

## Trump vs. EU: The Dead End of the Normative Approach

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'I feel really great. We're going to have a great discussion and, I think, tremendous success. It will be tremendously successful. And it's my honour. And we will have a terrific relationship, I have no doubt.'

Many would have wished to hear such complimentary words from US president Donald Trump when speaking about his European counterparts, about Mr Juncker or Mr Tusk, or at least about his G7 host Mr Trudeau – or his favourite Frenchman, Mr Macron. The above quotation is, however, not from the past G7 Summit in Canada but, of course, from the meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un in Singapore.

The disappointment of Europeans with the tone and manner of Trump's behaviour, his disregard for European arguments against trade restrictions grew stronger against the background of the lavish compliments he overloaded Mr Kim with. 'I learned he's a very talented man. I also learned that he loves his country very much.' Given Kim's desperate – but quite successful – efforts to keep his personal dictatorship in power by negotiating directly with the US, conceding him 'love for his country' seems a ridiculous appraisal in the eyes of irritated Europeans. The American giant who once had helped the European countries to rise from the extremism that had led to WWII and had deflected totalitarianism in 1989, now seems to have forgotten the western values and is destroying trust among western allies.

The weeks that preceded the Singapore meeting were loaded with tension between the two sides of the Atlantic. The American withdrawal from the Iran deal came if not as a surprise, then as an insult to European leaders. It was 'a massive attack on European countries' sovereignty', former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt wrote in the *Washington Post*. Breaking an international agreement and threatening European businesses with secondary sanctions was clearly against the spirit of an allied relationship. Trump's cozying up with French President Macron did not prevent him from assaulting European companies both through the Iran withdrawal and by imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum. The counter measures are slow and with limited effect. Europe is economically dependent on the US but cannot rely on its special allied relationship or even on its common sense anymore. To a world of unpredictable leaders Trump has added a new dimension: he is a predator within the frontiers of the West, as the G7 meeting clearly showed.

The problem for the European Union is, that - much more than it is interest-driven - it is a normative power, an organism based on rules and values. And while the US have probably always felt more comfortable dealing with nation states, they have always understood that European integration is a by-product of the US-led pacification of the continent; it lowers the security cost and organises economy and politics in a comprehensive manner, based on shared values. The moment America turned away from Europe with Obama was not so difficult to digest, as values and trust in international norms remained unchanged. Since the moment America became a rogue actor driven by 'the art of the deal', the EU has been perplexed.

This is especially valid for Germany, the emanation of the US driven transformation after WWII and again in 1989. Germany has the normative, *Rechtsstaat* approach and the values-based instinct engrained in its modern history. It is therefore that Chancellor Merkel was proclaimed last year 'the leader of the free world', the last defender of its norms. And probably Trump hates her for that much more, than for the 'bad deal' US car makers have compared to German ones. The picture that [Merkel's team tweeted from the G7 meeting](#): her didactically leaning over a defensive Trump, was probably the true reason for him to withdraw US agreement to the G7 conclusions, which had been watered down to his liking but still contained wordings against protectionism and pledges to follow established trade rules. The current weakening of Merkel through her coalition partners was thus not surprisingly met with satisfaction by the US President: 'The people of Germany are turning against

their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture!' he tweeted, clearly attacking the German chancellor.

Trump is relying on the nativist, nationalistic forces in European countries to deepen the splits within societies, and inevitably among Member States in the EU. His friendship with Nigel Farage was only the first case in point, with many more to follow. But the courting of some of the Eastern Member States can bring the long-sought after division in the EU. In the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the Iran deal, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that Poland wanted to be an 'informal go-between' and to explain to EU members and US officials the positions of the other. His statement remained a one-off but was a dangerous signal that John Bolton's efforts to undo the EU unity on the issue may be paying off. Poland's and the Baltic states' threat perceptions give the US military measures in the region high priority and are a good basis for creating a strategic East-West divide.

So, how can a divided EU, with an unstable Germany, a UK on its way out and renegade central eastern member states be of interest to the US?

The State Department's Assistant Secretary A. Wes Mitchell has laid out the administration's concept for Europe as an ally in the strategic competition with Russia and China. The (not so new) strategy has all the necessary prerequisites for a proper alliance: engagement based on values and strategic choices ('The West is a realm of ordered liberty, guarded by strong states bound together in leagues and alliances'; 'Engagement is about winning hearts and minds of publics for whom the memory of 1989 and NATO enlargement is increasingly distant.'). The assistant secretary's speech was not really mentioning the EU, with the exception of the paragraph about the Western Balkans: 'In the Balkans, we are increasing aid against Russian influence and coordinating closely with the EU to bring greater stability.' Nevertheless, his speech outlined key areas of cooperation in security, both east and sound, and even covered topics of disagreement like Iran and North Stream 2. The signal that it was sending was that the US interests vis-a-vis Europe have fundamentally not changed.

Yet the American President attempted to re-invite Russia to the G7 meetings and dismissed Germany as 'worse than China' on trade. Thus the answer to the question about the US interest and approach in dealing with Europe is clear: Trump and his inner circle have at best a transactional, mostly hostile approach to Europe, diverging from the US's strategic interest. Rational or not, this line of behaviour has taken root in the White House's attitude and Europe should learn to deal with it.

The EU and Russia have become locked in an open battle over the norms of international conduct, ECFR's Kadri Liik wrote recently. She advises that Europeans need to translate their unity vis-a-vis Russia into a political strategy that reflects not just European values, but also Russian realities. The same advice may very well apply in dealing with the US under Trump.