

EU-CANADA NETWORK POLICY BRIEFS

Trump Administration Security Policy Challenges for Canada and the EU

by Stanley R. Sloan¹

April 2019

The Jean Monnet Network on EU-Canada Relations: *The EU and Canada in Dialogue* is housed at [Carleton University](#) in Ottawa, Canada. The project supports a network involving Carleton University and four European partner universities: [University of Antwerp](#), [Technical University Darmstadt](#), [Technical University Munich](#), and [University of Latvia](#).

This policy brief is based on a presentation at the Network workshop, *The EU and Canada in the Face of Changing US Global Policy*, held on March 25, 2019, at Carleton University. The Workshop was co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and by Carleton University.



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Union support for the production of publications does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the European Union cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

¹ Stanley R. Sloan is a Non-resident Senior Fellow in the Scowcroft Center of the Atlantic Council of the United States, a Visiting Scholar in Political Science at Middlebury College, and an Associate Fellow at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy.

Trump Administration Security Policy Challenges for Canada and the EU

Stanley R. Sloan

April 2019

The Trump administration has arguably created the most dangerous crisis in NATO's 70-year history. The crisis revolves around the burden-sharing issue, which is a natural structural aspect of alliances among democratic nations. If NATO survives the assault on Western security and values that arises from a convergence of exogenous and indigenous threats, the future of the transatlantic alliance will depend on effective US leadership and improved European defense efforts.

If I were a European, or even a Canadian who believes in Western values, I'd be worried – very worried. The American guarantee of European security has, under President Trump, become very uncertain. Mutual trust among leaders of alliance nations is at an all-time low.

At the same time, the threat from Russia has become more challenging, even as Russian power may be diminishing. President Putin apparently believes that, if the United States retreats from Europe, Europeans will not choose to replace American power with comparable European power. He has constructed a convincing military threat facing Europe, mixed it with energy dependence, and wrapped it the comforting cocoon of a peace campaign. Putin offers Europeans peace and prosperity under his model of society and governance, to replace the Western model based on democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and equality under the rule of law.

The threat to Canadians perhaps seems more distant, partly because, even under Trump, Canadians can count on the United States to defend Canadian soil because it is an extension of the US security space. But a world in which Europe became safe for Putinism would not be a welcoming place for Canada, or Canadian values.

It may be useful to reflect on this historic significance of the Trump threat. In December 1953, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened his fellow foreign ministers at a NATO meeting in Paris with an “agonizing reappraisal” of the US commitment to European defense. Dulles, reflecting the austerity concerns of the Eisenhower administration, insisted that Europeans follow through on the French proposal for a European Defense Community (EDC). This was the first and, until the election of Donald Trump, the last time that an American government threatened to abandon its NATO commitments. Despite the “agonizing reappraisal” threat, the French government's proposal for the EDC fell victim to opposition in the French National Assembly. This failure shaped transatlantic relationships – featuring American preeminence and European dependence -- through the Cold War and beyond.² The question now is whether the Trump threat will fundamentally alter the transatlantic security relationship into the post-Trump future.

² Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain*, (Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 41-46.

The Trump threat to defend only those allies that “pay their dues” comes at a time when the alliance faces some other serious threats. Russia, led by former KGB officer Vladimir Putin, for several years now has actively sought to undermine Western unity while pursuing its own geo-strategic goals. Moscow’s campaign is multifaceted, including political and military intimidation tactics and subversion of Western democracies, all wrapped very nicely in “peace initiative” propaganda.

Ironically, another external threat is also aimed at destabilizing the Western system. The goal of the terrorists committed to the Islamic State, al Qaeda and affiliated groups is to undermine faith in Western democracy. The Islamic State has used its aggressions in the Middle East and North Africa to produce a flow of refugees to Europe. This, along with terrorist attacks on Western targets, destabilizes the West and disrupts European unity, thus advancing the Islamic State’s objectives.

Another threat comes from inside the alliance. The disruptive Russian and terrorist-produced challenges provide fertile ground on which radical right populist politicians and parties have thrived. A surge in radical right populism in many countries has given new life to a variety of political parties and candidates that have played on otherwise legitimate popular fears and concerns. These radical right “populist” politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are using the West’s democratic systems and practices to try to turn them in illiberal directions.

One can make a good case that the burden-sharing issue – at the heart of Trump’s formal complaint about NATO – is a structural one that will persist after Trump. That, of course, is true. Yet the alliance has lived with the burden-sharing tension in one form or another for its entire history. Perhaps the better question is not how the problem can finally be put to rest, but rather how it can best be managed.

Early in 2019, a major American think-tank report³ concluded that revival of the transatlantic alliance would require “strong, principled American presidential leadership.” While it is perfectly clear that a transatlantic renaissance cannot happen without US leadership, it is also guaranteed that effective European and Canadian responses to the crisis are critical.

Europeans and Canadians who want NATO to have a future need to support those in the United States who will continue working to make the American commitment politically viable. Looking ahead, even if American voters reject a second term for President Trump, the damage he has done to mutual trust between the United States and its NATO allies is serious and will not easily or quickly be undone. A successor administration will have to begin reconstructing a solid transatlantic bridge, and this means political, economic and security spans of that bridge. On the European side, in a post-Trump world, the United States will expect reciprocity for renewed American good will.

As Europeans shape their policy responses, it is unlikely that the divisions inside Europe that today block political union will be overcome in the foreseeable future. Discussion of proposals for European defense union should therefore yield to defense improvements based on political and economic realities – not on impractical symbols like a European aircraft carrier. European NATO

³ Ambassador Douglas Lute and Ambassador Nicholas Burns, “NATO at Seventy, An Alliance in Crisis,” report by the Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2019.

and EU members should pursue bi- and multi-lateral cooperation projects that produce real value added to defense and security while making sure Americans understand the value of such contributions while expressing appreciation for the US role in European defense.

Trump's assault on the transatlantic alliance has provided openings for critics of NATO on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴ Does NATO still serve the interests of European allies, the United States and Canada? My answer is that this is a flawed but flexible alliance, capable of being reformed and improved. In my five-plus decades of NATO-watching, I have never seen an alternative that would serve American and European interests as well. For now, I'll put my money on reinvigorating this imperfect arrangement, still based on collective defense and the values of "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."

⁴ See, for example, the argument of a leading proponent of the "realist" school of international relations theory: Barry R. Posen, "Trump Aside, What's the U.S. Role in NATO?" *New York Times*, March 10, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/opinion/trump-aside-whats-the-us-role-in-nato.html> (accessed 3/11/2019).