

Financial Review - afr.com

OPINION

May 17 2018 at 11:00 PM

Updated May 17 2018 at 11:00 PM

Iran crisis undoes 50 years of post-WW2 geopolitical relationships

by James Traub

The Atlantic alliance, built to contain the Soviet Union after World War II, began to die when the Cold War ended. What kept it alive over the past three decades has been less strategic necessity than a convergence of values — the values of the liberal postwar order.

Now, the senior partner of the alliance, the US, has lost interest in those values. The alliance was already a corpse, but Donald Trump drove the last nail into its coffin when he decided last week to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran.

What now? The US will lurch from crisis to crisis, but Europe faces more existential questions: it has been expelled from the garden — albeit a very thorny one — maintained by US military and diplomatic power, and now must build a home of its own.

The European diplomats, ex-diplomats, and scholars I have spent the last few days talking to agree on that much. They're less sure whether Europe is up to the task.

Am I, and my interlocutors, inflating a very bad moment into a mortal one? Perhaps that would be true if the problem were only Trump. In fact, Europe ceased to be the world's geo-strategic centre when the Soviet menace disappeared.

The humanitarian crises of the next decade reinforced the shared values of Western nations, but September 11, 2001, abruptly diverted the US to an obsessive focus on the Middle East.

Though [Barack Obama restored the shared faith in multilateralism](#) and institutions that George W. Bush had breached, his own interests lay more in the Pacific. He yearned to pivot away from the yawning pit of the Arab world to Asia. Obama wanted the US to face the future, not the past.

The American people, meanwhile, preferred to face home. They wanted a pivot to America, and they voted for the candidate who promised to deliver it. It has thus fallen to Trump to deliver the coup de grace to the alliance that has defined the postwar world.

The [Iran decision](#) followed his decision to impose tariffs on European aluminum and steel, which followed his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accords. Trump is no more contemptuous towards European allies than Asian or Latin ones; the only opinion to which he defers is that of [his base](#).

François Delattre, France's ambassador to the United Nations, says he regards the Iran decision as "the best illustration of the Jacksonian moment the United States is going through — the uni-isolationist moment". A new president, he concedes, might restore multilateralism.

But Delattre adds, "I am personally afraid the withdrawal is durable. The disengagement started before President Trump, and I am afraid it will last after him."

Why the Iran deal mattered to Europe

The Iran decision has resonated among European leaders as none of Trump's previous follies has. First, Europeans regard the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the pact is called, as the foremost proof of their capacity to act coherently and effectively.

The Iran diplomacy came hard on the heels of the debacle over the Iraq War, when a divided Europe watched a US president stumble into disaster.

"Iran was the opposite of that," says Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"Instead of standing blinded in the headlights of American policy, Europe figured out what its own interests were.

"European diplomats negotiated with the Iranians when the Bush administration refused to do so, designing a package of sanctions and incentives ultimately adopted and pushed through the UN Security Council by Obama."

Europe hoped to reduce tensions in the Middle East by drawing Iran out of its revolutionary shell. And it succeeded. The deal, Leonard says, was a "massive source of pride".

As a simple matter of geographical proximity, Europe is threatened by conflict in the Middle East as the US is not. [The tidal wave of asylum seekers](#) from Syria in 2015 upended European politics and exposed a popular vein of xenophobia and illiberalism that has thrown a terrible scare into European elites.

Europe simply cannot afford to follow the American lead if the US is prepared to sow further chaos in the region.

Of course, Europe's old reputation for deference and submission to the US was reinforced by [the spectacle of French President Emmanuel Macron](#) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visiting the White House in the hope of propitiating the First Bully and then being dismissed with scarcely a "by your leave" — and oh, by the way, we're still coming after your steel industry.

But perhaps Europe's leaders needed the shock.

Hours after Trump's announcement, Macron, Merkel, and British Prime Minister Theresa May issued a joint statement reminding the world that the deal had been "unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council" and thus remained "the binding international legal framework" on Iran's nuclear program.

European Council President Donald Tusk announced Trump's Iran and trade policies "will meet a united European approach".

US-EU trade war looms

The fur will fly if the US goes ahead with secondary sanctions targeting European companies that continue to do business with Iran.

Given the bellicose mood in Washington, there is good reason to think it will do so.

Hours after assuming his post as US ambassador in Berlin, Richard Grenell [tweeted](#), "German companies doing business in Iran should wind down operations immediately."

That would be Europe's put-up-or-shut-up moment.

"We're going to have to treat the US as a hostile power," Leonard says. "We might have to introduce countermeasures against US companies." The mind reels. No, the heart breaks.

Neither side has an incentive to widen the breach.

Some major European firms may withdraw from the Iranian market, even as European bankers potentially devise an end run around the US financial system that will blunt the effect of secondary sanctions.

Still, a combination of US tariffs and sanctions may provoke the European Union to erect barriers against American products and services in Europe, leading to a trade war between the erstwhile partners.

EU military boost

Even if cooler heads prevail, Europe may begin laying the foundations for a more independent military and diplomatic strategy.

All talk of a unified European army has long vanished, but Macron has invited the defence ministers of 10 European nations to Paris next month to discuss his plan to create a battle-ready force of up to 100,000 troops.

Everyone I have spoken to has felt the split with Trump has given a serious boost to the plan. Both the British and Germans have overcome initial reluctance and agreed to consider joining.

France is the capital of More Europe: last September, Macron delivered a major speech at the Sorbonne in Paris calling for more European integration on the military, as well as the economic front.

Last week, Macron used the occasion of the Charlemagne Prize, which he received for his efforts to promote European unity, to call for a European diplomatic riposte to Trump's unilateralism.

"Europe has to take its fate into its own hands," he said. "Because one country breaks its promise doesn't mean we have to change our course."

Merkel's reluctance

Every leader in Western Europe understands both that the continent must improve its capacity to act collectively and that all the political passions rest on the other side — with the nationalists. Few are prepared to take the political risks that Macron has. Merkel largely

shares Macron's view but, now that she teeters atop a brittle coalition, not his freedom of action.

I ask Josef Janning, an analyst of German policy with the European Council on Foreign Relations, if he thought Iran would force Merkel to overcome her habitual caution.

"One wishes it would," he says, sighing. "I'm not sure it's enough."

Macron has grown so frustrated with Merkel that after she presented him with the Charlemagne Prize, he criticised her reluctance to join his call for reform of the eurozone.

Janning assumes Germany will take a back seat in Macron's battle group initiative and continue to focus on a more modest and technocratic EU policy called Permanent Structured Co-operation.

He hopes Merkel will agree to use the EU program to push for an enhanced European drone capacity (for surveillance rather than offensive action) and for co-ordinated intelligence and data collection.

That would constitute at least symbolic progress. Germany remains a laggard on defence spending, devoting only 1.2 per cent of gross domestic product to the military.

An independent foreign policy

The Germans like it that way; even an increase of 20 per cent would encounter immense public resistance. Merkel, Janning says, "will think endlessly before she makes such a decision."

New military capacity has the advantage of not requiring a psychological break with Washington and with the history of deference; the US has long pressed Europe to step up defence spending.

An independent foreign policy, however, is another matter. Europe is going its own way on climate change and Iran — trade may come next.

Since the Trump administration has no interest in serving as an interlocutor between Israelis and Palestinians, [a new outbreak of violence](#) could thrust Europe into that traditional American role as well. The US has stopped bothering with human rights; Europe still does.

A truly European diplomacy will depend, above all, on a collective recognition that European interests, and European values, will only periodically converge with those of the US and at other times will require working with China, the Persian Gulf countries, or other actors.

Big shift in mentality

It may also require new mechanisms, whether formal or informal. Michel Duclos, a retired French diplomat who serves as special advisor to the Institut Montaigne, suggests the "EU3" — France, Germany, and the UK, which worked together on Iran — could serve as the nucleus of collective diplomacy, so long as the three find a way of working with the other members of the EU.

For older Europeans, including ones who have spent much of their lives regarding the US as a barely civilised menace, the prospect of facing crises with no one at their back will be strange and unsettling.

The mental transition will take far longer than the political one. But Trump is sure to hasten the process.

"I'm not sure the US gives a damn about the West," one senior European diplomat says. "When you speak to the US about the Euro-American relationship, you look like the most ridiculous guy on Earth. Nobody in the administration cares about that."

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