

Trump's neglect of Europe goes beyond angry tweets

Unfilled positions, truncated communications, lack of policy clarity combine to provoke anger across the continent.

Jack Shafer

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NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg (front) and President Donald Trump look on during the unveiling of the new headquarters of NATO on May 25, 2017, in Brussels. They are joined from left to right: French President Emmanuel Macron and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel. | Benoit Doppagne/AFP/Getty Images

BRUSSELS — Behind President Donald Trump's frequent attacks on European allies is a deeper neglect of the trans-Atlantic relationship: unfilled positions, truncated meetings, missed or crossed signals and confusion over basic policies.

Aides to the president insist that Trump's disputes with Europe are part of a long history of disagreements between leaders who, in the end, are inextricably bound by deeper shared interests and values. Churchill and Roosevelt. Johnson and de Gaulle. Kohl and Reagan. Each relationship had frictions and stumbles, only to yield to a stronger Western alliance.

But as they braced for Trump to barrel into Europe this week with visits to NATO and Britain and a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, senior officials from more than a dozen countries, most of them steeped in decades of experience with the trans-Atlantic relationship, insisted that the breaches under this administration go well beyond the types of policy disagreements of the past. They spoke to POLITICO largely on condition of anonymity out of fear of worsening the situation, or redirecting Trump's ire at their own capitals, which each have different interests

and priorities in Washington. Despite those differences, they voiced a consistent message of concern: pointing less to Trump's rhetoric than to a more organic breach of collaboration, a collapse of institutions and, most worrisome to them, the obliteration of any sense of predictability.

For instance, for more than a year and a half into a four-year term, dozens of positions crucial to the trans-Atlantic relationship remained vacant, leaving their European counterparts stranded and grasping for interlocutors, on everything from trade policy to Russian sanctions. One senior American diplomat in Brussels said European officials, desperate for lines of communication — and thrown off balance by the churn in the White House — pleaded for more visits by members of Congress, especially Republicans.

Only at the end of June did the Senate finally confirm Gordon Sondland, a hotel magnate and longtime Republican Party fundraiser, as ambassador to the European Union, and he just took up the post on Monday. The most prominent envoy Trump has sent — Richard Grenell in Germany — has stirred controversy by seeming to threaten to meddle in European politics, telling the right-wing news site Breitbart: "I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe, other leaders."

Several key European ambassadorships remain unfilled, including in Ireland, which is at the center of the sensitive negotiations over Britain's withdrawal from the EU, and Poland, which is in a fierce battle with Brussels over alleged rule-of-law violations. This month, Trump finally nominated an ambassador to Albania, days after a crucial EU summit where leaders decided to postpone membership talks with the strategic Balkan nation for at least a year.

Trump has still not appointed U.S. envoys to numerous United Nations institutions in Europe, nor to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has a crucial role in monitoring the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, the U.S. ambassador in Estonia, a career diplomat, announced he was retiring, partly in response to Trump's negative comments about the EU.

The disarray has had a direct effect on the delicate process of setting agendas for trans-Atlantic meetings — some of which, such as a NATO leaders meeting in 2017, were foreshortened for lack of an agenda — and others, like the recent disastrous G-7 summit in Quebec, collapsed for what many Europeans regarded as the inability of any of Trump's aides and advisers to make policy commitments on behalf of the president ahead of such conclaves.

The State Department, for over a year and a half, has yet to articulate a cohesive policy toward Europe that might fashion some sense of order or a ranking of priorities out of Trump's often impulsive criticism. Trump has cheered Brexit, but his administration has not made clear how it hopes the future relationship between the United Kingdom and Europe will evolve. There is even deeper uncertainty on Ukraine and Russia policy, with Trump's special envoy on Ukraine, Kurt Volker, negotiating directly with Putin's point man Vladislav Surkov, outside the formal Minsk

2 peace process being led by France and Germany, and making no discernible progress.

U.S. diplomats interceded late, and in vain, to try to help persuade EU leaders to formally open membership talks with Albania, and the country that will now be known as the Republic of North Macedonia after settling its name dispute with Greece. European officials said the Trump administration had misread the landscape in Brussels — where there is minimal appetite for expansion — and wrongly thought France could be pressured to change its mind and bring the rest of the bloc along.

All of these missteps, they said, were the result of an alarming lack of communications and disregard for trans-Atlantic institutions, some of which have been in operation since the end of World War II.

One diplomat from a Western European country who recently visited Washington said that in the early months of Trump's administration there was often no one to talk to — not at the White House, or the State Department. But if you reached someone, they tended to be forthright — reflecting the potpourri of views that arrived with Trump in his early days. Now, the diplomat said, dissent has been purged and administration officials merely regurgitate the common line.

“It's all talking points,” the diplomat said. “You can read it all in press releases.”

Now, after 18 months of trying — and failing — to flatter, cajole and convince Trump that Europe and the U.S. are still on the same side, European leaders say they have all but given up.

They had tried to distract Trump with ceremony, even altered the formats and discussions of international summits to adjust for his limited patience and famously short attention span, only to see Trump step up his rhetorical attacks on the EU, escalate his belligerent trade policies and even intercede aggressively in their domestic politics.

As Trump prepares to barnstorm into Europe for the NATO summit, a state visit to Britain and a summit with Putin, European leaders have adopted a new strategy, hoping to contain conflicts and wait Trump out.

Now, even as the Europeans try to avoid further blowups, they are eagerly pursuing policies that stand to rewrite the international order but in ways that undercut American leadership rather than reinforce it.

They are racing to complete major trade deals from the South Pacific to South America. And they are allocating billions of euros to develop European military capabilities, an effort Washington has begun criticizing, having suddenly realized the long-term threat it could pose to U.S. dominance.

By nastily browbeating allies over everything from military spending and the Iran nuclear deal to his perceived victimization of the United States in trade policy, Trump is redrawing the trans-Atlantic relationship in ways that many European officials believe will far outlast his presidency — making it difficult, if not impossible, for his successors to fully reclaim America's traditional seat at the head of the table.

"He is rather a gravedigger for the postwar order, which the United States itself has founded," Christian Ehler, a German member of the European Parliament, who is chair of the delegation for relations with the United States, recently said of Trump.

(Left to right) British Prime Minister Theresa May, President Donald Trump and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg look on as Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel speaks at the NATO headquarters in Brussels on May 25, 2017. | Matt Dunham/AFP/Getty Images

In response to the Europeans' concerns, the White House told POLITICO that Trump was committed to America's allies and its obligations, but that the president was insisting on fairness — in burden-sharing on defense and in trade policy — and that the Western alliance was united against repression.

Trump has repeatedly [criticized Senate Democrats for obstructing](#) his nominees, [including for diplomatic posts](#), and even when sparring with leaders he has insisted his relationships with them are great. "The relationship that I've had with the people, the leaders of these countries, has been — I would really, rate it on a scale of 0 to 10, I would rate it a 10," Trump said after the G-7.

"President Trump's national security strategy is anchored on the concept that America's partners and allies magnify our power and protect our shared interests and values," a spokesman for the National Security Council told POLITICO. "The president has expressed an ironclad commitment to meeting our global obligations; and he expects that in return our allies will shoulder their fair share of our common defense burden and will do more in areas that most affect them."

On trade, the spokesman said Trump is "addressing unfair trade imbalances that disadvantage American workers and is fighting back against trade abuses that we can no longer tolerate." But the spokesman rejected any suggestion that long-term relationships are in jeopardy. "Good friends can disagree," he said. "But we always come back to the core of our relationships. The United States and our allies stand firmly on the side of those who favor free societies, and we will stand together against those who favor repressive systems."

But European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who will visit Trump at the White House later this month, in the latest effort to defuse the trade fight, has offered a grimmer prognosis, and warned that the consequences of Trump's policies,

like withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, were already shifting the global geopolitical landscape — for example, by pushing Europe to take a more independent approach toward Russia and China.

"Cloudy rather than bright," Juncker replied with classic understatement when asked about relations with the U.S. during a recent interview with a consortium of German newspapers. He quickly added that, intentionally or not, Trump is pushing Europe toward taking a more independent approach to Russia and China.

"We have to draw some conclusions from Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran," Juncker said. "That does not mean that we are swapping partners. But it does mean that other partners are becoming more important than they were before."

At a news conference after the most recent EU summit, a resigned Juncker said he would present Europe's case in Washington but that he had little hope of reaching common ground with Trump. "We should de-dramatize these relations," he said. "We need these relations. The U.S. needs these relations. I am not sure we will find an agreement between the U.S. and the European Union, but we'll try."

It was a remarkable moment, if only for the matter-of-fact way in which Juncker acknowledged Europe's closest postwar partner has now become an adversary.

Unlike past disagreements, in which individual American presidents hashed out specific policy disagreements with an individual counterpart — Eisenhower and Eden on the Suez crisis, for example — this is now Trump vs. Almost Everyone, a dynamic that will be on full display when he arrives at NATO.

Some Europeans, especially in nations with a long-standing undercurrent of resentment against the U.S., are embracing the moment as an opportunity.

"I see it as a challenge but not only a bad challenge for Europe," said a senior government minister from a Central European nation. "Everybody recognizes now that partners are not for granted ... and if we are going to have a sustainable global, European way of life, and model in the European Union, we have to make an effort to be able ourselves to deal with these important issues."

The collapse of the European relationship with Trump wasn't foreordained. Many officials, offering newly revealed details about their strategies for dealing with the president, noted that it came only after a long series of events in which Europeans collaborated, sometimes furtively, to flatter Trump and appeal to his sense of patriotism, in hopes of cultivating better relations with the new administration.

For Trump's first visit to the alliance headquarters, in May 2017, officials tried to distract the real estate developer-turned- president with a ribbon-cutting ceremony,

and dedication of a 9/11 memorial. The memorial — a twisted hunk of metal wreckage from the destroyed World Trade Center towers — had been secretly shipped to Brussels by the 9/11 Museum, its existence known only to a small group of NATO officials and U.S. diplomats who hoped to use it as part of the effort to change Trump's view of the alliance, which he had branded "obsolete."

NATO leaders' meetings can be dense affairs. But for Trump's visit, officials designed an agenda far tighter than usual — so tight, in fact, it did not even formally count as a summit. There was a tour of the alliance's new headquarters, the building ceremony, and a working dinner — basically an afternoon and an evening.

There was no formal session of the North Atlantic Council. No thick briefing books or complex presentations of command structure — all to cater to the new president's attention span.

It didn't work. And, looking back, many European officials now regard it as the first failed effort in what would become 18 months of grave deterioration in relations.

Instead of using the speech at the memorial dedication, as NATO officials hoped, to celebrate the solidarity of allies after the Sept. 11 attacks, Trump used it to clobber the allies on the issue of military spending. Along the way, he engaged in a bizarre handshake contest with French President Emmanuel Macron, and manhandled the prime minister of Montenegro, shoving him out of the way while walking to the group photo.

A second effort by European allies to appease Trump, days later at the G-7 summit in Sicily, also failed, as Trump persisted in his opposition to the Paris climate accord. Nor was there any better result when Macron attempted a boys-and-toys strategy with Trump during his state visit to the French capital in July. The presidents had dinner with their wives at the Eiffel Tower, and Macron wowed Trump at a Bastille Day military parade — the sort of display of hardware that Trump is longing to stage in Washington. Whatever bromance seemed to blossom, however, yielded no concessions by Trump on policy.

Instead, months of further wooing by European leaders was met by one step after another by the U.S. president that infuriated them: the move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear accord; his ignition of a trade war by slapping tariffs on European steel and aluminum.

Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel (center) speaks with President Donald Trump during the G-7 summit in Quebec on June 9. | Jesco Denzel/German Federal Government via AP

Still, as they arrived to meet Trump once again at this year's G-7 in Quebec, the allies readied yet another strategy — hoping to talk Trump out of escalating the trade mess.

At a meeting with the summit host, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, European Council President Donald Tusk and Juncker "agreed that the first session should not be about trade but rather about overall economic policy," one senior official told POLITICO. "That would allow POTUS to relax and give him an opportunity to boast about U.S. growth, jobs, stock exchanges." Trump would be confronted, the official said, "only after that discussion of trade, so in the second session."

At a strategy huddle of European leaders the next morning, including Tusk, Juncker, Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, plans were laid for how to deal with the combustible U.S. leader, according to senior European officials who witnessed the discussions. They agreed to tell Trump that language supporting the international rules-based order and rules-based international trading system, including anti-protectionism language, in the final communique, was non-negotiable.

They also agreed to go ahead with Merkel's idea of offering a trip by Juncker to Washington, to cooperate in the newest U.S. investigation regarding tariffs on cars.

Finally, Merkel and Macron would pepper Trump with facts and figures "in a hope," the official said, "that it would have an impact on the U.S. decision." Mostly, these were the same numbers that European Commission Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström had prepared for prior visits by Merkel and Macron to Washington. But Macron also tried to cajole Trump out of his fixation on tariffs, noting that German cars outsell French cars in France, even though there are no tariffs between the countries.

That full-court press almost worked. Trump agreed to join the final leaders' declaration, only to blow the whole thing up later, in a pique of fury after hearing Trudeau insist that Canada would continue to fight back against Trump's tariffs.

As Trump went on to Singapore to meet the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, the Europeans flew home in disbelief. At a European Council summit late last month, they went back over those events and concluded there was little they could do but try to dial down the tensions, prevent major blowups, and wait Trump out, officials inside the meeting said. Some called it "strategic patience"; others described it as "containment."

Aides to Trump insist that he is effectively disrupting a relationship that atrophied long ago and that has delivered lopsided benefits to Europe. While recent U.S. administrations mainly regarded the trans-Atlantic relationship with a sort of benign neglect, Trump's aides say he is forcing European partners to renegotiate or rethink unfavorable trade policies, including tariffs. And they note that while many of Trump's

predecessors similarly demanded that NATO allies increase their military spending, Trump is actually getting results.

At the NATO summit this week, two more allies — Lithuania and Latvia — are expected to announce that they are meeting the alliance's goal of 2 percent of GDP in annual defense spending, and another 14 are on track to hit the target, officials said.

"NATO is doing many of the things that the president has asked them to," Kay Bailey Hutchison, Trump's ambassador to the alliance, told reporters on a conference call.

Among those voices from Washington seeking to bring historical perspective to Trump's handling of the U.S.-Europe relationship is Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs A. Wess Mitchell, the most senior official for Europe policy at the State Department.

Mitchell, a longtime analyst and scholar of European affairs, had written in a recent book about the crucial need for the U.S. to re-engage with allies. Instead, however, he is at the center of Trump policies that have distanced Washington from its traditional friends.

In a recent speech in Brussels, Mitchell insisted that there have always been significant disagreements in the trans-Atlantic relationship, but that they were far outweighed by the shared interests and values. "The history of trans-Atlantic relations has been marked by debate and crisis from the earliest days," he said, adding: "Over the decades, Americans and Europeans have disagreed about everything from Vietnam and the Iraq War to the Kyoto climate accords and Google. We have had and continue to have scores of disputes with one another at the WTO: on commercial airplanes, poultry, beef, biotech, steel — this is not the first one — bananas and chemicals."

"But at every turn we have found a way to come together," Mitchell insisted. "For the simple reason that what unites us — in values, interests, trade and security — is vastly greater than what divides us."

But while Mitchell may believe that, few Europeans are convinced that Trump has any goodwill toward Europe, nor do they believe he has a sufficient grasp of history to understand the gravity of the damage he is doing to the relationship. Senior European officials pointed to numerous instances in which Trump has shown no compunction about contradicting or undermining his Cabinet secretaries and senior officials.

Ever since the U.S. Congress adopted the Foreign Assistance Act of 1948 — more commonly known as the Marshall Plan — Washington had gotten credit for

generously rebuilding the war-torn continent. And American presidents had maintained a foreign policy that treated Europe as a trusted ally. But Trump, they say, has violated the relationship in a way that goes beyond previous chafing at U.S. arrogance, overreach or even flat-out screw-ups, like the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Europe's sense of distrust in Washington cannot be attributed to any one of Trump's eyebrow-raising policies or pronouncements, the senior officials said. It's not that he threatened Mercedes and other German cars with extinction on the streets of Manhattan. Or that he harps about how NATO is better for Europe than the U.S. and claims the EU was created to "take advantage of the United States, to attack our piggy bank."

More fundamentally, on a continent still highly risk-averse in the long shadow of the last Great War, Trump has turned the U.S. into a force of unpredictability and chaos, a country whose values — long out of sync with Europe on issues like the death penalty, gun control and health care — seem increasingly hard to reconcile with the ideals of the land that once beckoned to millions of Europe's huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

"The real geopolitical problem is not when you have an unpredictable opponent or enemy or partner, the problem is if your closest friend is unpredictable," Tusk said ahead of an EU leaders meeting in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia this spring.

"It's not a joke now," Tusk said, his face darkening as he laid out just how far away Trump had pushed America's traditional allies. "I can agree with President Trump when he says that unpredictability can be a very useful tool in politics. But only against enemies or opponents. But unpredictability in my opinion is the last thing we need when we are friends and inside family."

European officials say they have also lost their sense of hope for most of Trump's top-tier advisers, some of whom initially seemed to have more of a feel for the importance of the trans-Atlantic bond. Many of those officials, however, have been ousted or resigned in the frequent churn that defines Trump's White House. Among the few who remain are Mitchell and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis.

But while they are viewed as knowledgeable on European affairs, in Brussels that expertise has been rendered meaningless by Trump's willingness to undercut his own staff, as he did when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a successful first visit to NATO headquarters, only to have the goodwill blown apart by Trump, back in Washington, who quipped: "NATO is wonderful but it helps Europe more than us, so why are we paying the biggest share?"

While there is recognition in Europe that U.S. policy could shift depending on the outcome of midterm elections, there is also growing acceptance that Trump's support among his base seems resilient and that he could well win a second term.

"Whether there is a Europe policy below the president's policy is totally irrelevant," a senior EU official said. "I think he hates Europe. ... He has a visceral allergic reaction to Europe. He's a person — as much as I have read, and a couple times that I have seen him — he operates on emotions. He's not Mr. Cerebral, like Obama. ... As long as you have a president who doesn't read, who goes with his gut and makes decisions based on emotions rather than a calculated analysis, then I don't think there's much to be done. He doesn't like Europe. He is never going to start liking Europe."

It is unclear whether the arrival of Sondland — the new ambassador to the EU, whose parents escaped Nazi Germany — will help, or whether, like Grenell in Germany and Ambassador Pete Hoekstra in the Netherlands, he will become a further source of controversy. It's hard for anyone to represent Trump's views or speak for him when the president often seems to change his message without warning.

That Trump might prefer meeting the leaders of Saudi Arabia, North Korea or Egypt more than his democratically elected counterparts in Europe is not appreciated. But the possibility that he might make unilateral agreements, as he did at his meeting with Kim Jong Un, or as Trump may do at the upcoming summit with Putin, is a source of deep anxiety.

In response, officials in Brussels and across the continent have shifted into survival mode. In some cases, like the concerted effort to save the Iran nuclear deal, and the retaliatory tariffs against American goods, they are working actively to thwart Trump's stated policy goals.

The senior EU official said Europe is savvy enough not to take it all too personally.

"We all have to understand that a lot of this is domestically driven for Trump," the official said. "It's not about national security per se. It's about fulfilling campaign promises and putting it to the Obama administration. If you look at it in that context, the big questions, like why does he hate Europe, becomes almost secondary. It's about elections. It's about winning, It's about the whole philosophy of making deals."

Now, in the wake of the debacle in Quebec, European leaders are bracing for new shocks.

In terms of damage control, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has had perhaps the best success in managing Trump. Stoltenberg has courted Trump aggressively, repeatedly assured Trump that his demands for greater military spending by NATO allies were also Stoltenberg's goal and the alliance's goal as well. Stoltenberg has also repeatedly told Trump that he is winning, as he did on his most recent visit to Washington in May.

"Together, we've increased and, really, raised a lot of money from countries that weren't paying or weren't paying a fair share," Trump had said during a news

conference at the White House. "We have a little ways to go, but many billions of dollars of additional money has been raised."

Such statements would normally infuriate allies, who bristle at Trump's lack of understanding of how NATO financing works — that it is actually measured by each nation's spending on its own military, that all allies are paying their required share of NATO's central budget, and that no ally actually "owes" anything.

But Stoltenberg only reassured Trump. "Let me thank you for the leadership you show on the issue of defense spending because it is very important that we all contribute more to our shared security," Stoltenberg said. "And it is really having an impact because, as you said, allies are now spending more on defense. All allies are increasing their defense budgets."

Even that was not enough for Trump, who interjected: "Do you give me credit for that?"

"You have helped to do that because your leadership has been important," Stoltenberg replied.

Experts on trans-Atlantic politics say the relationship has never been as good as either side hoped, but that it is clearly at a low point.

"We take each other for granted," said Daniel S. Hamilton, executive director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations, a Washington think tank, who has held numerous senior posts in the State Department working on Europe policy. "It's our closeness that gets in the way of understanding."

Hamilton said that while Washington had long held strategic and policy goals for Europe, it had never developed an overall, strategic policy toward the EU, which is viewed by many officials in the United States as cumbersome and bureaucratic. But that approach has increasingly caused strains as Europe has become more deeply integrated — politically and economically — and the commission has taken a stronger role, especially in the areas of trade and regulation.

"I think for any U.S. president, regardless of who they have been, a U.S.-EU summit is like going to the dentist," Hamilton said. "The EU is the most important organization in the world to which the United States does not belong, and I think that highlights both its significance but also why Americans often don't know how to engage with it."

Hamilton said Washington has long had consistent goals vis-a-vis Europe: "The United States wants a Europe that is hospitable to freedom and democracy. ... We want a Europe that is open, open to American goods, open to American investment, open to American ideas. I think we have an enduring interest in a Europe that is free from the kinds of strife and conflict that drains inordinate resources from the United

States. We also want Europe to do more for their own defense and take care of their own civil wars, but often we have seen Europe simply isn't able to do that."

But Hamilton said that what had been a gradual evolution of Washington's policy toward Europe has accelerated and become more pronounced under Trump.

Beginning with the Marshall Plan, the view, he said, was of "the United States as a European power, that means fully engaged across the board in all of the institutions of Europe, and actually integral to all of the alliances and coalitions the Europeans would put together." Now, he said, "I would argue we are moving away from that ... to not being a European power, but being a power in Europe. A power in Europe is selectively engaged ... it means burden sharing, but also burden shedding."

The EU diplomat who recently visited Washington compared the U.S.-Europe relationship to a marriage. What was once a series of strains and squabbles has veered, under Trump, dangerously toward separation, and a potential divorce.

"The attitude is kind of the same on both sides of the Atlantic. 'You guys don't pull your weight. You don't do anything; you don't value the relationship' and 'You don't pony up. You don't make the hard decisions. You don't care about the relationship,'" the diplomat said. "It really is a dysfunctional marriage."

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