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Making Trans-Atlantic Relations Great Again? A Look at US Front-runners' Positions on Europe

by Jeffrey Brown

The latest, delegate-rich presidential primaries in Florida, Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio further cemented Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as front-runners within their respective parties. While official delegates will not be awarded until party conventions in mid-July, the often raucous and anti-establishment nature of this cycle has raised the specter of a drastic shift in America's tack toward Europe. With seven months until the presidential election in November, we assess Trump and Clinton's positions vis-à-vis Europe, taking stock of the leading contenders' positions on three critical issues that will define the trans-Atlantic relationship in the years ahead.

Trans-Atlantic Cooperation on Refugees

In order to shore up trans-Atlantic "burden-sharing" following the arrival of over one million refugees to the EU in 2015, US President Barack Obama agreed to admit up to 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016. However, since the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, momentum for increased cooperation has largely fizzled, with 31 U.S. states declaring their intent to block resettlements.

Trump sided with a majority of U.S. governors in opposing refugee resettlements, branding Syrian refugees Trojan horses, while stating that they [refugees] are "probably" ISIS fighters bent on infiltrating the United States. Perhaps most tellingly, the real estate magnate has leveled his ire at German Chancellor Angela Merkel, declaring that he is "no longer a fan" of her approach to refugee resettlement and that "she ought to be ashamed of herself, what she's done." To stem the flow of refugees to Europe, Trump has proposed the creation of a "big, beautiful safe zone" within Syria while suggesting further cooperation with traditional U.S. adversaries Russia, Iran and even Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In contrast to Obama and Trump, Clinton has adopted former Democratic contender Martin O'Malley's call to increase the number of refugee resettlements from 10,000 to 65,000 while simultaneously reiterating that she understands the "the legitimate fears and concerns people have" over the vetting of refugees. While Clinton's position is devoid of the fire and brimstone rhetoric spouted by Trump, her campaign has eschewed greater trans-Atlantic burden sharing in favor of a coordinated "global" response spearheaded by the United Nations and oil-rich states in the Gulf.

Thus, although Trump and Clinton have used their rhetoric to stake out diametrically opposed positions on refugee resettlement, both candidates have prioritized Syria-focused solutions led by Russia, Iran and the Gulf states at the expense of greater trans-Atlantic burden sharing. While Europe may expect softer rhetoric under a Clinton administration, elevated levels of domestic resistance ginned up during the primaries signal that America is unlikely to roll out the welcome mat to greater numbers of Syrians.

Trans-Atlantic Trade

Since the launch of talks on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in February 2013, negotiators have declared their intent to ink a deal before the end of Obama's term in January 2017. However, if negotiators fail to meet their self-imposed deadline, TTIP may face a rocky future under the tutelage of a Trump or Clinton administration.

In 2012, then-Secretary of State Clinton promoted TTIP as an "economic NATO" that would strengthen U.S.-EU relations in the face of mounting global competition and Russia's assertiveness. However, candidate Clinton now opposes the White House's "fast track" trade promotion powers and has tied Trade Adjustment Assistance for U.S. workers displaced by free trade to passage of trade agreements. Prompted by an unexpectedly strong showing from her Democratic rival Bernie Sanders, Clinton has come out against another mega-trade deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, adding: "We've lost American jobs to the manipulations that countries, particularly in Asia, have engaged in." While Clinton has provided neither a clear endorsement nor condemnation of TTIP, her alignment with trade-skeptic Democrats in Congress means that ratifying an agreement will be far more difficult than it might have been under a generally pro-free trade Obama administration.

Despite being a self-proclaimed "free trader" whose business empire has benefited greatly from free trade, Trump has echoed Clinton's concerns over currency manipulation while going one step further to make "unfair" trade with China, Japan and Mexico a centerpiece of his campaign to win over blue-collar voters. Trump has (incorrectly) cited trade deficits of \$500 billion with China and \$58 billion with Mexico as evidence the U.S. is being "killed" by countries whose "cunning" leaders manipulate their currencies while using free trade to strip Americans of jobs. While Trump has yet to launch a rhetorical broadside against America's \$153 billion trade deficit with the EU, brazen proposals to institute a 45 percent tariff on Chinese goods in order to negotiate a "good deal" for American workers bodes poorly for smooth and rapid approval of TTIP.

U.S. Relations with Russia

On Russia, the two front-runners have participated in a stunning and perhaps unprecedented reversal of roles, with Clinton adopting an increasingly hawkish position

despite having played a key role in launching the “reset” in relations in March 2009 as secretary of state. Candidate Clinton has since broken with the Obama administration’s approach to Russia, claiming that Russia’s primary objective is “to stymie, to confront and to undermine American power, whenever and wherever.” Clinton has gone on to advocate that the U.S. “stand up to his [Russian President Vladimir Putin’s] bullying” in Syria while equating Russia’s extension of protection to ethnic Russians living in Ukraine to Adolph Hitler’s defense of ethnic Germans residing outside of Germany.

In perhaps the most shocking break with Republican orthodoxy and in stark contrast to Clinton, Trump has hinted at a détente with Moscow, labeling Putin a “strong leader” whom he “would get along with very well,” while calling on the U.S. to disengage from Syria in order to “let Russia fight ISIS.” On Ukraine, candidate Trump has tiptoed around direct criticism of Russia, arguing that the U.S. “should do a little bit of following,” and shifting blame for the standoff to Ukraine’s ‘neighbors’ Germany and Poland, which are “not really engaged.” Trump has refused to ascribe responsibility to Russia for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 and even warmly accepted praise from Putin, who has called him “very bright” and “talented without any doubt.”

In addition to undercutting U.S.-EU sanctions placed on Russia following its intervention in Ukraine, Trump’s rhetoric is likely most worrying to longstanding U.S. allies and NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Meanwhile, Clinton, who has chided European leaders for being “too wimpy” in their dealings with Putin, would likely keep up pressure on Europe to see through sanctions until meaningful implementation of the Minsk II agreement.

Change Coming to the Status Quo

This year’s turbulent and oftentimes bizarre primary season in the U.S. shows that the status quo toward Europe established under the Obama administration may change after his departure from the White House in January 2017. Although front-runners Trump and Clinton have somehow discovered common cause in their tepid opposition to free trade, their views on U.S. relations with Russia and trans-Atlantic cooperation on refugees remain worlds apart. While both candidates are likely to moderate their positions as they shift into the general election, their primary positions presage change. With just 33 weeks until the election, political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic should prepare not just for a changing of the guard in Washington, but for the very real possibility of a dramatic shift in U.S. policy toward Europe and its periphery.

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