

# The New European Union and Its Global Strategy



# The New European Union and Its Global Strategy:

*From Brexit to PESCO*

Edited by

Valentin Naumescu

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## FOREWORD

# LAST CHANCE: THE REFORM OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE POST-BREXIT ERA

VALENTIN NAUMESCU

### Abstract

*This volume offers several possible answers to multiple questions regarding the future of the European Union and its relations with the world. Based on inter-disciplinary perspectives from international relations, European studies, political science, economics, and cultural studies, the following contributions address the “conundrum” of the EU’s transformations. In a relatively short time, the European Project has faced an incredibly diverse spectrum of crises and challenges. From the Eurozone crisis to the sovereign debt crisis, and from the migration crisis to Brexit, the European Union has found itself confronted with unprecedented threats and pressures, both internal and external. The 2016 Global Strategy and the 2017 Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the field of defence are just two of these new strategies and policies. It remains to be seen whether the Franco-German engine will succeed in surpassing this critical moment and trigger a deep reform of the European Union. Whether nationalism, sovereigntist discourses, and protectionism will grow and expand in Central Europe, or whether far-right parties will gain more support in Western Europe, we shall learn in the following years. Raising its level of ambition, the European Union projects itself as a global actor in the system of international relations. However, European security, along with the topics of European politics and society, remain subjects of intense debate.*

**Keywords:** European Union, Brexit, Global Strategy, PESCO, security, nationalism, populism.



This volume is about what we consider to be the last chance of the European Project. The post-Brexit era comes with an unexpected opportunity for reforming EU27. The EU Global Strategy emerged in the confusing days following the Brexit referendum. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the field of defence was adopted one year later. The change of political generation(s) and the rise of illiberal democracies, in both the Western and Eastern countries of the Union, threaten European solidarity and cohesion. Paradoxically, this also opens a window of opportunity. This is because the European Union cannot survive without deep structural reforms, even if we call them a “*re-foundation*”, as President Macron proposed. Radical nationalist, protectionist, and Eurosceptic platforms, and “illiberal populists” aiming to grasp power in different EU member state capitals are in fact those who indirectly trigger and accelerate the process of reformation, pushing pro-European leaders to act.

We assume it was not a coincidence that in June 2016, immediately after the shocking results of the Brexit referendum, Federica Mogherini, Vice-president of the European Commission and EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, launched the EU Global Strategy entitled “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe.” It was a clear message that Brussels was determined to strengthen European solidarity among the remaining 27 member states and to shape the EU as a global actor in international affairs.

It is somehow surprising and ironic that, almost 70 years after the beginning of European integration in Western Europe during the Cold War, the Summit on the Future of the European Union took place in Romania (Sibiu) on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2019, under the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU. In the context of the UK’s departure, a major western democracy is leaving, while a post-communist country assumes the coordination of the most powerful structure of the European Union. The former “Eastern Europe” which is now defined, geopolitically speaking, as Central Europe, is part and parcel of the EU and NATO. With pros and cons and lots of historical and ideological sensitivities, a deeply divided pro-EU/anti-EU Central Europe has regained its relevance in European politics but, at the same time, poses new problems.

*More Europe or less Europe?* Which one could be the right solution for the future of the European Union? This seems to be the debate of the next decade. While Emmanuel Macron and his supporters plead for “more Europe” and the nationalists for “less Europe”, European Commission President Juncker came up with a surprising middle-ground initiative called “*Doing less, more efficiently*” in the autumn of 2017. A task force was established and the first results are expected. However, neither the pro-

European states nor the Visegrád Group (V4) was very happy with this compromise. Poland and Hungary are afraid that one day the EU will recognise two or more categories of member states and this will have consequences in terms of budget allocations or other forms of discrimination against their citizens. A similar reluctance with regard to a “multi-speed” Europe is encountered in some pro-European countries such as Romania, the Baltic States, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece. The split of the European Union between the core and periphery economies refuels old suspicions regarding West-East cleavages. No scenario and no model seem to fully satisfy all 27 member states. Our contributors deal with the most relevant scenarios, alternatives, and predictions. They do this in a comparative and balanced way.

The window of opportunity for the EU’s reform was also created by the fact that, in 2017, general elections took place in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, so that three of the major democracies of the European founding core have recently-legitimated executives. Usually, at the beginning of a new term, governments are more inclined to make compromises and concessions, so negotiations for “a new European Union” should have more chances of success in the first half of the current electoral cycle. On the other hand, the fact that Angela Merkel did not run for a new term as CDU leader and announced that this was her last term as German chancellor, obviously weakened her power and influence, both in domestic and in European politics. In addition to the beginning of the end of the “Merkel Era”, the new Italian government, based on a coalition of leftist populists and far-right nationalists, does not spell good news for the reformers’ camp. Under these circumstances, French President Emmanuel Macron is nowadays positioning himself as the main leader of the pro-reformist European option. To make the equation of European politics even more complicated, it should be mentioned that Macron’s popular support in France shrank dramatically to 25% in November 2018 and 28% in April 2019, losing, therefore, more than half of the sympathy he had had in the spring of 2017.

Gathering research papers from various fields such as European studies, international relations, political science, economics, and cultural studies, this volume sketches the contours of a changing European Union. The methods and approaches used by our contributors are diverse, multidisciplinary, coming from different branches and schools of thought. Established scholars, as well as young researchers, put together the results of their work in a collection of essays, emphasising directions for change and solutions.

The book is structured into two main parts. From the perspective of international relations, the first part explores the potential of the European Union to act as a global power. Relations with the US, China, Russia,

Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East are approached in dedicated analyses. The UK's perspective on the future of European security is also approached, taking into consideration that London *is* and, most probably, *will remain* an important player within NATO. The Brexit referendum gave France and Germany the possibility to submit the project of European Defence in 2016, officially adopted by the EU in December 2017 as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) in the field of Defence.

Twenty-five out of the 27 remaining member states decided to be part of PESCO in the field of Defence. The idea of advancing the political initiative of a common defence policy was repeatedly blocked in past decades by the UK, a convinced "Atlanticist" country. After the June 2016 Brexit referendum, the obstacle preventing France and Germany from going ahead with PESCO suddenly disappeared. Behind PESCO is the political will of a "sovereign" Europe, with increasing strategic autonomy in relation to the United States. The idea of "*a European army to defend the European Union against Russia, China and even the United States*" landed President Macron in hot water and prompted vehement reactions from President Trump. At the same time, not all the 25 members of PESCO see European Defence with the same eyes. Beyond the core countries led by France and Germany, a second circle of semi-reluctant states having strategic partnerships with the US (such as Romania) have engaged in PESCO in a moderate manner and with limited contributions, while a third category, with Poland as the main representative, explicitly recognised that they had decided to join PESCO just because it was easier for them to block decisions in favour of a common European defence and to the detriment of NATO from inside than from outside this group.

Our contributors Alexandru Lăzescu and Octavian Manea analyse the perspectives of the European Defence initiative: "In this context, it is not surprising to see more and more calls for European *emancipation* from the *United States' hegemony*. [...] France is the main supporter of the 'European army' proposal since Paris probably thinks that it will be the dominant player in the EU's defence after Brexit, just as Germany is in economic terms. Berlin was initially reluctant but seems to be ready to embrace the initiative. But replacing the American security umbrella with a purely European one, when there is such widespread hostility towards hard power capabilities on the continent, is something easier said than done". Whether the new European Union will become a hard power in order to complete its vocation of a global actor, or whether it will maintain only the characteristics of a soft power remains to be seen.

Șerban Filip Cioculescu approaches the current EU-China relations. In order to explain Beijing's newly discovered strategic propensity towards

Europe, the author makes an evaluation according to which “the Chinese national interest would require a gradual EU disassociation from the US from a geostrategic perspective and a transformation of united Europe into a power pole (including militarily) capable of counterbalancing the American hegemon for a truly multipolar configuration of the system”.

Agnes Nicolescu addresses the future EU-UK relations in the field of security. Brexit will not completely change London’s strategic presence in Europe, mainly thanks to its NATO membership, but it will pose some challenges for both parties. Our contributor believes that “the UK will continue to collaborate with its allies in the defence area after Brexit, through its extensive range of bilateral, regional, and international formats. Against a political context in which the US president Donald Trump expressed himself in favour of Brexit, the UK may attempt to undermine collective EU decision-making processes through bilateral agreements with individual member states. At the same time, the chances that the Commonwealth may replace the EU on any level, be it economic or security and defence, are very slim. However, it is very much in the interest of the EU to ensure that London continues to be involved in the security of the European continent, and the same goes for the UK”.

The oscillating EU-NATO strategic relations represent a matter of concern in the long term. Claudiu Degeratu examines the perspectives of transatlantic ties on both the Western and Eastern flanks of the Alliance. He remarks that: “Widespread scepticism in Washington that EU defence cooperation could discriminate against the non-EU members of NATO, or that the EU could distance itself from the US, has long since dispersed. Instead, under US President Donald Trump, political differences weigh heavily on the relationship, as evidenced by his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. A fundamental debate on the EU-NATO cooperation has also been avoided due to the different strategic orientations of the EU Member States. While NATO’s collective defence is key for Eastern European countries, Western Europe is increasingly looking towards the EU’s goal of achieving ‘strategic autonomy’ in crisis management. Beyond technical exchanges between the EU and NATO staff, there is, therefore, a need to agree on common goals.”

Among the regional powers, Turkey develops by far one of the most sensitive and complex relations with the European Union. Raluca Moldovan proposes a moderate vision regarding the future of the EU-Turkey ties in the years to come: “The attitudes of both parties reveal a relationship stuck in political purgatory: EU officials are reluctant to cut the Gordian knot and put a definitive end to Turkey’s accession, while Turkey, although clearly more interested in pursuing its regional interests, stops short of walking

away from the negotiation table. The pretence—rooted in no small measure in hypocrisy—continues because both the EU and Turkey are aware that they cannot sever all ties completely and that there are economic, political, and geopolitical interests that involve both of them”.

Laura Herța proposes a contribution on the future of the EU-Western Balkans relations. The topic has recently acquired a growing importance for the European Union after the formulation of a new dedicated strategy. The once turbulent region becomes the scene of a strategic competition for power and influence, the EU being more and more challenged on the ground by China, Russia, and Turkey. According to our contributor, “the term Western Balkans incorporates pejorative recollections of previous perceptions on the Balkan wars but also retains the enduring ‘Balkan’ character of the region (often presented in opposition to the developed and civilised Europe). The re-imagined Western Balkan region, as tackled in this chapter, suggests the need for re-intensified relations with Southeastern Europe and more efforts on the part of the EU to bring the countries from the Western Balkan region closer by revisiting their role, as well as the shared knowledge and meanings assigned to the area.”

Of no smaller importance for the EU’s external relations are the political dynamics in the Middle East. President Trump changed the course of the US’ foreign policy towards Iran and strengthened ties with Israel. From Turkey to the Levant and Iran, political Islam influences both regional and inter-continental contexts. Terrorism and migration are just two of the main consequences of the turbulences affecting the region. Ioana Constantin-Bercean analyses “how the EU will seek to manage this new stance toward its transatlantic ally while safeguarding the Iranian nuclear deal at the same time. Will the Europeans be able to make a contingency plan to salvage the relationship with Iran, and what will be the impact of the new American foreign policy approach on the EU’s plans?”

The second part of this volume looks at European politics and societies. From an internal perspective, the EU seems even more problematic than in its international dimension. Martin Brusis deals with the specifics of the integration and relations with Brussels of the four Central European countries forming a sub-regional entity: “the V4’s collective resistance during the refugee crisis may signal the emergence of a common Central European identity that has initially been promoted by right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland and is likely to diffuse into the other two Visegrád states”.

Sergiu Mișcoiu proposes a substantial analysis of French politics, focused on populism and the advance of illiberal discourse. The results of the 2017 presidential elections and the first 18 months of the new political

cycle are thoroughly investigated in order to reach the conclusion that “illiberal democracy has become, thus, an international phenomenon. The parties that follow this ideological trend may engage in joint actions, episodic collaborations or, in some cases, long-term alliances. Given the peculiar (or isolating) position it occupies in the political landscape of the Hexagon, the National Front is the only important French party that appears to have assumed the objective of instituting illiberal democracy, representing, at the same time, an important voice supporting this trend at European level”.

Regarding the same topic of populism and illiberal discourse, Ovidiu Vaida sketches the landscape of Central and Eastern European politics. His analysis goes back to the past decade and sees the nuances between three subgroups of states: “Although the term illiberalism was adopted by the political arena and scholars just a few years ago, it describes a phenomenon that has existed, or exhibited its first signs, for more than a decade, in fact right after the accession of the CEE countries to the European Union. Except for one year, 2011, the Nations in Transit regional average index decreased year after year, starting with 2.33 in 2008 and ending at 2.61 in 2017. Although most studies discuss mainly Hungary and Poland, it is clear that this is a regional trend, with larger or smaller variations. The Baltic States and Slovenia have somehow maintained the same level of democracy, while the Visegrád group countries and the Balkan states (Romania, Bulgaria) witnessed a more sizeable decline”.

Ionelia Bianca Bosoancă identifies the main scenarios, visions, and perspectives for the future of the European Union, centred on Macron’s plan for the post-Brexit EU. It is a complex, ambitious, and somehow idealistic vision that combines political, economic, cultural, and intellectual ingredients for a new, re-established Union. From a Eurozone budget to European Universities, from strengthened European governance and sovereignty to research and innovation, Emmanuel Macron wants to re-launch the European Union in an almost revolutionary way. Some of these ideas refer to: “...in the field of security and justice, President Macron stresses the idea of expanding the European Public Prosecutor’s competences to fight terrorism and organised crime, amplifying the fight against the illegal financing of terrorism and Internet propaganda, and proposes a European Intelligence Academy to create closer ties among the Member States in the fight against terrorism. Both Presidents highlight the need for strengthening EU intelligence cooperation, but President Juncker wishes to do so by bolstering an existing agency, Europol, whereas President Macron calls for a new institution to be created”.

Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean approaches the Europe 2030 Agenda. After moderate success with Europe 2020, the EU considers a new 10-year strategic agenda. The author remarks that: “While the negotiations on the new multiannual budget of the Union are still underway, with events such as the Sibiu Summit of May 9, 2019, expected to shed some light on the post-Brexit directions to be taken, it remains unclear as to how broad an EU 2030 agenda will be. What is at stake chiefly revolves around the existence (and if so, ambition and breadth) of education-oriented goals in the new framework, possibly aligned with the much-expected revamped Erasmus programme. Social inclusion, often translated into outputs germane to poverty, should remain present among the priorities, notably due to the demographic and migratory challenges the Union has been facing in recent years”.

From a much broader, philosophical perspective, Gabriel Gherasim describes the crisis of European humanity as a cultural crisis. He makes a necessary comparison with the great American moment of the Wilsonian liberal project, whose Centennial the world celebrated in 2018: “When dealing with the historicity of European humanity and consequently highlighting exemplary human deeds consistent with the lofty ideals of European rationality, the same objective and allegedly realist historical accounts would deem Woodrow Wilson’s idealist politics of world peace, international cooperation, and super-national arrangements—for instance—as dreamy and ‘so unworldly’”.

The authors of this volume cover a large array of topics centred on the issue of the post-Brexit European Union. The multitude of dimensions taken into consideration in the contributions creates the premises for a complex diagnosis of this critical moment of the European Project. Inter and multidisciplinary aspects support the scope of the analyses. Obviously, no one has a crystal ball. No one can claim to possess the entire truth. Nevertheless, we define several essential, clear questions and also provide some answers with regard to possible developments in the years to come.

2019 is the birth moment of a “new European Union”. Brexit Day (set for October 31), the Summit on the Future of the EU on May 9<sup>th</sup> in Sibiu (Romania), the European elections between May 23<sup>rd</sup> and May 26<sup>th</sup>, a new President of the European Commission and a new College of Commissioners, a new President of the European Council, PESCO and the attempt to establish a Defence Union, an explicit desire of the core member states to become autonomous in relation to the United States, and who knows what other “black swan” could appear, will shape the profile of a changing European Union. The present book provides this dramatic birth

with a set of analyses and instruments for a future understanding of the evolution of the most ambitious political project in the history of Europe.



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Valentin Naumescu  
Cluj-Napoca,  
April 7, 2019



**PART I.**

**THE EUROPEAN UNION  
AS A GLOBAL ACTOR**

## CHAPTER ONE

# IS THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE FACING AN INEVITABLE UNRAVELLING?

ALEXANDRU LĂZESCU  
AND OCTAVIAN MANEA

### Abstract

*The once strong bond between Europe and the US is dissolving exactly when the new era of great power competition should have kept them closely aligned. This chapter is an assessment of the state of the transatlantic alliance in the context of a “brave new world” where illiberal powers are contesting the West, trying to impose their regional spheres of influence and hollow out key traits of the liberal international order. The chapter focuses on the disruptive trends that simultaneously reshape the ecosystem in which the transatlantic alliance operates: a constant erosion of Western economic and technological primacy, a return of the great-power competition, increased global ideological struggles, all compounded by a growing gap between the two sides of the Atlantic and increased domestic tribalisation inside the West itself. As for the latter, while Donald Trump’s abrasive style has had a significant impact, the overall picture is far more complex, and the responsibilities lie on both sides of the Atlantic. The internal political turbulences in the US and Europe, the shift in focus in Washington from Europe to Asia in the context of an increased geopolitical competition with China, the blatant anti-Americanism nurtured for decades in Western Europe, especially in France and Germany, and, above all, a different geopolitical mindset, with Europe locked almost exclusively in a soft power view of the international scene, are some of the things which have gradually eroded the transatlantic alliance from the inside. The chapter concludes that the fate of the transatlantic alliance will be defined by how the West will be able to manage two fundamental challenges on the horizon. The first is the growing tribalisation affecting western societies from the inside, which is*

*responsible for utterly confused political environments, governance dysfunction, and massive polarisation. The second challenge is how the US and Europe will position themselves relative to Russia and especially to China. Will the West remain a common space of shared values and major interests or is there an inexorable trend toward a new geopolitical reality where parts of it, North America, Europe, and like-minded countries from the Asia-Pacific region, will break apart and engage separately in a new geopolitical competition alongside Russia or China?*

**Keywords:** Transatlantic rift, Great-power competition, tribalisation, European army, NATO, democratic recession

By any definition, NATO is the symbolic embodiment of the strong post-WWII transatlantic link. Its *raison d'être* was famously described by Lord Hasting Ismay in 1952: “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”. Sixty-five years later, in a moment of serious doubt not only about NATO’s credibility but also about the future of the transatlantic bond itself, historian Victor Davis Hanson ended an article about the alliance and the “Old-New Order” by concluding that, when NATO withers, we have quite a different picture of the European order, with the “Russians a bit in, America somewhat out and Germany more up than down” (Hanson 2017).

In this fuzzy picture, what is clear is that America and Europe are drifting apart. The signs are everywhere in the public remarks of European leaders. After the Paris commemoration of the hundred years’ anniversary of the end of World War I, Bruno Le Maire, the French finance minister, urged Germany to team up with France and turn the European Union into a “sovereign power” on the world stage, able to stand against the United States and other great powers. In an interview with the German business newspaper *Handelsblatt*, he also emphasised that Europe needed to become “a kind of empire like China and the USA, but a peaceful empire that concentrates on environmentally friendly growth”. He also added that a Franco-German compromise on European integration and the Euro-zone was the necessary condition for implementing these strong decisions: “I keep banging on about it because agreement between our two countries is still the most important condition for progress in Europe”. It is rather uncertain whether other European countries will interpret all of these as *progress in Europe* or as their dilution into an imposing *Franco-German Empire*. Regardless, it is certain that this new European obsession with

sovereignty, which some states see as gaining “independence from the United States”, exemplified in proposals for a European army, distinct from NATO, will introduce significant new strains within the transatlantic relationship. In addition, the grandstanding lecture on “*nationalism*” and “*patriotism*” delivered by Emmanuel Macron during the Paris commemoration in the presence of Donald Trump, and the following aggressive tweets posted by the American President did not help at all.

The paradox, observes Walter Russell Mead of the *Wall Street Journal*, is that all this is happening at a time when the interests of major Western powers are more aligned than ever after the end of the Cold War. They face the same threats and the same geopolitical challenges:

Russia and China both seek a weaker European Union, a divided Western alliance, and a decline in American power. China’s aggressively mercantilist economic plans target the capital-goods and automotive industries at the core of the German economy. In a world with better leadership, the major European states and the U.S. would deepen their partnership to prepare for a challenging new era in world politics. In our world, however, bitterness and resentment fester on both sides of the ocean, and the alliance weakens as the need for it grows. (Mead 2018c)

But why did a once strong transatlantic bond linking the United States and Europe start to fracture? Why do “bitterness and resentment fester” between these two great pillars of the West, despite shared interests, challenges, and opportunities? The tendency is to consider Donald Trump the main culprit but, at a closer look, the story is more complicated. He is a symptom, not the ultimate cause, of much larger crises and destabilising trends. Several trends push against the transatlantic alliance today:

- the hyper-polarised domestic political climate in the US, responsible for the Trump presidency, with a growing perception of European allies as free-riders who benefit from both the American security umbrella and broad access to the huge US market, without giving much in exchange;
- the American conservative discourse on Europe also perceives the continent as fundamentally decadent, in light of overly generous welfare states, secularism, “multiculturalism”, and a failure to properly manage the migration from the Islamic world and global South;
- politically chaotic environments in the US and UK, as well as the disruptive Brexit process, not only inject new fractures within the transatlantic relationship but also distract the Western world’s

attention from the very serious security, economic, and ideological challenges posed by China and Russia;

- one can see expressions of what is called “democratic recession” not only outside the Western world but also within it, specifically in countries like Hungary and Poland;
- the long tradition of anti-Americanism in Western Europe, especially in Germany and France;
- the French impulse, in line with the Gaullist tradition, to use the EU as leverage and counter-balancing framework against the United States;
- the clash on trade between the US and Germany, the latter enjoying a large surplus in bilateral relations and facing innumerable accusations of mercantilism and “cheating” from Trump and American trade hawks;
- the rebalancing of the strategic focus in Washington from Europe to Asia, in line with the geopolitical competition with China;
- the massive subversive campaign that Russia has conducted in Europe through its propaganda vehicles, such as RT and Sputnik, as well as through the links with pro-Moscow right and left-wing populist parties, aiming to erode the Euro-Atlantic partnership as much as possible;
- the growing impact of Chinese influence, through trade and investment, within the EU, especially on its Eastern flank;
- societal fault-lines, the growing tribalisation inside Western countries, the fractures within the overall Western world that deepen and expand the transatlantic rift;
- the open nature of the societies that are part of the West makes them easy targets for Russia, China, and other hostile powers attempting to use new technologies, especially social media, as weapons designed to augment existing social divisions and amplify tensions between Europe and the United States.

On the other hand, despite real problems and a severely deteriorated general climate, the cross-economic integration of the two sides of the Atlantic, by far the largest worldwide, coupled with strong human links and common values, continues to provide a solid connection. The figures are impressive. The bilateral trade was more than \$1.1 trillion in 2017, with American FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) in the EU being \$3.24 trillion and the EU’s FDI in the United States being \$2.73 trillion. And, despite the rhetorical and policy clashes, the two sides of the Atlantic share the same fundamental values, although not always the same interests. But

while this is true, one cannot underestimate the serious transatlantic rift built on real or perceived grievances. And it is not only because of Trump. Bruno Le Maire's vision of Europe as an "*environmentally friendly empire of peace*", in competition not only with China and Russia but also with the US, shows that there is a serious split between the two sides of the Atlantic in approaching today's geopolitics. Some in the EU see this as a relatively friendly competition, with conflicts settled within global multilateral institutional arrangements such as the UN or the WTO. On the other hand, the dominant view among both American Democrats and Republicans is that the geopolitical competition is a tough one: it is all about the race for global dominance and the attempt, mainly by China and Russia, to unravel the Western-led liberal order. Powerful nationalist narratives are shaping our times and should discredit fantasies of utopian liberal multilateralism devoid of great political conflicts and passions:

Post-nationalism is a Western fantasy, not a global trend, and no lasting peace can be built on such a shaky foundation. China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Brazil, Turkey—these countries and many others are as nationalistic as France was in 1910, and their nationalism is shaping a new reality in world affairs that puts both European and American security increasingly at risk. (Mead 2018c)

### **The strategic code of the US Administration**

In his past works, John Lewis Gaddis, the famous historian of the Cold War, concluded that each presidential administration develops

certain strategic or geopolitical codes, assumptions about American interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses, that tend to be formed either before or just after an administration takes office, and barring very unusual circumstances tend not to change much thereafter. (Gaddis 2005, ix)

While much more chaotic, impulsive and erratic, the Trump Administration is no different. The first two years of his term provide ample evidence and vignettes from which the strategic code of the administration can be inferred. More importantly, the transatlantic relation, its underlying pressures, and challenges, cannot be understood in the absence of the broader context that articulates the main strategic directions of the current administration. In short, what makes the Trump administration tick on foreign and defence policies? What is the common thread between the White House and various key agencies, the glue that unites them



despite many disagreements on specific policies?

Many observers consider that one of the core traits of Trumpism is the deep scepticism towards, aversion to and instinctive rejection of what is generically considered the liberal international order—the multi-layered framework of institutions and alliances—developed by the United States after 1945 and massively expanded after 1989, during the unipolar post-Cold War era. In this understanding, an America-first foreign policy is about reassessing the utility of global alliances and institutions based on today's strategic imperatives. Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, emphasises that there is “*a need for reset*” and recalibration of many of the international structures created by Washington in the aftermath of World War Two (Mead 2018b). Discussions of reform and adjustment are no doubt necessary. The problem is that the president himself has long been convinced that these international structures are in themselves constraints and act as limitations on America's power, while alliances take advantage of American resources and free ride on the back of the American taxpayers. In short, the president remains profoundly “suspicious of global institutions and alliances, many of which he believes are no longer paying dividends for the US” (Mead 2018b). For example, Donald Trump has only reluctantly endorsed the key Article 5 of the NATO charter and openly questioned the viability of the organisation itself. Evidently, the American president is quite hostile toward any alliances and multilateral international organisations of any kind. “We have to explain to him that countries that have worked with us together in the past expect a level of loyalty from us, but he doesn't believe that this should be a factor into the equation” writes *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg, quoting a White House official, adding that, in the president's view, the United States “owes nothing to anyone, especially its allies” (Goldberg 2018). Moreover, the president “apparently considers the supreme folly of investing in alliances that harm or even constitute direct threats to the United States” (Friedman 2018).

An iconic event that describes how Donald Trump sees the world is the one captured in the latest book written by legendary journalist Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*. On July 20, 2017, the president was invited at the Pentagon for a collective briefing orchestrated by the top cabinet members responsible for foreign and defence policies—Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson, reinforced by Gary Cohn (the former economic adviser to the president). It was designed as a lesson of strategic history about the importance of free trade agreements, alliances, and the US' global commitments: in short, about the “world America made”. The message that Jim Mattis wanted to send was similar to the one he often

emphasised in his public remarks—“the great gift of the greatest generation to us is the rules-based, international democratic order” (Woodward 2018, 299). It has not only served the US well but also guaranteed no major war between great powers for the last 70 years. The fact that such elementary post-war history had to be laid out for the president captures the extent of his break from his Democratic and Republican predecessors. But for both Trump and his former political strategist Steve Bannon, this kind of message was the epitome of the globalist mindset that the president campaigned against. It was the essence of the establishment’s worldview, a symbol of “*the expansive, limitless engagements of the old world order*” (Woodward 2018, 300), the bipartisan consensus the president was elected to unravel.

Another underlying core belief of Trumpism and the America-first platform is the defence of American national sovereignty. From this perspective, Donald Trump is the defender of American sovereignty perceived as being under assault by the ultimate villain—the globalist elites. It is an image—Americanism vs. Globalism—that resonates very well with the president’s core electoral base. A case in point is the latest rejection by the United States of the International Criminal Court (ICC) perceived as having “no jurisdiction, no legitimacy and no authority” (Trump 2018). At the same time, he wanted to send a broader message to the global governance structures, emphasising that “we will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy”. He sees global governance as a fundamental threat to national sovereignty and incompatible with patriotism: “America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism”. What he usually wants is a unilateral America able to exert its power unhinged by the constraints of international institutions. In a way, the Trump administration is promoting a classic maximalist understanding of national sovereignty, a world where the nation-state is not “subordinated to a global cooperative ideal” and a “community with universally shared norms and values”, but is instead “an arena where sovereign states align—or clash—in pursuit of national interests” (Schadlow 2018). On a deeper, more profound level, the Trump administration is forcing a debate about the present and future of the nation-state especially at a time when “for too long many in the West have touted international institutions without acknowledging that they derive their authority and legitimacy from the nation state. It is in the nation that democratic accountability resides” (Mitchell 2018c), as the US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs made it clear during his remarks at the Atlantic Council. It is a discourse, even among more

traditional conservative internationalists like Mitchell, which suggests that globalisation went too far and removed too many policy debates from the realm of democratic self-government. In this view, the West must recover

the concept of the nation-state not in its aggressive nationalist forms, but as the seat of the political legitimacy. We have to work harder at reconciling our concepts of international institutions, many of which lost their relevance, with those deeply legitimate national institutions, what Edmund Burke called the little platoons. (Mitchell 2018d)

But this philosophical embrace of a strict sense of national sovereignty and a limited role for multilateral institutions could have unintended consequences. Sooner or later, this philosophy will set the stage for even more fragmentation in Europe, driving a wedge between Old Europe and New Europe. The entire structure of the European Union—based essentially on sharing and outsourcing sovereignty, could be cast as illegitimate in this attempt to recover the nation-state. Walter Russell Mead captured very well this ideological gap that may ultimately threaten to tear apart the Western alliance:

Trump doesn't believe the future will be one of interdependent, post-nationalist states engaged in win-win trade. (...) He doesn't think international law and international institutions can, should or will dominate international life. Individual nation-states will remain, in Mr. Trump's view, the dominant geopolitical force. (Mead 2018a)

In this sense, it is not an accident that Steve Bannon, a former political ally of the president, is actively working to disrupt the EU from inside, pushing for a balance of power favouring the nativist-sovereignist forces in the next European Parliament. Ultimately, this particular understanding of sovereignty will attract many supporters in some Central and Eastern European countries, especially those who are already engaged in fierce rule of law disputes with Brussels and display clear illiberal tendencies.

The core documents that formalise the institutional mindset of the administration and shape its behaviour on the global stage are the National Security Strategy (released by the White House in December 2017), as well as the National Defence Strategy (published by the Pentagon in January 2018). They both essentially recognise that the United States have entered a time of massive strategic adjustment triggered by the new structural realities of the security environment forcing America to reconsider its grand strategy (Jones 2016). They are both shaped by the understanding that “great power competition is now the primary focus of

the U.S. national security”, as former Secretary of Defence James Mattis said in the speech introducing the new NDS. The venue chosen for the event was a symbolic one—the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) named after and founded by Paul H. Nitze, the intellectual architect of the NSC68, the document that codified containment as the overarching doctrine of the Cold War. The NSS and NDS project a common recognition that individualises two primary challenges: “revisionist powers—China and Russia—are subverting the post-WWII political, economic, and security order to advance their own interests at our expense and at the expense of our allies” (McMaster 2017). Overall, the overarching theme and message are that the security environment has dramatically shifted since the 1990s (a time when the end of history was celebrated and American power had no rival), or since the post 9/11 era, when terrorism and Islamic radicalism consumed the West’s strategic focus. In this sense, the old geopolitics is back in a way reminiscent of the pre-1939 or pre-1914 worlds:

Russia and China are serious competitors that are building up the material and ideological wherewithal to contest U.S. primacy and leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It continues to be among the foremost national security interests of the United States to prevent the domination of the Eurasian landmass by hostile powers. (Mitchell 2018b)

The keyword that sums up well the collective strategic universe displayed by the NSS and NDS remains that of competition and the need to compete for influence in multiple arenas. As one of the thinkers that participated in the developing of the NDS said, “competition (geopolitical competition, great power competition, and competitive strategies) is the thread that runs through the strategic planning community in Washington right now.”

Nowhere is the competition more profound and intense than on NATO’s Eastern Flank, in Central and Eastern Europe. In a series of speeches over the summer and fall of 2018, in Bucharest, Prague, Brussels, and Washington, Wess Mitchell, the top American diplomat on European affairs, highlighted the broad contours of the US’ approach to the region. He framed the challenges as part of a larger battle for influence with two strategic competitors. On the one hand, there is Russia that “uses energy monopolies, and dirty money and military and hybrid threats to cow its neighbours into a kind of vassalage”. On the other hand, there is the increasing presence of China that “uses debt book diplomacy to create dependencies that will constitute very real leverage over Central European governments and societies in the future” (Mitchell 2018a).

The problem is that this competitive mindset is usually applied by the president, if not always by his key advisors and cabinet officials, to America's own allies. Donald Trump is convinced that allies like France, and especially Germany, use the EU simply as leverage for advancing their interests, which sometimes collide with those of the US. There is certainly a dose of truth here, especially when it comes to trade. Even Great Britain, America's main ally in Europe, decided in 2015, despite the Obama administration's request, to join the Chinese-led initiative to establish the *AIIIB* (*Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*). At the time, the White House openly and unambiguously expressed its displeasure. A US official told the *Financial Times* that Washington condemned alleged constant European accommodation of China as "*not the best way to engage a rising power*". But as Tony Blair said in an interview for Reuters, EU disintegration would be a worse alternative for both Europe and the US. Left on their own, a good number of current member states will become easy targets for the predatory practices of Russia and China.

Despite the zero-sum logic projected by the president, alliances remain at the core of the administration's thinking, at least from the perspective of the formal documents responsible for medium-term strategic planning. In fact, the whole NDS is premised on strengthening the architecture of the US' alliances in the world. It is one of its main lines of efforts. In general, there is deep institutional support for alliances strongly embedded in the Pentagon's organisational culture. Every time they had the opportunity, both James Mattis and General Joseph Dunford (the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) presented allies and alliances as a key comparative advantage that made the difference between the US and the other challengers: "*our real strengths are the network of alliances and partnerships around the world*". In the end, the broad architecture of alliances that were developed over the past 70 years remains the key signature of the American-led liberal international order.

I had the privilege to fight for America many times; I never fought in a solely American formation. The greatest generation created these alliances to which we owe so much because history is clear: nations with allies thrive, those without wither,

as Jim Mattis put it in a speech at the Centre for the National Interest (Mattis 2018). In Clausewitzian terms, the network of America's alliances is not only its centre of gravity but also "the backbone of global security" (National Defence Strategy 2018, 3). As historian Lawrence Freedman said, "the way the world is organised at the moment actually suits the US. It helps the security it enjoys", so the implication for the US' grand

strategy “is to look after its alliances. If you want to have a more troubled world then the alliance system is allowed to fall apart”. China and Russia clearly understand this fact reflected in their approaches towards American allies in Eastern Europe and East Asia. Multi-domain coercion, intimidation, corruption, subversion, co-option, even hearts-and-minds campaigns are developed in order to disrupt the US-centric alliance system. For both Russia and China, the American alliance system is the centre of gravity that keeps the liberal order together, so they search for ways to peel away the links binding the US to its allies. The cohesion of the alliances is permanently probed and targeted.

Last but not least, there is a broad recognition at the forefront of both the NSS and NDS that the biggest problem the US faces is the eroding technological competitive edge relative to the other challengers. This is no longer the unipolar world of uncontested military dominance of the 1990s. Russia, and especially China, are catching up. As the NDS frames it, the problem of our time is that:

for decades the United States has enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain. We could generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted. Today, every domain is contested—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace. (National Defence Strategy 2018, 3)

This is the outcome triggered by the democratisation of the previous Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Started incrementally in the late 1970s, the RMA-associated technologies matured during the Desert Storm Operation against Saddam Hussein. While the US has developed and invested ever since in the Desert Storm power projection model, Russia and China studied in detail that particular mode of warfare and have built the necessary antibodies leveraging differently the very same key components of the RMA, developing their own precision-guided munitions battle networks. And today, these competitors have almost achieved the threshold of parity. It is no accident that both Russia and China embarked on a quest for developing a cluster of weapons, anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD), specifically designed to disrupt and block the US’ ability to project its military power in vital operational theatres and deny access to allies in fringe regions:

Russia’s strategy is pretty simple—they want to undermine the credibility of the United States in terms of meeting its alliance commitments, and thus erode the cohesion of the NATO alliance. They also want to field capabilities to challenge our ability to project power into Europe. That’s