

A CHANGING EUROPE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

CONFERENCE REPORT

SCOTT A.W. BROWN & ALASDAIR R. YOUNG

Jean Monnet Center of Excellence
Georgia Tech  **Center for European and Transatlantic Studies**
The Sam Nunn School of International Affairs

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Foreword

The transatlantic bond, which has served peace so well for over 70 years, has never been so challenged as it is today. The standards of human rights and values we hold so dear are stretched painfully thin.

Internally, economics, nationalism, the “decline” of democracy, “me first,” and poor governance challenge our Alliance and draw thin the ties that bind across the Atlantic. Externally, Russia seeks at every turn to undermine democratic principles, defame democratic leaders, tear apart the fabric of democratic institutions and discredit leading western democracies. In every case its goal is to drag the West down and “normalize” relations between the resulting peers.

Change is never easy, and rarely embraced. Change is particularly difficult now. Politics have rarely been so polarized; the press, which can and should be an agent for truth, has in many cases become mired in partisan editorial policy; and social media is now a powerful tool of division and discord.

Rather than struggle for change, there is a temptation to accept a warm and comfortable normative decline. Famously, Edmund Burke said, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing.” We choose NOT to “do nothing.” Georgia Tech’s Center for European and Transatlantic Studies has taken on the tough issues and the team has advanced some great thoughts. Many are worthy of pursuit as we take these growing challenges head on.

General Philip Breedlove, USAF (ret)

Supreme Allied Commander #17

Former Commander US European Command

Executive Summary

On April 13-14 2018 the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs' Center for European and Transatlantic Studies and the Atlanta Council on International Relations organized an international conference to take stock of the European Union's place in the world in light of the United Kingdom's impending departure; the untraditional foreign policy of the Trump Administration; and the new/renewed assertiveness of China and Russia. The conference was supported by the European Union's Erasmus+ Program (Jean Monnet Center of Excellence Award 2017-2401); the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs; Alasdair Young's Ivan Allen College Distinguished Researcher Award; and the Atlanta Council on International Relations. This report reflects views only of the participants, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein. The conference took place shortly after the Trump Administration announced that the EU would be temporarily excluded from the aluminum and steel tariffs it imposed on national security grounds; as the US, France and the UK struck Syria in response to the chemical weapons attack on Douma; and as the Trump Administration contemplated withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal (formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).

The conference participants reached six broad conclusions:

- *Brexit will not dramatically affect the EU's role in the world.*
- *Democratic backsliding in member states threatens the EU's soft power.*
- *The transatlantic relationship is deep enough and sufficiently routinized to weather the Trump Administration and Brexit, but it will be a rough passage.*
- *Russia is both spurring cooperation among the EU's member states and fostering divisions within them.*
- *China's rise increasingly poses challenges and threats to the EU, but member states continue to focus on the economic opportunities in the relationship.*
- *The liberal international order is under threat from several directions, which poses a particularly significant challenge to the EU.*

Introduction: The EU is an unusual international actor

An important point of departure is recognizing that the EU is an unconventional international actor. It is composed (currently) of 28 member states. On some issues – most notably trade policy – the EU's member states can act only collectively. On more traditional foreign policy issues, EU member states pursue common policies only where they can all agree (or at least none object). Notable recent examples include the Iran nuclear deal and sanctions against Russia over its intervention in Ukraine. Absent common positions, the member states are free to pursue their own policies. This was made evident by France and the UK joining the US in striking Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons in Douma, which took place during the conference.

The EU's 2016 Global Strategy is less naïve than its 2003 predecessor about the motivations and behavior of other actors

The variation in the degree of cooperation across issues prompted some disagreement among the participants about the EU's capacity as an international actor. Some emphasized the difficulty EU member states have had in reaching common positions on key issues, such as the Iraq War and leveraging its capabilities to contain the violence following the breakup of Yugoslavia or to promote democracy and respect for human rights. Others stressed that on most issues, EU member states do cooperate, but disagreements among them attract more attention. This variable pattern of cooperation has implications both for the impact of Brexit on the EU's role in the world and for the EU's ability to engage with the US, Russia and China.

There was more agreement about another distinctive feature of the EU as an international actor: its emphasis on promoting values and preference for cooperation, particularly multilateralism, in the absence of significant coordinated military capability. While the EU still generally lacks a shared perception of threat and the will to use force, some participants detect signs of change. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy is less naïve

than its 2003 predecessor about the motivations and behavior of other actors and, while continuing to keep the emphasis on values, calls for greater military capability in order to establish “strategic autonomy” to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders. The new Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is a small step in that direction. Nonetheless, the EU remains particularly invested in and reliant upon the liberal international order.



Brexit: Not that big a deal for the EU's role in the world

While there was general acceptance that the EU would be stronger with the UK in it, the consensus was that Brexit will not dramatically affect the EU's role in the world. This conclusion was based on careful assessment of Brexit's impact with respect to security, diplomacy, trade, and soft power (in Nye's original sense of the term). This assessment reflects both what and how the UK does and does not contribute to the EU's global role; what the EU actually seeks to achieve collectively internationally; and likely alternative arrangements for UK-EU cooperation after Brexit.

Brexit's impact on EU security policy is, if anything, likely to be positive. This might seem to be a surprising conclusion as the UK is one of only two member states, along with France, with considerable military capability and the willingness to use force abroad, but there are four reasons supporting this conclusion. First, the UK's contribution to Common Security and Defense Policy missions has been

limited for some time. As a result, not being able to draw on UK forces (even assuming no arrangement for their participation is reached), would not affect the EU's (limited) ability to pursue these missions. In fact, the UK's decision to leave the EU has given a new momentum to European defense cooperation, as evident in PESCO and the European Defense Fund, which the UK has expressed interest in joining. Second, the UK's military capacity and willingness to use force are most relevant with respect to out-of-area combat operations, but these have never been pursued through the EU. Thus ad hoc coalitions of EU member states and non-member states (including, in future, the UK) – as witnessed with respect to Syria, Libya and Iraq – will likely continue. Third, the territorial defense of Europe is ensured primarily through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the UK has affirmed its continuing commitment to the alliance. Fourth, although the loss of the UK's counter-terrorism capabilities would be a

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serious blow to the EU, both sides are well aware of the benefits of cooperation, much of which occurs among member states directly, and there is even talk of intensifying intelligence sharing. As a consequence, Brexit is unlikely to adversely affect the EU's security.

Brexit is expected to have a somewhat more deleterious impact on the EU's diplomacy, but only to a limited extent. The UK is one of the few EU member states with a "global perspective," which the EU will miss. Brexit also means that the UK's former colonies will lose a key interlocutor within the EU. How much the EU will miss the UK's global perspective will depend on the extent to which others, most notably France and Germany, "step up." The loss of high quality British diplomats seconded to the European External Action Service is also expected to be a blow. That said, the UK has not played a leading role in EU diplomacy for a while. It was not part of the Normandy Process for resolving the conflict in Ukraine – which includes France and Germany, as well as Russia and Ukraine – and it has not been very active with respect to Syria. Moreover, the UK's departure is unlikely to shift the tenor of the EU's foreign policy dramatically, because it has not tended to be an outlier on foreign policy issues, except with respect to the use of force, which, as noted above, is not normally pursued through the EU. In addition, as with security, there are existing structures – most notably the United Nations Security Council – that can provide fora for UK-EU cooperation. Brexit, therefore, will weaken only slightly the EU's traditional foreign policy.

The impact of Brexit on EU trade policy will be greater than in security and diplomacy, but will still be relatively modest. Brexit will make the EU's economy smaller, and economic size is a key source of power in trade policy, but it will still be the world's second largest economy after the US. Thus while access to the EU's market will be slightly less valuable to other countries than it was, the EU will be the more powerful partner except with respect to the US. To the extent that the UK continues to use EU regulations, and there is good reason to think that this will be the norm, Brexit will not reduce the EU's considerable global regulatory influence at all. Brexit may have some implications for the tenor of EU trade policy, as it will remove the largest consistent

proponent of trade liberalization. The weakening of the liberal coalition will have relatively little impact on EU positions in trade negotiations, because the EU's position is most heavily influenced by the less liberal member states, who are defending a more protectionist status quo. Brexit is more likely to have impact on the EU's unilateral trade policies, such as reforms to trade defense instruments, where the smaller liberal coalition will be less able to resist shifts towards protectionism. Brexit, therefore, will likely affect the EU's trade policy only at the margins.

Not least because of its limited military capacity, soft-power - the ability to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion – is particularly important to the EU.



The departure of a prominent member state might be expected to diminish the attractiveness of the EU's "brand." The consensus opinion, however, was that it would not. In part this is because of how the EU has responded to the UK's decision. There has been a clearly articulated defense of the Union, as well as new areas of cooperation, such as in defense, discussed above. Public support for the EU, reflected in opinion polls, has also increased. The very visible internal turmoil in the UK, has also mitigated the deleterious impact of Brexit on the EU's soft power.

Democratic backsliding in member states threatens the EU's soft power

The sense of the conference was that democratic back sliding in some member states is a greater challenge to the EU's soft power than Brexit. Because of the EU's limited collective military capability, the values that undergird it are central to its global importance and influence. If some member states are seen as flouting values such as democracy and the rule of law, the EU's moral authority is eroded, and it becomes harder for the EU to ask others to live up to those same values. Thus how the EU deals with democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary has important implications for its soft power. The conference participants felt, however, that the EU's capacity to discipline backsliding members is severely limited. The EU's inability to defend its values at home will hurt its ability to promote them abroad.

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The transatlantic relationship: Deep enough to weather the Trump Administration and Brexit, but expect a rough passage

There was widespread agreement among the participants about the importance of the transatlantic relationship for both parties. The US, it was argued, needs allies more than ever as it experiences relative decline. While much of the Trump Administration's focus has been on NATO, it was argued that the EU is actually the "policy shop" that matters most on issues of great concern to the US from financial regulation to sanctions on Russia. Conversely, the US is also extremely important to the EU. While the EU may be working towards "strategic autonomy," it still has a long way to go. One participant remarked that the EU is "independent enough to get into trouble, but not independent enough to get out of it." Both sides, therefore, need a healthy transatlantic relationship, but only one side seems to appreciate it.

There was some disagreement about the scale of the Trump Administration's challenge to transatlantic relationship. One participant argued that the Atlantic is "fogged over,"¹ and that nobody in the current Administration is interested in Europe. As a consequence, the alliance is "fraying." Others argued that the Administration's policies have not been as unilateralist as some of its rhetoric, particularly early on, suggested. This was most notable with respect to the US's commitment to NATO. The contrast between rhetoric and policy has created a "rollercoaster ride" for the Europeans. Yet others argued that intense day-to-day cooperation carries on at official level, at least in part because senior US officials have not been appointed who might instruct their officials to do otherwise. The lack of US interlocutors below the secretary level,

The EU is "independent enough to get into trouble, but not independent enough to get out of it"

¹ This remark references a popular, if apocryphal British newspaper headline: "Fog in Channel. Continent Cut Off."

however, appears to have led to fewer visits by European ministers, which, it was argued, could damage the transatlantic relationship's "connective tissue." In addition, some participants expressed concern that if the EU confronted another crisis, such as the Eurozone crisis or further Russian aggression, the Trump Administration could not be counted upon to "do the right thing," and might actually exacerbate the situation. Participants also expressed concerns that the Trump Administration's actions might damage the liberal international order, to which the transatlantic relationship has been so central and which is so important to the EU (see below). The transatlantic relationship, therefore, has been strained by the Trump Administration's words and deeds.

The UK's decision to leave the EU creates another challenge to the transatlantic relationship. There was a shared view that the transatlantic relationship would be stronger if the UK remained in the EU, but there was also a sense that not all that much would change. First, there is no likelihood that the UK would pursue a foreign policy at odds with those of both the US and the EU. While the UK might leave the EU, it would not leave the transatlantic alliance. Second, the "special relationship" between the UK and the US has not been that special from the US perspective for some time. Under Barack Obama the US focused on Germany. Under Donald Trump the focus has been on France. Brexit does suggest a loss of a conduit for the US into the EU, particularly in intelligence, but the US has already begun looking for other interlocutors. While Brexit will weaken the transatlantic relationship, the US has other key partners among the remaining member states.

Russia: Spurring Cooperation and Fostering Divisions

The challenge of Russia pervaded each conference session, cropping up in discussions of Brexit, transatlantic relations, and China. In effect, although EU-Russia bilateral ties are significant in their own right, it is also necessary to recognize that the challenges posed cannot be treated in isolation from the wider international context facing the EU.

One of the most salient concerns amongst participants was Russia's aggressive foreign policy behavior, which was seen as both challenging the EU's sense of security and creating divisions. Over the past decade, Russian actions in Georgia and especially Ukraine - which borders several EU Member States – have perpetuated concerns over the security of European territory. These actions have catalyzed movement within the EU toward greater defense cooperation. Participants pointed to the reorientation of the EU's focus from rapid reaction, out-of-area operations to the development of force

Russia's challenge to the EU penetrates the latter's borders and so the EU's defense needs to begin at home

structures reminiscent of the Cold War as indicative of the strength of the perceived threat from Russia. Some participants emphasized that the EU needs to be more 'imaginative' than simply relying on traditional capabilities to deal with the unconventional threats posed by Russia. These threats include hybrid war – the exploitation of both military and nonmilitary instruments to pursue specific ends –

disinformation campaigns, and the use of corruption and blackmail, and interference in elections. Responding to these threats will require greater attention to cybersecurity while striking a balance between freedom of information, transparency and privacy of its citizens, enhancing media literacy, and making clear the ownership structures of platforms like RT and Sputnik. Russia's challenge to the EU penetrates the latter's borders and so the EU's defense needs to begin at home.

Despite heightened worries over the Russian threat, participants acknowledged that this is not the only dimension of the relationship. The EU should not isolate Russia solely for the sake of it, as such a move would only feed Putinism – the core of which is predicated on corruption and the allocation of resources in order to maintain power – thereby strengthening the regime’s internal standing. Participants, however, see no prospect for constructive engagement among governments, as all parties concerned are preoccupied with their domestic politics. The EU should instead look to continue to engage with Russian society – including the business and science communities.

Russia still looms large as a key energy partner for many EU member states, although the asymmetrical interdependence inherent in the relationship has started to shift. Today, the EU is more resilient thanks to the emergence of new natural gas hubs. Still, more needs to be done to diversify the EU’s energy supplies, particularly by increasing the use of alternative energy. Russia meanwhile is seeking to further enhance its leverage within the EU through developing some member states’ (e.g. Finland) dependence on Russia for nuclear power technology, and owning European energy companies. Recognizing the potential implications of this mercantile strategy, the EU has begun to look into the scale of Russian ownership of energy companies. Participants view this as a positive development, but the EU will need to develop better rules on transparency of ownership if it is to deal effectively with the problem. The prospects of robust European response are hampered, however, by the Member States’ different energy postures and vulnerabilities. Russia, therefore, presents the EU with a proximate and multifaceted security challenge.

China: The Emergence of a Geostrategic Challenge?

Europeans tend to perceive China as an economic opportunity. While the EU does not have security concerns about China, the latter's greater ambitions and more assertive behavior over the past two years have begun to provoke concerns. China's interest in the EU has two primary components. One rests on the scope for cooperation on – and thereby the rebalancing of – global governance. The other is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is at the center of China's current strategic narrative. As Europe is the ultimate destination of the new trade routes, relations with the EU are of increasing importance to the Chinese government.

The EU's approach towards China has rested on the principle of engagement, seeking to socialize China into the changing international order, but this yet has achieved few discernible results. Participants identified part of the problem as the EU's lack of geostrategic vision with respect to China. Attempts to articulate a new strategy have fallen short of the mark, failing to see the interconnected nature of various aspects of

Member States are often divided on policy, either due to China's influence, or due to varied interests

China's rise and its newer foreign policy initiatives. Member States are often divided on policy, either due to China's influence, or due to varied interests. The EU's response to the BRI, for instance, is still in development, because of differences among the Member States. Some, particularly western, Member States are concerned about China's acquisition of infrastructure in other Member States and its use of its economic weight for political leverage.

In addition, the EU offered only tepid support for the 2016 international tribunal's ruling against China's claims to sovereignty over territory in the South China Sea. This weak response was due to Croatia, Greece, and Hungary who had opposed strong language for fear of angering China. Greece and Hungary's demands for a watered-down

statement were essentially 'bought' by China as they had already benefited – and stood to gain more – from Chinese direct investment, and now frequently constitute the “weak links” in EU policy towards China. A proposal for establishing screening procedures for FDI is a response to these (western European) concerns. While such a mechanism will likely be weak, it would enable member states to say “no” to China, using EU rules as political cover. Participants felt that Europeans should pay greater attention to Chinese disinformation as a tool of influence. Funding of Confucius Institutes, NGOs, and think tanks appears to enable China to influence what is taught, written or discussed. What is clear is that as China develops its global role and expands its influence to the west, the implications for the EU are coming into sharper focus.

The EU-China relationship cannot be separated from their respective relationships with the US. On economic issues, there is considerable overlap in European and American concerns about China's industrial overcapacity, limited market access and weak intellectual property protection. In other areas, such as freedom of navigation, EU and US views of China's rise have diverged even where they have shared interests. In addition, even when they agree on ends, they disagree on means, with the EU preferring negotiations and reliance on institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, while the US is more confrontational and unilateral. Consequently, the US and EU have developed different strategic perspectives on China that impede cooperation. Thus while participants considered transatlantic cooperation to be desirable, they think that its prospects are poor. Moreover, the EU finds itself in a tricky situation in which both the US and China want it to side with them in their bilateral disputes. Simultaneously, the EU is concerned about the emergence of the US and China as a 'G2' in global leadership - at least in the areas where cooperation is feasible - and wants to avoid being left out of the picture. The putative EU-US-China strategic triangle does not present easy options for the EU to choose from.

Diverse challenges to liberal international order pose significant test to EU

There was a broad agreement among the participants on two related points. First, as suggested by the preceding discussion, the liberal international order is facing serious challenges. Second, the liberal international order is particularly important to the EU.

The EU needs to step up to sustain the liberal international order until the US “comes back and is ready to lead again”

While the participants did not consider Russia and China to be revisionist powers seeking to overthrow the international system, both are seen as actively and aggressively bending the rules, as evidenced by Russia’s intervention in Ukraine and China’s activities in the South China Sea. The Trump Administration’s increasingly aggressive “America First” foreign policy – evident in its withdrawal from the Paris

Accord and distain for the World Trade Organization – arguably poses an even bigger threat to the liberal international order, given its traditional role as champion of the system. The participants also considered that the preservation of the international order is especially important to the EU, because its power base is relatively narrow.

In the eyes of some participants, the EU has in effect been “free riding” on US leadership. Given that the US under Donald Trump cannot be counted on to play its traditional role, the EU needs to step up to sustain the liberal international order until the US “comes back and is ready to lead again.” Some participants argued that the EU is already doing this by championing the WTO and the Paris Climate Accord and continuing to pursue and conclude bilateral trade agreements. The EU, therefore, is “almost inadvertently filling strategic void.” In order to defend the liberal international order, participants argued that the EU will also have to continue to push back against the Trump Administration’s “most destructive tendencies,” such as threatening the WTO. Given the importance of the US to the EU, there was a discussion about how far the EU should go in resisting the US’s challenges to the liberal international order.

There was a sense that the difficulty of getting the EU's member states to agree on common positions would mean that the EU is likely to push back against only the most extreme US



moves. In light of the EU's abiding interest in a strong transatlantic relationship, limiting EU opposition to such extreme cases is probably just as well. Beyond seeking to defend the liberal international order, some participants advocated that the EU should play a more proactive role by promoting concrete multilateral cooperation on issues of common interests that were identified in its Global Strategy, such as cyber security and maritime security.

Some participants cautioned that the challenges to the liberal international order are more profound than those embodied in the Trump Administration. The underlying problem is that citizens in liberal democracies feel let down by their governments. China, in particular, makes it look as though there is a better answer to people's problems. As a result, it would be naïve to assume that the liberal international order will "snap back" once Donald Trump leaves office. EU leadership, therefore, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for maintaining the post-war liberal international order.

List of participants with current and most pertinent past affiliations

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President of GMF; Former special assistant to the President and senior director for European Affairs on the National Security Council

Theresa Fallon | *Center for Russia, Europe, Asia Studies (CREAS)*
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Evelyn N. Farkas | *Atlantic Council*
Nonresident Senior Fellow; Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia

Robert Kennedy | *Atlanta Council on International Relations*
Chairman; Professor Emeritus of the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs; Former senior Department of Defense official;

John Peterson | *University of Edinburgh*
Professor of International Politics; Visiting Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies

Adam Stulberg | *Sam Nunn School of International Affairs*
Professor and Neal Family Chair; Co-Director, Center for International Strategy, Technology, and Policy

Harlan Ullman | *Atlantic Council / Killowen Group*
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Celeste Wallander | *US-Russia Foundation*
President and CEO; former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia/Eurasia on the National Security Council (2013-2017)

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The Center for European and Transatlantic Studies (CETS), a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence, is co-directed by Prof Vicki Birchfield and Prof Alasdair Young. From 2017 through 2020, it is supported by funds from the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme. CETS serves as a locus for the Georgia Tech campus and the metro Atlanta community for research, teaching, and public events and programs related to the study of Europe, the European Union and the EU-U.S. relationship. Specifically, CETS aims to:

- Promote and disseminate policy-relevant research that pertains to Europe and the transatlantic relationship;
- Strengthen and expand the Nunn School curriculum and course offerings on Europe and transatlantic relations and lead an annual study-abroad program in Europe;
- Provide a focal point for the local European diplomatic corps and transatlantic business community; and
- Enhance public awareness and understanding of the EU-U.S. relationship through organizing public events and speaking to local groups and to policy makers.



The Sam Nunn School of International Affairs draws on its unique setting at one of the world's leading technological universities and on the unparalleled integrity and insight of the distinguished senator for which it is named to deliver innovative programs and cutting-edge research that integrate technology and the study of international affairs. The School strives to connect learning and experience through its interdisciplinary degree programs, policy-relevant research with a strong theoretical foundation, and regular interaction with practitioners.

A major goal of the Nunn School is to not only study, but to *influence* policy. The appointments of Admiral James A. Winnefeld, General Philip Breedlove, and Dennis Lockhart — three expert practitioners with international renown — as Distinguished Professors of the Practice, have expanded the Nunn School's network among eminent policymakers, while enhancing faculty expertise and improving our academic offerings for students. As the School continues to strengthen its academic programs, we seek to attract and support the highest caliber students — who will themselves become leaders in the fields of national security, international affairs, and technology policy.



The Atlanta Council on International Relations is a non-profit and non-partisan educational organization that promotes understanding of international affairs through the free exchange of ideas. The purpose of the Council is to help develop a nucleus of informed opinion on current international issues, world affairs, and US foreign policy. ACIR is always open to new members from the Atlanta community and internationally. ACIR's membership represents a group unmatched in accomplishment and diversity in the field of international affairs. ACIR's members includes government officials, renowned scholars, business executives, acclaimed journalists, prominent lawyers, and distinguished nonprofit professionals. The ACIR meets regularly at the Capital City Club in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as other locations in the Atlanta area.