

Donald Trump – Aggravator or Catalyzer of the European Crises?

Wolfgang Seibel

University of Konstanz, Germany

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Introduction

One might reasonably ask what is actually special about Donald Trump and the Trump presidency. After all, it is not populism in public office that is new. Neither is Donald Trump the first narcissist in high ranking public office nor is he the first head of state whose political proclamations sound plausible and credible to many but lack operational implementation strategies. And he is certainly not the first political leader whose conduct in office is likely to do most harm to those allegedly most favored by his policy, those “forgotten men and women of our country ... [who won’t] be forgotten no longer,” as Trump has put it in his inauguration address.

What is really new about Donald Trump and the Trump presidency is that, this time, populism in public office and extreme narcissism affects a stable and full-fledged democracy with a well-functioning rule-of-law system, a free press and a strong commitment to constitutional values. This is bad news and good news at the same time.

The bad news is that it is, after all, the most powerful democracy of the world that is now governed by a president whose commitment to the rules and institutional logic of the democratic system is doubtful.

The good news is that Donald Trump is facing a constitutional order and a system of rule of law of particular strength and deep-rooted tradition as well as a media landscape shaped by strong professional ethos. This marks the sharp difference relative to Putin’s Russia, Erdogan’s Turkey or the many other cases of populism in public office one might think of. The more than bumpy start of the Trump administration demonstrates precisely this. Losing a case for a travel ban at two consecutive stages in court and losing a National Security Advisor after three weeks in office was the result of the inevitable encounter of a president in defiance of basic principles of responsible and, thus, professional government and the tight grip of institutional and professional integrity that characterizes, after all, the American democracy and the guardians of its core-institutions.

Those are the signs of good hope and any talk of the US becoming a dictatorship or at least an authoritarian regime is, to put it bluntly, just nonsense.

In what follows, I will underline two statements.

First: The robustness of US democracy notwithstanding, we have no sound reason to assume that there will be a step-wise normalization of US foreign policy under the pressure of economic or other functional necessities and related strategy building outlined by the Trump administration, its advisors or think tanks.

Second: A more realistic and thus productive response to the Trump presidency is turning the predictable volatility of US foreign policy into the proverbial window of opportunity. This affects primarily those who used to be the United States' closest partners and that affects, as far as Europe is concerned, the member states of the European Union and NATO. What one may hope for is that determined agenda setters, especially in Europe, pave the way for a renewed multilateralism within the European Union and NATO and, ultimately, also for a renewed transatlantic partnership with United States of America.

Failure to perceive and to use that opening window of opportunity will, I am stating, make Donald Trump and aggravator of the already serious condition of the European Union and NATO while recognizing and using it may turn the Trump presidency into a productive catalyzer of the European crises in the sense that the Trump phenomenon may trigger and accelerate processes of political realignment in Europe that are overdue anyway.

1. The nature of the political change under the Trump presidency

Why is it unlikely that US foreign policy under the Trump presidency will evolve into some sort of normalcy and predictability?

To put it bluntly again: We have to take narcissism seriously. Donald Trump made his way through the primaries of the Republican party as a free-wheeling candidate, a man of independent means in the literal sense, capitalizing on a self-proclaimed role as an anti-establishment political neophyte. Precisely because his victory in the presidential elections remained unlikely well into election day, prevailing against all odds must have fueled an already more than boasting sense of being immune against everything what the media say and what experts predict. This might be the individual core of what meanwhile is called post-truth political behavior and communication style.

So the nature of the change in the US presidency is the combination of an extremely ego-centric personality in the Oval Office committed to by and large extreme political positions while being detached from both the established strata of the political elite and the constitutional order of the relevant political institutions in their inherent rationale. The president's contempt for regular

institutional procedures is such that it resulted in just the quasi-chaotic decision making we had to witness since January 20. This style of conduct in office is no coincidence. It comes with the very personality of the president who unlike the vast majority of responsible leaders according to all evidence not only lacks self-control but also an understanding of the necessity of control and restraint in public office in general.

That lacking sense for the basic rationale of responsible government finds a parallel in Donald Trump's unconcealed contempt for multilateralism as a principle of the international order. His slogan, "America first" – borrowed from the isolationist movement of the 1930s, heavily supported by Nazi sympathizers in the US – is just the blunt expression of a related mind set. Multilateralism was, however, one of the crucial lessons drawn from the worldwide economic and political disasters of the first half of the 20th century. Despite all the power asymmetries and despite the bipolar hegemonic order of the Cold War, the United Nations became the symbol and the focus of political aspirations of *all-nations-being-equal* and *every-nation-having-the-same-say* on the international stage, however elusive those principles might have been in political reality. Similarly, the European Union or the African Union just like other types of regional integration such as ASEAN or MERCOSUR emerged out of the conviction that multilateralism, including some sort of supra-national authority with coordinating and integrating functions, is superior to both the principle of balance of great powers at the expenses of minor powers and hegemony, let alone colonialism.

One may further contextualize the nature of the current change under the Trump presidency bearing in mind that, basically, relative to the other powerful and more or less globally influential nations such as China, India and Russia the United States, so far, had the most comprehensive and considerate approach to the international system and international relations: Very reluctantly had the United States entered World War I and World War II in 1917 and 1941, and after the experiences not only with war itself but also with the consequences of US inaction in the interwar period when the country was struggling with the Great Depression the USA did develop what historians and political scientists alike call a 'Grand Strategy'. That strategy, however insufficient and sometimes subject to misperceptions and outright blunder, was based on the notion of superiority through a combination of military, economic *and* cultural hegemony. And the strategy was successful to a decisive degree due to the creation and sustainability of like-minded partners in the Far East and in Europe where the former enemies Japan and Germany – the former West Germany, to be precise – were transformed into powerful hubs of economic growth and prosperity and, as far as West-Germany was concerned, of regional integration that gradually took the shape of what then became the European Communities and finally the European Union.

The daily basis of the close ties between the United States and Europe always remained economic exchange to the mutual benefit. But the embeddedness and stability of those ties was enrooted in much more elementary and emotional ingredients which was essential military security and cultural hegemony – in other words it was based on both "hard" and "soft power". I belong to the generation that grew up during the Cold War in the West of the divided European continent

and the vast majority of my generation accepted US hegemony not because of its decisive hard-core which was the United States' military power but because of the irresistible attractiveness of American consumer goods and everyday culture, ranging from chewing gum, Coca Cola, Rock 'n Roll and Petticoats to Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Leonard Bernstein, and of course the endless stream of Hollywood movies and TV series. This was comprehensive hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's sense, and we as West-Europeans, regardless of our individual political convictions, were more than happy with it during the Cold War.

So, in a nutshell, the United States became the proverbial superpower not only because it dominated key-segments of the international economy combined with unparalleled hard and soft power but also due to a longstanding commitment to the notion of multilateral arrangements and free trade. That commitment was, so far, strategic in nature since it took into account the necessity of international partners to develop their own economic strength for the sake of mutual benefit. The United States were wise enough, as Norwegian historian and former secretary of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee Geir Lundestad in a brilliant book outlined under the title "Empire by Integration", to support European integration at every consecutive stage. That included the waves of Northern, Southern and Eastern enlargement as well as institutional and economic reforms.

It is precisely for these reasons that the Trump presidency is likely to mark a sharp change of course even if not every single element of Trump's announcements and programmatic messages will materialize as actual US foreign policy. Donald Trump's presidency is likely to undermine or at least seriously affect every single component of what made the relationship between the United States and Europe strong and stable.

Trump defies the notion of multilateral arrangements that form the core of both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization known as NATO. He favors an economic policy of protectionism and, at best, bilateral treaties instead of the multilateral arrangements of comprehensive international trade agreements. He casts serious doubt on the United States' commitment to NATO, especially as far as the Eastern flank of NATO is concerned. And, last but not least, he managed within weeks to destroy the image of the US presidency as the pivotal symbol of democratic values already severely damaged through the Iraq intervention of 2003 and the images of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo but to some extent rebuilt by Barrack Obama.

And yet – it is unlikely that this is a change in foreign policy *strategy* in the classic sense precisely because Donald Trump defies strategy building in the first place. Rather, we have good reasons to anticipate that the Trump presidency and, consequently, the foreign policy of the United States will be shaped much more by the extreme personality of the President himself than by any kind of political program or coherent policy. It is the very absence of strategy – systemic strategylessness – that according all likelihood will become the signature of US foreign policy in the years to come. A most recent and spectacular example is the United State's explicit withdrawal from strategic agenda setting in one of the core-fields of US diplomacy so far which is the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, barely concealed by the president's wording he could "live with either a one state or a two state solution".

I hasten to say that, obviously, any kind of government may be subject to political myopia and poor assessment of the prospects and consequences of its own political action. But the Trump presidency is likely to display an extreme version of strategylessness, one that is characterized not only by the *inability* to define goals connected to operational diplomacy and realistic scenario writing but by a fundamental *unwillingness* to engage in any sort of strategic thinking and appropriately adjusted diplomacy.

Hence the actual nature of the current change of course which is above all a change towards profound uncertainty. And this is dramatic enough in a world where volatility and unpredictability are not in short supply which, in turn, affects to a large extent the current situation in Europe and the future of transatlantic relations that had emerged after the Second World War.

2. *The European Crises*

Which brings me to the European conditions that today are themselves shaped by deep crises of multilateralism and the mechanisms of regional integration. Here are the various components:

- The common European currency, the Euro, turned out to be as much a disintegrative as it is an integrative economic mechanism, putting tremendous strain not only on national budgets but also on the political legitimacy and stability of governments especially in Southern Europe.
- The massive influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa has created additional risks for the stability of the Southern and South-Eastern flank of the European Union where Italy and Greece have to carry the major burden of the waves of migrating foreigners. Moreover, disputes over how to deal with the influx of non-European immigrants under the condition of basically unrestricted movement and travel within the European Union created another major political crisis within the EU.
- The combined crises of the Euro-Zone and the barely manageable influx of refugees enflamed both right-wing xenophobic and left-wing anti-EU movements of various strength and nature. In some countries like Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic right-wing populists are themselves running the national government while in other EU member states such as Italy and France rather powerful populist movements of the Left and the Right are mobilizing their respective clientele against the European Union in an undeclared but de facto alliance.

- The Russian aggression against Ukraine in early 2014 through which the territorial integrity of a European state was violated through the use of force for the first time since World War II was and still is the most serious external challenge to both the EU and NATO so far. Through the installation of puppet regimes in Eastern Ukraine and the ability to escalate a military conflict on Ukrainian soil at will, Russia acquired substantial leverage vis-à-vis the European Union in the form of continuous threat of destabilization. The EU's response took the shape of sanctions that since the Minsk agreement of February 2015 are connected to Russia's compliance with a road map for re-stabilizing Ukraine and reinstating the country's territorial integrity.
- Right-wing extremists in EU member states are actively supported by Russia with the French *Front national* even being directly financed through a 9 million Euro credit granted by a Moscow-based bank [the First Czech Russian Bank FCRB]. All European right wing extremists are in favor of recognizing Crimea as Russian territory and ask for EU sanctions against Russia being lifted altogether. And all of them want their respective countries to leave the EU and NATO. This is flanked by cyber-attacks against political institutions, infrastructure and individual politicians of EU member states that according to the shared consensus within the Western intelligence community originate in Russia.
- The most spectacular blow to the European Union, however, was the largely unexpected success of the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom of June 2016. It is the first time ever that a member decided to leave the Union. Moreover, it is particularly devastating since it affects one of the "big four" of the EU (Germany, UK, France, Italy). And, finally, it demonstrates the power of a single-issue populist movement, here the United Kingdom Independence Party, also known under its acronym UKIP.

How does all this relate to Donald Trump and his presidency?

Trump made no secret of his general attitude towards these European issues. While Barack Obama during his visit to the United Kingdom in April 2016 in all frankness encouraged the Britons to remain in the European Union, Trump congratulated the Britons to their Brexit decision. He criticized German chancellor Merkel and her alleged open-flood-gates attitude vis-à-vis the influx of refugees. He declared NATO "obsolete". He had one of his very first telephone conversations with a foreign head of government with right-wing populist Viktor Orbán of Hungary, even before he talked to Theresa May or Angela Merkel. And, above all, he praises Russian president Vladimir Putin as a strong leader.

It was a matter of consequence that, on January 31, the president of the Council of the European Union, Donald Tusk, in a letter addressed to the heads of state and government of the

EU member states, openly criticized the “worrying declarations by the new American administration ... [that] make our future highly unpredictable”. “The change in Washington,” according to Tusk, “puts the European Union in a difficult situation; with the new administration seeming to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy.”

No less disturbing is Trump’s attitude towards NATO. One might say that his position is ambivalent since, on the one hand, he did declare NATO obsolete but, on the other hand, he underlined the United States’ commitment to NATO in his meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May and in the official common statement issued after his first telephone conversation with German chancellor Angela Merkel. But ambivalence of the by far most powerful NATO member state is detrimental enough when it comes to the fundamental political capital of NATO which is credibility. Lack of credibility in the defense of NATO’s most vulnerable member states in the Baltics means encouraging Russia to test NATO’s resolve and thus increases the risk of escalation with unknown consequences.

3. *Trump as an Aggravator or Catalyzer?*

Which brings me to the question to what extent the Trump presidency may work as an aggravator or catalyzer of the current instability of the international system and the multiple European crises in particular.

Donald Tusk, the President of the Council of the European Union, had a case when he pointed to the clear and imminent threat exerted by the Trump administration to the traditional partnership between the European Union and the United States. That threat is not abstract in nature in the sense that Trump’s denial of multilateralism is the opposite of the spirit and the institutional logic of the European Union and NATO. Instead, there is active and concrete interaction between what weakens the EU and NATO anyway and what can be identified, so far, as core-ingredients of the foreign and security policy of the Trump administration.

One dimension of that interaction is connected to left-wing and right-wing populist movements and some government officials of EU member states whose anti-EU position and influence is being reinforced by the US government’s attitude vis-à-vis the European Union. It is no coincidence that Marine Le Pen of the French *Front national*, the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) or ‘Alternative for Germany’ celebrated enthusiastically Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton. Those are the political forces that, at the same time, are explicitly pro-Russian and anti-NATO and they capitalize on a tacit consensus across the board reaching to left-wing populists that are anti-NATO and anti-EU anyway.

The first prominent victim of this implicit alliance between left-wing and right-wing populists in Europe and the Trump government is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership,

known as TTIP. It is of course rejected by Donald Trump but already seriously challenged by the anti-TTIP movements within Europe, not at least in Germany, formed by a broad alliance reaching from the French *Front national* and the German right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* to the left wings of the French Socialist Party and the German Social Democrats and the German Green Party. The latent winner is, ironically, China that in a matter of months saw falling apart both the Trans-pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

A second victim to Donald Trump's as an aggravator of already existing troubles within the international system might be the containment efforts of the European Union vis-à-vis Russia. Again, it is a broad and sometimes strange alliance between right-wing extremists among which one more time the French *Front national* plays a prominent role and rather left-leaning or traditional conservative political forces within the European Union that might pave the way for mitigating or even lifting the EU sanction regime against Russia without anything in return that could restabilize Ukraine in accordance with the Minsk agreement of February 2015. Certainly, the president, according to his spokesman earlier this week, made it "very clear that he expects the Russian government to de-escalate violence in the Ukraine and return Crimea." But there is no indication at all that the US is ready and capable to closely coordinate its policy towards the Ukraine issue with its European allies and their day-to-day diplomatic effort to keep the Minsk process alive.

A crucial litmus test for how seriously the Trump presidency could aggravate the European crises remains the US' commitment to NATO on the basis of the recent NATO summits of Wales 2014 and Warsaw 2016. That entails a modest reinforcement of NATO ground troops in Poland and the Baltic states in the form of four battalions (1000 troops each) and an additional US brigade. This happens in the framework of the NATO Russia Founding Act of 1997 that was purposefully violated by Russia and purposefully respected by NATO itself even after the Russian annexation of Crimea. It did not prevent Russia, however, from upscaling its own military forces disproportionately in the immediate vicinity of Estonia and Latvia and deploying nuclear-warhead-ready missiles in the Kaliningrad enclave in the north of Poland with Warsaw and Berlin in their reach.

So the fault-lines and risk zones that could be aggravated by the Trump presidency are quite obvious. But what are the prospects of the Trump presidency being rather a catalyzer than an aggravator? Is there any positive development that could be triggered or accelerated by the Trump presidency as far as the European Crises are concerned? This question has an empirical and a normative dimension.

The empirical aspect concerns the actual recognition of a window of opportunity and the role of agenda setters.

Since the very creation of the European communities, those agenda setters have been France and (West-)Germany. Both countries face elections this very year, and the agenda setting ability of the entire European Union very much depends on the outcome of those elections. According to current polls, it is about Emmanuel Macron or Marine Le Pen in France and about Martin Schulz

or Angela Merkel in Germany. Macron is clearly pro-EU in the sense of strengthening the Union through reform while Le Pen, as already mentioned, is the European spearhead of right-wing extremism and an outspoken advocate of France leaving the EU. By contrast, both Merkel and Schulz are clearly pro-European candidates – after all, Schulz is a former president of the EU parliament. A success of Le Pen in France however would be equivalent to the end of EU – and NATO – as we knew it. The likelihood of this outcome is low, given the nature of the French electoral system. But after the unlikely Brexit and the unlikely election of Donald Trump our trust in degrees of likelihood is significantly weakened.

So, working under the optimistic assumption that Emanuel Macron will be the next French president and either Schulz or Merkel will be the next German chancellor, the prospects are not so bad as far as the agenda setting capacity of the entire EU is concerned. But what are reasonable normative requirements of an appropriate agenda in the first place?

Ironically, it is first and foremost about strengthening the transatlantic partnership wherever and whenever possible. Neo-isolationism, Trump style, is potentially disastrous for the US itself precisely because, unlike during the inter-war period and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States' security and prosperity today is dependent on the very multilateral embeddedness the new US president is not willing to understand, let alone able to foster and develop. It may soon become apparent that the fault-lines and weaknesses that characterize the current state of the European Union find a parallel in the fault-lines and cleavages created by the Trump presidency within the political and economic elite of the United States itself. Unlike Putin's Russia or Xi Jinping's China and regardless of the impulse to pronounce travel bans and erecting walls, the United States will remain an open and accessible system, accessible especially for hundreds of thousands of predominantly young people from abroad seeking further training or excellent education or both. But it is also about accessibility and mutual partnership with US elites and counter-elites who do have a strategy for safeguarding the necessary conditions for maintaining US success and, let's face it, dominance in a global economy and the soundness and integrity of the United States' constitutional order and political core-institutions.

Within Europe proper, the United Kingdom will remain an even more important link between the European Union and the United States and especially the European key-player within NATO. So strengthening rather than neglecting or even loosening the ties between the EU and a future independent Britain will be of the essence when it comes to stimulating the productive catalytic effects of the Trump presidency within the European political system.

One if not *the* most obvious window of opportunity that the Trump presidency has unwillingly opened concerns NATO. Increased military spending, especially by Germany and other free riders enjoying the benefits of the international collective good called security at low costs is no longer a question of fairness in terms of burden sharing but an essential question of credibility vis-à-vis an openly hostile Russia counting on the new American ambivalence concerning NATO.

Provided that the Franco-German tandem remains intact, the Minsk agreement on Ukraine of February 2015 has to be implemented in full scale. Within the EU, in the framework of the so-called Normandy format, France and Germany are the guarantors of that agreement that entails, among other things, the demilitarization of a contact-zone between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian irregulars and the restoration of Ukrainian control of the border with Russia. And this might be a first step to “reset” EU-Russian relations through lifting, either gradually or entirely, the sanctions against Russia. It has to be, however, a strict give-and-take operation that prevents Russia from relaunching time and again local or regional military aggression on Ukrainian soil only for the sake to force the EU, Germany and France in particular, to accept a mere sequence of temporary ceasefires in lieu of the implementation of the Minsk agreement.

Moreover, making the Trump presidency a catalyzer requires to neutralize the latent and manifest coalitions of left-wing and right-wing populists targeting the European Union as either the nemesis of traditional, cultural and national values or alienated non-democratic machinery executing the imperatives of economic neo-liberalism. This is particularly important since mainstream politicians from both the moderate left and the moderate right are tempted to make rhetorical and material concessions to either branch of the populist movement. Those efforts should include two crucial programmatic steps, namely a coherent EU migration policy and a reform of the Eurozone. Both steps are again of practical and symbolic importance, not at least in contrast to what happens in the US under the Trump presidency.

The EU took pride in integrating the mobility of people in its framework of a common market. The influx of millions of refugees, however, puts this principle and its regulatory conditions under tremendous stress since it creates considerable political pressure to reinstate strict border controls between EU member states. The survival of what is known as the Schengen regime – unrestricted mobility of EU citizens within the Union – hinges not only on the EU’s ability to create outside borders controls that are humane and effective at the same time but also on the EU’s ability to contribute in a credible way to ‘restore hope’, if you will, in those regions where migration originates. And this obviously concerns Africa. In doing so, the EU could evolve into a credible challenger of a neo-isolationist US and ultimately exert a mitigating influence on the self-destructive impulses of the Trump administration featuring travel bans and protectionism.

Finally, the survival of the economic core of the EU, the Euro zone, hinges on the development of credible institutional mechanisms that guarantee the independence of the European Central Bank and the emergence of a coherent common fiscal and economic policy of the EU at the same time. That policy needs to integrate, again in contrast to what now is US policy under the Trump presidency, strict banking regulations. However, it must also address the societal fall-out of a merely monetary focus of the Euro zone in the form of growing economic and social inequality. Again, this is of pivotal importance for both the cohesion of the EU itself and its competitive partnership with the United States. Whether or not the Trump administration will reanimate the TTIP negotiations remains to be seen. The odds are clearly against any such option. But in case of a TTIP

silver lining, the bargaining position of the EU will be stronger when, in the meantime, the Union has demonstrated to its own constituency its ability to combine economic prosperity with societal cohesion.

Author's coordinates:

Professor Wolfgang Seibel, University of Konstanz, Department of Politics and Public Administration, 78457 Konstanz, Germany, wolfgang.seibel@uni-konstanz