

Trump and the defence of Europe

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No one knows what US President-elect **Trump** will do in office. Will he cut a geopolitical deal with Russian President Putin? Will he keep American soldiers in Europe? Or withdraw them but keep the nuclear guarantee? Or worse, even rip up the North Atlantic treaty?

Having said during the election campaign in March 2016 that **NATO** was obsolete, he stated during the first presidential debate in September that he was 'all for NATO'. His more troublesome instincts may be tamed by the US **checks and balances** system, including within his own party. But American foreign policy-making is extraordinarily centralised in the office of the President, particularly since 9/11, with the courts and Congress relatively sidelined. President Trump will wield tremendous power.

No European member of NATO wants to lose the protection of the US. But Europeans would be wise to at least *improve their own defences*, in case they can no longer depend on NATO –meaning the US– as much as before. Moreover, Europeans should probably also consider if they could collectively defend themselves if they had to, until now a taboo in European defence discussions.

Currently, the main state-based military threat to European security is **Russia**. Although possible, it is not obvious that Moscow wants to risk a shooting war with any European NATO member, and Russia perhaps prefers to wage war via hybrid means. In 2015, France, Germany and the UK combined spent US\$146 billion on defence, whereas Russia spent US\$66 billion.

But Russia is not the only threat to European security. There is a wide range of security challenges across the EU's broad neighbourhood that may require Europeans to use military means, such as preventing conflicts or helping weak states like Mali fight terrorists.

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To follow through on a credible full-spectrum plan for European defence would entail at least two things: a lot more **money** for defence and real political **commitment** to acting together if needed. This would require radical reforms for European governments, such as draining the swamp of their defence resource waste and making their differing political and security priorities converge. And they would have to be willing and able to defend the geographically isolated Baltic States.

The elephant in the room for such a European defence plan would be nuclear deterrence. If Trump withdrew the American nuclear umbrella –which should be very unlikely– would

France and the UK be willing and able to provide nuclear-armed protection for other Europeans? A Euro-nukes plan based on the French and British deterrents seems daunting today. As the 2016 German security white paper puts it: 'only together with the United States can Europe effectively defend itself against the threats of the 21st century and guarantee a credible form of deterrence. NATO remains the anchor and main framework of action for German security and defense policy'.

But the US will expect countries like Germany, Italy or Spain to invest much more in their conventional defence forces. **Germany** is perhaps a case in point. In a March 2016 *Washington Post* interview, Trump singled out Germany for criticism about not carrying its weight in NATO. Furthermore, such views had already become mainstream in the US. In a 2015 Pew opinion poll, 54% of Americans said that Germany should make a greater military contribution to international security, with only 37% saying it should limit its role.

As a proportion of GDP, Berlin devotes only a bit over half of what Paris and London do to defence (Italy and Spain devote even less than Germany, so they will surely also be pressured by Trump to spend more on defence). But such an investment would be domestically difficult for Berlin. Although Chancellor **Angela Merkel** has said since Trump's election that Germany will need to increase its defence spending, the defence budget may not grow substantially more in the short-term, at least until after the 2017 general election, in part because of public opinion. In a 2016 Pew poll, only 34% of Germans favoured increasing defence spending, with some 47% saying it should remain at its current level.

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Deeper European cooperation for defending Europe could not be credibly carried out via the EU, since the UK will depart. Depending on the precise nature of any US military scale-back, something like **a strengthened European pillar of NATO** would probably be needed instead. That in turn would require much closer political and military alignment between Berlin, Paris and London.

However, another complication during the Trump era could be **bilateral defence deals**, which could harm NATO's political coherence. Poland's government, which already meets NATO's spending target of 2% of GDP on defence, and shares some of Trump's worldview, might be tempted to push for a separate bilateral deal with the US. Bilateralism could also harm European political relationships more broadly. Some in London hope that Trump will somehow reinforce the UK's position in its forthcoming EU exit negotiations, given the President-elect's support for Brexit.

But this could encourage an 'Anglo-sphere versus Euro-sphere' divide between NATO allies, with the US and the UK on one side and France, Germany, Spain or Italy on the other. Similar to the bitter splits over the 2003 Iraq war, this could potentially force other European governments to choose sides. In that scenario everyone would lose out. Alternatively, in a more optimistic scenario, the UK could potentially act as a bridge between Europe and the new US Administration on defence matters, which could play positively into the ongoing Brexit negotiations with the EU.

No EU government wants to disband NATO. But events change strategic conventions. For example, because of his actions since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has made NATO defend again. When pushed, European countries have been able to align and act together –to help **deter Russian aggression** in Eastern Europe since 2014 and to combat the self-styled **Islamic State** since the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks–. The election of Donald Trump is potentially an even more profound event, considering the uncertainty it has already created for Europe's strategic landscape.