

**THE BASIS FOR STRONG US–EUROPEAN  
RELATIONS ENDURES**

CONTINUITY IN INSTITUTIONS AND INTERESTS

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# THE BASIS FOR STRONG US–EUROPEAN RELATIONS ENDURES

## CONTINUITY IN INSTITUTIONS AND INTERESTS

- President Donald Trump’s words and actions are disrupting US–European relations. Yet the structural basis for strong transatlantic ties endures. Key institutions and forces involved in the making of US foreign policy exhibit more continuity than change with respect to transatlantic relations.
- Congress strongly supports NATO. It agrees with the President on the need for greater burden–sharing, yet opposes the President’s harsh and gratuitous attacks on the Alliance.
- Executive Branch Departments, especially the Department of Defence, have longstanding institutional ties with European counterparts. High–level meetings, defence cooperation agreements, military exercises, and relationship–building continue without interruption.
- The US business community strongly opposes tariffs, and has been able to blunt the Administration’s further imposition of tariffs on European partners.
- Public opinion still strongly supports transatlantic defence and trade relations, even as partisan differences grow.



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ISBN 978-951-769-622-7

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen.

Cover photo: European Union

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## CONTINUITY IN INSTITUTIONS AND INTERESTS

### INTRODUCTION

President Donald Trump has insulted European leaders, called the European Union a “foe”, and threatened to pull the United States out of NATO. He is unremitting in his attacks on what he calls unfair trade practices and inadequate defence spending. His rhetoric is harsh and dismissive. In turn, Europeans express shock and anger at his tariffs, his open hostility towards allies, and his withdrawal from international agreements. They see him as a force for disruption. While there have been past crises in US–European relations, many see the damage to transatlantic ties as irreparable this time.

This Briefing Paper argues that the structural basis for strong transatlantic ties endures. It examines key institutions and forces other than the President in shaping US foreign policy. It will explore, in turn, the role of Congress, Executive Branch Departments, the business community, and public opinion. With respect to transatlantic relations, each exhibits more continuity than change. While there should be no complacency about US–European relations, there is also no reason for despair.

### CONGRESS: STRONG VOICE ON SANCTIONS AND NATO, LESS SO ON TRADE

Congress is a co–equal branch of government under the Constitution of the United States. Its powers are spelled out in Article I of the Constitution, and those of the President in Article II. The words “foreign policy” appear nowhere within the document. Congress and the President struggle over the direction of US foreign policy.

On the issue of sanctions, Congress prevailed over the President. Overwhelming majorities in both the House and the Senate supported the imposition of sanctions against Russia in 2017. The President opposed those sanctions on policy as well as principle because they limited the Executive’s flexibility. Yet he signed them into law because he did not wish to look weak. He did not want to risk a likely Congressional overriding of his veto.

Congressional support for sanctions bolstered the State and Defence Department’s institutional desire to continue them against Russia because of its actions in Ukraine, and to impose new sanctions because of its election interference. Congress, with the unspoken support of State and Defence, prevailed. Its strong stance helped to maintain coordinated US–European sanctions against Russia.

Congress also weighed in heavily on the question of NATO. The President’s multiple verbal attacks on NATO led to multiple responses in Congress to defend the North Atlantic Alliance. The Senate re–established its NATO Observer Group in early 2018, a group disbanded 11 years previously. The President’s own Ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, welcomed the Senate action. In addition, the Senate voted on a motion in support of the Alliance by 97 to 2, before the President’s July 2018 trip to NATO headquarters.

Activism increased with the 2018 election of a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. In February 2019, Speaker Nancy Pelosi led the largest delegation of Members ever to attend the Munich Security Conference. Their purpose was clear: to affirm US commitments to Europe.

In addition, Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell invited NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to address a Joint Session of Congress in April 2019 on NATO’s 70th anniversary, the first such address by a NATO Secretary General. They did not wait for a White House request. Their invitation was a rebuke of President Trump and a sign of support for the Alliance.

The new Democratic Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee held several hearings in early 2019 on NATO’s importance. Both he and the ranking Republican Member were in favour of the “NATO Support Act”, which was passed in January 2019 by a 357 to 22 vote. The vote’s importance, which was largely symbolic, was to send a clear message to the President and to European allies.

Similar bipartisan hearings played out in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee – and a vocal supporter of President Trump – opened a 2019 hearing on the

European Command with a resounding statement that America is safer and stronger because of the NATO Alliance.

In short, views on Capitol Hill in support of the Alliance are highly favourable. They are also bipartisan, and did not change when the administration changed.

Opinions on Capitol Hill on burdensharing are also bipartisan and unchanged. The President and Congress agree that NATO Members need to meet the 2% defence spending targets established at NATO's 2014 Wales Summit. This is no new development. Congress has, over many decades, supported more burden-sharing. Yet Members reject the President's harsh and gratuitous attacks, and support the Alliance.

When it comes to trade, Congress has been more circumspect in exerting its powers. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) led opposition last year to the administration's tariffs. He noted how they were damaging international relationships and alienating America's closest friends and allies. Corker sought to offer a bipartisan amendment to require Congressional approval of Section 232 tariffs (those currently in place on steel and aluminum, and threatened on auto imports). Majority Leader McConnell blocked him, calling the amendment an "exercise in futility". Corker expressed astonishment that his Republican colleagues' chief argument against him was that, "We might upset the President". As he pointed out in frustration: "I can't believe it. I would bet that 95% of the people on this side support intellectually this amendment ... A lot of them would vote for it if it came to a vote." Proving his point, Corker won Senate support (including from the Majority Leader) on a similar amendment in a non-binding form, 88 to 11, just a month later.<sup>1</sup>

Opposition in Congress and the business community helped stay the President's hand in terms of his threatened 25% tariffs on auto imports. The White House took note of strong Congressional sentiment, even as Republican leaders avoided directly challenging the President.

## CONTINUITY IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH, ESPECIALLY IN THE DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

Executive Branch agencies carry out the President's policies. The State and Defence Departments also have long-established relationships with European partners. There is substantial policy continuity.

The "engine room" in the US policy process is at the Assistant Secretary level. These officials draft policy papers, participate in interagency meetings, and are responsible for the day-to-day conduct of policy. Their public testimony on US-European relations shows broad policy continuity. For example, testimony on NATO by acting Assistant Secretary of State Philip T. Reeker and Acting Assistant Secretary of Defence Kathryn Wheelbarger in 2019 could easily have been delivered by any of their predecessors. The same is true of testimony by the Commander of the United States European Command, Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti.<sup>2</sup>

At the Department of Defence, former Secretary James Mattis's views matched those coming from his engine room. Transatlantic anxiety grew after his departure. Acting Secretary Mark T. Esper, the third top Defence official in six months, travelled to a NATO ministerial meeting in June 2019 on his second full day in the job. His message in Brussels was one of continuity – a change in leadership at DOD did not change the mission or US commitment to NATO.

More important than one person, of course, is the institution. The 2018 Department of Defence strategy outlines three goals: (1) build a more lethal force; (2) strengthen alliances and attract new partners; and (3) reform the Department for greater performance and accountability. The homepage of the Defence Department, "Our Story", reflects these priorities. One click on "Partnership" leads to report after report on high-level meetings, defence cooperation agreements, military exercises, and relationship-building with NATO and European partners.<sup>3</sup>

1 "Tariffs: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy and the International Economy," Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, July 12, 2018. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/tariffs-implications-for-us-foreign-policy-and-the-international-economy-071218>. Werner, Erica, "Corker says GOP cowers before Trump after party leaders block trade bill," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/06/12/corker-says-gop-cowers-before-trump-after-party-leaders-block-trade-bill/?utm\\_term=.b0dfe96bd5d9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/06/12/corker-says-gop-cowers-before-trump-after-party-leaders-block-trade-bill/?utm_term=.b0dfe96bd5d9). Congressional Record - Senate, July 11, 2018, pp. S4890-1. <https://www.congress.gov/115/crcr/2018/07/11/CREC-2018-07-11-pt1-PgS4890.pdf>.

2 Reeker, Philip T., and Kathryn Wheelbarger, "NATO Expansion: Examining the Accession of North Macedonia," Opening statements before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, June 12, 2019. [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219\\_Reeker\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219_Reeker_Testimony.pdf). [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219\\_Wheelbarger\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061219_Wheelbarger_Testimony.pdf). Scaparrotti, General Curtis M., Opening Statement, Committee on Armed Services, March 5, 2019. [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Scaparrotti\\_03-05-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Scaparrotti_03-05-19.pdf).

3 *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>. "Our Story," U.S. Department of Defense website. <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/> "Partnership," U.S. Department of Defense website. See multiple NATO, European stories. <https://www.defense.gov/Search-Results/Term/2582/partnerships/>.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary Mike Pompeo, and U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison discussed in the North Atlantic Council meeting in Brussels on December 2018. Source: State Department photo/ Public Domain

Finland’s own experience with the US Department of Defence matches the larger pattern. It is one of an increasingly close relationship, as evidenced by defence policy dialogue, information-sharing, joint research, and multiple bilateral and multinational air, naval and ground exercises pursuant to the 2016 Statement of Intent on US-Finland Defence Cooperation. The current Administration is implementing its predecessor’s policies with great energy. In addition, the Defence Department negotiated and signed a trilateral agreement with Sweden and Finland in May 2018 to augment the previous accord. The storyline is one of closer relations and continuity across Administrations.

At the State Department, policy continuity at lower levels is more ambiguous at the top. Secretary Mike Pompeo is careful not to contradict the President, even as he consciously works to soften comments and find common ground. When asked about Trump’s references to the European Union as a “foe”, he responded, “I think what President Trump meant was there are places where the United States economy hasn’t

been treated fairly”. He added, “There are always ... disagreements, there’s spats, there’s trade disputes ... but it’s always the case that our shared value sets ... those always prevail and they will here again too”. He described the overall US relationship with Europe as being “excellent”. On the 70th anniversary of NATO, taking place against the backdrop of Trump’s attacks on European defence spending, Pompeo both stayed on message and adopted a more diplomatic tone: “Canada and European allies will by the end of 2020 invest an additional \$100 billion in our collective security. America is grateful for these efforts, but we can and must do more.”<sup>4</sup>

Critics panned Pompeo’s December 2018 speech in Brussels, ‘Restoring the Role of the Nation State in the International Liberal Order’. They called it “tone deaf and arrogant”, and “ridiculous”, and the speech even

4 McCaffrey, Darren and Alistair Jamieson, “Pompeo says current US-Europe trade deal is ‘not fair’,” *Euronews*, March 6, 2019. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/03/pompeo-says-current-us-europe-trade-deal-is-not-fair>. Remarks at Reception to Celebrate NATO’s 70th Anniversary, YouTube, April 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3HfN6OYBvI>.

drew pointed correction from the European Commission spokesman.<sup>5</sup> Yet its jumbled composition also made bureaucratic sense. It contained elements that Pompeo cares about personally, including an homage to George Marshall and to recently deceased President George H. W. Bush, heroes of transatlantic relations. It contained elements of continuity, with praise for NATO's role in peace and stability and the EU's role in bringing prosperity. Sprinkled throughout were also Trumpian criticisms of multilateralism. Pompeo made it clear that, "Our mission is to reassert our sovereignty". The speech as it emerged was the predictable interaction of contradictory forces – institutional and White House views, intermediated by the Secretary of State.

## THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY'S STRONG OPPOSITION TO TARIFFS

Most US business leaders oppose the Administration's imposition of tariffs. Tariffs disrupt supply chains, hurt corporate competitiveness and profitability, and damage long-term efforts to build markets. As noted by Joshua Bolten, the Chairman of the Business Roundtable: "Through our nation's commitment to free and fair trade and our network of free trade agreements, the United States has shaped the international trading system in favor of our businesses, workers and consumers. The benefits of this approach are immense."<sup>6</sup>

Business leaders are keenly aware of the importance of the European Union as the biggest market for US exports. Transatlantic trade in goods and services totals \$3.75 billion each day. The US and the EU are each other's single largest source and recipient of foreign direct investment, and two-way trade and investment supports more than 16 million jobs.

Business leaders strongly object to Section 232 tariffs imposed on a "national security" basis. As the US Chamber of Commerce testified: "The imposition of

tariffs on our closest allies has undermined American credibility and economic leadership. Europeans are angered to be deemed a national security threat to the United States. Moreover, these unilateral measures have hindered our ability to partner effectively with Europe – and others – to address our common challenges in the global economy."<sup>7</sup>

While business objections did not block steel and aluminum tariffs, they strengthened opposition to the President's threatened 25% tariffs on auto imports under Section 232. Every player in the American auto industry has been outspoken against them. The President agreed to suspend such threatened tariffs when he met with President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker in July 2018. Trade talks followed, and an uneasy truce continues. The interests of the business and financial community stabilize and bolster transatlantic relations.

## PUBLIC OPINION – SUPPORT FOR NATO, SUPPORT FOR TRADE

Public support is the ultimate source of legitimacy and support for US foreign policy. On issues of importance to transatlantic relations, there is continuity – even as partisan differences grow.

Multiple polls show support for US engagement in the world, support for NATO, and support for coming to the aid of Allies. In its 2018 survey, the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, which conducts long-term surveys and asks the same questions over time, found that support for US engagement in the world stood at 70%, the highest level since 9/11. Support for NATO was at 75%, consistent with surveys of the past decade. The subset of those calling for an increased commitment to NATO, at 18%, was the highest number ever recorded. Opinion in support of US military bases abroad and using US troops to defend allies has risen steadily since 2014.<sup>8</sup>

5 Pompeo, Michael R. "Restoring the Role of the Nation-State in the Liberal International Order," U.S. Department of State, December 4, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/restoring-the-role-of-the-nation-state-in-the-liberal-international-order-2/>. Smith, Julie, "Pompeo's Speech in Brussels was Tone-Deaf and Arrogant," *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/07/pompeos-speech-in-brussels-was-tone-deaf-and-arrogant/>. Patrick, Stewart M., "Tilting at Straw Men: Secretary Pompeo's Ridiculous Brussels Speech," Council on Foreign Relations, December 4, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/tilting-straw-men-secretary-pompeos-ridiculous-brussels-speech>. Herszenhorn, David, "Mike Pompeo rips into Trump's EU critics," *Politico*, December 4, 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-brussels-mike-pompeo-critics-plain-wrong/>.

6 Bolten, Joshua, "Tariffs: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy and the International Economy," Opening Statement on behalf of Business Roundtable before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, July 12, 2018. [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/071218\\_Bolten\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/071218_Bolten_Testimony.pdf).

7 Statement of U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Hearing on "Transatlantic Policy Impacts of the U.S.-EU Trade Conflict," Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the Environment, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, June 26, 2019. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20190626/109716/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-ChorlinsM-20190626.pdf>.

8 Smeltz, Dina, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Lily Wojtowicz, "America Engaged: American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2018. [https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report\\_ccs18\\_america-engaged\\_181002.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report_ccs18_america-engaged_181002.pdf).

Not all polling on transatlantic ties is so favourable. A 2019 Pew Research Center poll found significant partisan gaps. On the question of whether “the US should take into account the interests of its allies, even if means making compromises with them”, 69% of Democrats agreed and only 34% of Republicans did so. Reflecting the President’s base of political support, older and less educated adults express more opposition to compromising with allies.<sup>9</sup>

Burden-sharing has wide and sustained support. In a 2017 poll, when asked “Do you favour or oppose the idea of allies taking over some of these [defence] responsibilities so that the US can reduce its presence abroad”, both 83% of Democrats and Republicans agreed. However, there is a partisan gap in intensity. In a 2018 Pew Research Poll, “56% of Republicans say getting other countries to assume more of the costs of maintaining world order is a top priority, compared with just 26% of Democrats”.<sup>10</sup>

Trade. In a Gallup poll, positive views of foreign trade as an opportunity for economic growth moved to a record high of 70% in 2018. That outcome tracked with the Chicago Council poll, which found a large increase since 2016, from 40% to 67%, of those who think international trade is good for creating jobs. Partisan differences on trade deficits match the President’s views. Pew found that over half of Republicans (54%) say “reducing our trade deficit with other countries” should be a top priority, while just a third of Democrats (33%) agree.<sup>11</sup>

Issues and Values. From the standpoint of issues and values important to Europe, polling data provides good news and bad news. Support for the Iran nuclear deal is at an all-time high (66%) and a strong majority supports the Paris Climate Change Accord (68%). Yet partisan gaps on priorities are vast. A Center for American Progress report finds, “Fifty-two percent of Democrats say that ‘working with allies and international institutions to confront global challenges like climate change, poverty, and disease’ should be a top priority, compared with only 19 percent of Republicans”. In

addition, generational differences are notable: While younger voters favour global action on climate change, human rights, and poverty, “[they] are much less committed to traditional international and military engagement than are their elder cohorts”.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite current transatlantic troubles, there is significant continuity of shared interests and values. There is more continuity than change in the views of Congress and the US business community. There is also significant continuity in the views of Executive Branch departments, especially the Department of Defence. Likewise, there is strong support in public opinion for transatlantic defence and trade relations, despite growing partisan differences.

The structural basis for strong and productive transatlantic relations is intact. While there is no reason to despair, there is also a need to repair. Rebuilding cooperation and trust across the Atlantic will take time. Those relations are profoundly important to the protection and promotion of US interests. Efforts to restore them should begin now.

9 Pew Research Center, “Large Majorities in Both Parties say NATO is Good for U.S.: Wide partisan divide in views of compromising with allies,” April 2, 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/02/large-majorities-in-both-parties-say-nato-is-good-for-the-u-s/>.

10 Kull, Steven, “Americans on the U.S. Role in the World: A Study of U.S. Public Attitudes,” Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, January 2017, p.6 [http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PPC\\_Role\\_in\\_World\\_Report.pdf](http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PPC_Role_in_World_Report.pdf).

11 Jones, Jeffrey M., “In U.S., Positive Attitudes Toward Foreign Trade Stay High,” Gallup, March 1, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/228317/positive-attitudes-toward-foreign-trade-stay-high.aspx>. Smeltz, et al., p. 5; Pew, November 29, 2018.

12 Jones, Jeffrey M., “In U.S., Positive Attitudes Toward Foreign Trade Stay High,” Gallup, March 1, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/228317/positive-attitudes-toward-foreign-trade-stay-high.aspx>. Smeltz, et al., p. 5; Pew, November 29, 2018.