No simple nationalist

THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY WILL FORCE DEFINING CHOICES ON EUROPE

It's not Euro-nostalgic conservatism but value-neutral Darwinism with its survival of the fittest-attitude that forms the basis of Trump's nationalism. Paired with his promise to revive military strength, Europe's choices now make or break the liberal world order.

With the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, guesswork on predicting the specifics of his foreign policy doctrine has begun. Will a Trump administration move further into, or completely out of, Syria and the Middle East? Will it abandon NATO, leaving Ukraine and the Baltics to whatever compromise Europe and Russia can work out? Will it revert the TTIP and TTP trade deals – and

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Europe should realize that Trump's nationalism is a cutthroat competitive Darwinism very different from conventional American conservatism: it has no sentimentality for existing alliances.
- Trump is likely to pair economic protectionism with selective and symbolic displays of military strength. This leaves European partners with a choice: will they team up?
- Trump views globalization itself as the true enemy. European countries need to appreciate the responsibility it places on Europe's commitment to play a unified role in defining the world order of the future.

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will it undo the US signatures to NAFTA, the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Climate Agreement? Will it begin a trade war with China, or perhaps most grimly, risk the return to bipolar nuclear competition?

With a president that hails unpredictability as a virtue, becoming too specific too soon is bound to prove futile: 'you can't draw up a simple, general foreign policy', Trump has said, it must be 'cunning, secretive, focused'. Despite accusations of confusion or contradiction, Trump has aired a surprisingly consistent philosophy of power and interest for the past two decades. Understanding this philosophy will be vital if Europe hopes to shape or curb it.

No nostalgic nationalist

To say that Trump is a nationalist begs serious qualification. The Republican Party has long been home to three distinctive strands of foreign policy thinking:

- Neoconservative interventionism
- Realist and libertarian anti-interventionism
- An old but largely marginalized tradition of American nationalism: a cultural nostalgia for America's white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant past; politically, economically and diplomatically protectionist of its geographical homeland

While Trump has obviously and strategically appealed to the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) identity, assuming that he squarely belongs in the latter is somewhat wrong.

Trump's perspective on the US' place in the world derives from a value-neutral Darwinism, not from cultural nostalgia. In books as well as interviews, Trump has repeatedly returned to the notion of world politics as survival of the fittest and to the essentially unsentimental idea of constant adaptation and reconfiguration: 'Darwin taught us that to survive, we must adapt', he writes, and 'since everything always changes, constantly re-examine the landscape; see what's changed and what those differences could mean to you. Then figure out how you can keep up with and make the changes work for you'.

In contrast to conventional US nationalism, Trumpian Darwinism has no special veneration for its European past or allies; no room for sentimental concepts of solidarity or habit; and no value-coloured prism through which it views the world. What it does have is a Darwinist preference for strength as a virtue, and an instinctive inclination to avoid association with those who are weak.

TTIP
The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is a proposed trade agreement between the European Union and the United States. The agreement is still not fully negotiated and in his presidential campaign, Trump has vowed to reject it.

TTP
The Transpacific Trade Partnership is a trade agreement between the US and 11 other Pacific Rim countries – notably excluding China. The agreement was signed in February 2016 and is currently awaiting ratification. Trump has vowed to reject the TTP as well as the long-established NAFTA agreement.

As president Trump can unilaterally stop the ratification of TTIP and TTP.

Whether Trump will regard Europe as an asset or an inconvenience is unsure. But he will certainly view both Europe and NATO through that cost and benefit-prism – devoid of the nostalgia of a special, historical or norms-based past. Moreover, his gaze will be attracted to those who wear the garments of strength: Russia, China and others who parade a desire to dominate the global future. The age of norm-based special relationships is over. In theory, nothing in the Trumpian outlook prevents the US from seeking new but hitherto unlikely types of friendship.

No conventional isolationist

This leads us to a second qualification: Trump is no conventional isolationist. Trump interprets Darwinist survival in favor of economic protectionism and sees no point or value in US leadership of some abstract, soft power order of liberal norms. On trade, on climate, and on genocide or peacekeeping, he is likely to step back from leadership. Yet, the military involvement of a Trump presidency is, in fact, very hard to predict. Not because responsibility seems bound to overtake him, but because the Trumpian reading of how to communicate sovereignty in a world of elusive governance is likely to attract him to conflicts that allow public displays of strength, decisiveness or control.

To grasp Trump's foreign policy as Darwinist, it is important to understand its roots in an anti-globalism that far exceeds dissatisfaction with economic inequalities or multi-cultural changes. While the 'angry white men' around whom much of Trump's media coverage has revolved are certainly important, and will likely be crucial to his stance on both the TTIP and the TTP, it is a deeper and more complex American resistance to twenty first century globalization which Trump not only exploits, but also subscribes to. This resistance concerns the nature of twenty first century power itself and the widespread sense that globalization has simply become another word for types of governance that escape the control of states and their populace. In much of the American public, long used to the idea of world history as one shaped by US plots and purposes, there is a deep and heartfelt longing to turn back the clock: to step back from fluid and fragmented forms of governance and reinstall a sense of sovereignty or leadership. No more elusive, unaccountable and seemingly endless forms of process, partnership and compromise.

These longings seem to be shared by Trump, who has criticized the technocracy of global governance for decades, and who views a partnering or compromis-

Trump supporter outside outside the San Diego Convention Center © AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi

ing US as not just weak, but also humiliated and humiliating. Both Trump and his supporters are aware that it is not easy to turn back the clock. However, if it is the feeling or sense of control that one longs for, engaging in military conflicts that momentarily simulate sovereignty – strong, decisive statesmanship – may be enough. A Trump foreign policy is likely to seek out arenas that will allow him such symbolic simulation.

European choices

Where does all of this leave Europe? In conjunction, the tenets of a 'Trump philosophy' has turned US security thinking upside down: while Trump will almost certainly continue to view Russia and China as competitors, his value-blind prism leaves little room for deep distinctions between liberal or autocratic. No absolute or existential opponents exist in a Trump foreign policy universe, but in a certain sense, the liberal world order – its push for global governance, its undercutting of national identity – has become the enemy in and of itself. Liberal world order has become the central object against which a re-assertion of US state sovereignty defines itself. Europe needs to understand this paradoxical shift and to appreciate the responsibility it places on Europe's commitment to play a unified role in defining the world order of the future.

More specifically, Europe now face a series of defining choices:

- In the short-term, a Europe that can no longer appeal to American sentimentality for long shared values will be faced with a deep and potentially dangerous challenge. Will Europe figure out ways to deal soberly and responsibly with an assertive Russia on its own? Or will it – in attempting to attract a fading American interest – find itself tempted to tighten the language of danger, risking the set off of security dynamics that might spin Europe-Russian relations out of control?

- Probably also short-term, European partners such as the UK and Denmark, long used to supporting US military interventions, will have to confront the question: can Europe submit troops or legitimacy to types of conflict, in which communicating strength to domestic audiences may loom larger than resolving the roots or securing the resolution of conflict itself?

- Finally, and most profoundly, Europe has a long-term choice to make on the fate of the liberal world order as such. How will the individual countries of Europe interpret Trump's victory? As a sign that they too must speak to a public desire for more visible, national sovereignty or strength? Or as a dire reminder, that even the democratic Western nation states, long indulgent with regards to their own benign intentions, are in need of global institutions that will check, control and restrain them?

Vibeke Schou Tjalve, Senior Researcher, International Security (vitj@diis.dk)

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