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The Current State of Transatlantic Relations: Déjà vu All Over Again?

Abstract: While the United States and Europe share a set of basic values and interests, debates across the Atlantic do repeatedly occur, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Transatlantic relations under the Trump Administration have experienced noticeable political tensions that were last witnessed under the Bush Administration in the early years of the millennium. There is a sense of *déjà vu* in Europe, given that despite Donald J. Trump's unusual rhetoric, the issues in hand are not necessarily new. Washington's take on the international order and transatlantic relations is best described by the concept of conservative internationalism, which differs from other U.S. foreign policy approaches yet continues to be in contrast with the more liberal views in Europe.

Keywords: conservative internationalism, Trump, West, geopolitics

Introduction

Having witnessed a full term of Donald J. Trump's presidency, politicians, experts and pundits often remind that transatlantic relations have mostly gone through anxieties since January 2017. The discord seems stark considering that the transatlantic alliance is referred to as a security community with shared values and interests. While some of the tension does originate from the Trump White House, divergences across the Atlantic are not necessarily new – to quote one of the malapropisms of Yogi Berra: “It's *déjà vu* all over again.”

Thus, the article's objective is twofold. On the one hand, it would like to serve as a reminder that certain areas in transatlantic relations tend to show differences and division among allies, regardless of who is sitting the Oval Office. Certain issues in

political thinking, security and defence or economics and trade repeatedly emerge to reveal how the “New World” continues to differ from the “Old.” The true novelty of Donald J. Trump is that he has repeatedly highlighted chasms¹, which may raise concerns in Europe, yet these are just reminders of how common problems are viewed from different perspectives. On the other hand, the article would like to point out that in contrast to the general notion among the public (especially in Europe), the Trump Administration has been consistent with regard to foreign policy – even if this stance has been unpopular among major European allies. President Trump’s disturbingly open rhetoric may have given the impression that his foreign policy has been solely about nationalistic transactions (associated with the motto “Make America Great Again”), yet in reality it has overall had a consistently conservative take on international relations between 2017 and 2020.

Accordingly, the article’s hypothesis is that the Trump Administration’s foreign policy has followed the concept of conservative internationalism and that the latter’s unpopularity in Europe is due to it being similar to neo conservatism – hence the *déjà vu* in transatlantic relations. In order to confirm this, the article reviews the concept of conservative internationalism, introduced by Henry R. Nau and highlights its characteristics in U.S. foreign and security policy. The article relies on a qualitative methodology based on theoretical works regarding U.S. foreign policy (particularly works on liberal and conservative internationalism), official documents and policy statements issued by the Trump Administration, and the developments on the ground between 2017 and 2020. The theoretical framework is inspired by the debates on the liberal international order, which is deemed to be in crisis. Although both liberal and conservative internationalists work for an international order based on Western values, the details of their respective approach have set them apart. The debates are present in academia and politics alike, and the transatlantic relationship is not safe from them either: as Europeans generally follow the liberal line, they are less open to a conservative American presidency, leading to tensions across the Atlantic.

1. Theories on U.S. foreign policy and transatlantic relations

1.1. Liberal and conservative internationalism

In order to understand the coherent nature of the Trump Administration’s foreign policy, it should first be set in a theoretical framework. The general view of the public is that America’s relationship with world under President Trump has been erratic and ad hoc; however, experts have also offered readings reflecting more coherence. According to some, President Trump has followed the nationalist-

1 Apart from the differences in certain values (e.g. the importance of religion in political discourse or the right to bear arms), Americans and Europeans live in different socio-economic realities (e.g. in healthcare, higher education or even employment conditions).

-populist Jacksonian tradition in foreign policy. This reading relies on Walter Russell Mead's classification of American foreign policy traditions, namely the Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian lines. While the first two are internationalist (particularly in trade and democracy promotion respectively), the latter two are more restrained². Jacksonians are protective of traditional national characteristics and are suspicious with regard to immigration and domestic elites who they believe to serve foreign (globalist) agendas. The only time Jacksonians show interest in international affairs is when national defence and prosperity absolutely necessitate it. In such cases, however, they fiercely confront adversaries³. A Jacksonian president may be considered as a reason for the recent tensions across the Atlantic: the same characteristics of American society that European elites disdain are praised by Jacksonians who regard Europe to be an out of touch actor in world politics⁴. Still, the re-emergence of Jacksonian tradition is insufficient to explain the current rift in U.S.-European relations. It is limited to presidential rhetoric, as the administration has pursued an active foreign policy instead of isolationism.

Mead's typology was intended to offer a fresh view of American foreign policy thinking in 1990s. Until then, debates on U.S. foreign policy were about its ways and means, namely whether it was isolationist or internationalist, and in case of the latter, whether it was dovish or hawkish. The isolationist-internationalist debate seems to be a constant in American public thinking since the beginnings⁵, although realistically speaking American internationalism has been consistent since WWII. In fact, already before the end of the war, Washington established the foundations of the liberal international order and extended it in the aftermath of the bipolar world. The dovish-hawkish debate was originally meant to describe the preferred means of addressing the challenges of Soviet communism throughout the Cold War; nevertheless, the dilemma of means has continued to surround Washington to this day. Similarly, to Mead's archetypes, other traditions of American foreign policy can be identified and arranged in a matrix along goals and means. Based on the American dilemma of spreading democracy or focusing on defence and security, Henry R. Nau identified liberal and conservative internationalist, as well as nationalist and realist strands of U.S. foreign policy. The former two aim more proactive foreign policies, whereas

2 W.R. Mead, *Special Providence. American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Books, New York, 2002, pp. 90–94.

3 W.R. Mead, *The Jacksonian Revolt*, "Foreign Affairs", Vol. 96, No. 2 (March/April 2017), pp. 2–7.

4 W.R. Mead, *The Case Against Europe*, "The Atlantic", April 2002, Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/04/the-case-against-europe/302466/> (access: September 6, 2020).

5 The most notable point of reference in this regard was President George Washington's farewell address in which he cautioned his fellow countrymen to "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world" United States Senate, *Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States*. 2000, Online: <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/WashFarewell.pdf> (access: October 10, 2020), p. 27.

the latter two represent less ambitious agendas. More interestingly, however, Nau's matrix also reveals these traditions' respective emphasis on diplomacy and force in dealing with the outside world: while the former is associated with the practices of realists and liberal internationalists, the latter is more preferred by nationalists and conservative internationalists⁶.

Conservative internationalism is a less known tradition in American foreign policy, introduced by Henry R. Nau himself in 2008. Although separated from the aforementioned three traditions, it combines certain aspects of liberal internationalism, realism and nationalism alike by promoting freedom, applying force along certain principles, and relying on national sovereignty⁷. Conservative internationalism is most easily compared to its liberal counterpart. Both strands believe in maintaining an international order based on Western values (and supported by American hegemony). Yet in almost every other aspect, they are at opposite ends. Liberals are optimistic with regard to the fate of the liberal international order, as the "end of history" was explained by Francis Fukuyama⁸, whereas conservatives are less certain that this outcome is inevitable. While liberals hold Western values universal, conservatives believe that they can only be spread where appropriate historical and cultural foundations are given. Liberals also have confidence in international institutions and organizations, as these are places to exchange views peacefully. By contrast, conservatives are sceptical with regard to these bodies and associate them with obstacles for defending national sovereignty and interests. Instead, conservative internationalists rely on the nation state and its hard power, which they see as a regular pillar for diplomacy to stand on. Liberal internationalists are not only wary of relying on force but are only willing to do so if they have (preferably international) legal mandate in their hands. Lastly, liberal and conservative internationalists have different views regarding the elites in public affairs⁹: in the liberal tradition, intellectuals are held in high regard, often as leaders of opinion, which can be traced back to Immanuel Kant's secret article for Perpetual Peace¹⁰. Among conservatives, however, the legitimacy of ideas comes not from elites but from the public (at least in free societies)¹¹.

6 H.R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 27.

7 H.R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, "The American Interest", Summer (May/June) 2014, p. 61.

8 F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?* "The National Interest", No. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3–18.

9 H.R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, "Policy Review", No. 150, August & September 2008, pp. 6–10.

10 I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Essay*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1903, p. 158.

11 H.R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, "Policy Review", No. 150, August & September 2008, p. 10.

These quarrels may seem abstract, yet their relevance in contemporary politics becomes clear in light of the current state of the liberal international order recently suffering from internal and external challenges. The former are related to the shock and after effects of the 2008 financial-economic recession and overall trends of globalization that have created inequalities within and among societies. Some of these trends go hand in hand with (neo)liberal policies, especially since their expansion after the Cold War¹². External challenges come from emerging centres of power trying to gain more influence at the expense of U.S. hegemony in the world. Likewise, the rise of these competitors was enabled by the expansion of liberal policies after the post-bipolar ‘unipolar moment’, *inter alia* through increased efforts of U.S. interventionism¹³. Overall, not only critics but liberals as well describe the order’s current state as being in crisis. Still, mainstream liberal scholars of international relations such as Michael W. Doyle, Joseph S. Nye Jr. and G. John Ikenberry, who introduced the concepts of democratic peace, soft power and interdependencies, and the liberal characterization of the U.S.-led international order respectively, regard the order’s Kantian triangle (liberal democracy, international institutions and trade) to be sacrosanct. By contrast, conservatives like Victor Davis Hanson believe that the U.S. stance towards these factors needs to be revisited and fine-tuned¹⁴. Donald J. Trump’s entry into the American body politic reflected this division in practice.

1.2. A brief overview of transatlantic relations

While transatlantic allies do form a security community, U.S.-European relations have not always been harmonious; the geopolitics, the extent of common values and interests, and the character of the Atlantic order have continuously changed throughout the past nearly three centuries from power balancing to forming occasional alliances under peaceful co-existence, to having a common identity in a co-operative community¹⁵. The latter was most visible after WWII and throughout the Cold War when Washington did not only remain in Europe to balance against Moscow but to keep peace and stability via a liberal internationalist project, namely a rebuilt economy based on open and free markets, and the restraint from extremist political ideologies¹⁶. Just as the United States assumed the role of hegemon

12 B. Jahn, Liberal internationalism: historical trajectory and current prospects. “International Affairs”, Vol. 94, No. 1, (January 2018), p. 57.

13 J. Lind & W.C. Wohlforth: The Future of the Liberal Order Is Conservative. “Foreign Affairs”, Vol. 98, No. 2, (March/April 2019), pp. 70–80.

14 V.D. Hanson: New World Order, We Hardly Knew Ye. “Hoover Digest”, No. 1, (Winter 2019), pp. 65–168.

15 Ch.A. Kupchan, The Atlantic Order in Transition. The Nature of Change in U.S.-European Relations, [in:] Anderson, Jeffrey J. et. al. (eds.), The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008, pp. 111–113.

16 Ch. Layne, America as European Hegemon, “The National Interest”, No. 72, (Summer 2003), pp. 19–21.

underpinning the rules-based international order (or at least its Western core), America became an “empire by invitation” in Europe, giving birth to NATO which remains to be the most successful alliance in history¹⁷.

Yet as the common Soviet enemy disappeared, the geopolitical reason behind the transatlantic bond began to fade; major Western European allies became more outspoken in their resistance against American policies, as the latter were less mindful of preserving allied unity¹⁸ and focused on other parts of the world. The most vivid rift in post-bipolar transatlantic relations occurred in the early 2000s. Washington’s policies (above all the 2003 intervention in Iraq) highlighted allied differences in strategic thinking, operative capabilities and thus actual behaviour. These divisions dominated the international literature on transatlantic relations at the time. Most notably, as Robert Kagan pointed out: “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus”¹⁹. Neoconservatives displayed an agenda that differed from European policies; Washington’s tendency for a unilateralist approach, emphasis on hard power and decreased attention to environmentalist concerns were in contrast with the ideas of multilateralism, soft power and sustainability that have been descriptive of Brussels.

The reason for today’s *déjà vu* is that key policies of the Trump Administration seem to reflect the same cracks in transatlantic relations. Even the characterization of Donald J. Trump echoes that of George W. Bush²⁰ despite the fact that the two presidents’ personas are different. Yet President Trump is no neoconservative. In fact, some neoconservatives criticize him regularly. President Trump seems to break with post-WWII American foreign policy traditions, lamenting its post-Cold War practices, an ill-balanced relationship with allies and adversaries while calling for less democracy promotion and more military power²¹. While this suggests that the Trump Administration discards the liberal international order, the essence of its criticism lies in *how* the order is managed. Thus, a more accurate description of its foreign policy is offered by conservative internationalism. Although conservative internationalism does share key values with liberal internationalism, its means of defending these values makes it unpopular among liberals. The Trump Administration’s European reception is a perfect example.

17 G. Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation” in the American Century, “Diplomatic History”, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 190–206.

18 D.M. Andrews, The United States and Its Atlantic Partners: The Evolution of American Grand Strategy, “Cambridge Review of International Affairs”, Vol. 17, No. 3 (October 2004), pp. 423–430.

19 R. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power. America and Europe in the New World Order*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2003, p. 3.

20 I.H. Daalder, The End of Atlanticism, “Survival”, Vol. 45, No. 2, p. 157.

21 D.J. Trump, Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech, “The New York Times”, April 27, 2016, Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html> (access: September 11, 2018).

2. Conservative *déjà vu* in transatlantic relations

2.1. Conservative America, liberal Europe and the world

The reason for European criticism of the Trump Administration is twofold: on the one hand, it is induced by President Trump's harsh rhetoric regarding European partners and the viability of NATO or the EU. On the other hand, it comes from the fact that Donald J. Trump's attitude is in sharp contrast with that of Barack H. Obama who was more popular among Europeans to begin with. The former factor could be offset by performance on the ground. Indeed, Donald J. Trump has made unprecedented and disturbing remarks concerning NATO (once calling the backbone of the transatlantic bond "obsolete") or the EU (once referring to America's first and foremost economic partner as a "foe" on trade). Yet his administration's official documents have been formulated to strengthen the Western alliance. Hence, the real thorn in relations relates to the second factor; the Trump Administration's conservative internationalism prescribes a different approach to transatlantic issues than the Obama Administration's (and overall the European Union's) liberal internationalism.

The Trump Administration's 2018 Europe Strategy aims at preserving the West, i.e. the political and military alliances and partnerships across the Atlantic²². However, American and European perceptions on the same issues are not in accord. Firstly, they see the world in different light. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy identifies a "competitive world" where America would "preserve peace through strength." It denies the liberal internationalist "assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners"²³. As President Trump's former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster's noted: 'the world is not a "global community" but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage'²⁴. The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy explicitly declares that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security"²⁵. This is a noteworthy statement as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction have been the number one security challenge for Washington since the early 2000s.

22 A.W. Mitchell, Anchoring the Western Alliance, "United States Department of State", June 5, 2018, Online: <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2018/283003.htm> (access: September 13, 2018).

23 The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, pp. 2-4.

24 H.R. McMaster, G.D. Cohn, America First Doesn't Mean America Alone, "The Wall Street Journal", May 30, 2017, Online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426> (access: September 13, 2018).

25 United States Department of Defense, Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America. Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge. January 2018, Online: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (access: October 10, 2020). p. 1.

In the final analysis, the Trump Administration's disappointment in liberal policies aimed at integrating other major powers like the People's Republic of China or the Russian Federation reflects the conservative take on the pressures of the liberal international order. By contrast, the EU's perception remains closer to the tenets of liberal internationalism. The 2016 Global Strategy emphasizes "principled pragmatism" – as opposed to the Trump Administration's "principled realism" – and sees "a difficult, more connected, contested and complex world" where the EU would rely on its "enduring power of attraction" hand in hand with its values²⁶. In other words, Washington sets greater emphases on geopolitics, great power competition, hard power and national sovereignty, whereas Brussels continues to rely on the procedures of the rules based international order (for example keeping the Iran nuclear deal), seeking cooperation via soft power and believing in the benefits of further economic and political integration.

2.2. American conservative view of Europe

The European unease over American foreign policy under President Trump has also come from his take on the transatlantic relationship. Although the Trump Administration has officially re-confirmed the U.S. commitment to a strong and stable Europe as well as the importance of the transatlantic bond, its rhetoric and actions have raised questions in this regard. Overall, there is a sense among critics that since 2016, Washington has not considered Europe an important partner²⁷. Diplomatic controversies have taken place in Western Europe (in Brussels and Berlin) where the Trump Administration's representatives have broken with diplomatic protocols or caused confrontation. By contrast, U.S. ambassadors in East-Central European capitals have seemed to be more cooperative with their hosts. Whereas German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have had indirect verbal clashes with President Trump (with the former even avoiding his presence), Polish President Andrzej Duda has met on several occasions with him on matters of security and defence. In addition to Secretary Pompeo's visit to East-Central Europe in February 2019 and August 2020²⁸, the White House itself has been more open to heads of state and government from the region than during the Obama years²⁹. Thus,

26 European External Action Service, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, June 2016, p. 10, p. 13 and p. 16.

27 D.M. Herszenhorn, Trump's relationship with Europe goes from bad to nothingness, "Politico", June 3, 2020, Online: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/03/donald-trump-europe-strategy-300074> (access: September 2, 2020).

28 M. Kartinschnig, Mike Pompeo's summer feel-good tour of Europe, "Politico", August 14, 2020, Online: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/14/mike-pompeos-summer-feel-good-tour-of-europe-395200> (access: September 12, 2020).

29 E. Tamkin, For love or money? Why Central European leaders are visiting the White House, "The Washington Post", May 2, 2019, Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/05/02/love-or-money-why-central-european-leaders-are-visiting-white-house/> (access: September 12, 2020).

there has been a sense since 2018 that Washington under President Trump re-cycled the neoconservative playbook of undermining transatlantic institutions and dividing European allies.

However, this is not the case. Firstly, the Trump Administration has not opted for a liberal (expanding) but a conservative (preserving) agenda aimed at re-tuning the liberal international order. While its conservative internationalism has been cynical with regard to international organizations and has shown unilateralist tendencies, it has not questioned key alliances³⁰. President Trump did not withdraw from NATO but enhanced U.S.-led deterrence measures on its Eastern flank. There is nothing new in Washington's complaints that most European allies do not spend enough on defence. Criticism in this regard had been clear for nearly half a century. The novelty of the Trump Administration's policy lies in its outspoken nature; its National Security Strategy has declared that "the central continuity in history is the contest of power" mentioning geopolitical considerations several times³¹. Moreover, the Trump Administration's efforts have related to allied defence and deterrence, not out-of-area missions. While it has laid greater emphasis on hard power than any European ally, it has restrained from starting serious armed conflicts that would drag half of NATO in and bypass the other half. Urging European allies (who indeed had begun to increase their defence budgets after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine) is not meant to undermine but to strengthen NATO.

Secondly, the Trump Administration's interest in East-Central Europe is rooted in geopolitical realities and the conservative take on addressing them. Conservative internationalists draw their attention to the borders of the West both in terms of defence and offense. One of the key features of the 2018 Europe Strategy is that it primarily deals with the Eastern and Southern flanks of Europe. As a result, Washington has renewed its focus on Central and Eastern Europe even while having troubles with traditional partners such as Britain, France and Germany³². The main case in point is the position taken on Ukraine, and Russia. Donald J. Trump is often lambasted for his warm rhetoric vis-à-vis Vladimir V. Putin, and although some of his statements are problematic (like the preference of a competitor power's word over that of his own national intelligence agencies), the tough line against Moscow is still led by Washington, not Brussels, Berlin or Paris. In addition to the enhanced military presence in East-Central Europe, the Trump Administration gave defensive lethal weapons (Javelin anti-tank missiles) to Ukraine. The decision reflected a conservative take on international relations, arguing that diplomatic efforts need to be backed by

30 H.R. McMaster, G.D. Cohn, *America First Doesn't Mean America Alone*.

31 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 25 and pp. 26-46.

32 T. Wright, *Trump Is Choosing Eastern Europe*, "The Atlantic", June 6, 2018, Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/trump-is-choosing-eastern-europe/562130/> (access: September 21, 2018).

limited force. By contrast, major European leaders like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron emphasized the necessity of peaceful solutions to the conflict. They did not criticize Washington albeit Berlin used to be against arming Kiev³³, fearing that such a change would lead to the conflict's military escalation. Washington's conservative stance has also been in contrast with Brussels' and Berlin's more liberal position on economic ties to Moscow. Washington has been a vocal critic of the Nord Stream II pipeline project – an enterprise that Brussels is unable, and Berlin is unwilling to shut down³⁴. In light of the U.S. shale gas revolution, President Trump decided to push LNG-exports which would be welcome in East-Central Europe (once the financial and technical requirements are met), especially since Nord Stream II bypasses countries in the region, raising their worries that Western commercial interest enjoy priority over East-Central European (energy) security.

2.3. Conservative take on Western values

The difference in emphases has been clear in values as well. President Trump's 2017 speech in Warsaw highlighted this perfectly. The speech stressed values such as freedom of religion and the sovereignty of the nation-state while emphasizing the civilizational perils against the West or the regulatory barriers to a free market³⁵. The speech was divisive, as most liberal critics saw racism and nationalist populism in it, whereas several conservatives praised it for decisively highlighting cultural factors that have historically defined the West³⁶. The Trump Administration's efforts in re-emphasizing certain values was also reflected by the formation of the Commission on Unalienable Rights in 2019. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo proposed the commission's establishment to revisit fundamental rights, as throughout the past three decades the expansion of human rights has brought controversies concerning their relation to each other³⁷. Though the commission itself is bipartisan, its first draft report received mixed views along a liberal-conservative fault line, as its announcement by

33 M.R. Gordon, Jim Mattis, in Ukraine, Says U.S. Is Thinking of Sending Weapons, "The New York Times", August 24, 2017, Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/world/europe/mattis-ukraine-russia.html> (access: September 12, 2020).

34 H. Ellyatt, Germany won't abandon its massive gas pipeline with Russia yet, analysts say, CNBC, September 14, 2020, Online: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/14/germany-likely-to-stick-with-nord-stream-2-despite-navalny-poisoning.html> (access: September 15, 2020).

35 The White House, Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland. July 6, 2017, Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/> (access: September 21, 2018).

36 R.J. Granieri, Whose West is Best?, "Foreign Policy Research Institute", July 10, 2017, Online: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/07/whose-west-best/> (access: September 12, 2020).

37 United States Department of State, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press, United States Department of State, July 8, 2019, Online: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press-3/> (access: September 12, 2020).

Secretary Pompeo implied a hierarchy of values (though the report itself did not)³⁸. The controversies around the draft report increased because it coincided with protests and riots in the United States. While the uproars have been officially about ending racism, the related public debates have surpassed the specific cases that had ignited them and started to focus on the moral foundations of the United States, deepening political divisions throughout the West. The European Parliament's vote on an anti-racist resolution raised issues among conservatives whether emphasizing the need for self-restraint among law enforcement officials would be a one-sided criticism (even if everyone agrees that racism should be denounced)³⁹.

The fact is that divisions with regard to values are present in Europe anyway. Several East-Central European governments have indicated their preference for conservative concepts of national identity and Judeo-Christian heritage over liberal readings of Western civilization. It was therefore no surprise that President Trump expressed his views on Western civilization in Warsaw and not in Brussels, Berlin or Paris. Politically speaking, the Trump Administration has found common ground with the countries in East-Central Europe along the lines of national sovereignty, external border defence and anti-establishment views. This extended to the realm of foreign policy as well. The most apparent example came in the Middle East where the Trump Administration broke with liberal establishment views by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. The decision received criticism from European countries, as it was deemed too dangerous with regard to the security in the Middle East. Notably, a few East-Central European allies (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania) blocked a joint EU statement in May 2018 that would have condemned the U.S. move⁴⁰.

This political understanding across the Atlantic is sensitive, as it occurs in parallel to quarrels with EU institutions. This is another reason for the sense of *déjà vu* in transatlantic relations. The last time European allies were divided along their relationship with America was under the Bush Administration when U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld distinguished "Old Europe" from "New Europe" along the lines of European support for the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq. Today this division is not due to some kind of rigid Atlanticism in East-central European capitals. The wider region had been deprioritized in U.S. foreign policy during the Obama years until the crisis in Ukraine; while the Obama Administration was engaged with

38 N. Toosi, Pompeo rolls out a selective vision of human rights, "Politico", July 16, 2020, Online: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/16/mike-pompeo-human-rights-hierarchy-366627> (access: September 12, 2020).

39 M. De La Baume, M. Heikkilä, Conservative MEPs wary of backing text condemning Trump, police brutality, "Politico.eu", June 16, 2020, Online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/conservative-meps-wary-of-backing-text-condemning-donald-trump-police-brutality-racism/> (access: September 12, 2020).

40 A. Rettman, EU gagged on 'fundamental' shift in Middle East, "Euroobserver", May 14, 2018, Online: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/141805> (access: September 12, 2020).

Moscow, its criticism of allies like Warsaw and Budapest left a vacuum behind for others to fill. According to the Trump Administration's former Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell, the Trump Administration has tried to reach a balance in renewing engagement and keeping principles⁴¹. This resulted in a "principled engagement"⁴² where the emphasis has been set on security and defence cooperation instead of political and ideological debates. A set of conservative views are shared among these allies, providing an extra political layer to the already intensified geopolitical attention from Washington.

2.4. Conservative take on Western institutions

From a European perspective, one of the main problems with the Trump Administration is its disdain for international institutions, particularly the EU. There is a difference between the mind-set of President Trump and that of his predecessor. While the Obama Administration emphasized the importance of unity among transatlantic partners, the Trump Administration – though looking for a reliable partner in Europe – is less worried about the integration issues of the EU. The most notable examples of this were President Trump's comments on Brexit, his alleged suggestion to Emmanuel Macron to leave the EU, and his views about Germany's position within the bloc. This EU-scepticism was also found at deeper levels. Before becoming a senior advisor to the U.S. Department of State, Jakub Grygiel wrote about the internal problems of the EU, noting that while "a return to aggressive nationalism could be dangerous, [...] a Europe of newly assertive nation-states would be preferable to the disjointed, ineffectual, and unpopular EU of today [in 2016]"⁴³. Such views are reminiscent of the neoconservative takes on EU integration, strengthening the *déjà vu* in transatlantic affairs. This impression has been particularly strong due to the Trump Administration's diplomatic actions ranging from President Trump's unusual statements to his various ambassadors' remarks and initiatives.

One of the major areas of debate has been European defence. Donald J. Trump's dismissive rhetoric on uneven transatlantic burden-sharing in defence led the French and German leadership to openly play with the thought of establishing a European

41 United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Assistant Secretary of State U.S. Policy in Europe. Subcommittee hearing of Assistant Secretary A. Wess Mitchell, June 26, 2018, Online: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/listen/us-policy-in-europe-062618> (audio, between 21:39–22:47 minutes) (access: September 22, 2018).

42 D.A. Wemer, The United States is back in Central Europe, state department official says, "Atlantic Council", July 17, 2019, Online: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-united-states-is-back-in-central-europe-state-department-official-says/> (access: September 2, 2020).

43 J. Grygiel, The Return of Europe's Nation-States. The Upside to the EU's Crisis, "Foreign Affairs", September/October 2016, p. 95.

defence separate from the U.S.⁴⁴. While this seemed harsh, it was not really new. Transatlantic relations have long had a dualist characteristic in which the United States has tended to turn its attention to other regions (mostly the Middle and the Far East), while Europe has focused on itself (mainly the institutional development of the EU)⁴⁵. Europeans have always been frustrated with the American habit of turning away⁴⁶, yet they have also fallen behind in defence efforts and could not offer a clear alternative to Washington's security umbrella. While liberal scholars underline European dismay and the desire to change, conservatives remind them of its fallacy. On the one hand, Washington is looking forward to having a more autonomous transatlantic partner, as it would ease the burden. On the other hand, European dependency on U.S. forces sets Washington in a strong position while the military bases are ideal locations for power projection to other regions. The Trump Administration's take has been reflective of this ambivalence. After hearing about French intentions to support the establishment of a European army, President Trump characterized it as "very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly"⁴⁷.

The other major issue has been trade. The Trump Administration decided to follow a revisionist approach to trade agreements; thus, President Trump withdrew from the TPP and renegotiated NAFTA. This also represented Washington's conservative internationalist thinking. While conservative internationalists are in favour of free trade, they do not trust international organizations, as they believe that the latter work against national interests. Donald J. Trump shares this view when he says that he would like to see not only free but fair trade which, however, is hindered by the other side⁴⁸. The National Security Strategy noted that competitors (primarily the People's Republic of China) were included in international free trade regimes

44 B. Haddad, Trump is getting the European army he wanted, "Politico", November 14, 2018, Online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-army-angela-merkel-emmanuel-macron-donald-trump-getting-what-he-wanted/> (access: September 1, 2020).

45 J.P. Kaufman, The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future, "International Affairs", Vol. 93, No. 2 (March 2017), p. 256.

46 This was the case under the Obama Administration as well when Washington announced its desire to 'pivot' to East Asia. President Obama's initiative had to be renamed 'rebalancing', as it was less outspoken on the fact that the United States would draw attention and resources (military troops) away from Europe.

47 R. Morin, Trump calls Macron's comments on building a European army to defend against US 'insulting', "Politico", November 9, 2018, Online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-calls-macrons-comments-on-building-a-european-army-to-defend-against-u-s-insulting/> (access: September 1, 2020).

48 W. Ross, P. Navarro, The Trump Trade Doctrine: A Path to Growth & Budget Balance, "RealClearPolicy", October 17, 2016, Online: https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2016/10/18/the_trump_trade_doctrine_a_path_to_growth__budget_balance.html (access: September 1, 2020).

like the WTO because Washington had expected economic developments to lead to political reforms within the countries. Not only was this liberal idea mistaken but competitors have corrupted international organizations with their own agendas⁴⁹. Although the EU is not among these actors, the UN is. The Trump Administration's trade quarrels with the EU have taken a tit-for-tat interaction, starting with Washington's decision to introduce tariffs on steel and aluminium imports. Yet transatlantic disagreements on trade and economic relations did not always originate in the Trump White House. While TTIP is off the table officially due to Washington's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, its outlook was already dim by the end of the Obama Administration because of European (not least of all German) objections. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration's decision to introduce a set of tariffs on European products was a legitimate move, as it was approved by the WTO as compensation for European subsidies provided to Airbus several years ago⁵⁰.

3. Prospects in transatlantic relations

Based on the strategic foreign and security documents and key official statements by the Trump Administration, the article's hypothesis can be confirmed: U.S. foreign policy has followed the main tenets of conservative internationalism between 2017 and 2020. Since these characteristics have led to quite similar issues as neoconservative policies in the early 2000s, there is a sense of *déjà vu* in Europe even though the two concepts are not exactly the same. As for the future, the general wisdom is that a second term by the Trump Administration could deliver further tensions across the Atlantic, as presidents who remain in office for another cycle feel freer to implement foreign policy initiatives. Donald J. Trump has proven to be a surprise in politics on many levels, and foreign policy has been one of his key areas of active performance between 2017 and 2020⁵¹. By contrast, many experts of international relations believe that a Biden presidency would improve U.S.-European ties⁵². Yet, there are two caveats to this.

Firstly, even if the U.S. administration would alter its conservative internationalist foreign policy to a more liberal one, the geopolitical realities are in the forefront for

49 The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, p. 3 and p. 37.

50 J.H. Vela, Trump poised to hit EU with billions in tariffs after victory in Airbus case, "Politico", September 14, 2019, Online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-poised-to-hit-eu-with-billions-in-tariffs-after-airbus-win/> (access: September 3, 2020).

51 The meetings with Kim Jong-un and the negotiated treaties between the State of Israel and countries like the UAE and Bahrein are only a few examples of unprecedented foreign policy moves.

52 E.B. Jackson *et. al.*, Snap Poll: What Foreign-Policy Experts Make of Trump's Coronavirus Response, "Foreign Policy", May 8, 2020, Online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/08/snap-poll-what-foreign-policy-experts-think-trump-coronavirus-response-election/> (access: September 12, 2020).

the decision-makers in Washington. The sanctions on Russia for example are driven by Congress who was initially wary that President Trump would withdraw his predecessor's executive orders on economic sanctions. Congress has not only enacted but supplemented them with additional measures, including potential secondary sanctions. The Trump White House has shown some restraint in applying these sanctions against European actors. One of the main legal vehicles for these sanctions is CAATSA, which President Trump signed in August 2017, noting that the original version of the bill had to be improved in order to include delays that could prevent U.S. and European companies from the applied sanctions' negative effects⁵³. Since then Congress has delivered new pieces of legislation introducing further opportunities for imposing secondary sanctions. Such sanctions are applied extraterritorially often without having serious barriers in international law. Theoretically, the EU could apply countermeasures (as with the blocking statute in the case of sanctions on European companies doing business in the Iranian economy); the financial and economic costs are too high for European actors to play along⁵⁴.

Secondly, even European countries are sceptical of fundamental foreign policy change after the elections. German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas noted that Europe should expect to do more for its own security (at least in the wider region) without American support. Optimists tend to emphasize Joseph R. Biden's Atlanticist background and European-like agenda which would mean a U-turn *inter alia* in climate change and multilateralism. Nevertheless, they also remind that this would not be realized overnight and would also require European efforts⁵⁵. This is a familiar message for Europeans. Barack H. Obama's presidency was praised in its first months in Europe albeit experts warned that expectations are mutual – and as it turned out, potential recipes for disappointments. Without having any ultimatums whatsoever, the fact is that Europe either cooperates with the United States or comes up with alternatives of its own – in both cases paying the political, military and economic price accordingly. The idea that Europe has to move out of its comfort zone means that inconvenient truths and responsibilities need to be addressed, possibly even in opposition to Washington.

53 The White House, Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Signing the “Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act”, The White House, August 2, 2017, Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-signing-countering-americas-adversaries-sanctions-act/> (access: September 12, 2020).

54 S. Lohmann, Extraterritorial U.S. Sanctions, “SWP Comment, Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Politik”, February 5, 2019, Online: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C05_lom.pdf (access: September 9, 2020), p. 3. and p. 6.

55 A. Soros, A Biden victory could reset transatlantic relations, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 6, 2020, Online: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_biden_victory_could_reset_transatlantic_relations (access: September 12, 2020).

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