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An American Revolution: The Election of President Donald Trump

by Anthony Silberfeld

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States marks a seismic shift in American politics. Tapping into widespread economic discontent and exploiting cultural chasms throughout the country, the president-elect ran an unconventional campaign that resulted in a revolution of the people against the political establishment. Although the specifics of Trump's domestic and foreign policy priorities have been elusive to date, his comments have provided a useful window into how his administration will approach key issues that will promptly land on the new president's desk.

For the trans-Atlantic relationship, there is legitimate cause for concern. Three issues in particular – NATO, Russia and trade – have caused significant anxiety in many European capitals. Trump has taken positions that at times are at odds with Euro-Atlantic priorities, and some that are inconsistent with decades of conventional foreign policy wisdom. The implications Trump's policy choices in the coming months have the potential to redefine the trans-Atlantic alliance for a generation. U.S. and European interests have been closely intertwined for decades, so if America is to become "great again," at home and abroad, it must have Europe by its side.

Future of Transatlantic Security

NATO has been the cornerstone of trans-Atlantic security and a pillar of global stability. Trump questioned the utility and equity of the alliance, in its current form, which sent shockwaves throughout the European continent. Expecting NATO members to meet their financial obligations is reasonable, but making U.S. assistance contingent upon payment, undermines American credibility and casts doubt on the Trump administration as a serious partner.

Given that the Trump doctrine can be summed up as "America first," it is difficult to predict how Washington will engage in other global hotspots in which the U.S. and Europe share mutual goals. From Syria to Iran, and Ukraine to counterterrorism operations, the coordination between the trans-Atlantic partners will soon enter a period of uncertainty. Those rumored to be in consideration for the role of secretary of state, like former House speaker Newt Gingrich, will provide little comfort to a jittery Europe.

A Reckoning with Russia?

One of the most pressing questions that Europe and the new U.S. administration will face is how to deal with Vladimir Putin. If Trump's campaign rhetoric portends the future, Russia will likely drive a wedge between America and its European counterparts. It seems that president-elect will rely heavily on his instincts and personal chemistry with Putin to determine the path forward. He has indicated that he intends to meet one-on-one with the Russian president prior to inauguration, so there will be an early opportunity for partners to observe and adapt to the new status quo. A rapprochement with the Kremlin will have a knock-on effect with the potential to alter the trajectories in Ukraine and Syria, so Europe will need to be prepared for any eventuality.

An additional feature of the U.S.-Europe-Russia relationship that will need to be addressed in the near term is cyber warfare. From attacks on the German Bundestag and the Democratic National Committee, to tampering with key infrastructure and services in the Baltics, the threat that Russian-sponsored hackers pose will become more acute in the months and years ahead. The Obama administration has already signaled that it would respond proportionally to Russian cyberattacks, but the president-elect may take a different tack. Given that Trump's campaign benefited from Russian meddling during the general election campaign, addressing Russian cyber warfare will pose a conundrum for the new White House.

No Appetite for Trade

The central facet of the U.S.-EU economic agenda is the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). In spite of Obama's support and enthusiasm for this initiative, negotiations have stalled amid public backlash in Europe, and the inability of negotiators to find common ground on the most sensitive issues. Trump's staunch anti-trade stance during the campaign season bodes ill for the future of TTIP. His stated priority on the trade agenda begins and ends with renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Trump has vowed to discard the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and shows no intention of pursuing TTIP.

The president-elect's victory came in large part to his commitment to a more insular and protectionist America. Any effort to pursue a free trade agenda would be seen as a betrayal to those who helped deliver the White House. It is unlikely that Trump would risk any hard-fought political capital for the sake of trans-Atlantic trade.

Stability Starts at Home

At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the American people were introduced to a relatively unknown state senator from Illinois. In his speech, Barack Obama famously declared that "there is not a liberal America and a conservative America; there is the United States of America."

Twelve years later, we are approaching the end of President Obama's tenure, with president-elect Trump waiting in the wings. The notion of a unified country has been left in tatters by a bitterly divisive general election campaign, and it is now up to Obama's successor to repair the immense damage that has been done.

In his acceptance speech, Trump extended an olive branch to all Americans and to "all other nations willing to get along with us." Though vague, this is good first step. The EU Commission has responded positively to this overture, inviting the president-elect to an EU-U.S. Summit after inauguration. The trans-Atlantic alliance requires a strong president in Washington to effectively advance its mutual interests. A Trump presidency has triggered a high degree of suspicion both at home and abroad. But in order for a President Trump to be an effective partner for Europe, he first needs to contend with the deep divisions in America.

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