

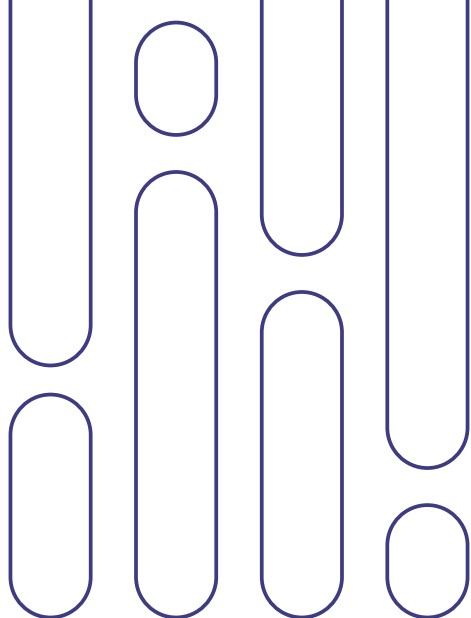
REPORT

Trump and the Threatening of European Allies: Indications and Consequences

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RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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Recent polling data which suggests a potential comeback for former US President Donald Trump has reignited the specter of “Trumpism” in global politics. Trump stirred controversy with remarks indicating he would urge Russia to target US allies failing to meet defense spending commitments. While current President Joe Biden condemned the remarks as “appalling and dangerous,” they sparked intense debate at the Munich Security Conference. Biden administration officials, including Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, sought to reassure allies of unwavering US support amidst the fallout. During the same event, Ohio Senator J.D. Vance, serving as a representative for Republicans supportive of Trump, [suggested](#) that a future US administration could collaborate with Russian President Vladimir Putin and reduce engagement in Europe. These remarks provoked strong reactions from European officials already apprehensive about the United States’ reliability as an ally under a potential second Trump presidency. Concerns regarding US commitment had already surfaced due to recent reductions in US support, exacerbated by congressional disputes. Meanwhile, as disagreements within Congress persisted, the Ukrainian military faced shortages of missiles and essential equipment on the front lines, hindering their counterattack efforts. These stances by Trump and the Republicans continue to reverberate across both sides of the Atlantic and are expected to resonate domestically within the United States and internationally across various regional contexts.

Trump’s Remarks: Background and Contexts

For starters, Trump’s emphasis on European defense spending is not entirely novel, as previous US presidents, notably Barack Obama, broached the topic, albeit with less fervor. Obama’s subtle critiques prompted NATO countries to significantly increase

their defense spending after 2016, particularly in response to the defensive imperative highlighted by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Currently, only Norway among the six NATO countries bordering Russia falls short of the bloc's 2% GDP defense spending target, pledging to meet it by 2026. However, the 2% threshold appears insufficient, with the United States continuing to pressure NATO allies to shoulder more of the defense burden, despite already covering roughly 70% of the alliance's total expenditure.

Trump's explicit call for NATO members to shoulder their defense expenses during the alliance's 2018 summit in Brussels marked a departure from previous approaches. Consequently, his recent revival of the European defense spending issue harks back to his initial term. Should Trump secure reelection, there is concern that the United States might withhold its commitment to defend NATO members from attacks unless they increase financial contributions. This potential scenario poses a substantial challenge to transatlantic relations and could impact numerous shared international agendas.

Biden found himself on the defensive following Trump's sudden threats, prompting him to reassure European partners of the continuity of US policy and to garner voter support. Consequently, he launched a forceful counterattack against Trump, deeming his rhetoric as "un-American." Biden officials emphasized the potential destabilizing effects of a Trump reelection, warning of global order disruption, the external and internal weakening of the United States, and the erosion of confidence rebuilt during the Biden administration's tenure. Vice President Harris reiterated this sentiment at the Munich Security Conference, underscoring the historical imperative of addressing external threats rather than solely focusing inward. Biden had previously highlighted similar themes during his 2020 election campaign.

Across the Atlantic, anxiety has surged within Europe's political, security and intelligence circles as vital [assistance](#) to Ukraine remains entangled in US domestic political dynamics. Europeans seem to be frustrated by the volatility in US relations which is exacerbated by internal political discord. Given the heavy reliance of European nations on Washington's military support, the unpredictability of the transatlantic relationship has stirred unease. Despite initial pledges from European leaders, some countries, including Germany, have been slower to ramp up defense spending, fueling European apprehensions, which officials in the Biden administration are striving to assuage.

Trump's recent remarks are particularly significant amidst a pivotal juncture in US history, marked by heightened internal and external challenges compared to the Trump administration years. With multiple conflicts ongoing and significant shifts in the international balance of power, fueled by the aspirations of major global players and Global South nations alike, there is a widespread push to reassess the existing world order. International institutions and the liberal world order are facing scrutiny due to perceived failures in upholding established rules, exacerbated by deep divisions within the United States.

Significations and Indications

Trump's remarks and the concomitant debates during the Munich Security Conference conveyed several significations and indications on multiple levels — the most prominent were the following:

Wooing voters

Undoubtedly, Trump possesses a remarkable ability to connect with voters by addressing sensitive issues directly. Coming from outside traditional governance institutions and without strict partisan allegiance, he boldly raises unconventional topics in

electoral races. As a populist, he seeks to discredit opponents by attacking their policies, as evidenced in his emphasis on immigration during the 2016 elections against Hillary Clinton — a strategy he is reprising against Biden. Additionally, Trump aims to leverage the nuclear agreement with Iran, struck by the Democrats in 2015, and is currently highlighting transatlantic relations as a key issue to undermine Biden's popularity. Senior adviser Jason Miller's statement reflects Trump's electoral strategy, with it emphasizing his push for NATO allies to increase spending and accusing Biden of enabling the exploitation of US taxpayers. While this issue holds political sway, Trump garners stronger support from Republicans, particularly evident in congressional deliberations over aid to Ukraine since the conflict's outset.

Warning to NATO partners

Trump's recent remarks carry an important message for Europeans, highlighting the urgent need to reassess defense spending and potentially more. With Trump's election, there is concern that the US protective umbrella may diminish, especially given the harsher tone of his recent remarks compared to 2018. Many view this as the most controversial message about NATO from a former US president who had frequently criticized the alliance while expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin. Former US National Security Adviser John Bolton suggests that Trump's re-election could lead to a more assertive policy toward Europe. However, Europeans appear to lack viable alternatives and their reactions indicate a failure to grasp the possibility of the United States withdrawing from its defense partnership with them.

Frustrating Ukraine

Trump's messaging undoubtedly exacerbates Ukrainian frustration and undermines the morale of soldiers on the front lines, particularly as it coincides with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's pleas to the United States and other allies not to abandon

Ukraine. Months of suspension of approximately \$61 billion in aid to Ukraine by Republican lawmakers have significantly impacted the Ukrainian army's capabilities, resulting in ammunition shortages on the front lines. This situation has allowed the Russian army to advance in eastern Ukraine and seize control of strategic cities.

Confidence boost for Putin and US rivals

Trump's remarks are likely a high point for Putin more than any world leader, as he views them as a means to weaken his Western adversaries. At a time when Europe grapples with its largest land war since World War II, Trump's remarks carry significant implications for Russia. Loose rhetoric surrounding NATO appears to signal a green light for Putin or could embolden him to pursue further territorial annexations. However, it is not just Putin who stands to benefit; Trump's anticipated return and provocative statements may also entice China and a broader coalition of countries opposed to US hegemony, operating within frameworks like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Warning to all allies

Trump thinks like a businessman, so it is not far-fetched to anticipate him linking US aid and partnerships worldwide to recipients' financial contributions. In a post on his social media platform, Truth Social, Trump suggested a shift from traditional economic development and military aid to foreign countries, which have served as the basis of US foreign policy for decades. "We should never give money anymore without the hope of a payback, or without 'strings' attached," Trump said in a post written in capital letters. Any loans would have to be immediately repaid if the recipient "ever turns against us, or strikes it rich sometime in the future," he wrote.

Potential Consequences and Open Questions

Trump's reelection forebodes a host of consequences that will not be limited to transatlantic relations. These consequences include:

Potential isolationism

The anticipated decrease in US responsibilities and a potential reduction in its role and military presence under a Trump administration would lead to significant internal and external ramifications. His term could witness heightened institutional conflicts or increased policy improvisation, given Trump's unpredictable behavior, as described by President Putin. This unpredictability poses inherent risks. Hence, the 25-second clip of Trump's remarks reverberated globally, signaling the potential for the United States to revert to international isolationism and embrace the "America First" mantra, leading to further withdrawals from various regions. This shift is not merely confined to the borders of the European continent; rather, it signals a broader strategic confrontation reversing the Biden administration's global approach. This begs the question: have internal divisions become so deeply entrenched as to imperil a fundamental pillar of US foreign policy — its alliance with Europe? Is Trump's rhetoric toward Europe driven solely by personal inclination and electoral gains, or does it tap into deeper American sentiments and convictions likely to endure beyond Trump's tenure? Ultimately, the most intriguing question persists: does isolationism genuinely mitigate the threats confronting the United States?

Testing leadership and confronting challenges

Trump's first term was marked by profound disagreements between the United States and European countries, whereas Biden successfully revitalized these relations, particularly strengthened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, a poten-

tial return of Trump to power would likely usher in a new phase of deterioration in transatlantic relations, with far-reaching impacts on various shared issues. Trump's threats to abandon European allies underscore the risk of the transatlantic alliance weakening, potentially exposing gaps in the US protective umbrella. This rift may extend to hinder coordination on numerous international issues, as evidenced by the nuclear agreement with Iran, which suffered damage due to disagreements. Consequently, Iran moved closer to the nuclear threshold amidst this discord. Here arises another question: which issues — of such a huge significance — could be affected by the tense relations and lack of coordination? Will it be the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine or European security as a whole in light of Russia's geopolitical ambitions? Or will it be the confrontation in East Asia and the Indian Ocean? More importantly, will the United States be capable of enduring such challenges on its own without the support of NATO and its European allies?

Enhancing Europe's independence

Following the Russian war on Ukraine, the push for strategic independence among some European countries waned. However, with the potential return of Trump, a renewed disengagement is possible, leading to a resurgence of the European independence trend. Countries like France and Germany may spearhead this movement, overcoming their differences to protect Europe's interests from US policy fluctuations. Some Democrats' reservations about the traditional transatlantic relationship could prompt Europe to reassess and formulate security and defense policies independently. However, the question remains: can the old continent truly afford to sever ties with the United States, and what alternatives exist if that proves unfeasible? Despite doubts about European capabilities to confront Russia independently, the urgency of the situation compels action. In the

wake of Trump's remarks, European officials have privately discussed the establishment of a continent-wide complement to NATO. This entity would collaborate with US security guarantees but could also serve as a credible alternative should US commitments be withdrawn.

Retreat in the face of Russia and China

Biden's strategy centered on countering China and Russia, viewing them as powers seeking to reshape the international order and diminish US hegemony. A key element of this strategy was the creation of robust strategic alliances to bolster Western dominance, curtail the ambitions of competitors in their respective regions, and limit their geopolitical and economic influence globally. However, Trump's approach threatens to undermine this strategy, potentially allowing China and Russia to expand their influence and exploit the unpredictability of Trump's policies to advance their agendas in the international arena. It is crucial to note that the transatlantic partnership is essential in these efforts, as Europe is a strategic ally in the United States' endeavors to curb China's global ambitions and counter Putin's hostile tendencies.

The role of US institutions in the face of Trump

European leaders are engaged in political maneuvering and consultations with both Republicans and Democrats to make it politically challenging for Trump to fully renounce US commitments. Additionally, US interests must be considered, which could temper the severity of Trump's rhetoric. The significant purchases of weaponry from US arms manufacturers by European allies highlight the mutual dependence and the alliance's role in maintaining Western hegemony. Moreover, US institutions themselves may resist Trump's impulsive actions by imposing obstacles and controls, potentially rendering his remarks mere election propaganda in the end.

Conclusion

In his first term, Trump navigated a relatively stable and less competitive global landscape, but a potential return to office would coincide with a world characterized by chaos and escalating geopolitical competition. Some would argue that “Trumpism” could signal the beginning of a decline in US hegemony on the global stage, while others maintain that democracy and institutional governance mechanisms have the capacity to correct course and restrain the actions of an exceptional president like Trump. However, the reality is that deep internal divisions within the United States have transformed issues of national security and global positioning into electoral battlegrounds and partisan disputes. Coupled with transformations in the international environment, the presence of other powers seeking to exploit the United States’ vulnerabilities, and the erosion of the international system’s appeal and credibility, the likelihood for confusion and improvisation represents a pivotal moment that could alter the course of history, not just in Europe, but globally. This is particularly relevant as US isolation would create a void that other powers could endeavor to fill, and developments in regions like the Middle East and Ukraine, along with shifts across various international contexts, may signal impending change on the horizon.

