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The reinforcement of European 'Trumpism' – on the verge of a 'new' Europe?

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Introduction

The Transatlantic relationship is on the verge of a highly unusual structural transformation that has the potential to change the outlook of both the European and international security architectures. Shaped by NATO, an alliance between the United States and Europe to guarantee mutual security and avoid the outbreak of war, the relationship is facing a stern test that has been exacerbated by the intensification of ‘mediation’ discussions being held on the war between Russia and Ukraine. However, in addition to renewed pressure from the newly re-elected President Trump whose ‘go at it alone’ approach appears to be hurting the political self-esteem of European leaders, key fissures within Europe itself threaten to further derail an already fragmented continent. Among the examples are divisions on issues like military defence, the degree of support for Ukraine and even EU enlargement. Growingly, specifically right-wing, European leaders appear to be in line with Trump’s rhetoric which calls for profound change in Europe’s approach to domestic and interstate issues. Accordingly, this analysis will assess the reasons behind this change, focusing on how the fact that specific European leaders accept and agree with Trump’s criticisms of ‘Europe’ might alter the region’s security and cooperation architecture. Most importantly, it will consider the extent to which ‘Trumpism’s’ consolidation in Europe might alter what one actually means by “Europe” and the subsequent implications this may have for the transatlantic alliance.

The revitalization of the “role of the individual”

The relationship between the new American administration and ‘Europe’ – a broad term the exact definition of which growingly requires extra clarification, is at the very least fragile. A significant reason behind this is the EU’s passive approach to the fundamental mutual security commitments that underpin the transatlantic alliance. President Donald Trump, for example, believes that European countries, especially influential ones like [Germany](#), have simply taken advantage of the economic and military guarantees that come with being in an alliance with the United States. He has warned that there will be consequences in the face of withdrawal of American support should European countries not succeed in doubling their military spending. That said, the foreign policy strategies of both Trump Administrations have always

stood out for the highly leader-centric approach they adopt. In fact, in one's assessment of a specific state's foreign policy hierarchy, the 'Trump case' calls for a reconsideration of the authority that 'individuals' (leaders) continue to possess. **In particular, during periods of structural alterations, such as the weakening of international institutions and the evolution of 'alternative alliances' that have been arising increasingly spontaneously, the role played by the political will of 'leaders' tends to be magnified.** Trump presidencies are the ultimate demonstration of this, reinforcing just how important personal relationships can be in diplomacy.

Trump is a politician whose conduct, both domestic and international, attracts a range of interdisciplinary reflection. This includes fields as complex as international relations theory, with his foreign policy decisions taking one back to the core essence of theories like classical (and neo) realism but also more 'plain-speaking' fields that can shed light on how assertive diplomatic behaviour can help yield genuine results. Trump is a unique case in this regard, with his unconventional personality reinforcing the importance that both political will and diplomatic strategy of a specific influential individual might have in global affairs. This relates directly to the differing levels of amiability that are demonstrated in both Trump's direct but also administration-level interactions with different European leaders. As suggested, in the context of potentially structure-altering regional dynamics, the impact of this is bolstered and will play a key role in upcoming negotiations on the war in Ukraine and the resolution of the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

"Europe" through Trump's eyes

The traditional ambiguity that more often than not surrounds Trump's views on various global issues does not extend to the issue of NATO and defence spending. The American president once made it clear that as per his information, only [5 NATO members](#) were contributing their 'fair share'. Even though this number has risen since (only slightly, to [11](#)), Trump maintains his view that the US is disproportionately contributing to the security of states that should be their own security guarantors. In fact, Trump was adamant that he would use America's dominant position in bilateral trade relations as a way to compensate for (essentially punish) those countries that refused to boost their defence spending.

Crucially, Trump's scepticism of Europe, and specifically the EU-centrism of European interstate relations, appears to resonate in an ever-larger range of European capitals. Several leaders of a small but increasingly vocal group of 'European' countries are echoing the concerns and discontent of their newly re-elected ally. This is not only a

group that he believes are less to blame for Europe's structural weaknesses but also individuals whose leadership styles and geopolitical orientations he does not reject and actually respects. The American president never hides his admiration for his counterparts, with it being a proven fact that in negotiations the maintenance of positive relations with his favourite leaders tends to take precedence over [the advice](#) of his inner team. The current situation therefore suggests that Trump will continue to once again implement his now well-known doctrine of 'targeted' and 'selective' engagement with the aim of maximizing American interests.

Prior to Trump's return, it was being speculated that certain European states would have to volunteer to the complex role of 'mediating' between the US and Europe's most powerful countries to address common issues. There was some hope in leading European capitals that vis a vis the issue of resolving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Trump would not adopt an approach that differs radically from that of its predecessor. This was especially related to his relations with Vladimir Putin and the fear that Trump, in line with his own personal interpretations of what might benefit American interests and its economy, would negotiate something that would heavily undermine the policy adopted by both the previous US administration and the European Commission.

As feared by most, however, the most recent developments regarding the negotiation of a solution to the situation in Ukraine indicate that Trump's scepticism of the EU as a credible and reliable partner has remained and even intensified. Instead of uniting over a common objective, Trump's arrival might push Europe into an alternative scenario whereby specific European nations might be forced into taking real ownership over the continent's security. The emergency security summit that took place on February 17th indicated just this, with certain European leaders deeply unsettled by Trump's reluctance to count on the EU's (and Ukraine's) participation in negotiations with Russia. Paradoxically, however, this situation is actually fuelling rather than preventing regional fragmentation. First, the attending leaders did not express a unanimous position on the issue of sending peacekeeping or military forces to Ukraine for the aim of safeguarding a hypothetical ceasefire agreement. Second, and perhaps most tellingly, the summit actually attracted some [backlash](#) from certain European states. Leaders of the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovenia publicly expressed their discontent at the lack of an invitation to the summit, with the Slovenian President suggesting that by dividing itself Europe will only further weaken the weight of its actorness in conflict mediation and resolution. Although the list of invitees was broadened for the [second meeting](#), these gatherings, along with the Munich Security Conference, failed in the basic but core tasks of achieving

unanimity among European allies. This reinforces the fact that leading European leaders, through their inability to operate cohesively and decisively, have exposed themselves to even more pressure from an American president that has proven to be inherently sceptical of traditional alliances.

The 'new look' European leaders

The Trump-Europe relationship has always been a strained one, with the American president's insistence on calling out European allies a reflection of his highly authoritative and self-imposing diplomatic style. In comparison with the first presidency, however, the sudden but decisive 'turn to the right' in Europe and the embracing of populist rhetoric by the electorate means there is a key difference that currently plays into Trump's hands. The European leaders that surrounded him in the first term were genuinely ['moderates'](#) and even if current leading governments remain relatively centrist, the emergence of genuine support for more right-wing and even far-right movements in European countries is undeniable.

This has given Trump significant room for manoeuvre. Both through the President's own social media channels but also through members of his closer team, the Administration has repeatedly expressed support for politicians that sympathize with his Euro-scepticism and unwillingness to continue upholding the Transatlantic alliance in its current form. Moreover, the political styles and rhetoric of individual leaders like Giorgia Meloni, Victor Orban and Robert Fico are significantly more closely aligned with what in Elon Musk's definition classifies as ["competent leadership"](#) *not* based on false and failed ideals. In fact, both Meloni and Orban have been described as the primary 'spreaders' of "Trump's [political gospel](#)", suggesting that Trump's frustration with European commitments to NATO do not seek to target "Europe" as a whole. Described by some as 'illiberal', 'populist' and 'anti-establishment', this new wave of influential European politicians has opened up the possibility of much deeper change in the European political landscape than just a few right-wing victories in specific countries.

These leaders differ from 'conventional' European leaders that tend to consider the EU as the dominant force of European integration and a model that all European countries must aspire to. The essence of modern-day European populism consists of a clear rejection of Europe's strategic position, essentially mirroring Trump's emphasis on the inability to prioritise national interests due to international over-commitments. The likes of [Meloni](#), [Orban](#) and [Fico](#) are all united by tough immigration policies, a significantly more balanced and 'laid back' rhetoric with

regards to international conflicts and an unease with what they consider to be an unbalanced EU that fails to advocate for the interests of *all* its members. For example, Victor Orban's presidency during Hungary's chairmanship of the European Council brought to the fore his proposition which consisted, in simple terms, "[making Europe great again](#)". This calls for a direct solution to a stagnating common economy and falling productivity which has resulted in European companies losing out in competitiveness to their Chinese and American counterparts. Orban, by citing Mario Draghi's study on European competitiveness, argues that EU institutions themselves are to blame for the poor performance of European industries and economies. Unfavourable conditions, such as excessive administrative burdens and too many reporting obligations have led the EU to stagnation and unproductivity. Moreover, slow economic performance makes the EU and the economies of its member states significantly more vulnerable to external pressure. This includes the hypothetical imposition of tariffs by the US against Europe should Donald Trump decide to act on the threats he voiced during the election campaign. Crucially, however, conservative leaders like Viktor Orban question the nature and moral legitimacy of the EU's leadership model. In addition to fiery exchanges with Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, Orban regularly claims that if anything, Europe should treat Trump's calls for 'greatness' as an inspiration to make change happen and not as a threat which requires an aggressive retaliation.

Future prospects – further erosion is not a given

The future of the transatlantic alliance, at least in its traditional form, is bleak. Even though Donald Trump's time in office is limited to just one more (current) term, the consequences of the envisioned changes will shake up an alliance that was in many ways unique in its mutual solidarity, despite the economic and military superiority of the United States. However, if one was to hope for an alternative scenario where the US and Europe take *just* a temporary break from their currently troubled alliance, it would not be beyond the realms of possibility. After all, many leading European nations take particular pride in their international status. From the perspective of individual personnel, Donald Trump undoubtedly has a more amicable set of leaders to deal with. Nevertheless, this does not mean that 'twisting' Europe's arm through his traditional political style will be a simple task. A prime example of this is how in France, Marine La Pen, one of the leaders of far-right National Rally, has adopted a deliberate distancing strategy from Trump and his statements. Le Pen did not only not rush to congratulate Trump after his re-election but was also clear that the rhetoric coming from the US president [worried and unsettled](#) her. Essentially, Le Pen

believes and understands that a hostile, anti-European Washington cannot be given infinite permissiveness if Europe wants to continue operating on its own terms. Moreover, engaging in a trade war with the US would almost certainly require the search of alternative partners, which means having to deepen economic ties with China cannot be ruled out.

The approach adopted by Le Pen can be described as 'rare' among right-wing European leaders. One can simply look at the momentum behind the AfD in Germany and the re-emergence of figures like Nigel Farage on the political arena to understand that Europe is looking increasingly 'to its right'. However, just like Trump adapts maximum transactionalism in his bilateral relations, one should not rule out a Europe that is eventually forced into a more assertive position for the sake of 'saving face' in front of its own people. This, however, can only be possible through, just like Trump himself, fearless and unconventional leaders who when making decisions tend to prioritise their own thinking and plans instead of institutional frameworks and commitments.

Conclusion

A core tenet of Trumpism is that America's traditional alliances have failed to benefit the US because of the inability of the other side to live up to what are basic commitments. This issue originates from a profound leadership crisis, evident in the EU's slowing economy and its now lack of actorness in foreign affairs. As with any institution, real change can only take place if there is internal recognition of a problem, independent from the amount of external pressure being applied. Even though Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 election and his highly problematic time out-of-office forced many to write off a political comeback, his ideas and foreign policy ideology appear to have found themselves in Europe.

Several Central and Eastern European countries are now led by politicians that are inherently doubtful of the current European security architecture and are passionately calling for change. Even though the exact outcome of 'Trumpism's' consolidation in Europe is unclear, **it has been the driving force of our redefinition of what exactly one means by Europe**. Western European leaders and diplomats in Brussels continue to back the EU and categorize leaders like Orban and Fico as 'illiberal'. However, the ties of these leaders with Russia and their consistent calls for the weakening of sanctions mean the EU simply cannot afford to 'lose' them. Countries like Hungary and Slovakia argue that they are [disproportionately affected](#) by a 'European' policy that is decided by powerful EU members that simply do not

represent all Europeans. Therefore, to empower 'Europe and its people', many leaders feel they no longer have to be 'reserved' in their acceptance of Trumpism and everything it encompasses.

As suggested initially, Trump's personal relationships with other leaders can be volatile and escalate in either direction without notice. However, his return to office coincided with perhaps the most decisive period of Europe's ongoing identity crisis. The EU's leadership model is increasingly under question and right-wing leaders that are more supportive of the US president and his ideas are taking a foothold in European politics. This, crucially, is a process that began before Trump's return as leaders, on both national and supranational levels, were calling for a more cohesive EU that defended the interests of its members. The rapid spread of Trumpism might prove to be a key turning point that pushes Europe away from the leadership vacuum that currently defines it as a region. Whether this will be at the expense of the broader "Western" alliance with the US, however, is largely in the hands of the individuals concerned. This reinforces the arrival of a new period in international affairs, where amidst increasing anarchy and disorder the "individual" level of analysis will prove most helpful for international relations analysts.

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