


## How Europe should deal with a Trump Administration

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It is very tempting for political leaders to react to **Donald Trump's** victory with anger or disdain. Leaders who express such sentiments can be sure to be applauded. And we have seen plenty of such statements over the past few days.

But to alienate the next US President is unwise, as it will harm European interests. Instead, **Europe must try to influence Trump's policies** and his decision-making by engaging with him. And it must start to work on a plan B.

Geopolitically, Europe is far from being strong or independent enough to survive a more or less hostile Trump presidency without major damage. It needs an active and engaged US to keep NATO alive and kicking, to help manage relations with Russia and to deal with growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, Europe has a major interest in being involved in US-Chinese relations, as **peace in East Asia** is vital for the European economy.

All these goals cannot be achieved against the US, or independently from the US. In the past, it was **US leadership** on all these issues that provided Europe with a framework in which it could prosper.

But now the cards are being shuffled anew. It is totally unclear whether Donald Trump is inclined to continue the policies the US has pursued over the past decades in Europe or whether he even sees Europe as a valuable partner.

There is no way of knowing to what extent Trump means what he said during the campaign, and whether these ideas will fundamentally change once they are transformed into policies by a larger political and bureaucratic apparatus. His intentions are as unclear as his priorities; and he has no record as a politician to give observers a hint of what he might do.

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A good start is to consider the worst-case assumption that Trump might follow through with what he said during the campaign. If he is serious, we might see policies that will put **NATO's** existence at risk, a deal with **Putin** over the delineation of spheres of influence, unconditional support for Russia and Assad in **Syria**, and **protectionist economic policies** with disruptive effects on the global economy. And that would just be the beginning.

European leaders should therefore rapidly cease commenting on Trump's elections from the sidelines and move towards a strategy of **damage control**.

Such a strategy would involve two elements:

1. **Resist**: European leaders –including the UK– should resist any attempt by the Trump Administration to weaken and undermine NATO. They must oppose a grand bargain with Trump over Eastern Europe –especially Ukraine– and the Middle East –especially Syria–.

European leaders must present unity towards Washington, and they must understand that the only way to prevent the worst from happening is to act in concert. They should start right now to build such a united front: defining their goals and red lines, agreeing on tactics and strategies of how to protect their core interests against a potential assault from a Trump Administration.

2. **Integrate**: at the same time, Europeans must reach out to Trump and to his team. They should start a broad charm offensive. But not independently, but rather in coordination.

Donald Trump is unprepared and unexperienced. He has some general ideas or feelings' but so far no clear policies. European leaders, especially in Germany, France and the UK –those Trump might take more seriously– must seek to influence his views and policies especially with regard to Europe's core interests. The more often they talk to him the better. Russia's President Vladimir Putin has already started his own charm offensive, and European leaders should not leave the floor to such a very skilled political operator.

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that a strategy of this kind would be successful. Trump might just ignore Europe's leaders and go ahead with policies that damage European interests. But given the enormous stakes at play, Europe's leaders should at least try and make an effort.

At the same time, Europeans need to start working on a **plan B**, which would consist, broadly speaking, of gaining greater independence from the US along with a growing ability to act alone.

Even if things go well, America will still expect the Europeans to do much much more with regard to their own security and their eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Among the items on which Obama and Trump are in agreement is that the Europeans must share more of the burden for the alliance. Both leaders have talked about **European 'free-riding'**.

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Trump's election should bring home the point to Europe that this is not just the usual bargaining over burden-sharing among trusted allies. In his farewell speech as US Secretary of Defense in Brussels, Robert Gates in June 2011 warned that 'Future US political leaders –those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it

was for me– may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost’.

With Trump now President-elect, the moment of truth may well come much earlier than many have been led to think.

At any event, Europeans need to become more independent with regard to their security. In the best case this would help retain the US engaged as a partner, as it will be able to see Europe doing its part. In the worst case, should American disengage from NATO, Europe will have already have set up structures to at least partly fill the void.

This is an issue in which the capitals of the major European powers need to take the lead: Berlin, Paris and London, as well as Rome, Madrid and Warsaw. And it will take some time. But the outcome of the 2016 US election ought to serve as a wake-up call that American protection can no longer simply be taken for granted.