



OP-ED

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European institutions and the European security order: American perspectives and their implications

Torn between Russia's growing influence and increasing frictions in a historic alliance with the U.S., European states face new challenges to their security architecture. Olga Oliker calls Europe to embrace a dialogue on security and threats in the neighbourhood to build sustainable peace all across the region.

The US and transatlantic relations are an essential part of the European security order. However, attitudes and policies in the US are in flux. The transitional nature of US approaches needs to be taken into account when we are discussing European security today (see also EUREN Chronicle 1, February 2017).

The absence of any single American perspective on Europe is not new. But the reality of many perspectives has become especially clear since Donald Trump's inauguration as the US President. Here, I offer a quick look at two prevalent, competing narratives that I think are particularly important and, consequently, offer some conclusions about how US policy is likely to evolve in the future. I then marry this up with

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some core questions about European security, asking what it would take to build a more sustainable European security order.

American perspectives

I characterize the first American perspective as a "traditional" perspective. Although what I present here is simplified, I think it accurately reflects the viewpoints shared by many in the so-called Washington foreign policy elite, whatever their party affiliation is or position on the liberal-conservative spectrum. This is a perspective rooted in the notion that the current European security order, the one comprising NATO, the EU, and a substantial US security role, is useful and effective. This worldview holds that American contributions to European security have helped to end centuries of conflict on the continent and remain valuable today. The transatlantic security relationship also makes it possible to bring European capabilities (and European infrastructure) to the table when the US needs them, and to provide a certain European imprimatur to US military actions around the world.

This security relationship also underpins European institutions, while the expansion of those institutions and ways of doing business beyond their member states (or to new member states) provides more stability and security to NATO, EU countries and their partners. Indeed, many proponents of the "traditional" view might argue that a "liberal" global order, based

on written and unwritten rules, but understood by all and followed by most, has grown from this European order and made the world a better place. The potential decline or collapse of this order would be extremely dangerous to Europe, America, and the world.

A few additional precepts flow from those already listed. Two are longstanding: First, NATO is the United States' primary, most important alliance. Second, the evolution and growth of the EU has been a positive development, even if EU bureaucracy is sometimes frustrating to navigate. Views on Russia, however, have shifted in recent years. A decade or so ago, most of this community would have argued that Russia needed to be better integrated into Western institutions. Today, they are more likely to say that Russia is threatening those institutions and, indeed, Western states themselves. Containing Russia has thus become an important policy goal. However, most "traditionalists" agree that some amount of cooperation with Russia is still necessary, particularly in the area of arms control, and many now argue that China is the bigger threat.

Aspects of this traditionalist perspective can be found in the foreign policies of George H.W. Bush, William Jefferson Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, to list just the American Presidents who have held office between the end of the Cold War and 2017. It underpins the viewpoints of neoconservatives on the right and liberal internationalists on the left. It is not, however, the narrative on Europe that emerges from statements and actions of the current American presidential administration.

The policy stance of the administration in office today is not always internally consistent (which is not to say that the "traditional" view is), but a few general themes are evident. First, we have heard, including from the top, intimations that NATO may have outlived its usefulness, and has fostered a European security order in which America provides the security and Europe enjoys it. Those who feel this way are particularly frustrated because they see the EU as an economic competitor to the US. At

the very least, they argue that America needs to spend less money on European security, although they probably agree it should maintain a robust presence in the region and have unfettered access to it. They might prefer this to be arranged on a bilateral basis with friendly countries, thus avoiding inconvenient negotiations with those who would limit American power. The current administration is also skeptical about arms control, and tends to view it as an unnecessary constraint on American capabilities.

Russia splits the administration. Many in the US government today, if forced to choose an adversary, would prefer China for a host of reasons beyond the scope of this essay. That said, a number of influential figures look at Russian behavior and see it as a challenge to US interests and goals. The President himself, meanwhile, continues to hope for a better relationship.

I often hear in Europe, and elsewhere, that this current approach is an aberration, and will go away as soon as Donald Trump leaves office, and America is brought back to the "traditional" approach. Leaving aside the question of when that might happen, I often point out that Donald Trump is the third president in a row to have come to office promising to limit America's global commitments. For all the lip service to "traditional" views, and all the "traditional" advisors in the halls of power, the perspective has never fully held sway. Past American presidents may have believed in Europe, but they also complained about the division of financial labor between the US and its NATO allies. The inclination to see China as an adversary is a perennial in US foreign policy, as is a less pervasive but still consistent trend since the end of the Cold War to identify Russia as a threat. So the "new" perspective, while different from the "traditional" one, is less of a departure from past policies than some may paint it.

Moreover, at least on the point of a less globally engaged America, the current US presidential campaign further suggests that this trend won't simply reverse itself when

Donald Trump's tenure comes to an end. The Democratic Party's top candidates are far more focused on domestic politics than foreign policy. This is not unusual – American voters rarely base their decisions on foreign policy. It is, however, especially pronounced in this campaign. In addition, most of the candidates, with the exception perhaps of the former Vice President Joseph Biden, appear to be more personally interested in the domestic agenda. Combined with the very many challenges that indeed face the country and war-weariness on the part of the population, it seems highly likely that if one of them becomes President, they will make the home front their priority.

However, even if “traditionalism” were to prevail in US policy, I'm not sure that the actions it would call for are as sustainable as their proponents might hope. The notion of a global liberal order, and the European order within it, has always been a bit flawed. It ignores transnational threats. It mischaracterizes America's wars (which have not always been in line with that order), and its efforts, successful and less so, to gain European support for them. It ignores the challenges of migration and the fact that so many growing economies, not least that of the United States, are only growing for a small proportion of the population – and shrinking for the rest. It ignores that not all economies are growing. There are reasons that populist and nationalist parties are on the rise. Russia, even if it has ties to some of them and is seen as a model in others, is not among those reasons. Nor is China.

Nostalgia for the European order that was (even if it wasn't as orderly as it is now remembered) also ignores the fact that Russia never felt secure about it. One can argue at length about why, but this fact is difficult to contest. Russia's greater global activism today means that its interests cannot be ignored or dismissed as invalid. Conversely, the idea that we can go back to a better, safer time conveniently puts aside the reality that countries wanted to join NATO because they feel threatened by Russia, and still want to join for the same reason. The bottom

line is that the old order was not as secure, or as orderly, as we may have wished it to be.

Towards a more sustainable European security order?

So what new order is now emerging? During the 10th EUREN meeting, participants have debated whether it makes sense to speak of “taking sides” in Europe (see EUREN Chronicle 7, September 2019). The “sides” in question are binary choices, between Russia on the one hand and the EU and NATO on the other. If there are no sides, everyone exists in a common Europe (and environs), where good relations with Russia are compatible with strong ties with the EU. If there are sides, countries must make choices – Russia, the so-called “West,” or some kind of neutrality. Countries that feel threatened by Russia, including some of its neighbors, hope that their allies and partners will, in fact, take their side. Countries that do not feel threatened may discount those perspectives, and seek ways to support friends and allies that do not aggravate a split with Moscow. They may also not want sides to be taken, for they do not want political conflict to turn into military conflict. The dangers of nuclear escalation mean that the costs of large-scale war in Europe today are even higher than they were in the first half of the 20th century, when two world wars devastated the continent.

Russia's own policies, however, seem to suggest that it does not mind the idea of a binary split in Europe, despite the risks. The country's history, including its recent history, has led it to seek security by promoting its own power and influence. If the choices are binary, and Russia is one of those choices, then its power and influence are cemented. If, however, everyone exists

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in a common Europe, Russia's interests and perspectives may be more easily overruled.

Thus, those who fear Russia want guarantees that allies and partners may not be able to give. Russia, for its part, remains nervous about those partners and allies, even if they don't support the countries that seek their help. A less involved US complicates the equation further. If the US doesn't put itself at the center of European security, then far more work will fall to the states of the region. The new challenge for Europe, then, is to find a path to security despite substantial disagreement on what the threats are and uncertainty as to what the role of the US is.

I propose that the solution is, strange as it may seem, not to go looking for converging interests, whether that is between Russia and the EU and NATO states or between the US and its European allies. I would instead embrace what one participant termed (and rejected as) a "dialogue about what divides us". But such a dialogue can be valuable if it is not undertaken to convince one another that someone is right and someone else is wrong. Rather, if European states can do a better job of clearly defining their insecurities and think creatively about how to ameliorate them, and if they are willing to accept that other countries' insecurities are real to them, it is possible that compromises can be found. One place to start is with placing limits on conventional forces. If countries are concerned about military aggression, limiting the tools of that aggression could be a good way to assuage fears and rebuild confidence. It also forces everyone at the table to define their fears, and engage with the fears of others. How to do this? The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE)

Treaty is now moribund. Do the countries of this region want to revive it? And if so, in what form? How much are European states willing to limit US presence on their soil, for instance, to ensure that the constraints that were provided by the INF treaty outlive it? How much is Russia willing to constrain its own deployments and capabilities to get those limits?

Plans for Europe's security, moreover, cannot exclude the countries in and near Europe. Their security cannot be cordoned off, because it has implications beyond their borders. Many Europeans view Russia's actions in Ukraine as especially threatening, not only to Ukraine, but to the rest of Europe. That is why European countries have responded as they have. If Moscow starts taking seriously the concerns of those who feel threatened by it, can it find its way to making deals with Kyiv and Tbilisi that will meet Russia's needs, ensure those states' security, and not make Europeans nervous? If it can, the building blocks to a more sustainable peace may exist.

The evolution of security in Europe will be a long process. Policymakers cannot design a new architecture that will make everyone happy, agree to it, and impose it. Rather, a new system will evolve over time, and it will be imperfect. But both policymakers and analysts have the opportunity to shape it thoughtfully, informed by historical experience to create something more sustainable and more secure.

Olga Oliker participated in the 10th EUREN meeting on "The EU, Russia and the future of European security". Based on her presentation, this paper was first published by EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN).