

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: FROM BAD TO WORSE TO WHAT NEXT?

By David J. Kramer

The author, an assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor in the George W. Bush administration, is Director of European and Eurasian Studies and Senior Fellow in the Vaclav Havel Program on Human Rights and Diplomacy at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs.

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Twice within a month's span, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Europe. On his first trip, he visited the United Kingdom and Denmark; on his second, more recent trip, he went to the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovenia and Poland. Aside from Austria, these countries are important members of NATO; they all are allies of the United States. Few relationships are as close as the one between the British and American people.

And yet a striking omission from Pompeo's itinerary was a stop in Germany. In light of President Trump's recent and impetuous decision to withdraw 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany, no senior U.S. official has traveled to Berlin to explain the decision and counter the negative reaction there. While some among the German population may support the withdrawal given attitudes there toward Trump, the officialdom in Berlin finds it troubling and damaging to the interests of Germany, NATO and the United States. Those officials are absolutely right.

Despite the best efforts of Defense Secretary Mark Esper to spin the withdrawal decision in a positive way by saying some of the forces would be re-deployed to Poland and the Baltic states, Trump made clear his decision was to punish Berlin for its lack of funding for NATO and for building a pipeline with Russia to deepen Germany's dependence on Moscow for energy. Trump's shortsighted view is that the U.S. presence subsidizes Germany's self-defense at a time when Germany is spending money to deepen ties with Russia.

The U.S. Congress has mandated sanctions on companies working to complete the Nord Stream pipeline from Russia to Germany. This route would obviate the need for Russia to export its energy through Ukraine, which derives more than \$2 billion in transit fees from Russia. Germany never should have entered into an agreement to build Nord Stream I – which has yet to reach capacity – let alone Nord Stream II, but the sanctions legislation has added to frosty ties between Berlin and Washington. Even German opponents of Nord Stream resent that the U.S. is looking to apply sanctions on an ally over the pipeline.

The problems run deeper, however. Trump seems to have particular grievances against German Chancellor Angela Merkel – something about strong women seems to trouble him. Trump was annoyed by Merkel's rejection of his idea to invite Russian President Vladimir Putin to the G-7 gathering, which the U.S. was supposed to host this year, though the meeting is indefinitely postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Trump's grievances have distorted his misunderstanding of the importance of maintaining strong forces in Germany. And that, in turn, is contributing to growing resentment toward the American president in Germany and elsewhere on the continent. The recently departed U.S. Ambassador to Germany Ric Grenell certainly didn't help matters with his incendiary approach and undiplomatic style.

In a Pew Research survey earlier this year¹ – i.e., before Trump's announcement on the troop withdrawal – only 13 percent of Germans had confidence that Trump will “do the right thing” regarding world affairs. The numbers were not much better elsewhere on the continent, with Sweden at 18 percent, France at 20, and Spain at 21. Only in Poland did a majority – and a bare majority at that at 51 percent – have such confidence in Trump.

Certain decisions and policies by the Trump administration have disappointed Europeans, including the imposition of tariffs on transatlantic trade, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. It's worth noting that when Pew asked respondents to rate five international leaders – in addition to Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/>

– Merkel scored the highest with 46 percent. Trump scored the lowest, with 64 percent saying they had no confidence in Trump; Putin was second in that category with 57 percent. It's equally worth noting that despite the negative views of Trump, the United States was still held in generally high regard by many of those surveyed. And a disturbing but not surprising trend is that support for Trump from Europe's right-wing parties has increased.

Not helping matters has been Trump's attitude toward the EU. He has called it a foe and views it as the main rival of the United States. He thinks its trade policies are unfair and that it "takes advantage of the United States. Following through on those views, Trump has imposed unprecedented tariffs on trade with the EU, widening the transatlantic rift. While the U.S. certainly has had disagreements over the years with the EU, no president before Trump has viewed it in such a disparaging way. Taken together with his criticism of NATO – namely, that other countries don't "pay their fair share" – Trump's attacks on European institutions have greatly damaged U.S.-European relations to the point where Merkel and others have talked about preparing to go on their own, without the United States. Such dissension across the Atlantic only benefits Russia's Putin and China's Xi.

Trump has been much more solicitous of Putin than he has of virtually all of our European allies. While his administration has undertaken certain actions that are laudable — providing lethal military assistance to Ukraine, beefing up the American military presence in the Baltics and Poland, maintaining sanctions under congressional pressure, increasing energy shipments to the continent — Trump himself has largely undermined these steps. Trump's attacks on European allies stand in stark contrast to Trump's posture toward Putin and refusal to confront or even criticize the Russian leader on anything— from election interference to alleged Russian bounties against American soldiers in Afghanistan. Trump may argue, as he has several times, that his administration is tougher on Russia than any of his predecessors, but his relationship with Putin undercuts that claim.

The Problems Didn't Start with Trump, but They Have Gotten Much Worse

President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 caused a major rift between a number of European allies and the U.S.; Germany and France publicly opposed the invasion. While Bush did his best to improve relations with those two countries and with Europe more broadly, his departure from office in January 2009 was welcomed by many Europeans, many of whom viewed him as a free-wheeling cowboy. They welcomed President Barack Obama's election, but the honeymoon took several sour turns. The first came with Obama's reset to Russia, which made those in Europe's east nervous to the point where they wrote to Obama in an open letter warning about such an approach. Obama's decision in 2009 to reverse Bush administration plans for missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic – announced on the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland, no less – reinforced those concerns and fueled suspicions that the new administration was selling out part of Europe in the pursuit of better ties with Moscow. And then there was the Obama administration's famous 2011 "pivot" to Asia – later renamed a rebalance, but too late to undo the damage. Europeans interpreted this as a slight – after all, in pivoting to Asia, the administration implicitly was pivoting away from Europe.

Transatlantic relations under Bush and Obama were far from perfect, in other words, but they have taken a vastly worse turn under the Trump administration. Those with the EU are even worse, given Trump's general dislike for multilateral institutions. And his lack of reassurance that the United States will be there should our NATO allies ever find themselves under attack – in an interview with Tucker Carlson in 2018, he raised doubts that the U.S. would support Montenegro, NATO's newest member, if it were attacked – has weakened the Alliance.

To be fair, the EU is not without its problems. Difficulty in getting agreement among its 27 members states (it had been 28 until the UK's withdrawal) is daunting. As the American Enterprise Institute's Dalibor Rohac recently observed:

"On subjects that are of interest to the United States and on which the EU would be naturally positioned to play a large role—think trade relations with China, or neighborhood policy—divisions within the EU often stand in the way...[N]either he nor the United States are the primary reason why divisions between EU countries exist and why it is often difficult to bridge them.

“As a result, the bloc is facing a chicken-and-egg problem. On the one hand, it demands that the world, especially the United States, take it seriously. On the other, it does relatively little to warrant that recognition.”²

If Trump wins re-election – and the polls these days make that prospect unlikely, but one never knows – it is possible he will seek to withdraw the United States from NATO. Even if he cannot legally do so on his own, his announced intention to do so would spell the end of the Alliance. For NATO countries that border Russia, such a step would raise alarm bells; only in Moscow would they be breaking out the champagne. To even consider this possibility is painful given how NATO for the most part has kept the peace on the European continent for the past seven decades. Created to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down,” in the famous words of NATO’s first Secretary General Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, any Trump move to “take the Americans out” would further weaken the Alliance, destroy transatlantic relations, embolden Putin’s Russia and threaten both NATO and non-NATO states alike. Trump also is likely to further denigrate the EU and look to establish closer ties with a small number of individual European states like Poland, Hungary and the U.K. The EU has enough problems on its own without the American president exacerbating them.

Should the election turn out differently and Joe Biden were to become president – and polls shows that outcome is more likely – one of his top foreign policy priorities would be to restore America’s image throughout the world, most notably in Europe. He also would repair frayed relations with key European allies and reiterate support for NATO and the U.S. commitment to Article 5. He likely would take a very different tone with Putin and offer greater support for Russia’s neighbors, including non-NATO states. Biden would support stronger ties with the EU, but he also likely would take a stronger stand on countries on the continent experiencing democratic backsliding (to put it diplomatically). He would treat our European allies with the respect they deserve, end the tariff wars, and renew the vitality of transatlantic relations.

The differences between the two – a newly elected Biden versus a re-elected Trump – are strikingly stark and would have massive implications for Europe and transatlantic relations. For Georgia and other countries in the region, the outcome of the U.S. election is equally important.

What Does This Mean for Georgia and the Region?

The situation in Belarus, however, cannot wait until the U.S. election is over. The country faces its gravest crisis since gaining independence three decades ago after longtime dictator Alexander Lukashenka blatantly stole the August 9 presidential election and then ordered his security goons to unleash brutal assaults against peaceful protestors. Neither Lukashenka’s jailing of thousands of demonstrators nor authorities’ use of torture against those in detention has dented the determination of Belarusians to end Lukashenka’s rule.

Leaders in the West are struggling to figure out how to respond, but one option they should take off the table entirely is enabling Lukashenka to stay in power or to run in new elections. His 26 years in power have impoverished the population, left them vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic, and isolated the country from the West while leaving it dangerously dependent on Moscow. Belarusians have had enough. And yet the tensions in transatlantic relations make coordination between the U.S. and EU, at a time of crisis, more difficult.

Both the U.S. and EU should move immediately to call for the immediate release of all those detained and reimpose sanctions on Lukashenko and his entire government — stealing elections and beating and arresting protestors should trigger consequences. Both sides had imposed sanctions on Belarus after rigged elections and subsequent violence in 2006 and 2010, but the U.S. lifted most of its sanctions and the E.U. all of its measures in 2016 in the naïve hope that Lukashenka and the West could somehow return to friendly relations. Pompeo even traveled to Belarus this year, becoming the most senior U.S. official to meet with Lukashenka in decades. Officials in the United States and Europe should recognize that “normal” relations with Minsk are impossible as long as Lukashenko — a master at pitting Russia and the West against each other — is in power.

Western leaders, both privately and publicly, also need to warn Putin that any intervention by Russian forces — overtly or covertly — will be met with severe consequences, including harsh sanctions tougher than those imposed for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

² <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/05/12/why-transatlantic-relations-are-in-trouble/>

The U.S. and E.U. also should ramp up assistance to Belarusian civil society, including humanitarian funds for those beaten and imprisoned and others compelled to flee the country, help to sustain the flow of information inside and outside of Belarus, and shore up support for Western nongovernmental organizations working there.

What happens in Belarus and how the situation there plays out will have an impact on other countries in the region. This is especially true for Ukraine given its shared border with Belarus, but it's even true for countries farther afield such as Georgia and Azerbaijan. Should the people of Belarus succeed in ending their decades-long nightmare of Lukashenka, they would set an extraordinary example for the region and beyond. The Aliyev father and son duo that has been running Azerbaijan for roughly as long as Lukashenka has been in power has taken a similarly repressive approach to handling critics, opposition figures and journalists. Already embroiled in a conflict with Armenia, the Aliyev regime should be watching developments in Belarus with great interest, and possibly even concern, and the people of Azerbaijan should be heartened by what is happening.

Few countries have been treated as unfairly and badly by Trump as Ukraine. The whole impeachment process revolved around Trump's efforts to drag Ukraine's newly elected president into American domestic politics. Instead of embracing Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who garnered 73 percent of the vote but who also needed all the outside help he could muster, Trump sought to exploit the new leader for his own personal and electoral agenda. As noted above, Trump, unlike Obama, approved providing lethal military assistance to Ukraine, and the importance of this cannot be understated. But the good that came from that move has been undercut by the scandal Trump precipitated in pressuring Zelenskiy to investigate Biden. A Trump defeat in November would enable Zelenskiy to start over with a new president experienced in and supportive of Ukraine.

In Georgia, the relationship with the Trump administration got off to a decent start with an important visit by Vice President Mike Pence in the summer of 2017. That was the first and last high-level visit, however, under the current administration, though Secretary Pompeo has engaged occasionally with his Georgian counterparts, including a recent phone call with the prime minister. For almost two years, the U.S. embassy was without an ambassador after Ian Kelly's departure in 2018. Kelly Degnan, the new ambassador, has been off to a very good start this year but could use more attention from Washington. In Georgia, after all, perhaps more than in any other country in the region, the U.S. carries great weight and influence. Exercising that influence will be important as Georgia prepares for parliamentary elections this October, and beyond.

