

## **1.2. The US under Trump: Potential consequences for transatlantic relations**

*Peter Rudolf*

It remains unclear how US foreign policy will develop over time under President Donald Trump. Only one fact is certain: For the first time since the United States' rise to superpower status a president has taken office who is breaking away from the hegemonic-internationalist consensus. Looking back at the foreign policy discourse in the US since the end of the Cold War it is notable how predominant and firmly anchored one basic premise has remained: the United States must play the leading role within the international system. According to this conception, the US ensures international stability and is an indispensable force for world order. Despite all the debates between conservative and liberal internationalists – the differences are primarily in the significance given to international legitimacy and the role of multilateral institutions – the orientation of US foreign policy has continued to be marked by a hegemonic way of looking at itself. Although the term “benevolent hegemon” was rarely used, nevertheless this was precisely what was meant when, as happened under Obama, the US made a claim to a leading role which was not only in the interest of the United States but, based on received wisdom, was in the best interest of most other countries as well. To the extent that presidents are, in a sense, the institutional guarantors of foreign policy ideology, Donald Trump's entry into the White House marks a juncture in history which should not be underestimated. For it can hardly be expected that Donald Trump will suddenly speak of the indispensable leadership role of the US, of the necessity of bearing burdens in the service of the international order and the benefits the US gains from the existing international order.<sup>1</sup>

### *Great power policy in the spirit of “America First”*

The “America First” motto proclaimed by Donald Trump – or in other words “Americanism, not globalism” – captures his basic convictions in one phrase:

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<sup>1</sup> The following paper is a revised version of an earlier publication by Peter Rudolf: *US-Außenpolitik unter Präsident Trump. Zum Umgang mit neuen Herausforderungen in den transatlantischen Beziehungen*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2017 [US foreign policy under President Trump: On dealing with new challenges in transatlantic relations].

a strongly felt skepticism about the value of America's alliance commitments, strong doubts about the usefulness of free trade for the US and unmistakable sympathy for authoritarian forms of rule – or at least for authoritarian rulers.<sup>2</sup> What is revealing itself in his program is a great power policy which is strictly focused on the national interests of the US, as unburdened as possible by any limitations to American freedom of action, as well as free from any often unresolved idealistic expectations; anti-interventionist, at least as far as the internal affairs of other countries are concerned, but certainly not anti-militaristic or unwilling to employ military force. The military dominance of the US is to be maintained, even expanded.<sup>3</sup>

With these ideas Trump draws, at least in part, on a foreign policy orientation which in recent decades has had only a fringe existence. At least it played scarcely any role in elite discussions and was mainly limited to the populist Tea Party wing of the Republican Party. This orientation may be labeled populist-nationalist, semi-isolationist or Jacksonian; it characteristically combines a preference for a strong military with a rejection of anything that looks like liberal internationalism in the Wilsonian tradition.<sup>4</sup>

A revised understanding of the international role of the US may well meet with approval in the important segment of his electoral supporters who see themselves on the losing end of globalization and of an expensive international leadership role. Trump largely addressed these people with the three-pronged message he proclaimed over and over again during the election campaign: *First*: America, once strong and respected, is now weak and humiliated. *Second*: China, Mexico and other countries have worked together with the establishment to bring about this decline and taken jobs and wealth away from the average American. *Third*: Together with his voters, he, Donald Trump, the non-politician and billionaire who, on the basis of his financial independence does not belong to the corrupt political class but to the people, is in a position to bring about change and make America greater and stronger than it has ever been before.<sup>5</sup>

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2 See Thomas Wright: *The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Crisis of US Foreign Policy*, Sidney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, October 2016.

3 See Trump's speech on foreign policy in: *The National Interest*, April 27, 2016.

4 Walter Russel Mead: *Donald Trump's Jacksonian Revolt*, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2016; Taesuh Cha: *The Return of Jacksonianism: the International Implications of the Trump Phenomenon*, in: *The Washington Quarterly*, 39 (2017) 4, pp. 83-97; Brian Rathbun: *Steeped in International Affairs? The Foreign Policy Views of the Tea Party*, in: *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 9 (2013) 1, pp. 21-37.

5 For a good analysis see Stephen D. Reicher/S. Alexander Haslam: *Trump's Appeal: What Psychology Tells Us*, in: *Scientific American*, March 3, 2017.

In his inaugural address Trump made clear that his ideas on foreign policy were not mere campaign rhetoric, but that he was serious about his radical reorientation. Thus, it was a wake-up call for all those in the political system and in the societal environment who oppose such a radical change of course.<sup>6</sup> Trump's ideas conflict with the preferences of the traditional foreign policy elite and the institutionalized role conception of the foreign- and security-policy bureaucracy. It remains an open question whether Trump can find experienced political personnel right down to the level of assistant secretaries who share his convictions and are capable of implementing them against the inertia, possibly even the resistance of the bureaucratic apparatus.

If "Trumpism," with its business-like understanding of international politics, its zero-sum thinking, and its realpolitik orientation, were to establish itself in American foreign policy, this would be a genuinely radical change, as has correctly been stated.<sup>7</sup> It cannot yet be seen what basic strategic orientation such a view of international relations would result in – a kind of "neo-isolationist" (although this concept should be used with caution) policy, which combines a high level of economic autonomy with military strength, or a balance-of-power strategy of the kind many "realists" imagine.<sup>8</sup>

However, what can be seen is a certain threat perception and a preference for certain instruments: The threat perception is strongly focused on developments having an effect within the US and can be understood as threatening American society and the American economy. This means, on the one hand, "radical Islam," which is perceived as posing an ideological threat to Judeo-Christian civilization. It means, on the other hand, "unfair trade agreements" to the disadvantage of the US and unfair trade practices of other countries, above all China, the country at least initially regarded as "public enemy no. 1," especially given that the economic threat is combined with a geopolitical one. And that, ultimately, is illegal uncontrolled immigration, with all its costs and alleged dangers for American society. The America First strategy is seen as providing an answer to these threats. "Economic nationalism," strict border protection, military strength and an "amoral transactionalism" in relationships with other countries can be identified as the core elements of this approach.<sup>9</sup>

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6 See Hal Brands: *The Struggle for the Soul of American Foreign Policy Has Begun, War on the Rocks*, January 23, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/gw3nwxd>.

7 See Adam Quinn: *The world according to Trump*, in: *The World Today*, December 2016/January 2017, pp. 14-15.

8 For a discussion of the possible strategic options and scenarios see Adam Garfinkle: *Same World, Lonely World, Cold World*, in: *The American Interest*, January 24, 2017.

9 See Colin Kahl/Hal Brands: *Trump's Grand Strategic Train Wreck*, in: *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2017; the term "amoral transnationalism" also comes from there.

This is not without contradictions. For example, it does not make geopolitical sense to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was conceived as an element in restricting China's hegemonial ambitions.

Even if a radical change does not occur, but instead only tough cost cutting and maximization of gains within the framework of the old basic strategic orientation (as many optimistic observers believe), and even if Trump is socialized in terms of foreign policy, this is reassuring to only a limited extent because foreign policy under Trump can be expected to remain unpredictable and incoherent.<sup>10</sup> Unpredictability and incoherence must be expected not only because of the person of the president, his personality structure and his preference for an approach which seems to be breaking up foreign policy into a series of bilateral deals,<sup>11</sup> but also because the filling of the most important positions leads to the expectation that different foreign-policy factions will compete with each other: on the one hand, traditionalists, which include in particular Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor Herbert Raymond "H. R." McMaster, and, on the other hand, those who represent the America First mindset and whose ideas – this includes especially Trump's advisor Stephen Bannon – appear to center on the conflict with radical Islam. The invocation of such a threat strongly justifies the US president's claim to power.

### *Substantial scope for action*

With the United States becoming a superpower, the powers of the presidency have grown greater and greater. President Obama, who prior to taking office had criticized the growth of the "imperial presidency," made his own contribution to the stabilization of the powerful role of the office.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly true for foreign policy and security policy, where, with regard to the use of military force, Congress is unwilling to apply its constitutional role because its members are fearful of assuming responsibility which poses political risks. But in trade policy, too, Congress has conferred substantial powers on the president.

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10 Phil Gordon: Why Trump's Foreign Policy Might Prove Less Radical Than You Think, in: Politico, December 3, 2016.

11 Micah Zenko/Rebecca Friedman Lissner: Trump Is Going to Regret Not Having a Grand Strategy, in: Foreign Policy, January 13, 2017.

12 See Jürgen Wilzewski: Ende der Exekutivdominanz? Obama und die imperiale Präsidentschaft, in: Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik, published online: February 2, 2017.

Many pin their hopes on the checks and balances restricting President Trump's scope of action. However, until the end of 2018 there will be a unified Republican government, with the GOP controlling both chambers of Congress. The only instrument for influencing policies remaining to the Democrats is the filibuster in the Senate designed to defeat bills by preventing a vote on the Senate floor. Sixty votes are required to force a vote against this form of resistance, a number Republicans do not have – but also do not always need. When the matter involves taxes and expenditures, the legislative process called “reconciliation” requires only a simple majority in the Senate. Of course, the courts too are part of checks and balances. But in the case of foreign policy and security policy, traditionally the policy of judicial restraint applies. The bureaucracy might refuse to carry out legally dubious instructions or block them, but possibly not. In any case, President Trump might well find legal advisors who would expand his freedom of action with more or less arguable legal interpretations.

But even President Trump cannot do as he pleases. In many of his views on foreign policy he is far distant from the prevailing opinion among Republicans in Congress. This is particularly true regarding his stance on Russia. Trump proposed a rapprochement with Russia – “from a position of strength.” If it is assumed that a long-term strategic logic underlies his position, then it can be speculated that through detente with Russia he is seeking to establish the prerequisites for the US, unburdened of acting as the final guarantor of European security, to devote itself completely to the confrontation with China as a rising power – in the expectation that Russia would be willing to play at least a neutral, if not supportive role.<sup>13</sup> A further explanation for the strong interest in Russia is the conflict with radical Islam. For example, there is speculation that Trump is seeking to reorient the Republican Party's foreign policy: “away from an ideological conflict with authoritarian Russia and toward a civilizational conflict with Islam.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is unclear what Trump concretely expects from Russia and what he is prepared to offer in exchange for an improved relationship.

In dealing with the Russians Trump will need to anticipate strong anti-Russian sentiment among the Republicans in Congress. At the least the “hawks” such as Senator John McCain and Lindsey Graham will put President Trump under pressure – together with Democrat colleagues – in connection with his Russia policy, and will try to restrict his maneuvering room, not least

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13 See the speculations of Daniel Nexon: The Many Faces of Trump Foreign Policy, *Duck of Minerva*, January 18, 2017; <http://duckofminerva.com/2017/01/the-many-faces-of-trump-foreign-policy.html>.

14 Peter Beinart: Why Trump's Republican Party Is Embracing Russia, in: *The Atlantic*, December 12, 2016.

against the background of the Russian role in the US election campaign and the speculation about Trump's affinity for Putin. But the Republican leadership seems to have little interest in a serious confrontation with the president over his Russia policy early in his administration.

Initially at least, President Trump will probably not have to reckon with any real resistance from the ranks of the Republicans, even though his foreign policy ideas, not just his Russia policy, contradict many traditional Republican positions. The Republicans will probably accept a great deal (including the "moral equivalency"<sup>15</sup> between the US and Russia implied by Trump), as long as they get what they are hoping for from the president in terms of domestic policy and get corresponding legislation passed during a unified Republican government: including the end of Obamacare, the removal of many regulations which restrict economic interests, and the filling of positions on the judiciary by conservatives. In addition, dissenters can be sure they will feel the anger of the president and his supporters among the electorate. This is the case because the "Trumpists" are already focusing on the congressional elections in 2018 and are putting in place people who share their views. The extent to which the Republican Party distances itself more and more from traditional conservatism in the course of the next few years and develops into a party of populist nationalism remains to be seen. This would also be of great significance for foreign policy.

### *New challenges in transatlantic relations*

Concerns are frequently being expressed that the liberal world order is no longer being threatened solely by power shifts in the international system, but from within by a president who is using fear of the consequences of globalization, skepticism about expensive international commitments, and concern about uncontrolled immigration for his own purposes.<sup>16</sup> Indeed: Trump is a president to whom the logic of "liberal" hegemony is completely foreign. An America First policy cannot be reconciled with the legitimacy requirements of liberal hegemony.<sup>17</sup> A common basis of values, willingness to participate

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15 The term is used by Michael McFaul: We can't let Trump go down Putin's path, in: The Washington Post, February 6, 2017, which refers to Trump's statement with which he reacted to a journalist stating that "Putin is a killer": "There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers. Well, you think our country is so innocent?"

16 As Stewart M. Patrick put it: Goodbye to All That? World Order in the Wake of Trump, The Internationalist, November 9, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/godglba>.

in multilateral decision-making processes and with that a certain restraint in the unilateral pursuit of national interests and finally, the provision of public goods – all these are prerequisites for a hegemony to be recognized as legitimate. At least in the Western system this by and large was the way it was for decades, even with all its shortcomings and conflicts. Trump also seems to be unfamiliar with the traditional logic of US European policy, according to which, without the US as the leading power Europe might be faced with security dilemmas and rivalries from the past – with related security policy and economic consequences for the US.

To this extent his election really is a historic watershed, and his policies, if he really follows his basic ideas, amount to an undermining of the existing international order. To what extent a downward spiral, an erosion of economic interdependence and an intensification of existing and the emergence of new security dilemmas will ensue is a matter of speculation. Even though the “old” order should not be idealized and its inherent potential for violence not be overlooked, its erosion would certainly not constitute progress. Democracy, interdependence and international organizations – this can be stated more or less reliably – are factors conducive to peace not only in a negative but also in a positive sense.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to transatlantic relations too, the break with the policies of earlier administrations should not be underestimated. On the one hand, in the context of the transactional approach to policy, European allies are forced to take a defensive stance because the call for greater defense spending is linked to questioning of the American pledge to stand by the mutual defense clause. On the other hand, European unity is undermined as a result of President Trump making use of resentment of alleged German hegemony in Europe and welcoming European disintegration.<sup>19</sup> For example, the apparently undervalued euro is depicted as an instrument serving German interests – at the expense of other European countries and the US, which are supposedly being exploited by it.<sup>20</sup>

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17 For more information, see Peter Rudolf: *Liberal Hegemony and US Foreign Policy under Barack Obama*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2016.

18 See Bear F. Braumoeller/Bruce Russett: *Trump’s tweets can be a distraction, but do they signal a real threat to international institutions?*, Monkey Cage, January 18, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/zxp2ftm>.

19 Josef Janning puts it succinctly: *Trump and Europe: Dilemmas of Discontinuity*, European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2017.

20 According to Peter Navarro, Chair of the National Trade Council, see Ana Swanson: *Trump’s administration has a new target on trade – and it’s not China or Mexico*, in: *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2017; Harold James: *Trump’s Currency War Against Germany Could Destroy the EU*, in: *Foreign Policy*, February 2, 2017.

As a result of the looming changes in American foreign policy, Germany and the EU are facing a number of direct challenges. *First*, it will be necessary for them to achieve the highest possible degree of unity in conducting businesslike transatlantic relations in order to deal with the US with as much cohesiveness and strength as possible.<sup>21</sup> If under President Trump everything is made the subject of negotiation and international politics disintegrates into multiple bilateral *deals*, Europe will have to position itself in such a way that it is not placed at a disadvantage in terms of economic and security policy by potential American-Russian or American-Chinese agreements.<sup>22</sup>

*Second*, the question arises whether and to what extent the demands of the Trump administration should be met. To give in to them in bilateral transactions – for example by being prepared to buy more American arms and in this way reduce the German export surplus – could perhaps be a form of appeasement that might arouse greater appetite. Basically, the question needs to be considered whether to quasi-legitimize the Trump approach by making concessions or whether it would not be better to allow an escalation in order to strengthen Trump’s critics in the US instead of weakening them.<sup>23</sup> An increase in German defense spending may be objectively necessary, or it may not be; it is just that it will not be possible to “buy” the fulfillment of the US commitment to provide protection in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty by increasing military spending. The credibility of “extended deterrence” – and that means: the credibility of the deterrence threat to wage a war with the potential of nuclear escalation – was already being repeatedly questioned in the years of the East-West conflict. However, at that time there was no doubt that the security of Western Europe was in the fundamental interest of the US.

*Third*, there is a need to clarify where and to what extent the gap resulting from a shifting US foreign policy can be closed. If the US phases out its role as a multilaterally oriented leading power, this poses the danger of international regimes and institutions collapsing. Damage limitation is therefore called for.<sup>24</sup> It would be necessary to explain to the Trump administration the costs and risks of a policy which places little stock in alliances and institu-

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21 Giovanni Grevi: *Lost in Transition? US foreign policy from Obama to Trump*, Brussels: European Policy Centre, December 2, 2016, p. 13.

22 See Justin Vaïsse’s discussion of this problem from his point of view, according to which Europe has weaknesses in terms of hard power, unilateral actions and mercantilism: *Trump’s International System: A Speculative Interpretation*, War on the Rocks, December 29, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hdyakwz>.

23 See Adam Tooze: *Ohne großen Bruder*, Die ZEIT, February 9, 2017.

24 On this subject and in following sections see “An Insurgent in the White House,” in: *The Economist*, February 4, 2017.



tionalized cooperation. But whether it is open to such advice is questionable. This makes it necessary to safeguard – to the greatest extent possible – existing multilateral institutions from collapse – in the not unfounded expectation that under a different US administration the strategic pendulum will swing back to the middle. Supporting existing institutions can mean, for example, compensating for financial shortfalls which will result from the likely reduction in US contributions to the United Nations. In particular, this should involve ensuring financing of peacekeeping operations; the US contribution amounts to about a quarter of total costs.

*Fourth*, an answer must be found to the question how, in the absence of any fundamental divergence of interests, influence can be exerted upon the content of policies which are largely determined by the US. If, despite domestic resistance, Trump were to seek an improvement in relations with Russia, this would basically be in accordance with German interest in reducing tensions in Europe – under the condition that such a rapprochement was not achieved at the price of softening alliance commitments. Here, in connection with arms control and the resolution of the Ukraine conflict, Germany could play a supporting role while simultaneously exerting influence on Washington. However, since the conflict between the “West” and Russia is at its core a matter of power rivalry, in which liberal concepts of order are at odds with geopolitical ones, a discourse on conceptions of regional order is needed, and this would have to be conducted initially with the Trump administration. What a “new” security order would look like and on what compromises it would have to be founded are essential questions in need of further discussion. Contributions to this debate have sketched out the elements of such a new order: the territorial integrity of the Ukraine would have to be guaranteed and its membership in NATO in effect excluded; the country’s linkage with the EU – through the Association Agreement which has now been signed – would have to be structured in such a way that it was compatible with free trade between the Ukraine and Russia; the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe would have to be strengthened.<sup>25</sup>

And finally, *fifth*, an answer is needed to the question how, in the event of a conflict, independent positions against the US could be maintained.<sup>26</sup> In European-US economic relations, because of symmetric interdependence, this can take the form of hard balancing: the threat of economic sanctions and their

25 For more information, see Peter Rudolf: *Amerikanische Russland-Politik und europäische Sicherheitsordnung*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2016.

26 On the following options, see for a general overview Peter Rudolf: *America Policy: Some Conceptual Thoughts about Dealing with the Hegemon*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2006.

being implemented in the event of trade conflicts. The question of hard balancing could also arise if Trump or Congress were to surreptitiously torpedo the Iran Agreement by threatening to continue sanctions against European banks and companies. Then the question could arise what options the EU could apply to persuade the US to refrain from applying its sanctions against European companies and banks.<sup>27</sup> If it came to a US-China confrontation and China increasingly turned to European suppliers (let's say: Airbus instead of Boeing), one would have to reckon with the extraterritorial application of US sanctions laws – with the goal of making it impossible for European companies to fill the gap left by the US. At least in the initial rhetoric of Trump, his Secretary of State and the Director of the White House National Trade Council, Peter Navarro, some triggers and drivers for an intensified conflict with China have emerged: a hard line in trade politics against the People's Republic, which allegedly is benefiting from economic globalization at the expense of the US; playing the Taiwan card and the occasional questioning of the one-China policy as trump cards in American-Chinese negotiations and, finally, statements which sound as though the US wishes to block China's access to the artificial islands constructed by Peking in the South China Sea.

Establishing a counterweight to the United States could also take the form of *soft balancing*, whether through the use of international institutions to restrict the exercise of American power or at least to influence it; whether by refusing to give international legitimacy to American actions or particular political concepts. Because of the US self-image of itself as a leading power and for domestic reasons, even the Trump administration might, to a certain extent, realize the need or at least the usefulness of such legitimization, meaning some international recognition that American actions are appropriate. In some cases, the debate in the US might be influenced indirectly by American society. Thus on important controversial issues, criticism would have to be expressed openly with an eye to its public effect.

### *The desideratum of a policy towards America*

In the vocabulary of German diplomacy, the concepts "America policy" or "US policy" are almost never used. People speak of "transatlantic relations" when they refer to dealings with the US. These relations are so institutionally

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<sup>27</sup> See Simon de Galbert: *Transatlantic Economic Statecraft; The Challenge to Building a Balanced Transatlantic Sanctions Policy between the United States and the European Union*, Washington, DC.: Center for Strategic and International Studies/Center for a New American Security Policy, June 2016, p. 12f.

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intertwined and the interactions are so wide-ranging and close-knit that, until now, it has not proved necessary to refer openly to an explicit America policy. Fundamental conceptual issues are seldom discussed: What international role for the US is desirable from the German point of view? What can be done to promote such an understanding of the US role? What guiding principles and options for dealing with the US flow from this? With the entry of Donald Trump into the White House and the loosening of transatlantic relations, the question of a sober, strategically reflected way of interacting with the US poses itself more strongly than ever for German foreign policy.

Translation: Matthew Harris