

The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future

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Setting the stage

With a new and unpredictable administration taking the reins of power in Washington, the United States' future relationship with its European allies is unclear. The European allies are understandably concerned about what the change in the presidency will mean for the US relationship with NATO and the security guarantees that have been in place for almost 70 years. These concerns are not without foundation, given some of the statements Trump made about NATO during the presidential campaign—and his description of NATO on 15 January 2017, just days before his inauguration, as 'obsolete'. That comment, made in a joint interview with *The Times* of London and the German newspaper *Bild*, further exacerbated tensions between the United States and its closest European allies, although Trump did claim that the alliance is 'very important to me'.¹ The claim that it is obsolete rested on Trump's incorrect assumption that the alliance has not been engaged in the fight against terrorism, a position belied by NATO's support of the US conflict in Afghanistan. Among the most striking observations about Trump's statements on NATO is that they are contradicted by comments made in confirmation hearings before the Senate by General James N. Mattis (retired), recently confirmed as Secretary of Defense, who described the alliance as 'essential for Americans' security', and by Rex Tillerson, now the Secretary of State.²

It is important to note that the concerns about the future relationships between the United States and its NATO allies are not confined to European governments and policy analysts. In the United States some of the most notable members of the security establishment have also expressed dismay not only about President Trump's policy pronouncements as candidate and as President, but also about what US policy will be under the new administration. In fact, a letter published in the *Washington Post* signed by more than 30 of the most illustrious members of the US security and foreign policy community, including Madeleine Albright,

¹ James Masters and Katie Hunt, 'Trump rattles NATO with "obsolete" blast', CNN Politics, 17 Jan. 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/16/politics/donald-trump-times-bild-interview-takeaways/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 27 Jan. 2017.)

² Michael R. Gordon and Niraj Chokshi, 'Trump criticizes NATO and hopes for "good deals" with Russia', *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/world/europe/donald-trump-nato.html?_r=0.

Nicholas Burns and Wesley Clark, states clearly that ‘our security is indivisible with our democratic allies in Europe’ and takes issue with some of Trump’s campaign statements about the alliance in respect of the doubt they cast on the US commitment to NATO. The letter also emphasizes that ‘A solemn obligation of the American President is to lead NATO, to remain resolute in defense of our allies and to convince potential adversaries that we will stand up for NATO without fear or reservation. Every President, without exception, has accepted the wisdom of this strategy.’³ This is a point echoed by outgoing NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who wrote in the preface to his book published in 2016: ‘The world needs a policeman. The only capable, reliable and desirable candidate for that position is the United States. We need determined American global leadership.’⁴ The question is whether the United States under a Trump administration wants to take on that role—and is capable of doing so—and whether other countries, especially the NATO allies, will accept that US leadership again.

During this time of transition and uncertainty, the best way to try to divine what the relationship will be between the United States and NATO is to look at the comments made in the confirmation hearings of James Mattis for Secretary of Defense and Rex Tillerson for Secretary of State, as well as those of candidate Trump. A particularly telling comment by Tillerson was his remark that ‘our NATO allies are right to be alarmed at a resurgent Russia’, suggesting that the alliance remains an important bulwark against Moscow. However, he also noted that he had not yet had a conversation with Trump about these issues.⁵ And, in fact, during their respective confirmation hearings each of the men made statements that were contradictory to those that had been made by Trump as noted above, further raising concerns about what US security and foreign policy will be.

As we look to the future, it is important to reflect on the evolution of the relationship between the US and its European allies to date, recognizing that it has not always been an easy one. In the past, shared values and commitment to democratic ideals, as well as the collective security nature of the alliance, have held it together and enabled it to weather these storms; however, given the changed political landscape of both the United States and Europe, there is no assurance that this will continue to be the case.

This article takes a historical perspective, exploring the evolution of the transatlantic relationship from the Harmel Report of 1967 up to the present. The focus is on some of the decisions made by individual US presidents, based on America’s political and strategic needs at the time that contributed to strains and also recon-

³ Letter available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/files/2016/08/NATO-statement-Final-080416.pdf> (emphasis added).

⁴ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, *The will to lead: America’s indispensable role in the global fight for freedom* (New York: Broadside, 2016), p. ix.

⁵ Nick Waldhem, Joe Carroll and Margaret Talev, ‘Tillerson veers from Trump line as Russia looms over hearing’, Bloomberg News, 11 Jan. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-01-11/russia-must-be-held-accountable-for-its-actions-tillerson-says>. See also Alexander Lanoszka, ‘Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe’, *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 175–96; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Russia’s Europe, 1991–2016: inferiority to superiority’, *International Affairs* 92: 6, Nov. 2016, pp. 1381–400; Sten Rynning, ‘The false promise of continental concert: Russia, the West and the necessary balance of power’, *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2015, pp. 539–52.

ciliation between the United States and its European allies. That history should provide insight into the current relationship and some answers to the questions that are currently being raised about NATO, its relevance and the role of the United States in the alliance. Just as the Harmel Report, 50 years ago, was precipitated in part by the approaching 20th anniversary of the alliance in 1969, perhaps the questions that are being raised now by President Trump and members of his administration will prompt some additional re-evaluation that can strengthen the institution, or, at the very least, prompt a reaffirmation of its relevance in the light of a resurgent Russia. The other possibility is that they will continue to undermine an alliance at a delicate point in its existence.

The US context for the Harmel Report

Fifty years ago, while NATO was undertaking the review that would lead to the Harmel Report of December 1967, the United States was engaged in a costly and bitterly divisive war in Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson was promulgating his 'great society' domestic programmes at the same time as trying to manage a war in Asia that was seen not only as a fight against communism—this was the height of the Cold War—but also as a significant test of the United States and its military abilities. It was a war that the world was watching and that the United States ultimately lost; or, perhaps more accurately, it was a war that Vietnam won, prompting real and valid questions about the United States, its military, and some of its foreign policy decisions.

Although Vietnam was the focus of American politics, both domestic and foreign, it was a concern for the NATO allies primarily because of the possible impact it could have on the US commitment to Europe. The noted American political commentator and journalist Walter Lippman wrote a column in June 1965 following a trip to Europe stating that what he saw there was 'a spectacular decline in respect for United States foreign policy', and that he 'feared a decline of solidarity with the NATO partners that might result in their disillusionment with US leadership of the alliance'.⁶ Despite the fact that through the Vietnam War the United States was making clear its determination to fight against communism anywhere in the world, a hallmark of its Cold War foreign policy, in devoting attention and resources to this conflict in Asia it risked undermining its ability to support Europe strategically if needed. Not unlike President Obama's 'pivot to the Pacific', the US focus on Vietnam prompted concern that Washington's attention to Asia was coming at the expense of its promises to Europe.

That said, the NATO allies were not unaware of the linkage between the war in Vietnam and perceptions of the West in its fight against communism globally. Not only was NATO aware of the potential threats coming from Asia, but some of the NATO allies, most notably Canada and the United Kingdom, supported the United States in its struggle against communism. Two other NATO members,

⁶ Quoted in Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the UN: a peculiar relationship* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), p. 79.

Greece and Portugal, identified their own fights against communist forces as similar to the US experience in Vietnam. Notwithstanding those expressions of support, however, NATO Secretary-General Manlio Brosio, addressing the NATO parliamentary conference in Brussels in 1965, warned that ‘a setback of the United States in Asia, for example, in Vietnam, would also be a grave setback for the whole of the West’.⁷ And the German delegate and member of the Bundestag Helmut Schmidt voiced the doubts that many Europeans already had about the United States when he warned that ‘America’s historic orientation toward the Pacific arena would drain the Atlantic alliance of its vitality as well as of US troops’.⁸

It is well known that divisions existed within the alliance at the time of the Harmel Report; the 1966 decision by French President Charles de Gaulle to withdraw from the integrated military command certainly stands as one example of a lack of common vision and understanding at that time. Further exacerbating the concerns was the possibility that NATO could cease to exist under the terms of Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which stated that: ‘After the Treaty has been in force for twenty years, any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given.’⁹ The twenty-year mark in 1969 was rapidly approaching.

It was these fears and the divisions within the alliance that set the context for the Harmel Report of December 1967, which identified two main tasks for the alliance: ‘to maintain adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression and other forms of pressure and to defend the territory of member countries if aggression should occur’; and ‘to pursue the search for progress towards a more stable relationship in which the underlying political problems can be solved’.¹⁰

The Harmel Report and US–NATO policy

The context in which the Harmel Report was produced is of crucial importance. As noted above, the United States was preoccupied during the period immediately preceding and following the adoption of this important NATO document. In 1969, Lyndon Johnson was replaced as president by Richard Nixon, who not only approached the war in Vietnam differently, but had a very different strategic vision for the United States. Nixon’s approach to foreign and strategic policy, encouraged and supported by his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, was to engage in a policy of detente with the two major communist countries, the Soviet Union and China. In pursuit of this intended reordering of the international system, Nixon had to extend his focus beyond Europe, although NATO was part of his political agenda early in his tenure. In fact, it can be argued that Nixon’s strategic

⁷ Quoted in Kaplan, *NATO and the UN*, p. 82.

⁸ Quoted in Kaplan, *NATO and the UN*, p. 83.

⁹ The North Atlantic Treaty (Treaty of Washington), Washington DC, 4 April 1949, in *NATO Handbook Documentation* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 1999), p. 39.

¹⁰ *The future tasks of the alliance* (Harmel Report), Brussels, 13–14 Dec. 1967, in *NATO Handbook Documentation*, p. 195.

vision would not have been possible without a strong and stable Atlantic alliance; shoring that up and providing a broader rationale for its existence were among the early items on Nixon's foreign policy agenda.

Nixon's first tour outside the United States as president took him to western Europe in February 1969, including a visit to NATO headquarters. In a statement before embarking on the journey, Nixon said: 'The purpose of this trip is to underline my commitment to the closest relationship between our friends in Western Europe and the United States. I would like to lift these relationships from a concern for tactical problems of the day to a definition of common purpose.' Regarding NATO specifically, he went on to assert that 'the Alliance, held together in its first two decades by a common fear, needs now the sense of cohesiveness supplied by common purpose'.¹¹

The importance of NATO and the US relationship with the countries of western Europe was further underscored in an address given by Kissinger, in which he said: 'The President believes that our relations with Western Europe are of overriding importance—because they are the oldest and closest allies and also because a stable world is inconceivable without a European contribution.'¹² In fact, according to documents mined from the Nixon Foundation, the trip to Europe was an important part of Nixon's (and Kissinger's) pursuit of the administration's strategic vision and larger foreign policy goals. Shortly after returning from that trip, at the 20th anniversary meeting of NATO in Washington DC, Nixon asked for the creation of 'a committee on the challenges of modern society ... to explore ways in which the experience and resources of the Western nations could most effectively be marshaled toward improving the quality of life of our peoples' and to help twentieth-century man to learn 'how to remain in harmony with his rapidly-changing world'.¹³ The subsequent creation of the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS) was designed, in conjunction with the Harmel Report, to ensure NATO's relevance in a changing world, at least from the US perspective.¹⁴

In many ways, the underlying goals of the CCMS stressed the importance of Article 2 of the NATO Treaty with its emphasis on cooperation and friendly political and economic relations,¹⁵ and the belief that the strength of the alliance depended as much on the vitality of the individual member states as on their military strength.¹⁶ According to Nichter, the CCMS 'marked a formal entrance of the alliance into the area of détente'.¹⁷ More important, perhaps, is that Nixon

¹¹ Richard Nixon, 'Statement on the forthcoming visit to western Europe', 6 Feb. 1969, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2219>.

¹² Quoted in Chris Barber, 'Why Europe was President Nixon's first foreign trip', 5 March 2014, <http://nixon-foundationblog.org/europe-president-richard-nixon/>.

¹³ 'Address by President Nixon to the North Atlantic Council', Washington DC, 10 April 1969, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76vol1/d18>.

¹⁴ See Tiffany Thompson, 'President Nixon's vision of NATO', 2 Nov. 2016, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2016/11/president-nixons-vision-nato/>.

¹⁵ See Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

¹⁶ See Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: the reshaping of the postwar Atlantic world* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 14.

¹⁷ Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe*, p. 16.

used his European trip and subsequent call for the creation of the CCMS to stress the need for the allies to bear a greater share of the common defence burden, a point that has been repeatedly raised subsequently, most recently by Trump. Furthermore, the idea was established that NATO is not only a collective security agreement but also a relationship with the potential to bind like-minded countries together in any number of ways for their mutual benefit.

Many of Nixon's policies outraged and further estranged the other members of NATO. An example of this is Nixon's decision in 1971 to implement a radical change in US monetary policy that resulted in the end of the Bretton Woods economic system that had been in place since the end of the Second World War, a decision that was made without adequate consultation with the European nations.¹⁸ In effect, 'they were supposed to be American allies, but they were not being treated like allies'.¹⁹ As Nixon's larger strategic vision was being implemented, the US relationship with Europe was eclipsed by other priorities. While the Nixon administration did attempt to repair some of the fractures it had created, these moves were greeted sceptically by European leaders who had seen this attempted before. Simultaneously, political changes in European countries, coupled with the movement towards enlargement of what was then the European Economic Community, shifted attention away from the United States. 'Over time, Europeans became frustrated with their diminished place in American foreign policy',²⁰ and this was a concern that the Nixon administration did little to address. This is further evidence of the emergence of a dual pattern whereby the United States pursued policies deemed to be in its own national interest, often at the expense of Europe, while at the same time the European countries were developing their own policies, both individually and collectively, that minimized or excluded the United States.

Patterns

The 30-year period from Nixon to the Bush era was not always an easy one for the US relationship with other NATO members. The four years of the Carter administration (1977–81) were characterized by a series of blunders that further divided the United States from its allies. The ill-conceived enhanced radiation warhead (ERW) decision, coupled with Helmut Schmidt's lecture to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in October 1977,²¹ called into question the United States' commitment to NATO, fostering a renewed feeling of estrangement on both sides of the Atlantic. Carter was followed by eight years of Ronald Reagan during which the Cold War was approaching its end. The excellent relationships Reagan had with his fellow conservative heads of government, Margaret Thatcher in

¹⁸ For more detail about the end of Bretton Woods and the restructuring of US economic and monetary policy and the impact of this change on the allies, see Nichter, ch. 2, 'Closing the gold window', in *Richard Nixon and Europe*, pp. 36–67.

¹⁹ Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe*, p. 88.

²⁰ Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe*, p. 218.

²¹ The full text of the Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture given on 28 Oct. 1977 by Helmut Schmidt, then Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, can be found in *Survival* 20: 1, Jan.–Feb. 1978, pp. 2–10, and online at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Euromissiles_Reader_PartI_SectionA.pdf.

Britain and Helmut Kohl in Germany, helped strengthen US–European relations during this period. Nonetheless, there were also critical areas of disagreement. Britain’s attack on the Falklands in 1982 was carried through over the objections of the allies, as was Reagan’s announcement of the possible creation of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983 and the US bombing of Libya in 1986.²² SDI was especially important in reinvigorating the Western European Union (WEU) at a time when its activities had lost momentum—another indicator of growing European independence *vis-à-vis* the United States.

As a collective security alliance, NATO took the initiative in starting to address the changing geostrategic and political environment following the end of the Cold War, arriving at a Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance (the London Declaration) in 1990, and in the following year producing the Rome Declaration which affirmed the key role of NATO even in a changing world and a new Strategic Concept for the alliance for the future; both of these reaffirmed the fundamental principles of the alliance while also seeking to adapt the alliance to changing global realities. The Strategic Concept was especially prescient in identifying possible risks to the alliance likely to result ‘from the serious economic, social and political difficulties, including ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes which are faced by many countries in Central and Eastern Europe’.²³

In fact, as Yugoslavia disintegrated into brutal ethnic conflict, serious differences arose about how to address that situation while NATO was also dealing with President Clinton’s call for enlargement in 1994.²⁴ The subsequent war in Kosovo in 1999 and the disagreement about the use of ground forces there, something to which Clinton was adamantly opposed, caused further division.²⁵ As the alliance was dealing with the aftermath of the wars in former Yugoslavia and the events leading up to the Kosovo conflict, at a ministerial meeting in Berlin in 1996 it developed a framework for cooperation with the EU that would evolve into ‘Berlin Plus’ in 2002. This grew from the 1990 London Declaration and the belief that ‘the development of a European identity in the domain of security will strengthen Alliance solidarity’.²⁶ Later in 1996 this was accompanied by the emergence of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) which, in effect, allowed for the creation of European-led security coalitions. These depended heavily on the resuscitated WEU, although, as Rynning notes, ‘this [compromise] was sufficiently ambiguous to let some actors (i.e. the United States) claim that NATO was now established as the bedrock of Europe’s security architecture and

²² The only NATO country to support the United States in this enterprise was Britain; other European countries refused US permission to use bases in their countries and to overfly their territory in the course of the bombing raids.

²³ ‘The Alliance’s Strategic Concept’, in *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 1995), p. 237.

²⁴ See e.g. James M. Goldgeier, *Not whether but when: the US decision to enlarge NATO* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1999).

²⁵ For further discussion about the different approaches to the use of ground forces in Kosovo, see Joyce P. Kaufman, ‘War in Kosovo and its aftermath, 1999’, in *NATO and the former Yugoslavia: crisis, conflict and the Atlantic alliance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), ch. 6, pp. 171–208.

²⁶ Sten Rynning, *NATO renewed: the power and purpose of transatlantic cooperation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 29–30.

others (i.e. France) that the European option was on track to grow increasingly autonomous'.²⁷ NATO would have to make some changes or 'reforms' in order to ensure the viability of this evolving relationship, which it did at the same time as dealing with enlargement issues. One result was that NATO members were put into a position where 'they needed to clarify their choice of design for future cooperation'.²⁸ Or, to put it another way, these changes, including a resurgent European security arrangement, required NATO to address its role in a changing world coupled with an internal power struggle about the leadership and direction of the alliance.

9/11 and its aftermath

While the George W. Bush administration initially came into office with a call for a neo-unilateralist, almost isolationist foreign policy, the attacks of 9/11 forged a new direction for US foreign policy; once again the United States was actively involved internationally with a 'you are either with us or against us' brand of foreign policy. When Bush pursued policies that he felt were in the best interest of the United States, including the decision to go into Iraq and to pursue Saddam Hussein in March 2003 without UN approval, his actions created rifts with NATO allies and also shifted world opinion against the United States. While few contested the wisdom of, or justification for, the war with Afghanistan, alleged to be harbouring Al-Qaeda and specifically the individuals behind the 9/11 attacks, many saw the war with Iraq as an unnecessary diversion. That decision remains controversial today.²⁹ And it can be argued that the United States has yet to rebuild the relationships with its allies that were fractured by the Bush decision to invade Iraq.

The events of 9/11 significantly altered the priorities of the Bush administration, creating the 'global war on terror' and making this the United States' highest foreign policy priority. From that time forward, all aspects of the Bush administration's foreign and security policy stemmed from, and were justified by, the need to support the 'war on terror'. It is therefore instructive to review an article written by Condoleezza Rice in 2000, prior to the presidential election, and to note the attention she paid there to the US national interest, which she defined 'by a desire to foster the spread of freedom, prosperity and peace'.³⁰ It was that

²⁷ Rynning, *NATO renewed*, p. 30.

²⁸ Rynning, *NATO renewed*, p. 38.

²⁹ This decision has been examined from a number of political and policy perspectives in a plethora of books, many of which came out during or shortly after the end of the Bush administration. Among them are Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: the American military adventure in Iraq, 2003–2005* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Todd S. Purdum, *A time of our choosing: America's war in Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2003); Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The endgame: the inside story of the struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage, 2012). All three of these rely on interviews and documents to tell the story of the war with Iraq and how it evolved. See also Carlotta Gall, *The wrong enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (New York: Mariner, 2014), which addresses the impact of the US invasion on Afghanistan and its people; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial life in the Emerald City: inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Vintage, 2006), which looks at Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion in 2003.

³⁰ Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the national interest', *Foreign Affairs* 79: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2000, p. 62.

desire to spread freedom and democracy that ultimately was used to justify the US decision for war in Iraq, eclipsing the initial rationale for the attack, which was 'regime change' and the desire to eliminate the spread of weapons of mass destruction allegedly possessed by Iraq.

It is also important to note that the decision to go into Iraq was not without dissenters even within the administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had been the military director of the first Gulf War, warned of the possible dangers of such a mission, and was quoted as warning the President at a meeting in August 2002 that 'We'd own a country.'³¹ Nonetheless, the decision was made that the campaign in Iraq was to be a priority.

Despite his suspicion of international organizations such as the UN, Bush was persuaded of the necessity of going to that organization to seek international legitimization of his decision. In a speech before the General Assembly in September 2002, Bush made it clear that unless Iraq complied with the UN Security Council resolutions demanding that weapons inspectors be allowed back into the country, action would be taken, and he left no doubt that the United States would go it alone if necessary. But Germany, a major NATO ally, was already voicing opposition to any war in Iraq, as was France, another ally. Six months before the war with Iraq, then, disagreements as to the next steps to be taken were already brewing between the United States and some of its closest European allies. Only Britain was showing complete support for Washington.

Bush took the opportunity of the State of the Union message in January 2003 to make the implicit case for war, claiming that Saddam had systematically violated the agreement to dismantle all weapons of mass destruction.³² Then in February, despite his own reservations, Powell went to the UN to make the case against Saddam Hussein there and to persuade other countries of the need for military action. Although UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned that without the support of the Security Council the legitimacy of any such action would be questioned, on 19 March 2003 President Bush announced that 'at this hour American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger'.³³ The result was a significant schism between the United States and its allies, which proved to be especially damaging at a time when the United States was building support for, and needed to sustain allied commitment to, the continuing conflict in Afghanistan.

A 2016 biography of President Bush concludes as follows: 'Whether George W. Bush was the worst president in American history will be long debated, but his decision to invade Iraq is easily the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American President.'³⁴ Analysts may argue about that judgement. However, what is undeniable is the damage that decision did to the United States' prestige,

³¹ Purdum, *A time of our choosing*, pp. 41–2.

³² George W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address', 28 Jan. 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushstext_012803.html.

³³ 'President Bush's address on the Iraqi invasion', 19 March 2003, <http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2013/03/18/full-text-of-president-george-w-bushs-speech-march-19-2003/>.

³⁴ Jean Edward Smith, *Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 660.

its economy and its relationship with its allies. In retrospect, it is possible to ask whether the severe differences that have emerged between the United States and some of its allies in recent years were solely the result of the Iraq War, or whether that war simply provided the occasion for deep-seated differences to be brought to the surface once again.

The Obama administration

After the divisiveness of the Bush years, which seriously disturbed the alliance, the candidacy of Barack Obama was enough to begin to restore a sense of hopefulness, although foreign policy was quickly eclipsed by the global economic crisis which hit just a few months prior to his election. Rightly or not, the United States was blamed for the economic downturn that affected not only it, but most of the rest of the world. In fact, a 2008 Pew poll found that ‘the US image is suffering almost everywhere’, at least in part because ‘in the most economically developed countries, people blame America for the financial crisis’.³⁵ Thus, the emphasis of the presidential campaign quickly shifted to economics, although Obama also made it clear that, if elected president, among his first priorities would be foreign policy: specifically, ending the war in Iraq, giving renewed attention to the war in Afghanistan, closing the prison camp at Guantánamo Bay and, in general, working to restore the United States’ position in the world.

In his first inaugural address as president, on 20 January 2009, Obama set out his foreign policy stance with clarity and emphasis: ‘Know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that *we are ready to lead once more*.’³⁶ Philip Gordon notes that simply ‘having a new face in the White House will itself do much to restore many allies’ disinclination to work closely with the United States’.³⁷ While that was true initially, the onus was on the Obama administration to show that it could follow through on its campaign promises and that the United States *could* lead once more. This has not proved to be an easy task. Within his first year in office, Obama outlined how he proposed to deal with the continuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, criticizing the lack of attention to Iraq and announcing the ‘surge’ in troops to redress it. During the remainder of his tenure in office, Obama worked hard to re-establish the pre-eminent role that the United States had played globally. He gave speeches in Ankara in April 2009 and in Cairo in June 2009, both specifically reaching out to the Muslim world to try to mend the ties frayed by the years of the Bush administration. In both of these he stressed an important theme: ‘America is not—and never will be—at war with Islam.’³⁸ The Ankara speech was especially important;

³⁵ *Global public opinion in the Bush years (2001–2008)*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/>, p. 1.

³⁶ ‘Barack Obama’s inaugural address’, 21 Jan. 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address> (emphasis added).

³⁷ Philip H. Gordon, *Winning the right war: the path to security for America and the world* (New York: Times Books, 2007), p. 97.

³⁸ ‘Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish parliament’, Ankara, 6 April 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament; see also Asaf Siniver and

Turkey is a NATO member with a strategic location geographically, and this speech was important in shoring up relations between the two allies.

The relationship between the United States and its European allies—the closest relationship that the United States has—were strained severely by the US decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003, as noted above. In an effort to restore those ties Obama met many European leaders, either individually or in the course of summit meetings, and he came into office wildly popular in Europe. Nonetheless, the lesson the President learned is that Europe as a whole is no longer willing to go along with whatever the United States wants or wherever the United States leads. It has become clear that ‘Europe’ is made up of independent countries as well as being a single bloc, and that there are differences among them, and with the United States, that are not easily bridged.³⁹

Relations between the United States and its European allies were further strained relatively early in Obama’s second term when information was leaked that the US National Security Agency had been collecting phone and data records of millions of Americans and had also bugged EU offices; this drew criticism from European leaders and cast a pall over Obama’s trip to Berlin following the G8 summit in June 2013. Pressed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Obama said that ‘terrorist threats in her country [Germany] were among those foiled by such intelligence operations worldwide—a contention that Ms Merkel seemed to confirm’.⁴⁰ At a news conference held with the two leaders, Merkel said that ‘she and Mr Obama had discussed the surveillance issue at length, indicating that it took precedence over subjects like the global economy and conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan’.⁴¹ This latest issue in many ways overshadowed what the administration hoped would be America’s successful re-emergence on the world stage under Obama and his *rapprochement* with the European allies.

Further questions about the US commitment to Europe were raised as a result of Obama’s stated ‘pivot to the Pacific’, a policy shift designed to help counter the growing power of China, especially in the South and East China Seas. This policy decision emerged from findings documented in the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, which notes: ‘The United States and China’s Asian neighbors remain concerned about China’s current modernization efforts, including its qualitative and quantitative modernization of its nuclear arsenal.’ Moreover, ‘the lack of transparency surrounding its nuclear programmes—their pace and scope, as well as the strategy and doctrine that guide them—raises questions about China’s future intentions.’⁴² It is this uncertainty that is so problematic for the United

Scott Lucas, ‘The Islamic State lexical battleground: US foreign policy and the abstraction of threat’, *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 63–80; Andreas Krieg, ‘Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East’, *International Affairs* 92: 1, March 2016, pp. 97–114.

³⁹ Luis Simón, ‘Europe, the rise of Asia and the future of the transatlantic relationship’, *International Affairs* 91: 5, Sept. 2015, pp. 969–90.

⁴⁰ Jackie Calmes, ‘Obama says surveillance helped in case in Germany’, *New York Times*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/world/europe/obama-in-germany.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴¹ Calmes, ‘Obama says surveillance helped in case in Germany’.

⁴² Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf. See also *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, special issue on China’s foreign policy, esp. Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, ‘China’s “new type

States, and also for other states in the region (many of them US allies) that wonder about China's intentions and US commitment. As was the case decades earlier in the Vietnam War, however, this shift in policy raised concerns among some of the European allies about a potential diversion of US attention from Europe, as well as about overstretch of US military forces in the light of the continuing conflicts in the Middle East.

As noted in a piece published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies in 2014, which reflected the US interpretation of European reactions to the 'pivot', among the greatest concerns of the European allies was that the announced deployments of additional US troops to Asia 'might heighten the risks of a military confrontation involving China, its neighbours, and the United States'. However, as the authors also noted, some of the European reactions can be attributed to 'insufficient efforts by US officials to consult with their European counterparts in advance of the public rollout of the new strategy'.⁴³ So, according to this analysis, rather than reacting to the policy shift itself, European policy-makers were reacting to the way in which the shift was announced, which they equated with a 'dismissive' US attitude: not the first time such a cycle of action and reaction has occurred. Since then, however, European leaders have been reassured by both public and private declarations by senior US officials 'of the enduring American commitment to European security'.⁴⁴ Further, the United States' forceful stand against Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 also reassured its NATO allies, at least temporarily.

That said, one of the unintended consequences of the recent US actions regarding Asia has been to encourage Europeans to rethink their own strategy and policies towards that region, including expanding trade ties. This can be seen in changing policies on the part of the EU as a whole and by individual states. For example, under Angela Merkel's leadership Germany has forged a 'strategic relationship' with China, to include high-level government contact on a range of issues. France too has pursued 'broader and deeper trade, investment, and diplomatic relations with Asia-Pacific nations ...', thereby building on a pattern that it has had in the region for decades.⁴⁵ Following his election in May 2012, France's President Hollande appointed two Asian specialists to key positions in his staff, another indicator of France's changing focus.⁴⁶ Since then, France has increased its trade relationship with China, which it, like Germany, sees as a strategic partnership.

The shift in US policy has also caused the United Kingdom to take a fresh look at its own relationship with Asia in the twenty-first century.⁴⁷ Britain already had

of Great Power relations": a G2 with Chinese characteristics?', pp. 773–94; Wu Xinbo, 'Cooperation, competition and shaping the outlook: the United States and China's neighbourhood diplomacy', pp. 849–68.

⁴³ Leo G. Michel and James J. Przystup, *The US 'rebalance' and Europe: convergent strategies open doors to improved cooperation*, Strategic Perspectives no. 16 (Washington DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press, June 2014), p. 3.

⁴⁴ Michel and Przystup, *The US 'rebalance' and Europe*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Michel and Przystup, *The US 'rebalance' and Europe*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ See Michel and Przystup, *The US 'rebalance' and Europe*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Complex security and strategic latency: the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', *International Affairs* 91: 2, March 2015, pp. 351–70.

strong ties to the region through its Commonwealth relationships with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore, with which it established the Five Power Defence Arrangement in 1971. For some other European countries, however, the US decision has provided additional reasons to focus on European security needs, both with and without the United States.

Daniel Twining of the German Marshall Fund of the United States offered a slightly different perspective in a 2015 article. While he acknowledged that individual European nations pursued their own policies regarding Asia, he advocated that the EU develop a common comprehensive policy for engagement with Asia.⁴⁸ He suggested that this would be a stronger policy and would be less likely to result in the splintering of alliances, such as NATO or the EU, in the face of a resurgent China. His concern—and it appears to be a valid one—is that competition for trade with China could serve as a wedge among the European nations at a time when they need to work together. We can put his argument another way by suggesting that the US pivot to Asia could have the effect of forcing the European allies to pursue their own individual interests at the expense of the common interest of the whole. Rather than enhancing security in Asia—the alleged goal of the US policy shift—the result would be to undermine US security ties to Europe as the European countries, individually and/or collectively, formulate their respective policies regarding Asia.

Trump and the prospects for US–NATO relations

In July 2016, the night before he was to accept his party's nomination for the presidency, Donald Trump was asked in an interview about his commitment to NATO and to defending the NATO allies if they were attacked. His response shocked and startled the allies. Trump said that 'if Russia attacked them [the Baltic states] he would decide whether to come to their aid only after reviewing if those nations have "fulfilled their obligations to us"'. According to coverage by the *New York Times*, this statement 'appeared to be the first time that a major candidate for president had suggested conditioning the United States' defense of its major allies'. It should also be noted that this statement 'was consistent ... with his previous threat to withdraw American forces from Europe and Asia if those allies fail[ed] to pay more for American protection'.⁴⁹ During the 45-minute interview, Trump described how he 'would force allies to shoulder defence costs that the United States has borne for decades, cancel longstanding treaties he views as unfavorable, and redefine what it means to be a partner of the United States'.⁵⁰ As might be expected, these comments raised concern not only among the European allies of the United States, but in all countries with which the United States has had a

⁴⁸ See Daniel Twining, 'Europe's incomplete pivot to Asia', Asian Institute for Policy Studies, The Asan Forum, 9 April 2015, <http://theasanforum.org/europes-incomplete-pivot-to-asia/>.

⁴⁹ David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, 'Donald Trump sets condition for defending NATO allies against attack', *New York Times*, 20 July 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html?_r=0.

⁵⁰ Sanger and Haberman, 'Donald Trump sets condition'.

security relationship. In many ways, those comments struck hardest at the NATO allies, which were already concerned about the extent of US commitments, especially in the face of a resurgent Russia. Trump's support of Russia's President Putin and his unwillingness to recognize the aggressive nature of Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea seemed to be directed especially at the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all NATO members.⁵¹

The unconventional nature of Trump's campaign, his unlikely election as president, and his apparent reordering of US security and foreign policy priorities have combined to undermine other nations' confidence in the United States as a world leader at a time of increasing global uncertainty, even instability. What made his ascent to the presidency of the United States and the leadership of a major military and economic power particularly unlikely has been Trump's apparent disregard for precedent and for the priorities that have largely managed to keep peace internationally since the end of the Second World War. As noted above, there have been strains in the Atlantic alliance before, some major, some less so. However, the strength and common purposes of NATO have been great enough to overcome those and to keep the alliance united for the greater good. The comments made by Trump during the campaign and since his election have been enough to cause concern about whether NATO can withstand this latest attack from its major partner and putative leader.

For clues about what might happen we may usefully turn to Trump's choice for Secretary of Defense: Marine General James N. Mattis (retired), who had served as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Transformation from 2007 to 2009. While Mattis has indeed spoken of the need for all NATO members to spend at least 2 per cent of their GDP on defence, long a NATO goal, he is perceived as someone who supports the goals and role of the alliance. During his tenure at NATO his main focus was on improving the military readiness of the allies. He is also perceived to be a serious strategic thinker as well as an influential military leader who is not likely to change US military policy quickly or without careful study. That has provided some reassurance, both within the United States and beyond.

Furthermore, there are already indicators that General Mattis and President Trump do not agree on a range of issues, and the hope is that Mattis can be a necessary counterweight to ensure the stability of the alliance with US commitment as an anchor. While Mattis favours a tougher stance towards US adversaries, such as Iran, which he has called 'the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East', he has also argued that, despite the weaknesses of the Iran nuclear deal, 'he did not see a way that Washington could go back on it, because any unilateral sanctions issued by the United States would not be as valuable if allies were not on board'.⁵² Early indicators are that, unlike President Trump, Secretary

⁵¹ David S. Yost, 'The Budapest Memorandum and Russia's intervention in Ukraine', *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2015, pp. 505–38.

⁵² Dan Lamothe, 'Trump picks retired Marine Gen. James Mattis for secretary of defense', *Washington Post*, 1 Dec. 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-has-chosen-retired-marine-gen-james-mattis-for-secretary-of-defense/2016/12/01/6c6b3b74-aff9-11e6-be1c-8cec35b1ad25_story.html?utm_term=.a8a7884ae5c9.

of Defense Mattis understands the larger strategic issues, including the necessity of working multilaterally as a key aspect of US security policy. Similarly, the statements of Rex Tillerson during his confirmation hearings as Secretary of State provide more clues to the future behaviour and policies of the country; and he too seemed to offer positions that contradicted those put forward by Trump. For example, in his opening remarks to the Senate Tillerson affirmed the necessity of US leadership globally, while Trump ‘has cast the US as overextended and in need of an “America first” policy’⁵³—a theme that the new President stressed forcefully in his inaugural address on 20 January.⁵⁴ Tillerson comes into the position of Secretary of State never having served in the government and, holding the post at the pleasure of the President, will ultimately be responsible for implementing the Trump administration’s policies.

Conclusion

There are important lessons to be learned from the United States’ relationship with its European allies, and the interaction between and among them. The first is that the individual who holds the office of president does have a direct impact on other countries’ perceptions of the United States. We can see this clearly with the change in attitudes towards the United States from the Bush presidency to that of Obama and now Trump. Second, even though many, both within the United States and abroad, disagreed with some of the Obama administration’s policies, other countries regained confidence in the United States and in that President to lead. That perception generated important goodwill on the part of US allies. And third, as Obama leaves office, while there is still a belief in the importance of the relationships—political, military, economic—between the United States and the countries of Europe, those relationships are once again under threat. Where candidate Hillary Clinton spoke of the importance of such relationships, candidate Trump disparaged them, thereby sowing seeds of mistrust that have been reinforced by early statements made by the incoming President.

The European allies have their own issues to deal with, not least how to respond to the result of the ‘Brexit’ vote in June 2016 and the British decision to leave the European Union. Although it might appear that this has little to do with the United States, the reality is that the United States is tied to the EU as an economic bloc—the largest trading partner that the United States has. Also, the departure of Britain from the EU raises questions about European security and what this might mean for NATO. During the presidential election campaign Trump raised questions about the relevance of NATO in the wake of the Cold War, claiming that the United States is bearing too much of the burden for Europe’s security. In contrast, Clinton talked about the importance of NATO, especially in the face of a resurgent Russia. This difference in approach also reflects the divergence between

⁵³ Waldhem et al., ‘Tillerson veers from Trump line’.

⁵⁴ “America first”: full transcript and video of Donald Trump’s inaugural address’, *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Jan. 2017, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2017/01/20/america-first-full-text-of-donald-trumps-inaugural-address/>. The full text, some with annotation, can be found at virtually every major news source.

the two candidates about Russia in general, with Trump talking about Putin in complimentary terms and hinting that the United States and Russia could (and should) work together to address the crisis in Syria and elsewhere, while Clinton called Putin a 'bully'. This example of the difference in perspective between the two candidates illustrates why the rest of the world watches US elections, especially presidential ones, so closely.

There is little doubt that NATO faces challenges ahead, some pertaining to how the alliance will deal with the uncertainties of a Trump administration and some deriving from the unpredictable nature of the domestic policies of other allies. The Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump have given momentum to nationalist leaders in Europe who see upcoming elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany as creating new opportunities for their own political gain. Turkey has moved closer to Russia, joining that country and Iran for peace talks in Moscow and Kazakhstan hoping to end the war in Syria. Turkey has been working directly with Russia in part in retaliation for US willingness to work with Kurdish forces on the ground in opposition to the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This poses any number of dangers to NATO and to regional stability, and also has implications for the changing power dynamic *vis-à-vis* Russia, none of which bodes well for the United States. In January 2017, the United States started to deploy troops to the Baltic states, Poland and Romania, a move authorized by the outgoing Obama administration and designed to send a signal of deterrence to Russia in the wake of its aggression against Ukraine and its seizure of Crimea, as well as one of reassurance to NATO. What President Trump will do about this deployment remains unclear.

In his recent book, Anders Fogh Rasmussen writes of the need for continued US leadership in a world that has become increasingly dangerous. He also reminds us of the divisions that exist within Europe, between 'those forces who favor an alliance with America and those who want to create a geopolitical alternative to the United States'.⁵⁵ In many ways, those differences have become more pronounced in Europe since the election of Donald Trump, just as his election has divided many in the United States. But that makes it even more important that the United States does not abrogate its leadership role.

While the eyes of the world are on the United States and its new, unpredictable and untested President, it is also important to remember that the alliance has weathered crises and divisions before, and has survived and continued to operate because of its ability to adapt to changing realities. The role that NATO plays transcends its security function which, while clearly important, itself enables the economic growth and political stability of the member nations to flourish. In short, the goals of the NATO Treaty of almost 70 years ago and the Harmel Report of 50 years ago remain important and as relevant today as they were then.

⁵⁵ Rasmussen, *The will to lead*, p. 141.