



## ARTICLE

# America's new direction in foreign policy

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**Abstract** US foreign policy is approaching a decision point. One option would keep the US heavily engaged in the international system. The other would produce a gradual exit from the global stage. Out on the presidential campaign trail, candidates from both parties are offering variations of this choice to voters. This makes the stakes of the 2016 presidential election unusually high for Europe. Hanging in the balance is the future of transatlantic relations and the security of America's longstanding allies.

**Keywords** US foreign policy | Next US president | Security | Transatlantic relations

## Introduction

These are unsettling times for the US and Europe. On the transatlantic periphery, the Islamic State (IS) is destabilising Syria and Iraq, Russia is fighting a 'Cold Peace' with Ukraine, and NATO's eastern flank looks wobbly and exposed. All the while, Russian

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forces are projecting power into the Middle East and an increasingly assertive Chinese navy is probing the waters of North America and the Mediterranean (Bugajski 2004; Lucas 2015; Sciutto 2015; Holmes 2015). If the frontiers look troubled, the home fronts are not especially calm either. On both sides of the Atlantic, democratic polities are grappling with the plight of refugees and undocumented immigrants, the perils of bloated deficits, and the shock of sporadic, politically motivated violence. If there was ever a time to forge a confident, transatlantic response to shared policy dilemmas, this is the ideal moment. Yet out on the US presidential campaign trail, iron-clad solidarity with Europe is not universal.

American foreign policy is fast approaching a decision point. Will the US turn inward or outward during the next presidential administration; will President Barack Obama's successor muster the financial resources to deter rising competitors and restore tranquillity to the global commons; and what—if anything—are Europeans to make of the unusually large crop of 2016 presidential hopefuls? The answers that each campaign offers to these questions provide insight into the next phase of the transatlantic relationship. Unfortunately, some of the answers currently set forth are troubling.

## The next Madam/Mr President

One fact that is immediately apparent about the 2016 presidential field is its size. Nineteen Republicans and Democrats are currently vying for the White House. The breadth of the field, and the divergence of political views among the candidates, has altered the typical nomination patterns of both parties. As former US President Bill Clinton once explained, 'In every presidential election, Democrats want to fall in love. Republicans just fall in line' (Kuhn 2007). This was true in past election cycles, but Clinton's observation holds little currency in the early race for 2016. On the right, Republican voters have yet to find a candidate with whom to fall in line. On the left, Democrats are still flirting with their options, but with little romance.

A second, and more significant, dimension of the presidential contest is that two old and powerful strains of US foreign policy DNA are jostling for dominance. One is inward-looking: it flourishes on account of America's relative isolation between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The other is an outward-looking internationalism that seeks predictability and stability in the global commons. To varying degrees, all presidential hopefuls manifest traits from one or the other strain. Over the next year, US voters will decide which version they prefer: an inward- or outward-looking foreign policy. The stakes for US–European relations are unusually high as a result. This tension is especially notable in the Republican field, since European leaders could encounter a very different kind of US foreign policy under a prospective Jeb Bush presidency than under a Ted Cruz one. Yet this variation is also present on the Democratic side of the political spectrum. It is for this reason that candidates from both parties deserve close scrutiny through the lens of US–European relations.

## Republicans

The lengthy list of Republican candidates defies easy summary or abbreviation. However, a survey of the current leaders in the presidential pack is illustrative of how the foreign policy debate is shaping up within the Grand Old Party (GOP).

Businessman and reality television personality Donald Trump is—for now—leading the Republican field. Thus far, Trump has been a one-issue candidate, deftly channeling strong anti-establishment feelings among some Republican voters into a campaign against undocumented immigrants. Trump's one and only foreign policy proposal is to build a 'wall across the southern border' and 'make Mexico pay for it' (Trump 2015). It is isolationism without nuance.

Physician Ben Carson has an equally strong appeal among anti-establishment voters. Unlike Trump, however, his foreign policy positions are more developed and internationalist in tone. Carson's primary focus is on establishing a strong national defence and asserting leadership in NATO 'when dealing with international bullies such as President Putin' (Carson 2015). He offers an internationalist alternative to other anti-establishment candidates in the GOP field.

Former Governor Jeb Bush represents the gold standard in mainstream Republican politics. He has assembled a who's who of leading foreign policy experts (with many hailing from the Bush 41 and Bush 43 administrations). Bush's Atlanticist credentials are rooted in the Dean Acheson tradition of active US–European engagement. Bush has invoked Ronald Reagan as a leader who 'believed that the Cold War could be won, not just endlessly managed' (*Washington Times* 2015). In policy he has rejected the current White House's rapprochement with Iran. Under a Bush 45 presidency, current policy towards countries like Iran could see substantive changes. Europe take note.

Senator Ted Cruz is an enthusiastically anti-establishment candidate and a hawk on deficit spending. The US comes first on the Cruz campaign. His foreign policy outlook shuns any encroachment on national sovereignty from international institutions such as the UN. Cruz has also pledged that anyone who wages jihad on the US has 'signed [their] death warrant' (*Washington Post* 2015). It is a message that resonates strongly with a good portion of Republican voters, but turning this promise into a coherent policy could prove difficult and expensive.

Potential game-changer candidates to watch are Carly Fiorina and Marco Rubio. Both are working their way up in the polls, and both candidates have the potential to eventually lead the pack. Europeans can take heart from either candidate's internationalist credentials.

## Democrats

Compared to the GOP roster, the field of Democrats vying for the White House is small and orderly. Yet even here, the inward/outward tension on foreign policy (especially on trade) is discernible.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has the best-established foreign policy record among all of the declared Democratic candidates for president. As a quintessential liberal institutionalist, her international credentials are easy to identify and predictable. She is an Atlanticist, but her pledged support to labour unions on the campaign trail could eventually put her at odds with supporters of free trade (see below for the discussion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or TTIP).

A self-declared ‘Democratic Socialist’, Senator Bernie Sanders appeals to the left wing of his party. Emphasising income equality and free-wheeling spending in his campaign stump speech, recent estimates put the cost of Sanders’s proposals at \$18 trillion over 10 years (Geier 2015). At that rate, the US would have little money left to execute a foreign or defence policy. One notable difference between Sanders and the Obama White House is trade. Sanders opposes all free trade agreements. If TTIP is not ratified before Obama leaves office, it could have a short life-expectancy in a Sanders White House.

## The tremendous task

Whoever wins the election in November 2016 faces a tremendous task. The US’s forty-fifth president will inherit a dangerous, crisis-prone international system that shows little sign of righting itself. It is an environment in which the US and Europe have the most to gain from tight cooperation. They also have the most to lose by failing to put forward a new transatlantic game plan. Recognising the proliferation of potential crisis points in US–Europe relations, five issue areas could prove pivotal:

- **Russia** The Kremlin’s illegal annexation of Crimea and ‘Cold Peace’ with Ukraine represents an overt challenge to the post-1989 settlement of Europe. Even now, Russia remains in open revolt against the fundamental principles of the international system (as laid down in the Helsinki Final Act and the UN Charter). Under the next president, the US and Europe will need to re-establish the validity of these documents and the rules-based international system that they represent. More immediately, transatlantic leaders will need to prevent future revisionist probing from Russia into Europe. The best way to accomplish this goal is to visibly bolster NATO’s security frontier with Russia. Paying for this will prove challenging.
- **IS** The horrific brutality of this terrorist group makes headlines. Its advances into Syria and Iraq threaten multiple US and European partners across the Middle East. While Washington has debated the extent to which IS might threaten the

American homeland, IS-inspired attacks and the ensuing refugee crisis are the obvious knock-on effects from the fighting. Arms shipments from the UK, Germany and France to Kurdish forces, coupled with the US's ongoing train-and-equip programme in Iraq, offer a starting point for better US–EU cooperation to eliminate the virulent danger of IS. As in the case of Russia, however, the investment of political and financial resources in this task is daunting. Without clear leadership, American and European publics might not be prepared for the long-game against IS.

- **Refugees** The walls are going up all over Europe. If this trend continues, it could mean an end to the EU's bold vision of creating a Europe without borders (or at least man-made internal barriers). Europe is not alone in contending with a surge in refugees from the fighting in the Middle East. The US has begun to 'scale up' its own efforts and plans to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees in the coming year (Harris et al. 2015). The deeper transatlantic dilemma is the spread of IS from which the refugees are fleeing. Making the EU's external borders more secure will help to manage the inflow of millions more refugees. This will require sizeable investments in defence and maritime fleets; and it represents an additional budgetary burden that many European states might be unable or unwilling to bear.
- **TTIP** When the US and Europe began negotiations over the TTIP in 2013, it was supposed to represent 'low hanging fruit' on the transatlantic agenda. As two of the largest trading blocs in the world, and with \$3.7 trillion invested in each other's economies, the removal of commercial barriers seemed like an easy win–win for both sides (Akhtar and Jones 2014). That was then. Today, a host of technical impediments obstruct the completion of the TTIP. As the largest free trade agreement the US has ever tried to negotiate, nearly all segments of the American economy will be affected. Unless an unexpected breakthrough in the deadlock occurs, it now looks as if the TTIP will not be presented for ratification by the Senate before Obama's term ends. This means that the election of the next president will almost certainly determine whether the TTIP succeeds or fails. If an anti-free trade candidate wins the election, the TTIP's future looks bleak.
- **Energy (carbon)** One topic that could potentially divide the US and Europe is carbon. While presidential hopefuls like Bush have stated that they 'continue to embrace the reduction of carbon emissions that have taken place', others like Sanders have endorsed outright taxes on carbon and methane emissions (Sanders 2015; *Real Clear Politics* 2015). Since the next president will be in office when current global greenhouse gas rules expire in 2020, the US implementation of any future agreement will almost certainly hinge on the winner in 2016. In a hypothetical Cruz White House, for example, national sovereignty will trump any binding UN emissions treaty, making the issue a dead letter upon arrival.

## What now?

An organisational problem for US policymakers and, by extension, the US–EU relationship, will be money. The generation of US leaders who are alive today must contend with the real limits of a resource-constrained fiscal environment. At current rates, the US debt-to-GDP ratio will hit 100 % by 2040 (US Congressional Budget Office 2015). The unfeasibility of deficit spending is real, and efforts to curtail the US debt burden are a

painful necessity. The net effect of these measures will be to move US foreign policy into uncharted territory. In the past, large sums of money have invariably been spent on international problems. Whether it was the Marshall Plan, the Nixon Doctrine or the democracy assistance programmes of the 1990s, US leaders have always been able to rely on taxpayer largesse to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Not anymore.

One way to better align dwindling resources with policy objectives is a return to strategy. This sounds straightforward. However, the concept of incorporating strategy into US policymaking has been on the decline in recent years. This trend represents a break from the actions of previous generations of US diplomats, generals and thinkers, who enjoyed the benefits of an organisational strategy to guide decision-making. The dominance of strategy in policymaking helped these leaders to navigate the multi-faceted geopolitical environment of pre-war Europe, a dual-fronted World War, a global Cold War and the post-1989 settlement of Europe. As scholars such as John Lewis Gaddis (2009) have stressed, the gradual breakdown of strategy after the Cold War has imposed an unwanted burden on the sustainment of US (and by natural extension European) interests.

The good news is that a transatlantic strategy does exist. Even better, it can be put to work in the twenty-first century. It is the concept of ‘Europe: Whole and Free’, and it is relatively impervious to the tides of domestic American politics. Regardless of who becomes the next president, the US will always have an interest in pursuing political unity, democratic freedom and peace in Europe. After 1989, this strategy guided the expansion of the EU and NATO as a means—not an end—to achieving a stable, prosperous Europe with robust ties to the US. In the post-Crimea environment, this same strategy can guide a new means: managing geostrategic competition in the lands between Berlin and Moscow. Should Western leaders allow Russia to carve Ukraine into puppet proxy states? Should Europe commit itself to defending Lithuania against a Russian probe of its sovereignty? By applying the filter of ‘Europe: Whole and Free’ to these and other potential crisis points in the future, transatlantic leaders can set priorities, allocate resources, and determine what they are, and are not, willing to sacrifice. It is the ultimate test of any successful strategy. ‘Europe: Whole and Free’ can pass that test.

Within the American foreign policy debate, the need for an organisational strategy in Europe is clear. The operational details of such a strategy are less settled. As this debate unfolds, Europeans should watch for some notable changes in US foreign policy behaviour. These include

- **Frankness** The exuberant idealism of the Russian Reset is in the past. In the future, look for US officials to openly single out Russia as a revisionist power in both their public and closed-door statements. While a Republican president is likely to stress the need for greater deterrence against Russia, a Democratic administration could balance this with recognition of Moscow’s counterterrorism

efforts, assistance on the International Space Station and so on. In either event, rhetoric on Russia is likely to become firmer.

- **A replacement for the ‘Pivot’** The Obama administration’s ‘Pivot’ to Asia is increasingly out of sync with the dangerous flare ups across the Pacific, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Under the next president, defence budgets will remain tight, yet rising security pressures will require the next commander-in-chief to maintain a persistent military presence in all three regions. This means that a unilateral pivot to Asia will not proceed as the Obama White House first envisaged. The size of the US’s remaining overseas presence will therefore depend on the winner of the 2016 presidential election, since some candidates will be more willing to maintain a large overseas footprint than others. Even so, an outright US withdrawal from is Europe unlikely.
- **A focus on new dangers** Since the invasion of Crimea, the US policy community has directed its attention to the threat of limited, ‘hybrid’ warfare. While formally recognising this danger, the Obama administration has stressed that US competitors do not seek a ‘direct military conflict with the United States or our allies’ (US Department of Defense 2015). When it comes to Iran, Russia and (to a varying extent) China, Republicans are far less sanguine. The same is true for a few hawkish Democrats. The next president will either invest in robust deterrents to hybrid war, or minimise these investments in favour of competing, domestic priorities.
- **Paying for reassurance** Deploying US forces in Europe is expensive. In 2015, the US’s much-needed troop rotations to front-line allies cost \$985 million. Next year, the Pentagon has asked to spend an additional \$789 million on European reassurance. Importantly, this money does not come from the defence budget. It originates from a special war fund, known in Pentagon parlance as ‘Overseas Contingency Operations’ (US Office of the Under Secretary of Defense 2015; US European Command 2015). By design the Overseas Contingency Operations fund is not permanent. Paying for reassurance with a temporary fund communicates to its allies that the US believes that the Russian threat is equally transitory. Eventually, the next president could be forced to make a choice: cancel European reassurance or enshrine it in the permanent defence budget. This will require the expenditure of political capital in Congress. Once again, this is why the selection of the next president will matter greatly for the future of transatlantic security.

## Conclusion

Europeans do not get a vote in the 2016 election, but they will have a say in what comes afterwards. Regardless of who wins the White House, the next US president will need Europe—as much as Europeans will need the US. Transatlantic economic links amplify this beneficial dependency, since countries that trade together tend to stay together when the chips are down. But trade is not enough. The re-articulation of a shared strategy will be equally essential for sustaining transatlantic interests. This is entirely possible to achieve—and necessary for managing heightened competition in the East. In the past, some of the greatest moments in US–European relations occurred during times of crisis. Looking over the horizon, the potential for future crisis is great. This is

an excellent time for the current generation of US and European leaders to match the legacy of their forbears.

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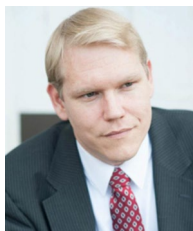
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