



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Trump-proofing: A divided Europe will be defenceless against Trump's whims



Europe is currently facing a set of extraordinary political, economic and security challenges but this might all be small beer compared to what awaits in the aftermath of the US elections in November.

After president Joe Biden's dismal **debate** performance, the prospect of a second Trump presidency is looming ever larger and Europe, both the EU and the NATO allies, will have to brace for even rougher weather.

'Trump-proofing' the EU and crucial NATO programmes such as aid to Ukraine has become a hotly debated topic in policy circles. Another strategy of dealing with what in all likelihood will be an even more truculent second Trump term, is the search for so-called 'Trump-whisperers', i.e. leaders who would be able to get the ear of the prospective US president.

Unfortunately, the old continent's many troubles will make it harder to develop effective strategies to deal with a new Trump presidency, should that happen. First and foremost, the political **divisions** within the EU are now much more pronounced than in 2016-2020.

## Trumpian fifth column

Far-right governments in some of the core EU countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands and possibly, partly, France, could seriously undermine a united effort to withstand the pressures of a Trump presidency.

Worse, these governments, or elements within them, might actively welcome Trump's efforts to both undermine the EU and NATO. Far from becoming Trump-whisperers in the service of a European cause, they could act more like a Trumpian fifth column.

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There's a whole laundry list of policies detrimental to the EU and NATO that a second Trump administration could instigate. Some of these appear to dovetail with ideas that are part of the far-right DNA, even if some movements have now disavowed them in order to gain power.

On security, Europe might find itself almost solely responsible for the defence of Ukraine. The likelihood of that happening can be gauged from the hugely damaging block on the US aid package to Ukraine that Trump's allies in Congress maintained earlier this year.

Trump has also made clear he'd expect Europe to spend a lot more on aiding Ukraine or compensate the US for military stockpiles it has provided.

## Trade wars

On trade and economic policy, a threatened tariff of ten percent on all US imports would hit the EU hard. But even short of that, trade wars with the US, such as last time over steel, are bound to return and can wreak havoc.

The US under a new Trump presidency will also be more likely to undermine the international order than to bolster it. For starters, he will pull the US, once more, out of the Paris climate agreement. Some international bodies, such as the ICC, could face even stronger attacks than in his first term.

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Trump appears to have a bully's attitude towards his perceived enemies. If they're strong, or he does not have adequate ways to tackle them, he can be fawning. When he perceives weakness, he will do what he can to boss them around and undermine them.

He is no friend of the EU and its internationalist outlook and is more likely to see it as a weaker competitor than as an ally that actually helps boost America's influence and power.

## Substitute for a US-led NATO

Europe's new far-right bloc, rather than resisting these challenges, might actually welcome many of them.

While some of the far-right movements that are now in power or are on the brink of achieving it have ostensibly moderated a couple of their positions, on Ukraine and on membership of the EU, for example, they are more than likely to revisit them under the influence of Trump.

The ideas that are circulating to Trump-proof the EU mostly emphasise greater unity and purpose of action on the part of the EU. EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's idea for a Defence Commissioner, could be seen in that light.

**Increasing the EU's defence and arms manufacturing capabilities, could go some way towards countering the security challenges a second Trump presidency might pose**

Increasing the EU's defence and arms manufacturing capabilities, could go some way towards countering the security challenges a second Trump presidency might pose. But it's a poor substitute for a US-led NATO.

A unified front will also be once again needed on trade, climate policies, defending the international order and on foreign (trade) policy. If, for example, a new Trump administration were to pressure Europe over trade ties with China, the bloc should be able to act as one.

Until now, it was mainly Hungary's Viktor

Orbán who'd be the outlier when some of these issues came up. Hungary effectively had to be bribed earlier this year to agree to the EU package for Ukraine and allow accession talks.

## Far-right obstructionism

Now imagine that multiplied by three or four, with far-right governments across the EU using crucial policy agreements to extort concessions to their own agenda.

For example, the Netherlands will be asking for an opt-out on migration rules, France might ask for a rebate, Italy, like Hungary, will demand that Brussels refrains from tackling its assaults on the rule of law and freedom of the press.



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All this will be problematic regardless of the occupant of the White House but with Trump in residence, it could be even more damaging. Far-right obstructionism would have US political cover. It could also be seized upon by Trump to try crack the EU's united front.

Ideally, Europe would not elect these far-right fellow travellers of Trump but that ship has sailed. The next best option would be for the EU to achieve as much internal agreement, including possibly setting aside some issue for later debate until after a new Trump presidency.

The EU should also give priority over the next six months to initiatives to sort out its economic troubles, because a strong and blossoming bloc will be harder to challenge, both from within and without.

Finally, the prospect of a new Trump presidency should reignite the issue of Brexit. While the UK was at times itself and outlier as an EU member, nothing screams division more than Brexit.

Even though British politics is unreceptive to the idea of rejoining the EU now, the Labour party in particular should look at the larger picture after its anticipated election victory. Even setting a first few very careful steps towards re-uniting Europe, would send a signal of defiance to those who'd seek to pull it apart.