

MANAGING TRANSATLANTIC (MIS)TRUST

THE TRUMP ERA IN PERSPECTIVE

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The transatlantic relationship is undergoing a period of turmoil. President Trump’s unorthodox policies have exacerbated historical sources of mistrust between the US and its European allies. This Working Paper approaches the transatlantic bond from the perspective of asymmetric trust, a perennial factor in transatlantic security and defence affairs.

For Europe, the US remains the ultimate guarantor of security, rendering allies dependent upon Washington’s decisions and goodwill. From the American perspective, the European allies are not critical in ensuring US national security, but remain a pool of reliable partners that Washington can periodically draw upon to pursue its global ambitions.

This paper evaluates how mistrust has featured within the asymmetric alliance setting, and places the current friction between the US and Europe within this broader context. Acknowledging the sources of mistrust and managing mutual suspicions are crucial for the sustainability of the alliance in an increasingly competitive international arena.



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INTRODUCTION

The transatlantic relationship is undergoing yet another period of turmoil. Although pre-existing fundamental structural trends undermine the transatlantic bargain that was struck in the early post-Second World War years,¹ the primary source of the immediate tensions is Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States (US). His unorthodox views on allies, the (f)utility of alliances and multilateralism, coupled with his actions as president, have caused considerable concern in Europe. Trump has mounted a number of rhetorical attacks against the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and single member states, and he seems to question the value of the alliance networks that the US built with its partners after the Second World War.

In recent years, much ink has been spilled on analysing the apparent crisis of the transatlantic alliance. Few commentators have seen Trump's approach to foreign affairs as a positive disruptive force,² preparing the Western alliance to face the new realities of the changing nature of the international order. Rather, apprehensive and even alarmist comments abound, and the current crisis is seen as historic. According to one renowned journalist:

*Europe has had many fights with American Presidents over the years, but never in the seven decades since the end of the Second World War has it confronted one so openly hostile to its core institutions.*³

Some pundits have also pointed out that the current disagreements concern the issue of trust. For instance, Anne Applebaum – a US historian conversant with European affairs – argues that ‘there is a black hole at the heart of NATO [...] It's about belief, trust, and confidence’.⁴ This is an observation echoed by various other commentators.⁵

When it comes to the role that a lack of trust plays in the current transatlantic malaise, this study concurs with the concerned experts. Although mistrust is not the only cause of the current impasse between the US and its European allies, the erosion of trust is a significant factor in the equation, deserving theoretical and analytical attention.

The present Working Paper probes the transatlantic trusting relationship systematically, and asks several questions: How can the current state of transatlantic relations, in the realm of security and defence in particular, be assessed in terms of a trusting relationship? How have the allies historically cultivated trust and managed mistrust during the seven decades since the inception of the Alliance? How does the Trump era appear against this backdrop?

The basic premise of the paper is that trust is a fundamental phenomenon in collective defence alliances. This is particularly the case for NATO – the principal organisation of transatlantic cooperation. More specifically, trust is essential in alleviating collective action problems, and it also helps to sustain and maintain alliance cohesion. Furthermore, an alliance animated by deep trust among its members can assume a credible deterrence posture vis-à-vis potential adversaries, while one where allies exhibit manifest signs of mistrust towards each other can hardly be expected to do so.

The paper claims that the post-Second World War ‘transatlantic bargain’ has been characterised by an asymmetric trusting relationship, which is in fact a perennial factor in US-Europe relations. From the European perspective, the United States is still the ultimate guarantor of its security, whereas for the US Europeans constitute a pool of allies it can periodically rely on, for example as a platform for projecting out-of-area power. This unevenness results in specific mistrust issues that the allies must occasionally manage – even if the relationships that constitute the Alliance can be described as generally trusting. The Trump presidency has not only brought these perennial trust issues to the fore of transatlantic relations, but it has done so in an exacerbated manner.

1 See e.g. Risse 2016.

2 There are, of course, exceptions. See e.g. Michta 2018a.

3 Glasser 2018.

4 Applebaum 2018.

5 Boot 2018; Lute & Burns 2019, 38.

ASYMMETRIC TRUST WITHIN THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE

Trust is ubiquitous in social life: ‘essential for stable relationships, vital for the maintenance of cooperation, fundamental for exchange and necessary for even the most routine of everyday interactions’.⁶ A modicum of trust is therefore integral to the functioning of society, whether of the domestic or international kind. NATO as an alliance of 29 members is no exception.

Although scholars working on the concept cannot agree on an all-encompassing definition, they are by and large in agreement that trust is fundamentally implicated in uncertainty about the future intentions of others; the flipside of trusting another person is that the prospect of betrayal always lurks in the background.⁷ The decision to trust thus implies putting one’s faith – and ultimately fate – in the hands of another. There is an expectation, based upon one’s beliefs about the other party’s trustworthiness, that she will reciprocate the trust by refraining to act in a manner that causes harm to one’s interests.⁸

The process through which an actor comes to hold a trusting (or mistrusting) belief may, of course, be an inherently complex affair. The trustor should be privy not only to the trustee’s interests *per se*, but also to how her identity (or character) influences the formation of said interests, and how her capacity to reciprocate trust is affected by external constraints.⁹ To further complicate matters, the interlinkages between these three factors in real-life political situations tend to be multifaceted.

For present purposes, and in light of the above, we will adopt a working definition of trust as ‘the belief that one will not be harmed when one’s interests are placed in the hands of others’.¹⁰ It is important to appreciate that this definition does not necessitate any aprioristic assumptions about how an actor’s interests, or another actor’s beliefs regarding those interests, are constituted in the first place. To put it differently, the formulation is agnostic *vis-à-vis* the central ontological questions that inform the International Relations discipline and debates on trust therein.

Be that as it may, the fairly commonsensical definition still conceals considerable complexity. First

and foremost, variation in trusting beliefs can be attributable to manifold factors. These can be intrinsic to the trustor or the trustee, related to the intricacies of the relationship between them, and attributable to external factors that pertain to the environment within which the said relationship takes place. It is likewise evident that actors can make different assessments of a counterpart’s trustworthiness both across time and in different domains or issue areas. There is thus a distinction to be made between ‘general’ and ‘specific’ trust, namely within a broadly trusting relationship situational differences in the manifestation of (mis) trust can arise. In this vein, trust can be viewed as context-specific and variable in scope.¹¹ A related conceptual nuance is that trust, and its oft-employed antonym mistrust, should not be treated as binary opposites. Some suggest that they make up opposite ends of a continuum,¹² but it appears that the two can actually coexist in a relationship, and do so with varying intensities.¹³

In addition, studying trust in the international arena often necessitates moving from the level of individual actors to (more or less) anthropomorphised political communities. It is evident that trust, when used to describe international relationships, may exhibit variation across different levels of analysis.¹⁴ It is entirely feasible that deep trust among political elites, or even trusting collective beliefs that have become embedded in the social fabrics of state bureaucracies, will not lead to similar sentiments within the broader societal body.¹⁵

Trust in International Relations

The developing IR literature on trust remains divided on how the phenomenon should be conceptualised. At least three perspectives can be distilled: trust as a rational choice, as a social construct, and as a psychological disposition.¹⁶ It should be stressed that these approaches to the concept are not necessarily competing. They should instead be thought of as complementary, each illuminating a different facet of an inherently complex phenomenon.

The first approach treats trust as a probability calculation made by a unitary rational actor. In this sense,

6 Misztal 1996, 12.

7 Hoffman 2002, 376–379; Wheeler 2018, 2–4.

8 On the importance of reciprocity in trusting relationships, see Rathbun 2011, 247.

9 Cf. Wheeler 2018, 4; Welch Larson 1997, 709; Brugger 2015, 80–81.

10 Rathbun 2011, 246.

11 Hoffman 2002, 377.

12 Hoffman 2002, 387.

13 Juntunen and Pesu 2018.

14 See esp. Keating 2015a. On the levels-of-analysis problem, see Singer 1961.

15 Sinkkonen 2018.

16 On this formulation, see Ruzicka and Keating 2015; Haukkala et al. 2018.

trust is effectively boiled down to the willingness to take risks, a probability assessment informed by an actor's knowledge about a counterpart's constraints (essentially structural variables) and of how she forms her preferences given said constraints.¹⁷ Thus conceptualised, the decision to trust is inherently strategic in nature.¹⁸ The rational choice approach also stresses the role of prior knowledge and the potential of learning the other's trustworthiness through interactions. For instance, the more uncertain (and thus unfamiliar) the potential trustor is regarding the intentions of the designated trustee, the more 'costly [the] signals of reassurance' the former demands from the latter.¹⁹ Moreover, whether the assumed agents playing the 'trust game' are individual leaders or states in the form of essentialised corporate actors has little analytical relevance for rational-choice theorising on trust; such intricacies are essentially papered over for the benefit of analytical rigour.

The second approach stresses the centrality of norms and collective identities in sustaining trusting relationships. The expectation is that actors enmeshed in a social environment possess an obligation to engage in norm-following behaviour by reciprocating trust. The onus is no longer solely on maximising utility in a strategic interaction, but on 'doing what is right' or socially sanctioned.²⁰ Reciprocating trust means that an actor is – intentionally or unintentionally – complying with the rules, norms and values of a group. In the process, she is effectively reproducing her identity as a member of that particular group, a dynamic which should be particularly relevant in an alliance setting.²¹ This understanding of trust is in line with a key constructivist tenet: interests and identities are deemed co-constitutive,²² so the former cannot easily be reduced to a simple cost/benefit calculation based on material payoffs. The trust as social construct perspective thus opens up the possibility of treating trust as an intersubjective phenomenon, an evolving collective belief 'that stands above individual minds and is typically embodied in symbols, discourse and institutions'.²³

The third approach focuses on the socio-psychological foundations of trust. This tradition ties the phenomenon to individual-level attributes, to 'particular way[s] of looking at the world' which have a bearing upon actors' ability to trust.²⁴ In short, some people are *ceteris paribus* more inclined to deem others trustworthy – they are 'generalised' as opposed to 'strategic' trustors.²⁵ Attention to psychological factors also sheds light upon the emotional dimension of trust, such as emotive experiences of mistrust. This is an insight that the rationalist approach in particular tends to eschew. According to proponents of the psychological approach, the ability to 'empathize with [the other's] fear'²⁶ or 'grant others the benefit of the doubt'²⁷ are essential in a trusting relationship. Conversely 'mental biases' may lead foreign-policy leaders to 'overestimate the influence of internal sources and underestimate the impact of external pressures' on their counterparts.²⁸ This can be particularly detrimental for international cooperation, by prolonging cycles of mistrust. Given the role that individual leaders play as representatives of states in the international arena, attention to the psychological foundations of trust is pertinent – such is the case especially at the initial stages of trust building and during periods of flux.²⁹

Indicators of trust and mistrust

Studies of trust usually rely on either statement-based or behaviour-based indicators to examine the incidence of trust and mistrust.³⁰ Brugger, for instance, argues that trust/mistrust can be uncovered by searching for positive/negative statements concerning the character and behaviour of others.³¹ Weinhardt, similarly, proposes that assertions regarding the counterpart's benevolence, altruism and cooperative nature can be treated as expressions of trust, while descriptions of malevolence, selfishness and obstinacy indicate the presence of mistrust.³²

Hoffman, in turn, suggests that trusting relationships between states can be gauged in behavioural terms by paying attention to 'discretion granting

17 Kydd 2005a, 6–12.

18 The notion of strategic trust draws on the idea of 'encapsulated' (or aligned) interests; see Hardin 2002, 4. See also Rathbun 2011, 246.

19 Kydd 2001, 801–802; Welch Larson 1997, 720–722.

20 Hoffman 2002.

21 This point is central to the security communities literature; see Adler and Barnett 1998, 42–46.

22 Wendt 1999.

23 Legro 2000, 420; see also discussion in Brugger 2015, 80–81; Weinhardt 2015, 31–33.

24 Rathbun 2011, 244.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Booth and Wheeler 2007, 237.

27 Mercer 2005, 95.

28 Welch Larson 1997, 717.

29 Wheeler 2018; cf. Keating 2015a.

30 On the distinction, see Brugger 2015, 84–85.

31 *Ibid.*, 88–91.

32 Weinhardt 2015, 35–36.

policies' instigated by state leaderships.³³ Such policies shift decision-making authority and implementation from the trustor to the trustee. Another policy-based indicator consists of the measures actors use for assessing each other's conduct after granting them discretion, where less invasive monitoring and less stringent rules are associated with more trusting relations.³⁴ However, a more relevant behavioural indicator for studying trust in an alliance setting is proposed by Keating and Ruzicka. The removal or erection of 'hedging strategies', designed as a buffer in case the other party decides to defect, indicate the presence of trust or mistrust, respectively.³⁵ Crucially, given that trusting is a reciprocal exercise, the manner in which actions and policies – signals – are interpreted by the parties concerned is of paramount importance. For instance, actors can reveal their trust by deeming the counterpart's behaviour as fair and justified as opposed to unfair and illegitimate.³⁶ Therefore, any behaviour-based indicators of trust should be assessed in unison with statement-based indicators.³⁷

Trust and alliances

Analysing trust in an alliance setting necessitates attention to idiosyncrasies that deserve further theoretical attention. In fact, it can be argued that the IR literature on trust has been preoccupied with (at least initially) conflictual dyads.³⁸ It is indisputable, but often overlooked, that trust is a pervasive factor in alliances – especially in ones that exhibit features of a security community.³⁹ As Kegley and Raymond underline:

*A modicum of trust in others [...] is endemic to the functioning of relations between members of all alliances, and the performance of all alliances is affected by the shared expectations held about the behavior of actors in contingent circumstances.*⁴⁰

Moreover, we should expect the role of trust to be magnified in situations when other factors that can

bind or rupture alliances – such as perceptions of an external threat or the balance of power in the international system – are in flux and thereby heighten the sense of 'strategic uncertainty'.⁴¹ As Haukkala et al. have argued, the effects and manifestations of both trust and mistrust are generally 'easier to identify and gauge [...] during ruptures'.⁴²

In fact, exploring alliances through the prism of trust illuminates key issues of concern in the broader alliance literature. First, trust can help alleviate collective action problems – a central conundrum in alliances – by facilitating cooperation between states that would not have taken place otherwise.⁴³ In fact, a modicum of trust appears to be necessary for states to come together to form an alliance in the first place.⁴⁴ Second, trust is an essential factor when it comes to sustaining alliances and maintaining their internal cohesion, especially during periods when the external environment or domestic political scenes of the allies are in a state of uncertainty, and states' leaderships are in the process of (re)assessing the parameters of their national interest.⁴⁵

Of course, trust and mistrust also have external signalling functions. An alliance animated by deep trust among its members can assume a credible deterrence posture vis-à-vis potential adversaries, while one where allies exhibit manifest signs of mistrust towards each other can hardly do so.⁴⁶ In this sense, clear signs of mistrust – whether in the form of rhetorical posturing or hedging – can indicate to outsiders that the alliance is in dire straits.

Asymmetric trust and power

NATO as an alliance has its own in-built peculiarities, which is also reflected in how trust is exhibited in interactions between its members. When assessed in terms of the distribution of material capabilities, the transatlantic relationship remains fundamentally 'asymmetric'.⁴⁷ According to Stanley Hoffmann, geopolitical unevenness is the most profound continuity

33 Hoffman 2002, 385–386.

34 Ibid., 388–391.

35 Keating and Ruzicka 2014, 761.

36 Weinhardt 2015, 36.

37 Hoffman 2002, 386. Strictly speaking, any uncovering of behaviour-based indicators necessitates the study of sources – whether written, oral or audio-visual – that report on the conduct of states and their leaders. Hence, the division between the two categories is not necessarily sustainable at the level of data.

38 On this point, see Juntunen and Pesu 2018.

39 The seminal exposition in this regard is Adler and Barnett 1998.

40 Kegley and Raymond 1990, 248.

41 On strategic uncertainty brought about by shifts in the balance of power, see Press Barnathan 2006.

42 Haukkala et al. 2015, 3.

43 Kydd 2005a; b.

44 Cf. Rathbun 2011; Wheeler 2018.

45 Here social theories of trust should be particularly relevant; see Keating 2005b, 6–9.

46 In this vein, credible deterrence appears to be both a question of 'coordination' as well as 'solidarity', Möttölä 2017, 51.

47 We deem this to be the case even if, in recent years, calls for (and assertions of) a multipolarisation of the international order have proliferated.

in the alliance.⁴⁸ Asymmetry prevails regardless of whether one looks at the state-to-state dyads that comprise the transatlantic space (e.g. the US-UK, US-Germany or US-Montenegro relationships), or at the transatlantic bond as a whole, particularly with regard to the military/security dimension.⁴⁹ While asymmetries in capabilities by no means predetermine the nature of intra-alliance relationships, such disparities do tend to place structural constraints upon them through an interplay with other (ideational) factors.

Military alliances are habitually riddled with what Snyder termed the alliance security dilemma. In an established alliance like NATO, the conundrum is two-fold: allies fear both abandonment and entrapment, namely being left to their own devices by a defecting partner or being reluctantly drawn into a conflict by an overeager one.⁵⁰ In fact, one can argue that these two phenomena constitute fundamental trust issues that are built into the structural logic of any alliance.

Be that as it may, in a situation of profound power asymmetry the risks of abandonment and entrapment weigh differently on the more and less powerful allies. In terms of the former, the disproportionately more powerful partner has a larger set of options to choose from in the face of desertion than any (coalition) of its less powerful allies. This is accentuated further when the partner happens to be the most powerful state in the system – as is the case within NATO.⁵¹ For instance, the US can feasibly ‘go it alone’ or resort to ‘coalitions of the willing’ should (some of) its allies shun cooperation, although this does not mean that the hegemon is indifferent to such shows of defiance by its ‘junior’ partners. For the weaker parties, in contrast, abandonment by a significantly more powerful partner might not only leave few feasible options for replacing the alliance benefits the latter provides, but also pose

a potentially existential threat to survival.⁵²

In the case of entrapment, asymmetry plays a similar role. From the standpoint of the stronger party, the fear of entrapment is mitigated by its disproportionate bargaining power within the alliance setting, in that it has the capacity to force ‘conditional alliance obligations’ upon its partners to mitigate the risk of being drawn by its allies into conflicts that do not serve its national interests.⁵³ Meanwhile, the less powerful have less wherewithal to extract such concessions, leaving them more vulnerable to entrapment by stronger partners.⁵⁴

The question of trust in alliances should not, however, be limited to the two above-described conundrums inherent to the alliance security dilemma. In fact, the more mundane and regular functioning of the alliance relationship brings to the fore an array of collective action problems. The most pressing of these fall under the rubric of burden- and risk-sharing. Resolving such challenges necessitates the engagement of allies in recurring cycles of trust management. From a rational choice perspective, allies can be expected to search incessantly for signals of the others’ trustworthiness. Similarly, from a social trust standpoint, the norms of reciprocal obligation in an alliance will only remain relevant if they are periodically reproduced in shared practices and policy discourse, or their existence is otherwise rendered concrete through reassuring policy actions.⁵⁵

Appreciating the effects of power disparity is particularly relevant when it comes to assessing the role that trust plays in asymmetric alliance relationships, of which NATO is a prime example. In short, by virtue of this structural attribute of the relationship, America’s European allies have significantly more to lose than the United States if their trust in the powerful partner turns out to have been misplaced. From the standpoint of Europe, the ‘transatlantic bargain’⁵⁶ renders the allies ‘asymmetrically vulnerable’ and, by implication, they appear to gain disproportionately if their trust is indeed reciprocated by the US.⁵⁷

48 Hoffmann 1979, 88–89.

49 In the economic realm, of course, the proposition of asymmetry is more debatable. Here the idea that the European Union – or Europe in general – is an economic giant and a military dwarf is particularly telling. In fact, when assessed in terms of the size of their economies, they punch in the same league, with the US GDP at \$19 trillion and the EU’s at \$17 trillion (in 2017 at current US dollars); see World Bank 2018. However, the US enjoys certain structural advantages vis-à-vis the EU, particularly when it comes to the persistence of the dollar as the predominant global reserve currency.

50 Snyder 1984, 466–467. In fact, there are two alliance security dilemmas in Snyder’s formulation. The primary one has to do with the actual formation of alliances (in a multipolar setting), where each state would be better off not allying with anyone, but choose to do so anyway because they are unsure of the motivations of the other players and cannot, therefore, know for sure that the others will not ally, or that the alliance that forms will serve only defensive purposes. Our exposition is only concerned with the secondary alliance security dilemma, animated by fears of abandonment and entrapment.

51 This insight regarding the realm of choices available to the superpower – or, conversely, how the disproportionate relative material power advantage lessens the effects of constraints – has been central to discussions about the implications of American primacy; see e.g. Brooks and Wohlforth 2008.

52 In this manner, drawing on asymmetry theory: ‘The most basic fact of any asymmetric relationship is that the smaller side is proportionally more exposed than the larger side – a difference that affects every dimension of the bilateral relationship [...] The structural difference of interests implicit in asymmetry leads to differences in perception and, consequently, to differences in behavior. The smaller side will be more attentive to the relationship because it has more to gain or lose.’ Womack 2012, 45–46.

53 Kim 2011, 359.

54 Ibid.

55 Keating 2015a, 9–10.

56 Sloan 2016.

57 Placing oneself in a vulnerable position is central to forging trusting relationships; see Booth and Wheeler 2008, 241–243.

For Europe, the risks and concomitant rewards appear twofold. On the one hand, as per the *modus vivendi* established across the Atlantic in the aftermath of World War II, Americans have remained committed to guaranteeing Europeans' security in the face of an (existential) external threat. In return, Europe has allowed Washington to assume leadership of the Western alliance. In such a context, the prospect of the US reneging upon its commitment, breaking the bond of trust, could lead to external domination – a prospect that is alive and well today, given the increasingly tenuous security environment in and around Europe. On the old continent, the disproportionately powerful US thus remains the security guarantor of last resort, rendering allies dependent upon Washington's decisions, interests, and goodwill.

On the other hand, the US has agreed to abide by common institutionalised rules in order to reassure allies of both its commitment to defend them against aggression, and its willingness to practice 'strategic restraint'.⁵⁸ In the original transatlantic bargain, America's disproportionate power was thus harnessed under a norm-bounded framework for the benefit of the alliance, and this was done, in part, to placate the allies' fears not only of domination, but also of abandonment and entrapment by the senior partner. From the American perspective, the European allies are not crucial in ensuring US national security, although in terms of consolidating stability on the old continent NATO retains intrinsic value for America. More importantly still, the European allies remain a pool of reliable partners that Washington can periodically rely upon to pursue its foreign and security policy objectives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ASYMMETRIC TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP AS A SOURCE OF MISTRUST

Before embarking upon a deeper analysis of the NATO alliance, two small disclaimers are in order. First, it is not the intention of this paper to overstate the 'trust case'. Our titular notion is evidently not the only factor that binds alliances together – one must constantly be privy to the presence of other relevant variables, including, but not limited to, external threats, domestic-political vagaries and changes in the structural attributes of the international system.⁵⁹ It is likewise clear that rifts between allies can arise irrespective of

a manifest erosion or lack of trust. Relatedly, differences between allies, even over seemingly fundamental questions, need not necessarily create spirals of mistrust.

Second, NATO as an alliance has always been heterogeneous, and the allies have often pursued divergent policies. This is even more true in the contemporary context, when the alliance has 29 members – 17 more than at the time of its inception. Consequently, the European side of the alliance has never had a unified view with regard to how much and in what contexts the United States should be deemed trustworthy. France, for example, has practised a fair amount of hedging as part of its post-Second World War foreign policy to deal with perceived US unreliability.⁶⁰ The UK and Germany, in contrast, have relied on the US to a considerable degree, to say nothing of the new allies on NATO's eastern flank. This diversity notwithstanding, understanding the transatlantic trusting relationship in terms of the US-Europe dyad captures the essential characteristics of the bond.⁶¹

The history of the transatlantic alliance, which has nonetheless proved itself successful and enduring, is characterised by endemic tensions and divergence of interests. To paraphrase a distinguished historian of NATO, the alliance has been both united and divided.⁶² Every decade since the 1950s has witnessed a crisis of some sort between the allies – often between the US and Europeans⁶³ – although it must be noted that observers of the transatlantic relationship have had a tendency to exaggerate the gravity of recurring diplomatic disputes, large and small.⁶⁴

The underlying factor lurking behind these periods of disagreement has often been the lack of specific trust. To put it differently, the asymmetric trusting relationship between Europeans and the US has been – and still is – a permanent structural factor, generating fluctuating mistrust among NATO members. Whereas the concerns of Europeans have habitually revolved around the credibility of the US commitment to defend Europe, Washington has, in turn, mistrusted the Europeans' determination to act as reliable allies, willing to bear the necessary burdens and take the requisite risks on behalf of the community.

60 See e.g. Bozo 2016.

61 An obvious disadvantage of this approach is that it neglects Canada, the other North American member of NATO.

62 Kaplan 2004.

63 There have also been many disputes among European NATO members, notably between small democratic and authoritarian members. See e.g. Sawyer Samp 2017.

64 Thies 2008.

58 Ikenberry 1998.

59 See e.g. Walt 1997.

In her study on trust within NATO, Dorle Hellmuth distills the issues of trust into three specific issue areas: extended nuclear deterrence, burden- and risk-sharing, and NATO enlargement.⁶⁵ For the purposes of this study, the first two are of particular relevance.⁶⁶ Indeed, as Hellmuth rightly points out, the credibility of the US as the ultimate guarantor of European security is connected to the question of extended nuclear deterrence. The reliability of the US nuclear guarantee – that is, the US pledge to respond to a nuclear attack with nuclear weapons – is a key issue in the transatlantic relationship, and to this day the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe serves as a crucial signal of Washington’s commitment to European security.⁶⁷

Many of the deepest US–Europe disputes have concerned nuclear weapons, their role in enhancing deterrence against the Soviet Union/Russia, and the potential use of atomic devices. It is thus no surprise that changes in US nuclear policies have more than once been galvanised into issues of mistrust within NATO. The revisions to NATO’s nuclear doctrine in the 1960s are a prime example of the problematique regarding nuclear deterrence and US commitment. During the Kennedy administration, as a response to the Soviet advances in nuclear technology and long-range weapons systems, the United States began to advocate a new strategy called ‘flexible response’ to replace the more rigid massive retaliation approach. Basically, the new strategy was based on escalation control and aimed at expanding US options for responding to aggression; the policy highlighted the value of having several alternatives, also non-nuclear ones, at America’s disposal should a military confrontation erupt in Europe.

The Europeans, especially the already skeptical French, interpreted this strategic readjustment as a weakening of the ultimate American commitment to European security, and Paris managed to fuel doubts in other NATO capitals about US reliability. Eventually, after the French decision to leave the military structures of the alliance, NATO adopted the flexible response approach. However, to alleviate concerns on the old continent, Europeans obtained a seat at NATO’s nuclear deliberations, which was enough to enhance their confidence regarding US security guarantees.⁶⁸

The flexible response debacle was hardly the only nuclear dispute between the allies over the years, but it reflected the basic dilemma in NATO’s collective defence when it came to nuclear weapons. As Risse-Kapfen has put it:

For the United States, the ultimate question was whether Berlin was part of ‘us’ to the extent that there was no difference between an attack on the city and an attack on New York. For Western Europe, the question was to what extent the allies could trust American commitments and normative obligations to risk the survival of New York for the defense of Berlin.⁶⁹

Not all mistrust concerning US credibility as the guarantor of European security has concerned nuclear weapons; there are a host of questions that can influence European beliefs regarding US trustworthiness. For instance, the global scope of America’s interests has periodically engendered doubts in Europe.⁷⁰ During the Vietnam War, there were widespread concerns in Europe that US efforts in South-East Asia would affect the strength of its forces in Europe. These European worries were not completely unfounded, and Washington did remove some key capabilities, not to mention tens of thousands of servicemen from NATO assignments, in order to boost its presence in Vietnam. This shocked Germany in particular, which faced the Warsaw Pact on the frontline, and where the reduction of forces was conflated with fears over the US commitment to secure the Federal Republic’s survival.⁷¹

A more contemporary concern in Europe is also related to Asian security dynamics. In 2012, the Obama administration launched its ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy. The evident symbolism of the initiative notwithstanding, it reflected perceived ongoing shifts in the global balance of power, namely the ascendancy of China and its implications for US interests. In the aftermath of the policy’s unveiling, anxiety over the sustainability of America’s foothold in Europe once again began to grow. Potential consequences of the US ‘rebalance’ (as the initiative was eventually rebranded) became a subject of debate. One of the key questions was America’s willingness to support the Europeans in light of new geopolitical realities.⁷² However, the war in Ukraine,

65 Hellmuth 2017.

66 The enlargement question is to a great degree related to NATO’s relations with external actors such as Russia, and many of the internal issues of enlargement are, in turn, linked to the credibility of deterrence and burden-sharing.

67 Schwarz 1983, 3; Yost 2009.

68 Schwarz 1983.

69 Risse-Kapfen 1995, 184 (emphasis added).

70 This paradox of over- and under-attention plagues all asymmetric relationships in the international arena; see Womack 2003, 96.

71 Kaplan 2004, 44–50.

72 See e.g. Gareis & Wolf 2016.

and the subsequent US refocus towards Europe's security toned down the debate for the time being.

From the Western side of the Atlantic, the transatlantic trusting relationship has looked different. American security does not rely on the goodwill of the Europeans and, as has already been argued, for Washington, its allies in Europe are rather a pool of reliable allies whose support it can periodically draw upon to pursue its global interests. Thus, the mistrust experienced in the United States has predominantly concerned collective action issues such as burden- and risk-sharing. In this manner, from the US perspective, the trusting relationship with its allies involves less vulnerability. Washington expects the Europeans to act according to the tacit norms of the transatlantic cooperation, to meet the obligations of the relationship, and to refrain from freeriding.

The burden-sharing question has characterised the transatlantic relationship since the 1950s, gaining in prominence periodically. The source of US mistrust and frustration has been the alleged unwillingness of the Europeans to take greater responsibility for their own security and Europe's hesitancy to do their fair share in shouldering the necessary risks of maintaining regional and global security.

During the Cold War, at the heart of the burden-sharing issue lay European reluctance to build up conventional military capabilities that would have been sufficient to balance those of the Warsaw Pact. Although NATO set concrete force goals in 1952, European allies failed to reach them.⁷³ US reassurance based on extended nuclear deterrence and the absence of an imminent Soviet threat disincentivised Europeans from doing more with their own defence. From time to time, Washington's frustrations towards its allies grew. For example, the Johnson administration, under congressional pressure, pushed the Germans in particular to pay a greater share of the costs of US presence in the country. Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, was in turn more concerned about European efforts to help themselves in terms of military spending. Similarly, the Carter administration's objective was to set long-term defence spending goals in order to boost European spending.⁷⁴

After the end of the Cold War, the traditional burden-sharing question did not evaporate, but NATO's new efforts in out-of-area operations brought to the

fore novel issues, such as risk sharing. Not all of the allies were willing to put their soldiers at high risk in operations like the International Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and they demanded various caveats, which further disconcerted the US.⁷⁵

The end of the Cold War also generated another issue area, which led Washington to doubt the trustworthiness of its allies. European integration began to take new steps and, interrelatedly, calls for more autonomous European action in security and defence affairs proliferated. Towards the end of the 1990s the Europeans – the United Kingdom and France in particular – seemed to arrive at a mutual understanding about the need for more robust European security policies. The meeting of minds eventually led to the Saint-Malo Declaration of 1998. This further exacerbated American fears, and the Clinton administration voiced its reservations about European strategic autonomy. The conditional approach of the US was condensed into three Ds: no decoupling of the United States from Europe, no discrimination of non-EU NATO members, and no duplication in European and transatlantic defence resources. Interestingly, although US fears were legitimate to a degree, its doubts reflected the alliance security dilemma through fear of abandonment. It should be recalled that US pre-eminence in European security has created a dependency dynamic between Washington and its European allies, which has given the US considerable political leverage over European capitals. More European autonomy in defence would definitely decrease European political dependency on the US, duly weakening America's hand vis-à-vis its allies across the Atlantic.⁷⁶

The above discussion has demonstrated that the asymmetric relationship is indeed a permanent structural factor in transatlantic affairs, which breeds fluctuating specific mistrust between the allies. This acknowledgment should not obscure the fact that in terms of managing such centrifugal dynamics, the transatlantic alliance has been a success characterised by general trust. Although certain ambiguity regarding the solidity of US commitment to Europe was always present, it never grew too strong to jeopardise the sustainability of the transatlantic bargain.⁷⁷ Generally, Europeans have trusted the US and vice versa, owing to shared interests, identities, institutions and values. Neither the Americans nor the Europeans have

73 See e.g. Sloan 2016, 33.

74 Sloan 2016, 96.

75 Dellmuth 2017, 170–171.

76 Blankenship 2018.

77 Williams 1983.

seriously considered disengagement from the arrangement, but have rather weathered the storms and maintained the level of trust necessary to keep the alliance together.

THE TRUMP ERA IN PERSPECTIVE

Due to Donald Trump's rise to the presidency and his antagonistic attitude towards multilateralism and key allies, transatlantic relations in general – and NATO in particular – are facing profound turbulence. Although there is a tendency to exaggerate the gravity of intra-alliance disputes among politicians and policy pundits alike, the Trump administration's policies and especially the president's convictions are historically unprecedented. Coincidentally, the US and the Europeans have found themselves at loggerheads not only over burden-sharing in security and defence but also over trade, climate, and the value of multilateralism. As was already implied in the introduction, this novel state of affairs has led many commentators to lament the collapse of trust within the transatlantic relationship.

In terms of asymmetric trust, Trump has managed to heighten the perennial mistrust factors to an unprecedented level. Interestingly, the source of the current dispute seems to be Trump's personal mistrust towards the allies. At the same time, the president's inclinations admittedly reflect long-standing US doubts regarding the reliability of the Europeans as allies, but in a simplified manner and on a magnified scale.

Trump's inherent views on the unreliability of (certain) European allies and NATO seem to be ingrained in his worldview.⁷⁸ Although the president has largely failed to imprint his unorthodox positions upon the whole administration or the government more broadly, the US has adopted the perennial burden-sharing question as one of the core pillars of its Europe policy.⁷⁹ The main US demand to its allies is to increase their defence spending to NATO's 2%-of-GDP target, a figure reaffirmed at the 2014 Wales Summit – although the president apparently floated an even higher figure at the Brussels Summit in July 2018. This goal has been accompanied by Trump's rhetorical attacks against the alliance and singling out of allies, particularly Germany. The president has explicitly blasted the Europeans

for taking advantage of the United States for the better part of seven decades, even insinuating that the EU is a 'foe' because it treats the US unfairly on matters of trade. Moreover, Trump was long hesitant to endorse Article 5 of the 'obsolete' organisation, and even reportedly threatened to pull out of NATO in the company of fellow alliance leaders. Recent revelations suggest he has discussed the idea with his officials several times.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Trump's mistrust goes well beyond collective action issues. In fact, he even appears to fear entrapment in a potential confrontation, speculating that Montenegro – a state he described as 'very aggressive' – could potentially draw the US into an unwanted conflagration.

Trump's mistrust and his administration's ensuing policies have provoked both rhetorical and behavioural reactions in Europe. An overwhelming majority of European governments – not to mention European publics more broadly – see Trump in a negative light.⁸¹ It is clear that the current US administration has aggravated persistent doubts about the US commitment to European security.

European signals of mistrust began right after Trump's election, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel reminded the president-elect of the common values that bind Europe and America.⁸² In spring 2017, Merkel went further by saying that Europe cannot fully rely on others and must take its fate into its own hands, obviously referring to the United States.⁸³ This message was later echoed by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and, notably, French President Emmanuel Macron.⁸⁴ Even smaller allies with strong Atlanticist traditions have signalled their doubts regarding the state of the US commitment. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the Prime Minister of Denmark, suggested that the state should perhaps reconsider its opt-out from the EU's common security and defence policy (CSDP) because Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security given the mixed messages emanating from Washington.⁸⁵ In a similar vein, Radosław Sikorski, the former Foreign Minister of Poland, has said that the Europeans have no idea what Trump would decide to do if a crisis with Russia erupted.⁸⁶

78 Wright 2016; Laderman and Simms 2017.

79 See e.g. Mitchell 2018; Pompeo 2018.

80 For a fairly up-to-date exposition of Trump's forays in the oval office, see Lindsay and Daalder 2018; Barnes and Cooper 2019.

81 Shapiro and Pardijs 2017.

82 Faiola 2016.

83 Henley 2017.

84 Vonberg 2017; Chrisafis 2018.

85 Deutsche Welle 2018.

86 Polakow-Suransky 2018.

Moreover, this seems to be a concern among some of the current Alliance policymakers. One anonymous NATO diplomat reportedly summed up the mood in February 2019 by wondering: ‘if there’s a situation that would require a quick response in the Balkans or the Baltics, will President Trump deploy troops? No one can answer this’.⁸⁷

Although there are clear rhetorical signals of mistrust, there have been far fewer concrete hedging measures against the perceived (and newfound) US unreliability in Europe. Granted, the Trump administration’s policies have added a further incentive to develop European defence cooperation; new political frameworks have been established and more are under development.⁸⁸ Some of the suggestions about potential hedging measures – such as Macron’s vision of a European army – have provoked Trump, which is indicative of the potentially negative implications that such forays might have.⁸⁹ However, mistrust towards Trump has not, so far, been a centripetal force – one bringing about substantially more autonomous European action in defence. In territorial defence, Europeans still trust the United States.⁹⁰

This begs the question of why Europeans are not hedging against US disengagement or, at worst, the prospect of abandonment. There are multiple potential answers. Russia’s resurgence notwithstanding, there are few unifying threats, and European strategic and geopolitical visions remain divergent. Europeans simply disagree over the desirable course of European defence policy – Germany and France, the engines of European integration, in particular. Moreover, from the perspective of trust research in IR and the levels-of-analysis problem embedded therein, European mistrust is clearly directed towards the president, not necessarily towards the whole administration or government. The presence of the so-called ‘adults’ on Trump’s team – in addition to increased resources for European defence – was evidently a stabilising factor in terms of the maintenance of the trusting relationship. Apprehensive reactions from Europeans following the departure of reassuring figures, including Secretary of Defence James Mattis and National Security

Advisor H. R. McMaster, were indicative of the faith European allies placed in them.⁹¹

CONCLUSIONS: TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS – CROSSROADS OR DEAD END?

In addition to the structural asymmetry that generates mistrust, there are also a number of rather static elements in the transatlantic alliance that facilitate the maintenance of a trusting relationship among NATO allies. Keating, for example, regards NATO’s institutional nature, collective defence planning, and liberal democracy as potential trust-building mechanisms.⁹² The vitality and future of the alliance depend on maintaining a favourable balance between these centripetal and above-discussed centrifugal forces of a trusting relationship.

Both sides of the Atlantic have recently signalled mutual mistrust. However, despite the turbulence in the relationship, in its day-to-day workings NATO has by and large functioned as normal. At the 2018 Brussels summit, the alliance managed to make important decisions aimed at consolidating the post-2014 turn back to collective defence as the primary mission of the organisation.⁹³ Still, there should be no room for complacency since mutual mistrust on specific issues is real. If it persists or accumulates, and thereby turns into general mistrust, institutionalised political processes will be undermined.

This prompts the question of what might constitute even more disconcerting signals in terms of the future of the transatlantic relationship. First, the exchange of unfriendly rhetoric may escalate further. Negative references to the trustworthiness of the other may proliferate, completely outnumbering positive ones, which have already been in short supply. Additionally, allies might also fail to agree on joint declarations, such as NATO summit communiqués, which would be a major blow to the performative acts necessary for trust-building and maintenance. From the European perspective, it is imperative that the antagonistic rhetorical posturing does not trickle down from the White House to the rest of the administration or government.

87 Ryan & Birnbaum 2019.

88 These frameworks include the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation, the French-led European Intervention Initiative, the German-led Framework Nation Concept, and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force.

89 Morin 2018.

90 One could, of course, argue that the Europeans have no feasible alternatives. However, a concerted and concrete commitment to enhanced autonomous defence is – in our view – an option in the longer term.

91 Janning 2019.

92 Keating 2015, 17. A similar formulation can be found in Thomas Risse’s work, focusing on the transatlantic relationship as a security community. He argues that the state of the relationship can be assessed in terms of four categories: interests, interdependencies, institutions and identities; see Risse 2016.

93 On NATO’s return to collective defence, see e.g. Deni 2017.

Secondly, when it comes to hedging measures, the Europeans in particular face a paradox. It is recognised and urged in Washington that Europeans must do more to share the burdens of collective defence. Indeed, this would redress the imbalance between the US and Europe – the most potent source of US mistrust. However, there has been a tendency in Washington to interpret European efforts to develop European capabilities as moves directed against American interests. Hence, European reassuring could well be perceived as hedging in Washington, to the detriment of the transatlantic relationship.

Moreover, as discussed above, one issue that is highly indicative of the nature of trust within NATO is nuclear deterrence. In terms of concrete hedging measures, should suggestions of independent European nuclear deterrence or a greater role for the French nuclear deterrent in European defence proliferate, it would indicate growing European mistrust towards the US. Washington, in turn, could easily fuel European mistrust by hinting about troop withdrawals or by watering down its commitment to Article 5, thus signalling willingness to disengage or to renegotiate the fundamental parameters of the transatlantic bargain.

To what extent is it possible, then, to contain the erosion of trust? As already argued, there are multiple factors facilitating the maintenance of the trusting relationship among the transatlantic allies. It is unlikely that the current US president will change his opinions on America's friends, and thus the Europeans should treat the current administration with healthy scepticism. As a prominent scholar and practitioner of transatlantic politics has written, 'Europeans will never feel safe with a Trump White House'.⁹⁴ However, the current political disarray in Washington is not a particularly fertile environment for trust-based multilateral foreign policy. In fact, it is incumbent upon the Europeans to become more attentive towards the domestic-political fluctuations in the United States, as America's political polarisation might produce more violent swings in America's foreign engagement in the future.⁹⁵

On the other hand, US concerns about burden-sharing are legitimate, and Europeans must work in earnest to redress the existing imbalance.⁹⁶ Washington should accept that a more capable Europe

is also more independent. However, US allies in Europe should not frame their defence efforts as a hedge against American unreliability, and overly grandiose statements about European defence should be avoided. Instead, Europe should remain patient and engage in selective sector-based proactivity, for instance, by coordinating responses to the Chinese exercise of power, especially in novel domains.⁹⁷

Those policymakers in Washington who are mindful of the importance of the transatlantic link should still try to reassure Europeans. At the moment, European mistrust is mainly directed towards the president and his 'loyalists'. This means that transatlanticist voices emanating from the administration should continue to reassure Europeans of the longevity of US commitments. Avoiding overtly unilateral decision-making and posturing – to the extent that this is possible given the impulses of the White House incumbent – would prevent further transatlantic alienation.

To conclude our discussion, it is clear that the structural uncertainties that govern alliance politics – and international politics more broadly – render perfectly trusting relationships between states illusory, even in a well-established alliance with a long and illustrious history. In the case of NATO, the asymmetric nature of the transatlantic bargain means that the trust issue looks qualitatively different from the European and American vantage points. The prospect of abandonment places the Europeans in an asymmetrically vulnerable position vis-à-vis the US. Any signals from Washington – especially ones that arouse the prospect of betrayal, even if only on specific issues – will be studied intently on the old continent. For this reason, the recent uptick in burden-sharing talk emanating from the White House, coupled with the president's ambivalence regarding the core norms of alliance obligation, have aroused fears in Europe. Were such ideas to permeate Washington beyond the incumbent's immediate coterie of advisors, the prospect of specific mistrust questions morphing into more general suspicions would be heightened. For the foreseeable future, the focus of transatlanticists on both sides of the ocean should therefore be on finding strategies of engagement that paper over specific issues of mistrust. This would serve the goal of keeping the alliance afloat through troubled times by maintaining a sufficient reservoir of general trust.

94 Valášek 2018.

95 Sestanovich 2014; Aaltola 2018.

96 Michta 2018b.

97 Brattberg and Le Corre 2018; Aaltola 2018, 246–248.

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