

America First... and Europe Last?

What will the Trump Presidency mean for Europe

Jean-Yves HAINE

After the audacity of hope, the rage of hopelessness has thus propelled Donald Trump to the White House. In a tamed but still tragic repetition of history, the economic crisis of 2008 has eventually produced its eventual political outcome, embodied in a farcical show-businessman who proudly cultivates contempt for the liberal institutions of Washington while supporting the authoritarian politics of Moscow. The consequences of this Trump moment will be profound for America, they may be even more crucial for Europe. That American elections are a global phenomenon is not new. But for the first time since World War II, an overtly nationalist, proud protectionist and self declared neo-isolationist will become the leader of the free world.

It is of course too early to predict what Trump foreign policies will look like. He probably doesn't know himself. He has multiplied contradictory statements on nearly every aspect of international diplomacy and often used opposite arguments regarding the use of force. Beyond this confusion, some may hope that inertia and pragmatism will prevail. There is however a distinct cloud of neo-isolationism in his discourses with an emphasis on an old and familiar idea, America First. Initially used by Woodrow Wilson to keep the US out of the First World War, the slogan became the motto of the American isolationist movement of the late 30s, carried by the Hearst press empire with an obvious appeasement agenda made popular by Lindbergh. In Trump's worldview, -if such a thing actually exists-, the slogan denotes a willingness to disentangle America from what he perceived as unfair international obligations, from security alliances to trade agreements. For most of the foreign policy establishment, the United States supremacy and leadership is perceived as a condition to, if not a guarantee of, world order. Trump on the other hand considers America's withdrawal from international commitments as a solution to

Jean-Yves Haine is associate fellow at the French Institute for International Relations.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 978-2-36567-642-7

© All rights reserved, Paris, Ifri, 2016.

How to quote this publication:

Jean-Yves Haine,
« America First... and Europe Last? », *Éditoriaux de l'Ifri*, Ifri, 15 November 2016.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris Cedex 15
Tel.: (0)1 40 61 60 00
Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website:
www.ifri.org

American disorder. The imbalance between global responsibilities, – from strategic to humanitarian duties –, and domestic difficulties, – from economy to identity –, is the main source of Trump isolationism. To make America great again at home, make it smaller in the world.

For Europeans, this broad and simplistic vision is worrying enough. In a rare translation of his foreign policy approach, candidate Trump voiced explicit criticism about NATO's burden sharing and abruptly warned that Europeans failing to pay their fair share will not be protected by the United States. This restrictive and venal interpretation of Article 5 seemed to portray an American ally with a very selective defense commitment leading to a meaningless NATO. Coupled with Trump's repeated declarations of support and sympathy towards Russia's foreign policies, Europe could thus find itself dangerously alone and isolated. Clearly, to some Europeans, the blame has a familiar tone. The US has repeatedly criticised the weakness of European defense budgets, their lack of investments and operational commitments. Since the end of the Cold War, nearly every US administration had pointed to the dangers and to the illusions of an Atlantic Alliance made of European members with permanently diminishing defense budgets. Clearly too, an understanding with Russia has been part of President Obama's international diplomacy. Working with Moscow has been an integral part of multilateral diplomatic efforts regarding Iran, Syria and the fight against terrorism. But the so-called reset button had evaporated with Russia's annexation of Crimea and recent coordinated efforts over the Middle East had dissolved over its bombings of Aleppo. Differences are thus obvious. The revisionism of Trump cannot be confused with the realism of Obama: where the second opted for a relative retrenchment from unnecessary wars, the first has declared his preemptive resentment from existing alliances.

The Trump revisionism may affect Europe in many ways: a protectionist agenda with Smoot-Hawley style tariffs could only hurt German exports, the core of German economy; a withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change would seriously damage one of the most visible French diplomatic successes of the Hollande presidency. More importantly however, the Trump victory could trigger another kind of ripple effect on continental Europe. From the French National Front to the Dutch Party for Freedom, extreme right movements, – already reinforced by Brexit –, may be further

bolstered by Trump's populism. The dangerous nationalism it entails could threaten the European Union economic fabric, from the single market to the Euro. Crucially, it may destroy the very notion of European solidarity at the very moment where the unity of Europe is an obvious strategic necessity. This echoed the British paradox: London has traditionally played the role of a bridge and a messenger between Europe and the U.S. London had enjoyed the best of both worlds: on the one hand, a special relationship based on privileged security arrangements with Washington and on the other, an access to the European Union single market and Brussels decision making process. With the election of Trump, Great Britain feels suddenly much more European than it thought it was, at the very moment where it negotiates its departure from the European Union.

Raymond Aron once noted that one of the lessons of World War II was that NATO didn't exist to stop it. To all across the Atlantic, that absence was never to be repeated. With the Trump presidency putting its America First into practice, this 1930s combination of isolation and division could become again a dreadful but possible scenario. Equally however, President Trump may turn out to be a harmless and benevolent even if bad mannered and outspoken ally. Yet the warning signals need to be heard and to the European ministers who will gather Saturday in Brussels, the message should be loud and clear: the combination of a Europe strategically isolated and politically divided is lethal. A serious strategic understanding between Berlin, Paris and London, with thus the capabilities to back it up, is urgent. Experts and citizens alike often asked what would trigger the long overdue strategic awakening of Europe. The answer may be: President Trump.