 27, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-crimea-sanctions-russia-226292>.

became president.³⁷ Days after speaking with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko early in his term, Trump tweeted that ‘Crimea was taken’ and questioned whether President Obama had been ‘too soft on Russia’.³⁸

That the US State Department has yet to name officials to either the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia or the soon-to-be-created post of special envoy for the Ukraine-Russia conflict has only raised further questions about the amount of interest the Trump administration truly has in working to solve this conflict.³⁹

Yet there have emerged several signs that the administration is indeed interested in helping to solve this issue. Some have been encouraged by the fact the President Trump met with the presidents of both Ukraine and Poland – a key Ukrainian ally – before his long-awaited first meeting with Putin. And after meeting with Trump in the spring of 2017, European Council President Donald Tusk told the press that ‘when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine, it seems that we were on the same line.’⁴⁰

The White House may also be interested in exploring new ways to move towards a solution in Ukraine. In recent testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Tillerson indicated that the Trump Administration wants to avoid being ‘handcuffed’ by the existing Minsk II Agreement and is open to trying to find other ways to solve the conflict.⁴¹ He did not expand upon what he thought those options could be, though he did float the improbable scenario ‘that the government of Ukraine and the government of Russia could come to a satisfactory resolution through some structure other than Minsk but would achieve the objectives of Minsk, which we’re committed to.’⁴²

The Trump administration has also used somewhat stronger language when talking about the Russia-Ukraine war than did the Obama Administration. They have begun to speak of ‘Russia-

³⁷ Samuel Osborne, ‘Donald Trump accuses Russia of taking Crimea by force in attempt to distance himself from campaign allegations,’ *The Independent*, February 15, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-russia-latest-tweet-accuse-crimea-obama-too-soft-distance-campaign-team-white-house-a7581511.html>.

³⁸ Angela Dewan and Euan McKirdy, ‘Trump: Crimea was ‘taken’ by Russia,’ *CNN*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/15/politics/trump-crimea-russia-twitter-obama/index.html>.

³⁹ John Hudson, ‘Trump Administration Expected To Open Diplomatic Channel With Top Putin Aide,’ *Buzzfeed*, April 21, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/johnhudson/exclusive-trump-administration-expected-to-open-diplomatic?bftw=undefined&utm_term=.wLwN0Ne7R#.xsbDWMWK81.

⁴⁰ Donald Tusk, ‘Remarks by President Donald Tusk after meeting with President Donald Trump,’ European Council, May 25, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/05/25-tusk-trump-remarks/>.

⁴¹ ‘U.S. doesn’t want to be “handcuffed” to Ukraine agreement,’ *Reuters*, June 14, 2017, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN19528J>.

⁴² Nick Wadhams, ‘Tillerson Signals Easing Policy Toward Russia on Ukraine Accord,’ *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-14/tillerson-signals-easing-policy-toward-russia-on-ukraine-accord>.

led separatist forces,⁴³ rather than the milder term 'Russian-backed separatist forces' that was consistently used by the Obama team.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the US foreign policy establishment is increasingly hopeful that in an atmosphere where the actions of the US president are unpredictable and remain unelucidated, Europe will take on even more responsibility for the military crisis in its own backyard. There remain fears in Washington that once the domestic hullabaloo around potential connections between Russia and Donald Trump's presidential campaign does eventually die down, the White House may be tempted to give a little on the question of Ukraine in hopes of building a strong Trump-Putin relationship.

The administration's wavering rhetoric is reason enough for concern, but they have also been worried by a proposed budget for the fiscal year 2018 that would slash the aid monies that have been used to help reform Ukraine's economy, legal and political structures by 68.8 percent. Other nearby nations that have Russian troops occupying parts of their territories, like Georgia and Moldova, would also see aid from the US cut by 41.1 percent and 47.4 percent, respectively.⁴⁵ Most other countries that are recipients of US aid would also see their assistance packages cut under this budget, but that the Trump Administration has not recognised the importance of continuing to support Ukraine financially has concerned many. Such moves are yet another indicator of Mr Trump's antipathy towards US involvement in world affairs. Here again, he seems to believe that Europe should take more responsibility for the situation in its own backyard if it cares as much as it says that it does.

Nord Stream 2

American attitudes towards the potential construction of a second natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, called Nord Stream 2, seem set to remain much as they were in past years. The majority view in the US policymaking community continues to be that the conclusion of yet another deal to bring Russian gas to Germany and Europe is in the long run a bad thing for the European Union and gives a gift to a Kremlin that very much needs the guarantee of gas sales to Europe.

This is reflected in the recent package of sanctions that was passed by the US Senate. It includes a statement that 'It is the policy of the United States... to continue to oppose the Nord Stream 2 pipeline given its detrimental impacts on the European Union's energy security, gas market development in Central and Eastern Europe, and energy reforms in Ukraine'.⁴⁶ The bill also includes a provision that would allow this or any future president to place sanctions on persons or companies that provide more than USD 5 million per year in sales and leases to

⁴³ See, for example: Rex W. Tillerson, 'Remarks to NATO-Ukraine Commission,' US Department of State, March 31, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269359.htm> and Heather Nauert, "Department Press Briefing - June 22, 2017, U.S. Department of State, June 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/06/272114.htm>.

⁴⁴ Mark Toner, 'Marking the Second Anniversary of the Shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17,' Archive Website of the U.S. Department of State, July 16, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/260137.htm>.

⁴⁵ Bryant Harris, Robbie Gramer, and Emily Tamkin, 'The End of Foreign Aid As We Know It,' *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/24/u-s-agency-for-international-development-foreign-aid-state-department-trump-slash-foreign-funding/>.

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, "S.722 - Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017," 115th Congress, Amendment as modified June 13, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/115th-congress/senate-amendment/232/text>.

Russia ‘for the construction of Russian energy export pipelines, goods, services, technology, information, or support...’⁴⁷

The bill makes sure to signal a belief that the failure of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to be built would create more opportunities for increased US liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to Europe and thus support more American jobs, a topic on which Mr Trump has based his domestic reputation. And his administration seems ready to take up that call. On 9 June 2017, the first ever shipment of US LNG arrived in Poland, prompting US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry to speak hopefully of how ‘Europe has been looking to the United States as a key potential source for energy diversification to decrease Russia’s leverage as the region’s dominant gas supplier’.⁴⁸ But the Trump Administration’s commercial interests are also on full display: ‘We will become a dominant energy force, using our research, development, and delivery capabilities. We will reassure the energy security of our allies and partners around the world, acting as a force for good in an environment of uncertainty.’⁴⁹

These measures, when combined with the new Senate sanctions on Nord Stream 2 have put the Trump administration solidly on the side of those central and eastern European nations that hope to stymie the project, and firmly against countries further to the west that are keen to see it through. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern were vehement in their anger towards the Senate measure, which they denounced for ‘blending foreign policy interests with economic.’⁵⁰ They also warned that by implementing sanctions that harm the economic interests of several European countries, these new sanctions – if implemented – could further widen the rift between the United States and its European allies. A businessman himself, Mr Trump may be sympathetic to their arguments, but he has already shown an inclination to take decisions that he believes help the American people even though they may hurt others around the world. His decisions to end US participation in the negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership as well as his choice to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement were both based on this principle. The opportunity to hurt ‘bad’ Germany and boost his job-creating reputation at home is likely to be too much to pass up.

Although their motivations may be different, both the Trump Administration and the US foreign policy community are likely to continue to oppose the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and will continue to push the European Union to continue to diversify its energy sources away from Russian oil and gas.

On the future development of EU-Russian relations

American diplomats are correct to say that ‘right now, US-Russia relations are in the gutter.’⁵¹ They are in fact worse than they have been since the days of the Cold War. But neither are the European Union’s relations with Russia terribly good. The greatest fault for this slump in

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ ‘Statement by Rick Perry, U.S. Secretary of Energy, on LNG Shipments to the Netherlands & Poland, US Department of Energy, June 9, 2017, <https://www.energy.gov/articles/statement-rick-perry-us-secretary-energy-lng-shipments-netherlands-poland>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ‘Kern und Gabriel zu einseitiger Verschärfung der Russland-Sanktionen durch die USA,’ State Chancellery of Austria, June 15, 2017, <https://www.bka.gv.at/-/kern-und-gabriel-zu-einseitiger-verscharfung-der-russland-sanktionen-durch-die-usa>.

⁵¹ John Hudson, ‘The Trump Administration Has A New Plan For Dealing With Russia,’ *Buzzfeed*, June 19, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/johnhudson/this-is-the-trump-administrations-plan-for-dealing-with?utm_term=.ccY6g796#.nlVEa97E.

relations lies with the Russian Federation's choice to first annex Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and to then engineer a 'separatist' movement in the eastern part of Ukraine. That these Russia-sponsored and directed troops were then involved in the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 only further confirmed Europe's choice to place sanctions on Russia and to reconsider its relationship with the nation that had executed the first annexation of territory on the European continent since World War Two.

How then does the US hope to see EU-Russian relations develop in the next years? Were it solely up to President Trump, would he prefer to see the complete lifting of sanctions – whether the questions of Crimea and Donbas are solved or not – and the reestablishment of strong diplomatic and trade ties between Russia, the US, and the EU? Without the emergence of some kind of foreign policy strategy or overarching idea to guide his administration, it is a difficult question to answer.

Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland recently made headlines by announcing that '...many of the voters in last year's [US] presidential election cast their ballots, animated in part by a desire to shrug off the burden of world leadership. To say this is not controversial: it is simply a fact. Canada is grateful, and will always be grateful, to our neighbour for the outsized role it has played in the world. And we seek and will continue to seek to persuade our friends that their continued international leadership is very much in their national interest—as well as that of the rest of the free world. Yet we also recognize that this is ultimately not our decision to make. It is a choice Americans must make for themselves. 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 post-war multilateral order.'⁵²

For now at least, she is quite correct. The United States *is* questioning its position in the world and wonders quite openly whether it should continue its role of 'global policeman', extend its overseas deployments in far-flung places like Afghanistan and Iraq, and insert itself into matters that may be best solved by more interested local parties. This introspection is not something that is unique to the Trump Administration. It began during the Obama years and may last for some time while Americans take stock of themselves, their country and the way they wish to interact with the world. In the meantime, the United States will demand that all NATO member nations work to increase their contributions towards defence and contribute far more to the general international security situation.

Meanwhile, the European Union seems poised to emerge from its own age of uncertainty. Where only a few years ago Europe seemed an economic and political mess, the last months have rather clarified the situation. The United Kingdom has chosen to leave the EU, while the bloc's stance towards Russia has become clearer. During his first weeks in office, newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron has exhibited a strong stand against Russian President Vladimir Putin, a position which seems to have been influenced as much by the reported Russian hacking of his electoral campaign servers as by concerns that Trump is weak on Russia. In this, he has much in common with Chancellor Merkel, whose parliament and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party were similarly targeted in 2015 and 2016.⁵³

⁵² Chrystia Freeland, 'Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's foreign policy priorities,' June 6, 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html.

⁵³ 'Russia "was behind German parliament hack",' *BBC*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-36284447>.

That Macron will have a large majority in the National Assembly gives the American foreign policy elite some hope that he will be able to accomplish his campaign aims of reforming the French economy and labour market and will put France back on a firmer international footing. A strong France alongside a Germany that has exhibited leadership in the past years could help to make up for any lack of US guidance. There is in turn much hope that the election of Macron as French president will inject some much-needed energy and life into the Normandy Process that is designed to help bring the conflict in eastern Ukraine to an end.

And while the Trump White House will encourage Europe and the EU to do more in their neighbourhood, the Trump administration is unique its interest in pursuing bilateral relations with partners like Russia that are only potentially profitable rather than maintaining the long-standing alliances with NATO and the EU. In turn, there is likely to be some tension between the United States and the European Union over the Russia question.

On the one hand, the US is nearly certain to continue to ask European countries to take on an increasingly large share of the responsibility that it is perhaps not ready or able to assume for the security of the continent. On the other, the US willingness to intervene in European politics over Russia-related matters like the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is likely to irk both Russia and the European Union. Of course, the United States cannot have it both ways and insist on European leadership whilst interrupting when it doesn't like the European solution. But it just might try to do so.

Because of the domestic investigations into President Trump and his presidential campaign's potential ties with the Russian government, any movements by his administration on the Russia question will be difficult and highly scrutinised in the public sphere. This situation gives rise to the possibility that the White House may need to rely increasingly on European partners to first take the steps that it eventually wants to make, giving the Trump Administration precedent for any such moves. But the level of opprobrium already built up between European leaders and President Trump makes even this a difficult proposition. Far more likely is that European actions on Russia – even though the president may not much like them – may end up becoming the example that Trump is forced – by public demand or the guidance of the US foreign policy community – to follow.

It is also likely that the Trump administration will continue to muddle through on the question of Russia until the domestic political inquiries dies down. Of course, their hand may be at some point forced by Russian actions in Syria, Ukraine, or elsewhere, but the current US domestic questions seem set to disrupt the foreign policy sphere as it concerns Russia for some time. If and when that 'cloud' will lift is not yet known, nor are its consequences.⁵⁴ In the meantime, Europe and Russia must learn to live in a fog of uncertainty over any US attitude or reaction to anything Russia-related.

⁵⁴ Tom LoBianco, 'Russia cloud settles in over Trump's White House', *CNN*, June 12, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/12/politics/trump-sessions-comey/index.html>.