



Has Trump Reshuffled the Cards for Europe?

Sven Biscop

“I think NATO may be obsolete”. When Donald Trump, the next President of the United States, spoke these words during the campaign, he most likely had only a vague idea of how he would act upon them. But one thing is certain: if he made the statement, it is because he knew it to be a vote-winner. And win he did. Has his election reshuffled the cards for European diplomacy and defence?

The fact that Trump has won, means that his view is more than just a marginal opinion. Support for European security is much less automatic than it once was, and the view that Americans are doing too much and Europeans too little is widespread. It's an opinion underpinned by academic argument. In his 2014 book *Restraint – A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, MIT professor Barry Posen proposed to greatly reduce American involvement in order to force its European and Asian allies to stand on their own feet, up to the point of Germany and Japan acquiring nuclear weapons. In his view, NATO ought to be replaced with a more limited arrangement between the US and the EU, which should organize for its own defence.

The Alliance will not be dissolved as quickly as all that. But the criticism of Europe is far from

unjustified. Take the US out of NATO, and the collective defence guarantee (Article 5) looks a lot less credible – if at all. That is why the doubt that Trump's statements about NATO have induced is so dangerous. Not that Russia is gearing up to invade the Baltic states – that would still force all Allies, including the US, to unambiguously and immediately declare their military support. Putin is smarter than that. He has an interest in exploiting the vacuum that Trump's ambiguity has created, under cover of which he can pursue more assertive policies in the countries wedged in between the EU/NATO and Russia.

DEFENCE

If Europeans want their defence to be less dependent on the vagaries of US domestic politics, they need to acquire the means to achieve strategic autonomy: the ability to undertake not all, but certain military tasks alone. The EU Global Strategy (EUGS), presented to the European Council last June, puts forward exactly this objective. The way to reach it is not necessarily for Europe as a whole to spend a lot more on defence but, first, to ensure that every EU and NATO member pays its due – the EU average of 1.5% of GDP spent on defence is a real and realistic target.

Second, making full use of EU institutions and

incentives, Europeans must make the leap from defence cooperation to defence integration. Instead of just making their forces interoperable with each other, they should do defence planning as if they had a single force, to which each contributes national combat units, anchored in multinational corps structures with multinational command, logistics, maintenance, and training. The corollary is that all European states who join in such a scheme (hopefully at least a dozen or so) should then also do away with all structures and units that are, in effect, useless – and therefore do not deserve to be called capabilities at all – and there are many. This would free up budgetary space to invest in the strategic enablers which until now the US has to provide for nearly every European operation.

All of this would allow Europeans to do two things: to convince the US to maintain NATO by stepping up their own contribution to collective defence, and to project power in their own broad neighbourhood (under the EU or the NATO flag), where the Obama administration already made it clear the US will no longer always come and solve Europe's security problems. The more Europeans can take care of their own problems, the less risk in that same neighbourhood of American adventurism, the consequences of which, as we know since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, can reverberate for decades. While Trump has condemned America's wars in the Middle East, he also seems to be yearning for a dramatic decisive strike against IS. And one can easily imagine him lashing out when an incident would provoke him to act like he thinks a strong commander-in-chief should act. He certainly has announced his wish to increase the US defence budget.

DIPLOMACY

The preferred solution to security challenges in Europe's neighbourhood remains of course a

diplomatic one. Europe, through the EU, is good at diplomacy. Witness the Iran nuclear deal, which would not have happened if the EU had not kept negotiations going during all those years when the US thought they could afford not to talk with Tehran. Witness also the Minsk agreement between Ukraine and Russia, brokered by Angela Merkel and François Hollande and backed up by EU sanctions and NATO deterrence.

Will President Trump withdraw US support in both these instances?

If Trump seeks to unravel the agreement with Iran, which may be a tempting symbolic act, it is highly unlikely that the EU will follow suit. Not only are European companies, which had been chafing at the bit, just re-entering the Iranian market. The normalization of relations with Iran also is the absolute precondition for any attempt to create a dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in order to end their proxy war in Syria (and Yemen) and create a stable regional order in the Gulf. As much is said in the EUGS – but so far the EU plays a conspicuously small part in Middle East and Gulf diplomacy, even though the spill-over effects of continuing war hit it much more than the US.

A huge additional European diplomatic effort is therefore necessary. It was anyway, regardless of the outcome of the US elections, but even more so now, including to prevent the potential negative fall-out of a prospective deal between Trump and Putin.

The Obama administration was of course also trying to reach a deal, at least on Syria – that is why Foreign Ministers John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov met so many times. Had Hillary Clinton won, any deal on Syria would still be one that keeps Assad in place – Russia's military intervention made that inevitable months ago. Which is why Russia too now has an interest in ending the war: it has achieved its

war aim, which amounts to the preservation of the influence that it already had, and it cannot achieve more, as Assad cannot be defeated but also cannot win. Trump should not fall for the temptation therefore of paying too high a price: a Syrian deal at the cost of selling out in eastern Europe would not be the early demonstration of leadership that he undoubtedly seeks.

For sure, the Crimea will not revert to Ukraine. That has been tacitly recognized by everybody, as has the fact that EU or NATO membership for Ukraine is not on offer. Trump may well choose to render this explicit, which from the EU point of view might perhaps be acceptable as long as the core of the Minsk agreement is upheld: Moscow must restore the control of Ukraine's eastern borders to Kiev and end the flow of support to the separatist rebels. Europe's aim is not to entice its eastern neighbours into a close partnership, but to uphold their sovereignty to choose for themselves whom they want to be enticed by. And to support them if that does turn out to be the EU, as is the case for Ukraine.

“Success” in Syria and the satisfaction of being openly recognized as a great leader by someone who also imagines himself as such may entice Putin to conclude a deal with Trump. But it is as likely that the two prima donnas will clash. Putin may well continue to see more advantages in maintaining a “frozen conflict” in eastern Ukraine, giving him a stick to beat Kiev and its allies whenever he feels like it or his domestic popularity demands it. Doubts about Trump's commitment to NATO may likely increase Putin's greed instead of his will to compromise. And it is difficult to see how he can accept a deal on Syria that does not include his ally Iran. Trump will have to choose therefore between distancing himself from NATO and a deal with Putin, and between no deal with Iran or a deal on Syria.

Nobody knows what his preference might be.

TRADE

As if all of this did not create enough of a headache for Europe, there is also the fear of the consequences of Trump's views on trade for security in Asia. If Trump effectively undoes the free trade agreement with America's Pacific partners (TPP) while simultaneously scaling up protectionist measures against China, he will create an economic and political vacuum and a China that is even more eager to fill it. More countries that traditionally keep a middle position between the US and China might then go the way of the Philippines, which has moved a lot closer to Beijing, while those who rely on a US security guarantee, like Japan, may start considering other options.

The EU however has just stated, in the EUGS, that it will accelerate free trade negotiations with its Asian partners. Those FTAs will then suddenly acquire a lot more political and security importance than probably the EU had imagined. The EU can and will of course not replace the US as the external security guarantor. But it can play a significant role in maintaining some political margin of manoeuvre for Asian countries wary of China's dominant position. There is a growing awareness in Brussels that the EU must become a political and a security actor, as well as an economic player in Asia. For that aspiration to become reality however, European diplomacy here too will have to become a lot more purposeful and united. Just this year, a divided EU managed only “to acknowledge” the verdict in the arbitration procedure between the Philippines and China on the South China Sea, in spite of its self-professed image as the champion of international law and multilateral institutions. Europe's Asian partners were decidedly underwhelmed by this lukewarm statement on the security issue in Asia today.

CONCLUSION

The election of Donald Trump has reshuffled the cards for Europe. Whether activist or isolationist, his policies will affect European interests – and probably not for the better, judging by his pronouncements so far. Does it necessarily mean that the cards are stacked against Europe? No, but the EU definitely has to up its game and show a lot more resolution and unity.

The prospect of Brexit has of course just rendered that even more difficult than it already was. European leaders have to realise that they cannot afford to let Brexit distract them from the huge foreign policy challenges facing them. Clearly, even if and when the UK effectively leaves the EU, the remaining 27 will have a great interest in continuing to involve it

in foreign policy-making. The UK however will have to accept that if it wants a “special relationship” with the EU in foreign and security policy, as its foreign policy establishment has begun to frame it, it will have to ask for it, and put an offer on the table. One cannot slam the door and expect to be asked to return. Or do British leaders really think the special relationship with a US led by Trump will suffice to defend British interests?

Europe: up your game, or *rien ne va plus*.

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is the Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and a Professor at Ghent University. He is an Honorary Fellow of the EU’s European Security and Defence College (ESDC).