



**BROOKINGS – ROBERT BOSCH FOUNDATION
TRANSATLANTIC INITIATIVE**

A satellite night-time photograph of Europe and North Africa, showing city lights and geographical features. The image is dark blue with bright yellow and white lights representing urban areas. A diagonal blue band runs from the top left towards the bottom right, partially obscuring the image.

A POST AMERICAN EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF US STRATEGY

THOMAS WRIGHT

A POST AMERICAN EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF US STRATEGY

THOMAS WRIGHT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past 10 years, starting in the Obama administration and accelerating in the Trump administration, the United States has retrenched diplomatically and politically from Europe. The commitment to NATO stands out as the exception rather than the rule in U.S.-European relations. While the continent faces a wide array of problems—including the eurocrisis, Russia, refugees, the erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, Brexit, regional separatism, difficult relations with Turkey, and terrorism—Washington is strikingly absent from efforts to resolve them. This paper examines the legacy of U.S. political engagement in Europe, how the continent is likely to address its numerous challenges as it is left behind by the United States, and what a post-American Europe means for Washington. The Trump administration and future U.S. administrations face a strategic choice between (1) taking short-term advantage of European divisions even if it might spur disintegration, (2) benign disinterest in Europe's internal problems, and (3) a return to deep engagement in positively shaping a Europe that is coherent, prosperous, and effective on the world stage. Engagement may be a difficult sell domestically, but it is the best way of ensuring that Europe is a full partner of the United States in upholding the postwar international order of alliances, an open global economy, and support for democracy. However, Europeans cannot count on the United States consistently pursuing such engagement, and must continue efforts to strengthen autonomous European capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2002, Spain and Morocco found themselves in a military conflict over Parsley Island, a tiny place in the Straits of Gibraltar inhabited only by feral goats. Twelve Moroccan troops “invaded” Parsley—which they call Leilu—and hoisted their flag. Spain sent 75 troops to expel the Moroccans and raise their own standard. Each side denounced the other’s “aggression” and “acts of war.” The EU backed Spain and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation backed Morocco.

In Washington, the Bush administration was preparing to invade Iraq. But Colin Powell, then U.S. secretary of state, was asked by both sides to mediate and broker an agreement. Powell was bemused. He had never heard of the dispute and thought it smacked of the movie *The Mouse That Roared*, in which a minuscule European country gets a superweapon by mistake.¹ The United States had no interest in the dispute and had bigger things to worry about. However, Powell did his duty as the superpower’s chief diplomat and negotiated a return to the status quo ante. Tensions eased and the world went back to the impending invasion of Iraq.

The Parsley Island saga underscored a simple truth: The United States was involved in every facet of European politics after World War II. The Truman administration helped to rebuild and democratize Western Europe and created NATO while its successors micromanaged politics in new democracies and created deep networks of cooperation with European elites. The United States played a vital role in the creation of the European Economic Community, later the European Union. After the Cold War, it brokered German reunification; championed the expansion of democracy, NATO, and the European Union into Central and Eastern Europe; intervened in the Balkan crises; and much else. This was consistent with U.S. policy during the Cold War. The United States was deeply engaged in shaping the future of Europe for six decades.

Over the past 10 years, starting in the Obama administration and accelerating in the Trump administration, the United States has retrenched diplomatically and politically from Europe. The military commitment to NATO remains in place and has received most of the press coverage, given President Trump’s criticism of the alliance. But the military commitment has obscured the shift on politics and diplomacy. When one looks at the array of problems in Europe today—Catalonian separatism, faltering Brexit negotiations, difficult relations with Turkey, Russian political interference, the fallout from the refugee crisis, illiberal political trends in countries like Poland and Hungary, and differences over the future of the eurozone and the EU—the striking thing is the absence of the United States. Political problems appear to fester without meriting so much as a phone call from the president or secretary of state, let alone a concerted national effort to shape the outcome. Even at a lower level, key diplomatic positions remain unfilled or political appointees are just getting started.

The United States will continue to work with European countries of course, and even with the EU, but on an ad hoc basis with a narrower understanding of the U.S. national interest than before. President Trump’s visit to Poland provided a window into this future—he spoke about energy exports but said nary a word about preserving democratic institutions in Poland.

1 Colin Powell, “Parsley Island,” *The American Interest*, June 14, 2012, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/06/14/parsley-island/>.

Much of this is defensible. Why should the United States be deeply engaged in the politics of another continent? With serious threats and challenges to U.S. interests elsewhere in Europe and around the world, Europe must tend to its own garden. And, from a European perspective, perhaps removing the training wheels provides the continent with an opportunity to get its own act together.

But the fact that American political disengagement is understandable and may even be justified on certain grounds does not necessarily mean that its impact will be benign or positive. All too often analysts and policymakers confuse how they believe Europeans should react to American disengagement with how they are likely to react. And the actual reaction will create a new strategic reality for Europe, its adversaries, and for the United States.

American political and diplomatic retrenchment from Europe comes at a time when European democracies face a greater array of threats and challenges than at any time since the Cold War. EU leaders have signaled a willingness to prepare to address these problems on their own, but internal disagreements between these states and within them, and the sheer intractability of the problems, mean that there is a reasonable chance these efforts will fail without American involvement. The United States must choose between trying to take short-term advantage of Europe's predicament, even if that results in disintegration, adopting a stance of benign disinterest, or returning to a strategy of deep engagement in Europe in pursuit of shared security and prosperity.

This paper is in four parts. The first traces American political engagement in Europe since the Cold War. The second reviews the type of Europe that America leaves behind. The third considers how Europe is likely to respond to its challenges and to American political and diplomatic retrenchment. And, the fourth discusses what a post-American Europe means for the United States.

PART I: AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN EUROPE

After World War II, the United States abandoned its self-imposed isolation from European politics and built a massive military, diplomatic, and political presence in Western Europe. Over the following four decades, the United States helped create the conditions to transform Western Europe from a balance of power system to a security community where war between France, Germany, and the United Kingdom was not only unlikely but unthinkable and unplanned for. This did not occur by accident. Successive American presidents made a series of deliberate policy choices that required vast resources and consistency.

For instance, as Charles Kupchan and John Ikenberry have shown, the United States used the leverage provided by the Marshall Plan to build up centrist coalitions in Britain, France, and Italy that were committed to democracy and a mixed economic system that was relatively open internationally and had a role for the welfare state domestically.² This mixed system—what John Ruggie has called embedded liberalism—had the effect of weakening far left and far right elites that advocated for alternatives such as national socialism, communism, and imperialism.³ The U.S. military presence and the creation

2 G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Economic Power," *International Organization* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 283-315, cite 303.

3 John Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 379-415.

of NATO also had a pacifying effect in that Western European nations no longer had to worry about the threat from each other or security competition among themselves. Instead they could devote their time and energy to integrating their economies, first in the coal and steel sectors and later in other areas.⁴ This was not guaranteed—for instance, President Eisenhower wanted to take U.S. troops out of Europe but was persuaded not to because they were a necessary element in solving the German problem. The American presence facilitated a West Germany that was limited in its military power.⁵

This period of activism had much to do with the fear of communism but it also reflected the desire of the American elites to reform and revitalize Western Europe. Anti-communism may have been a necessary component in mobilizing Congress and the American people to legislate for economic aid and ratification of the NATO Charter, but successive generations of U.S. leaders were committed to the European project for its own sake. The fall of communism removed one of the key strategic reasons behind U.S. engagement—fear of the Soviets—but the positive rationale remained.

As the historian Mary Sarotte has shown, the outcome of the post-Cold War settlement was not inevitable.⁶ There were several different models of order on offer, including a spheres of influence system, a confederation of German states instead of unification, a cooperative economic and security institutional structure, and the expansion of Western institutions like NATO and the EU eastward (what Sarotte called the “prefab model” in that it simply expanded the West). Washington was internally divided on the best course forward, as was Germany, but both came around to the prefab model and then worked closely together, in the face of opposition elsewhere in Europe, to ensure its success.

After the Cold War, the United States hoped to stay aloof from Europe’s internal problems. The George H. W. Bush administration actively sought to stay out of the emerging crisis in the Balkans, as did the Clinton administration, at least initially. But Europe’s inability to cope, and the intensification of the conflict, ensured that the United States gradually reversed course and intervened actively in the Balkan Wars, including by arming the Croats, bombing Serbian positions in Bosnia, brokering the Dayton Agreement to end the war in Bosnia, and going to war with Serbia over Kosovo in 1999.⁷

Nevertheless, by 2000, broader trends were underway that would give the United States powerful incentives to limit its engagement in Europe. The rising specter of Islamist terrorism ensured that the U.S. military would be increasingly tied down in the greater Middle East. The rapid decline of Russia meant Washington could reduce the U.S. military presence in Europe. The apparent success of democracy promotion in Central and Eastern Europe created the impression that the European project was self-sufficient. For their part, European populations saw little reason to seek American help and a significant portion viewed U.S. power negatively after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, the rise of non-Western powers like China, India, and Brazil prompted the United States to look to new horizons. Nevertheless, the impact of these trends was

4 Josef Joffe, “Europe’s American Pacifier,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 54 (Spring 1984): 64-82.

5 Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-63* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

6 Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create a Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

7 For an account of U.S. diplomacy in Europe during this time, see James Goldgeier and Derek Chollet, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

mented from 2000-2008 because Europe had few internal problems, partly because of robust levels of economic growth. The EU had both widened, from 12 member states before 1995 to 27 after 2007, and deepened, with the successful launches of the Schengen area and the euro. Europe's good fortune may have also exacerbated the trans-Atlantic divide over the longer run as EU member states focused on domestic issues and reduced their military spending, outsourcing their defense to the United States. It was only in 2008 and 2009, when the international financial crisis spread to Europe in the form of the eurozone crisis, that the tide began to turn.

At this crucial moment, Europeans found themselves faced with an American president who simultaneously appeared to be the most and least European president in U.S. history. Barack Obama described himself as America's first Pacific president, owing to his upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia. He was ideologically supportive of European integration but he was also impatient with Europe's inability to carry a greater share of the burden in upholding the international order and with what he saw as its reliance on the United States. He wanted to look east, to Asia, and redirect resources from military interventions in the wider Middle East to what he called "nation-building at home." He struggled to develop close relations with any European leader (although in his second term he would develop a friendship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel).

The prism through which President Obama looked at Europe was shaped by the principle that everyone ought to tend their own garden.⁸ According to this principle, Europeans are wealthy and well-equipped with the means to deal with their own challenges, if they show leadership and political will. Europe's travails are its own fault and responsibility, and it must find its own way out. The United States can help, but it will take a back seat: Europe must lead. If the situation in Europe were to threaten core U.S. interests, Obama would make his views known—as his Treasury Department did over the question of a Greek exit from the eurozone, which could have destabilized the global economy, and as he did on the Brexit referendum—but otherwise, Obama felt that the United States should leave the European project to Europeans.

This had a substantive effect on U.S. policy toward Europe. Obama was largely inactive on the eurocrisis in its early years, until Greece was on the verge of exit in 2015. He deliberately limited U.S. involvement in the Libya intervention of 2011 because he hoped that it would compel European nations to do more. He later told Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, "When I go back and I ask myself what went wrong, there's room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya's proximity, being invested in the follow-up."⁹ In 2015, the Obama administration did not anticipate the destabilizing impact of refugee flows from the Syrian Civil War on the EU. European officials complained that they received no assistance from Washington in negotiations with Turkey or in other efforts to stem the flow of refugees. The impact of refugees on Europe was also not a factor in U.S. deliberations on whether to intervene in Syria.¹⁰

8 Interview with senior Obama administration official, April 8, 2016.

9 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#8>.

10 Chatham House rules conference on the refugee crisis with senior U.S. and European officials, The Brookings Institution, February 6, 2016.

It was not just Obama. His first secretary of defense, Robert Gates, who held the same job in the George W. Bush administration, complained publicly about Europe's lack of spending on defense.¹¹ Much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment regarded Europe as a region where the business of history was finished. The threats of the 20th century—fascism, communism, and belligerent nationalism—had been dealt with and European countries had transcended the nation-state to create a postmodern system that eschewed violence and was seeking an exemption slip from the normal challenges of world politics. Europeans would not do much to help the United States in the world's trouble spots, but they would not require much attention either. Europe would be a postmodern haven from the trials and tribulations of the 21st century. This zeitgeist was perfectly captured by Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass in a June 2011 article titled "Why Europe No Longer Matters": "Europe's own notable successes are an important reason that trans-Atlantic ties will matter less in the future. The current eurozone financial crisis should not obscure the historic accomplishment that was the building of an integrated Europe over the past half-century. The continent is largely whole and free and stable. Europe, the principal arena of much 20th-century geopolitical competition, will be spared such a role in the new century—and this is a good thing."¹²

If Obama was lukewarm toward Europe and unconvinced of America's traditional strategy there, President Donald Trump is outwardly hostile. Trump is the first president to openly question whether the European Union is in America's interests. Shortly following his election, Trump said the EU was created to "beat the United States when it comes to making money," and is now "basically a vehicle for Germany." "I believe others will leave," he told *The Times of London* and *Bild*.¹³ He said he agreed with Britain's decision to vote to leave the European Union and he criticized Merkel for her handling of the refugee crisis. In the months after his election, Trump appeared to be heavily influenced by two people on how to think about Europe. One was Nigel Farage, the former leader of the U.K. Independence Party and a staunch opponent of the EU, and the other was Steve Bannon, his then-chief strategist, who maintains close ties to populist and nationalist parties in Europe, including to the National Front in France.

Trump also famously criticized NATO and accused its European member states of not paying their fair share. During the campaign he said that NATO's traditional mission of containing Russia was obsolete. He claimed credit for persuading NATO to do more to combat terrorism and he hinted that he would pull out of the alliance if Europeans did not dramatically increase their levels of spending. Trump's criticism of NATO was consistent with a 30-year track record of skepticism about U.S. alliances around the world.¹⁴

11 "Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defense Agenda, Brussels, Belgium," U.S. Department of Defense, June 10, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4839>.

12 Richard Haass, "Why Europe No Longer Matters," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-europe-no-longer-matters/2011/06/15/AG7eCCZH_story.html?utm_term=.689b7d3ddbf4.

13 Henry Mance, Shawn Donnan, and James Shotter, "Donald Trump Takes Swipe at EU as Vehicle for Germany," *Financial Times*, January 15, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/1f7c6746-db75-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce?mhq5j=e6>.

14 Thomas Wright, "Donald Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy," *Politico Magazine*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>.

In office, President Trump began to moderate his position somewhat. European leaders, including British Prime Minister Theresa May, used their time with him in the Oval Office to say that the breakup of the EU would not be in their interest. May's intervention made a particular impression on him. The defeat of populists in the Netherlands, Austria, and France also labelled those movements as losers, rather than winners. On NATO, Secretary of Defense James Mattis led the way in convincing Trump not to withdraw from the alliance. Mattis, Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also sought to reassure Europeans of the U.S. commitment. Trump was resistant. He altered a speech at NATO's new headquarters in Brussels to remove an explicit endorsement of Article 5, the mutual defense guarantee, only relenting under serious pressure several weeks later in the lower-profile setting of a press conference with the Romanian president.¹⁵ He followed up with a formal endorsement of Article 5 in a speech in Warsaw.

When Trump took office, Europeans were alarmed and worried that seven decades of U.S. support for European integration may be coming to an end. EU Commission President Donald Tusk identified the United States as a threat to European integration along with China and Russia. In an open letter to the heads of EU governments less than two weeks after President Trump was inaugurated, Tusk wrote, "For the first time in our history, in an increasingly multipolar external world, so many are becoming openly anti-European, or Eurosceptic at best. Particularly the change in Washington puts the European Union in a difficult situation; with the new administration seeming to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy."¹⁶ That danger has abated somewhat. Though Trump is agnostic at best about the European project, the bureaucracy may be strong enough to prevent him from seeking to sow the seeds of division.

In 2017, the U.S. commitment to NATO and to deterring conventional and nuclear aggression by Russia remains in place (political warfare by Moscow is a separate issue) and has been bolstered by troop deployments under the European Reassurance Initiative, begun in the Obama administration and continued in the Trump administration. Doctrinal statements are complemented by deployments and exercises in Europe. But U.S. engagement on security is now the exception rather than the rule in the overall relationship between the United States and Europe. The United States has systematically reduced its political and diplomatic involvement in helping Europe fix its problems. The causes of U.S. retrenchment are much deeper than the policies of one or two presidents might imply. One could argue this pulling back from Europe is justified given the other problems America faces and Europe's own wealth and power. But regardless of its origins and justifications, the retrenchment is real and it will have adverse effects.

PART II: THE EUROPE THAT AMERICA LEAVES BEHIND

The reduction in U.S. engagement in non-military problems in Europe has coincided with the EU's most challenging period in its history. Between the end of the Balkan Wars in 1999 and the financial crisis of 2008, the EU had no major internal problems. It was bitterly divided over the Iraq invasion and vulnerable to al-Qaida's attacks, and

15 Susan Glasser, "The 27 Words Trump Wouldn't Say," *Politico Magazine*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/06/trump-nato-speech-27-words-commitment-215231>.

16 Donald Tusk, "'United we stand, divided we fall', Letter to the 27 EU heads of state or government on the future of the EU before the Malta summit," *Council of the European Union*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31-tusk-letter-future-europe/>.

efforts to create an EU constitution ran into problems, but it was generally a benign era. That fundamentally changed with the advent of the eurocrisis in 2009. What has followed over the past eight years is a series of extraordinary challenges that threaten the coherence and stability of the European project. These are:

1. The eurocrisis: The creation of a monetary union without a fiscal and financial (banking) union resulted in significant divergence within the eurozone that led to a sovereign debt crisis in 2008-09. This crisis split the eurozone into two—a creditor bloc led by Germany and including many Northern European states, and a debtor block consisting of Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Cyprus. France’s then-economy minister (and now its president), Emmanuel Macron labeled the eurocrisis “a religious war” that pitted the Lutheran morality of the Germans against the Catholic forgiveness of the South.¹⁷
2. The Russia crisis: Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian presidency in 2012 ensured that Russia would be an active adversary of the EU. Putin believes that the EU represents an existential threat to his regime—the spread of democracy, economic openness, and the rule of law to his borders could lead to a revolution within Russia itself. The spark for this crisis came in late 2013 and early 2014 with the second pro-Western Ukrainian revolution in a decade, sparked by President Viktor Yanukovych’s decision to drop an association agreement with the EU and his crackdown on subsequent protests. Putin responded to Yanukovych’s February 2014 flight from Kyiv by occupying and annexing Crimea and sending covert forces into eastern Ukraine. The result was a sanctions regime against Russia, escalated Russian political warfare against EU member states, and a new era of geopolitical rivalry. European nations are divided over Russia with populists taking a more benign view of Putin.
3. The refugee crisis: The failure of the Arab Awakening and the resulting civil wars led to a dramatic increase in the number of refugees attempting to seek sanctuary in the EU. This crisis put immense pressure on national governments, boosted populist anti-immigrant parties, and drove a wedge between Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand and Western and Southern Europe on the other. The Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev has argued, “What we are seeing in Europe today is not what Brussels likes to describe as a lack of solidarity but it’s rather a clash of solidarities: national, ethnic, and religious solidarities are chafing against our obligations as human beings.”¹⁸
4. Erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Freedom House’s 2017 “Nations in Transit” report looked at the state of democracy in 29 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans.¹⁹ Of the 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, nine endured a reduction in their levels of freedom from the previous year. The report noted a dramatic reversal of fortune in Polish democracy, where the Law and Justice Party has attempted to undermine institutions and the rule of law. Hungary is now proudly described by its Prime Minister Viktor Orban as an illiberal democracy.

17 “Failure and its consequences,” *The Economist*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2015/08/europes-religious-war>.

18 Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

19 “Nations in Transit 2017,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017>.

5. Brexit: The British referendum on membership in the EU was the result of a long-brewing civil war over Europe within the ruling Conservative Party and a wider sense that the EU was on the brink of failure. The vote to leave has set in motion an incredibly complicated negotiation that is likely to leave both sides worse off. The effects could include a poorer United Kingdom, a more protectionist EU, and less security cooperation in Europe.
6. Regional separatism: Scottish and Catalan efforts to seek independence raise the question of the breakup of nation-states within Europe. Scottish independence appears to be on hold for now but it could make a return if Brexit proves costly for Scotland. Meanwhile, the Catalonia question has given Spain its most severe constitutional crisis since the end of authoritarian rule in 1981.
7. The deterioration of relations with Turkey: It was not long ago that Turkey appeared to be on the brink of a closer relationship with the EU. Hopes were high that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would build a prosperous and confident nation that was a shining example of a democracy in the Islamic world. Today, this vision is in ruins. Erdoğan has shredded Turkish democracy, jailed tens of thousands of his opponents, and adopted a confrontational attitude toward Europe.²⁰ Turkey's relationship with Germany is particularly troubled. In a debate in September 2017, both Merkel and her Social Democratic challenger Martin Schulz argued Turkey should be blocked from ever joining the EU.²¹
8. Terrorism: As ISIS' control of territory for its self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq came under pressure from a military coalition, which eventually led to the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa in 2017, it increasingly turned its focus to terrorist attacks in Western Europe. Islamist terrorists, primarily European-born, have killed scores of people with guns, bombs, knives, and vehicles in high-profile attacks in Paris, Nice, Brussels, Manchester, London, Berlin, Barcelona, and other cities over the past three years. These attacks have raised threat perceptions about the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, and underscore Europe's difficulty in integrating Muslim minorities, particularly second generation nationals.

These are Europe's main challenges, but it is not an exhaustive list—uncertainty in the Balkans, increasing Chinese influence particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, tensions between the eurozone and the EU, and other risks remain.

Europe's ability to solve these crises and meet these challenges is in doubt for three principle reasons.

First, there is a negative synergy between them. Russia has exacerbated the refugee crisis through its military intervention in Syria and it is stoking populist tensions arising out of the eurocrisis. The refugee crisis, and how it was conflated with the migration issue by the British tabloid media, was a contributing factor in the U.K.'s decision to vote for Brexit, the rise of right-wing populism in Germany, and the erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The terrorism problem complicates the response to refugee

20 Kemal Kirişçi, *Turkey and the West: Fault Lines in a Troubled Alliance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2017).

21 Kemal Kirişçi, "Merkel and Schulz Are Making a Major Strategic Mistake," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, September 12, 2017, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/merkel-and-schulz-are-making-major-strategic-mistake>.

flows, as does the deterioration in relations with Turkey. As long as the individual challenges remain, they will continue to interact negatively, resulting in a significant deterioration in regional order.

Second, several of these challenges result from the anti-Goldilocks effect—incomplete and stalled integration that prevents a return to national sovereignty or progress toward a single state, thus leaving the EU especially vulnerable. For instance, monetary union without fiscal and financial union leaves the eurozone permanently exposed. Free movement of people within the Schengen zone without centralized control of external borders makes it impossible to effectively manage migration.

Third, with the exception of Russia, the United States plays a marginal or negligible role in all of these areas. It did not cause any of these problems, but it is also not presently a major player in solving them. The United States has no real view on the future of eurozone governance. It has absented itself from Brexit negotiations. President Obama had little foresight about the impact of his Syria policy on refugee flows to the EU. Washington has chosen not to put significant pressure on Central and Eastern European governments to uphold democratic institutions. The United States has had nothing to say about Catalonia and it is not involved in addressing the problems between Turkey and the EU.

PART III: WHERE IS EUROPE HEADED?

Faced with multiple crises and an American president who is at best indifferent to Europe's fate, many continental European leaders and policymakers have decided that they have to rely on themselves. Trump—and Brexit in a different way—has given European integration a boost. Merkel summed up the feelings of many. Speaking at an election campaign event in a tent at a Bavarian beer festival shortly after returning from a troubled meeting with Trump at the April 2017 G-7 summit in Italy, the German chancellor said, “The times in which we could totally rely on others are to some extent over, as I have experienced in the past few days. We Europeans really must take our fate into our own hands.”²² Her message was clear. Europe could no longer count on the United States.

It wasn't just Merkel. In France, Emmanuel Macron swept to victory as an independent candidate promising domestic reform and support for the EU. The French election was widely perceived as a tipping point. It was in France that many believed the EU could come undone. A victory for Marine Le Pen could have spelled the end of the Union. But Le Pen lost the run-off in a landslide and her party, the National Front, did very poorly in the parliamentary elections that followed. The French election came hot on the heels of an election in the Netherlands which saw the populist Geert Wilders defeated by the centrist incumbent Mark Rutte. In September 2017, Merkel won a fourth term and her likely coalition partners—the FDP and the Greens—are both staunchly pro-European.

In the aftermath of the elections, Macron has staked out a bold pitch for enhanced EU cooperation, including a finance minister, a defense minister, a single intelligence

22 Michael Birnbaum and Rick Noack, “Following Trump's trip, Merkel says Europe can't rely on ‘others.’ She means the U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/following-trumps-trip-merkel-says-europe-cant-rely-on-us-anymore/2017/05/28/4c6b92cc-43c1-11e7-8de1-cec59a9bf4b1_story.html?utm_term=.3517e8ab1e8e.

agency, and reforms to eurozone governance.²³ In a revealing interview to *Der Spiegel*, the German news magazine, he promised to take back the grand narrative from the populists and offer a vision of a stronger EU. “Let’s put an end to this European civil war, the existence of which we don’t want to admit, and stop constantly looking at whether we are better than our neighboring country at this or the other thing,” he said. “We have to be open to new things, and that includes things that have been taboo until now: France still insists that the treaties cannot be changed. Germany doesn’t want any financial transfers. We have to leave these old ways of thinking behind.”²⁴

It is an attractive vision and one that many Americans would like to endorse. It has also led many people, including at the highest levels of government in the EU, to believe that American retrenchment is exactly what Europe needs. With the United States pulling back and the problems mounting, European nations are taking responsibility and stepping up to the plate. The result could be a stronger Europe that ultimately will be a better partner for the United States in upholding the postwar liberal international order.

However, there are at least three reasons to be skeptical that Europeans can succeed on their own simply by redoubling their efforts and being more ambitious.

The first is that EU member states are deeply divided on the type of Union they want to build. Macron’s vision of a eurozone based on solidarity—real financial and fiscal union with fiscal transfers and mutual responsibility for banking liabilities—is opposed by Germany, which favors a European Monetary Fund (EMF) that would micromanage the economies of problem states under strict conditionality.²⁵ Germany and France’s vision of a common approach to migration and refugees, including burden-sharing, is a non-starter in Central and Eastern Europe.

These are not divides that can be easily bridged in negotiations. They are fundamental and incompatible differences in vision. Broadly stated, there are three models for Europe’s future. The French vision would see the creation of an EU or eurozone state in which the decisions would be made collectively and liabilities would be shared. Germany would have a significant say but it could be outvoted on major decisions, much as California and Texas can be in the U.S. system. The German view is only to agree to further integration if it enshrines German preferences on economic policy into law. There would be little scope for fiscal choice, countries would have to adhere to strict guidelines, and if problems arose, liabilities would not be shared and independent and unaccountable institutions—namely the EMF—would have tremendous power to manage them.

What the French and German views have in common is that they both largely allow for greater integration in other areas including security, migration, and corporate tax harmonization. This is where the third view comes in—Poland and other states in

23 “Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron,” *Ouest France*, September 26, 2017, <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

24 Klaus Brinkbäumer, Julia Amalia Heyer, and Britta Sandberg, “We Need to Develop Political Heroism,” *Der Spiegel*, October 13, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/interview-with-french-president-emmanuel-macron-a-1172745-2.html>.

25 On Franco-German differences see Agnès Bénassy-Quéré et al., “A resilient Euro needs Franco-German compromise,” *Le Monde* and *Die Zeit*, September 27, 2017, text available in English at <http://bruegel.org/2017/09/a-resilient-euro-needs-franco-german-compromise/>.

Central and Eastern Europe are fiercely protective of their sovereign rights and oppose further pooling of sovereignty that transfers those decisions to Western Europe. They are also actively looking for ways to balance against French and German influence, such as through the creation of the Three Seas Initiative that brings together Northern, Central, and Eastern European nations under the auspices of cooperation on energy policy. Austria may be increasingly aligned with Hungary and Poland with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) likely to join a government led by 31-year-old Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) leader and Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz.²⁶

The second reason is that European governments' ability to make compromises to advance European integration is severely constrained by their domestic politics. Part of this is about populism. In France, almost 50 percent of voters opted for the far left or far right in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. This is a solid base from which anti-EU campaigners could defeat a new treaty. In Germany, the far left and far right received just over 20 percent and mainstream parties will be wary of steps that could allow them to gain more ground in the next election. In Italy, populists are on the verge of winning power. However, perhaps more important is that the mainstream parties in Western Europe have hardened their positions. In Germany, the CDU and CSU are deeply suspicious of France's proposals for eurozone governance, and the FDP, Merkel's likely coalition partner, ran on a platform of outright opposition to mutualization of liabilities. If Merkel decided to compromise with France, there are real doubts over whether she could deliver. Throughout the debtor nations, anti-German and anti-ECB sentiments run deep and there is little desire to grant a super-empowered EMF influence over economic decisions that currently rest at the national level.

The third reason is that many of the problems Europe faces are intractable and cannot simply be solved with greater willpower.²⁷ The completion of integration is a herculean task that eluded previous generations of statesmen in more benign times. The management of a rivalry with a Russian regime that uses its vast historical experience in covert operations and political warfare to interfere in the politics of EU member states is a security challenge on a par with that of the Cold War. British politics are such that Brexit negotiations seem destined to produce sub-optimal outcomes that could seriously complicate relations between the United Kingdom and the EU in future decades. Even with the proper institutions and determined leaders that do not have to worry about their domestic power base, the EU may fail to address its various crises.

The EU is unlikely to fall apart. It is more resilient than it appears. The euro is very difficult to leave and there are enough people at all levels of society that have a stake in its success. But, survival is not the same as success. Muddling through is often framed as a success as it implies progress, albeit uneven and inefficient, toward a better future. But, muddling through can also mean mere survival without such progress. It is quite possible that the EU will continue to exist but it will also be seen to fail as it struggles to build a resilient eurozone, as the various crises it faces worsen rather than improve, and as populist anti-EU forces rock the political system at regular intervals.

26 Carl Bildt, "Will the new Austria lean toward the politics of Brussels — or Budapest?" *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/18/will-the-new-austria-lean-toward-the-politics-of-brussels-or-budapest/?utm_term=.a2cf164c981f.

27 For excellent in-depth accounts of Europe's difficulties see these two books by my Brookings colleagues: William Drozdiak, *Fractured Continent: Europe's Crises and the Fate of the West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2017); James Kirchick, *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

PART IV: WHAT SHOULD AMERICA DO?

The United States is retrenching politically and diplomatically from Europe at a time when the EU's problems are mounting. There is a reasonable chance that Europeans will be unable to make much headway in solving their problems and they could worsen significantly over the next 10 years. While the possibility of formal break-up of the EU or significant inter-state conflict is remote, even with Russia, Europe is fragile and vulnerable to large-scale shocks on a par with the eurocrisis. Even without a formal break up, Europe faces real risks of partial disintegration, protectionism, democratic backsliding, and disunity.

The question facing the United States is whether and how this risk matters to U.S. interests and what to do about it. This and future administrations have three strategic choices:

Option one: Take short-term advantage of European divisions

For the past seven decades the United States has generally promoted European unity and coherence but this frequently comes at the expense of short-term interests. The United States has to deal with the EU as a peer on economic matters. American firms must obey EU law and accommodate the EU's regulatory preferences as the market is too large to ignore or avoid. The EU often takes political stances that are unpopular in Washington, whether on climate change, sovereignty, or economics. The troubles and divisions in the EU offer Washington—like Russia and China—the opportunity to play divide and conquer, especially on issues like privacy and data, energy security, refugees and migration, and corporate taxation. The United States could work to heighten the contradictions inside the EU, to put pressure on the euro, to discourage integration in security and foreign policy, and to cut bilateral deals with individual nations either to gain a short-term economic and diplomatic advantage or on the assumption that a strong EU is a competitor of the United States.

In its more aggressive form, taking short-term advantage means actively exacerbating Europe's divisions. For instance, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton has argued that the euro is bad for U.S. interests and the United States ought to do nothing that helps it survive. Bolton stops short of arguing that Washington ought to undermine the euro but he makes it clear that it would be preferable to see it die of its own accord.²⁸ Bolton has also argued that European integration damages the NATO alliance and promotes a vision of multilateralism that undercuts American sovereignty. Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon has argued that the United States should try to boost anti-EU politicians on the right, including Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage. A milder form of taking short-term advantage means working with individual European governments and exploiting differences between the EU's member states, particularly on economic issues.

Option two: Benign disinterest in Europe's internal problems

In this scenario, the United States would reiterate that Europe must tend to its own garden but there is scope for cooperation on shared challenges. In other words, the EU must up its game and deal with its internal problems and external challenges that

28 John Bolton, "Don't Mourn the Euro," *New York Post*, May 25, 2010, <http://nypost.com/2010/05/25/dont-mourn-the-euro/>.

directly affect it. The United States can lend some assistance when U.S. interests are involved and it will continue to play a significant role in European security, especially on NATO's core mission of protecting its members from attack, but it will also seek to rebalance burden-sharing within the alliance and will be reluctant to lead on the broader array of European security issues, such as instability in the Balkans and North Africa. This option is, in effect, the approach pursued by President Obama. The United States would remain a supporter in principle of European integration but its involvement in Europe would be strictly limited.

Option three: A return to deep engagement²⁹

The final option is a return to the Cold War and 1990s posture of deep political and diplomatic engagement to help Europe solve its own problems, both internal and external. The United States would seek to use its power to advance the goal of a Europe that is coherent, prosperous, and effective on the world stage. The best way to understand this strategy is to look at what it means for the various problems and challenges discussed above:

- The United States could put Russian political warfare at the heart of NATO planning, including at leaders' summits. U.S. intelligence agencies could also work closely with their European counterparts to thwart Russian efforts and to develop means of deterring them. The United States could also constructively engage on countering Russian and Chinese political influence in the Balkans.
- Washington could engage more directly in Brexit negotiations, practicing a tough love approach with both sides in pursuit of a win-win outcome that sees a confident, prosperous, and independent Britain with a stronger EU that is free to pursue greater integration.
- The United States could look at better coordinating its diplomacy in Turkey with Germany and other countries and work in partnership with them to put pressure on Erdoğan.
- The United States could engage in quiet economic diplomacy to assist the eurozone in bringing about financial and fiscal union. There is no doubt that this will prove to be particularly difficult, but the United States will have some influence in debates over the creation of an EMF through its stake in the IMF.
- The United States can engage in quiet diplomacy on regional separatism, particularly in Catalonia, where it can make clear its support for the Spanish government's stance against unilateral secession but also mediate with the Catalans for a peaceful resolution to the crisis.
- The United States could help to bridge the gap between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe on how to respond to the refugee crisis by pressuring Warsaw and others to agree to common borders while impressing upon Western Europe the very real concerns held in Eastern Europe.

29 Deep engagement is also the name of a grand strategy coined by William Wohlforth, Stephen Brooks, and G. John Ikenberry to describe the U.S. global strategy of promoting a liberal international order. See Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-11-30/lean-forward>.

- Washington could put liberal democracy at the heart of its diplomacy with at-risk countries.

None of these diplomatic efforts would solve any of these crises overnight but as in the case of the Balkans in the 1990s, the United States could help fashion a consensus and overcome differences between European member states.

When Americans choose their strategy, they must first ask a basic question. Why should they care about what happens in Europe? Does it matter if European integration succeeds or fails? The answer lies in looking at the trajectory of failure and success. The failure of European integration will likely produce a Europe that is less influential on the world stage, weaker economically, and vulnerable to systemic corruption, oligarchs, and autocratic interests. Individual governments will be tempted to cut their own deals with Russia and China. The effect of this is quite clear. The United States will lack a partner in upholding the liberal international order. When it comes to imposing tough financial sanctions on a nuclear proliferator like Iran, there will be no one to answer the call. When the United States seeks to prevent the transfer of advanced military technologies to China, no one will listen. Western democracies will be less capable in upholding an open global economy and China's mercantilist approach will be in the ascendant. That is the price of failure.

The success of the European project, on the other hand, offers two major advantages. First, it is more likely that the United States and the EU working together can help mitigate many of Europe's problems, and thus the negative externalities described above. Second, a strong, prosperous, and coherent Europe is likely to be a more effective partner for America in advancing the postwar international order of alliances, an open global economy, and the advancement of democracy and human rights, especially as a rising China offers an alternative.

The shape and trajectory of the European order since World War II has been a remarkable success. Credit is primarily due to the efforts of Europeans but some of it must also go to American strategic decisions. If the United States had removed its troops from continental Europe, we may have seen the revival of the German problem. If it had not supported the spread of democracy to Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War, it may not have taken root. NATO expansion is controversial but had that not occurred, we would likely see the equivalent of the Ukraine crisis in the Baltics and maybe even in Poland. That these failures have been avoided is no accident—it is the result of deliberate policy choices.

Shortly after World War II, George F. Kennan argued that Western Europe and Northeast Asia were the two critical strategic theaters for the United States—economically, politically, and militarily. Our understanding of these regions has expanded somewhat after the Cold War but his basic point remains valid. The health of the global order rests on the health of these regional orders, much more so than on global institutions. Ultimately, it is the strategic importance of Europe—and its connection to a strong global order—that necessitates a strategy of deep engagement.

CONCLUSION

Deep engagement may be the best path forward but there is little chance that President Trump will pursue it. Trump has a much narrower understanding of the national interest than any other president. He may well be tempted by the first strategy of playing divide

and rule to take short-term advantage. He flirted with such a strategy early on, only to be coaxed back to neutrality by various European leaders. But, there are plenty of obstacles ahead—on Iran, on trade, on data and privacy, and on climate change and other multilateral issues.

The broader question, though, is whether the United States and U.S. foreign policy have shifted permanently. American presidents may have usually pursued a strategy of deep engagement but the last two have not. This is not just a matter of personal preference. There are structural reasons why the United States has retrenched politically and diplomatically from Europe. The United States has other challenges that seem more pressing and urgent. Europeans have the power and wealth to do more to solve their problems and many Americans believe that the responsibility is theirs alone. And, there is a larger debate underway in America about the benefits of internationalism, not just in Europe but globally.

The argument of this paper is that future presidents should reverse course and return to deep engagement in Europe. The United States has too much of a stake in the success of Europe to hang back. But, Europeans must be aware that this restoration may not occur. If it does, it will be difficult and subject to change. And in any event, it only works with greater European effort. So it is important that leaders like Macron and Merkel continue their efforts to develop an autonomous European capability. Europeans must prepare for a Post-American Europe. However, European efforts to do more in light of an American retrenchment will be surely fraught with difficulty. Europe is divided and the problems it faces may be intractable. After the Cold War, Europe seemed to be of little relevance to the unfolding global drama of the 21st century. Now, whatever happens, that drama has a European plotline.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Wright is director of the Center on the United States and Europe and senior fellow for the Project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. He is the author of *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their advice, assistance, and comments on drafts: Célia Belin, Natalie Britton, Sinan Ekim, Bruce Jones, James Kirchick, Kemal Kirişci, Andrew Moffatt, Will Moreland, Anna Newby, Alina Polyakova, Ted Reinert, Amanda Sloat, Constanze Stelzenmüller, Anthony Yazaki, and Rachel Slattery.

This publication is part of the Brookings – Robert Bosch Foundation Transatlantic Initiative (BBTI), a comprehensive multi-year project of applied research and programming aimed to create synergies and originate new activities that reinvigorate transatlantic collaboration on global issues. Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its partners reflect this commitment. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings research are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu)