

A Century of 'America First'

The history of American exceptionalism in transatlantic relations

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Speaking at the 2019 Munich Security Conference, former US Vice President and 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden attempted to reassure America's European allies about the strength of the transatlantic relationship. The American people, he said, "understand that it's only by working in cooperation with our friends" that opportunities can be harnessed and threats can be avoided. He pledged that President Trump's 'America First' attitude will soon give way to renewed cooperation and that "[we will be back, don't you worry](#)".

For transatlantic observers wondering exactly when and how America might return to a more Atlanticist outlook, the history of relations between the US and Europe offers useful clues. Over the past century, the United States has sought close ties with Europe only when political arrangements acquiesce—implicitly or explicitly—to America's concept of its own superiority. This notion of 'American exceptionalism' is a core component of the country's founding myth and has had a profound influence on its foreign policy for the entirety of American history, including both the 'internationalist' cold war period and the present era of more uncertain transatlantic links.

Although many historians and scholars of international relations observe 'isolationist' and 'internationalist' phases in US foreign policy, there is a great degree of continuity in American behaviour abroad: the US will accept international partnerships only when it is granted a privileged role in such agreements. If this condition is not met, the US will either refuse to accept formal ties or seek to undermine the existing system. Accordingly, regardless of who the next US President is, Europeans should expect the United States either to demand what it sees as its rightful place as the senior partner in the transatlantic relationship, or to further withdraw from international agreements.

KEY INSIGHTS

THE NOTION OF 'AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM' HAS HAD A PROFOUND INFLUENCE ON US FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE ENTIRETY OF AMERICAN HISTORY.

TO HOPE THAT A NEW US PRESIDENT WILL REPAIR THE TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP IS TO LONG FOR A 'GOLDEN AGE' OF COOPERATION THAT NEVER TRULY EXISTED.

EUROPEANS SHOULD EXPECT THE UNITED STATES TO FURTHER WITHDRAW FROM INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IF IT IS NOT GRANTED A PRIVILEGED ROLE.

THE ORIGINS OF 'AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM'

The earliest leaders of the United States possessed a clear vision of a country superior to and separate from those of the old world. However, to confuse exceptionalism and isolationism would be a mistake. American resistance to permanent alliances was based not on a belief in non-interventionism, but rather on a realist understanding of the fact that the US lacked the power to shape the international order as it desired. Indeed, as political scientist Hilde Eliassen Restad [describes it](#), the early US displayed “an unwillingness to be a junior partner [and] an aversion to the risk of losing sovereignty”. These twin tendencies persist to this day.

Far from being isolationist, the US frequently conquered land and subordinated others throughout its early history—a pattern Restad describes as ‘unilateral exceptionalism’. President Thomas Jefferson advocated

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“entangling alliances with none” not due to a philosophical disposition toward isolation, but because the relative weakness of the US at the time and its inability to claim the privilege it desired made such partnerships unappealing. Only after it achieved hegemony was the US able reap the benefits of alliances without the burdens of entanglement.

AMERICAN RELUCTANCE IN WORLD LEADERSHIP: 1914–1941

A century before leaders from Europe and America were fretting about the state of transatlantic ties in Munich, they were attempting to build the foundations of the alliance in Paris. When US President Woodrow Wilson arrived in Europe in 1919, he brought with him a firm belief in American exceptionalism. Widely remembered as the quintessential liberal internationalist who sought multilateral governance, Wilson in fact had a deeply hierarchical view of how the international order ought to be crafted.

In *The Deluge*, Adam Tooze describes Wilson as “an exponent of turn-of-the-century high nationalism,

bent on asserting America’s exceptional claim to pre-eminence on a global scale”. Wilson was keenly aware that American entry into the war would render Britain and France financially dependent on the US and gladly welcomed such a development. Contrary to later descriptions of wartime negotiations, he did not seek to subordinate US interests to international institutions, but rather to establish the US as the “neutral arbiter and the new source of a new form of international order”.

The refusal of the Republican-led US Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles is often described as a triumph of isolationism over multilateralism, but this view distorts the facts. Republicans did not oppose transatlantic alliances per se, as they supported bilateral treaties with France and Britain. Their objection was specifically to the treaty’s collective action clause, which they felt could have necessitated US military action without congressional approval. Lacking the ability to set the rules of its international engagements on an ad hoc basis, the Senate refused to ratify the agreement, displaying an early instance of what would become a predictable pattern over the next century.

America’s tendency to avoid international agreements when it cannot set the rules continued throughout the interwar period. Predictably, successive Republican presidents made no effort to join the League of Nations. But Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt—later hailed as a great internationalist—also displayed foreign policy tendencies similar to those of his predecessors. Following the beginning of the Great Depression and the contraction of US credit to Europe, Roosevelt rejected any agreement that would forgive European debts and stabilise international exchange rates. FDR’s refusal to entertain an international solution curtailed efforts to contain the damage of the Depression. In the [words](#) of economic historian Charles P Kindleberger, “the 1929 Depression was so wide, so deep and so long because the international economic system was rendered unstable by British inability and United States unwillingness to assume responsibility for stabilizing it”.

CREATING THE POST-WAR ORDER: 1941–49

By the end of the second world war, the US finally possessed the preponderant power to dictate the terms of a new international order. The Bretton Woods system placed the US at the centre of the world economy through a system of narrowly adjustable exchange

rates to the dollar, which in turn was pegged to gold. American military supremacy formed the cornerstone of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which institutionalised the US foreign policy objective of linking western Europe to North America in its effort to contain the Soviet Union.

Still, this period was not the heyday of selfless internationalism that is often portrayed. The US [rejected](#) legally binding labour and environmental commitments of the International Trade Organisation (ITO) in favour of the much weaker General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). It also torpedoed John Maynard Keynes's proposal for an International Clearing Union (ICU), preferring conditions more amenable to its creditor status in the form of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Keynes himself so resented the Americans' negotiating style in the lead-up to the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference that [he claimed](#) US officials were treating Britain "worse than we have ever ourselves thought it proper to treat the humblest and least responsible Balkan country".

This is not to downplay the significance of the United States' achievement in creating a relatively stable and prosperous order in the aftermath of the second world war. But it would be wrong to interpret this period as the US graciously sharing its wealth in the name of transatlantic cooperation. The creation of the various post-war institutions all followed a similar pattern: Europe was dependent on the US, but the US retained its sovereignty and veto power. The imbalance in power, and the willingness of the US to use that imbalance to its advantage, was not lost on contemporary observers: *Harper's* magazine [remarked](#) in 1951 that "the Atlantic alliance is not and cannot be an 'equal alliance'".

THE COLD WAR: 1949–1989

The long confrontation between the United States and Soviet Union is often held up as a key example of strong transatlantic cooperation, as the US consistently encouraged and supported European integration and economic development. Still, the US maintained a strong interest in relative European weakness throughout the cold war. As Josef Janning of the European Council on Foreign Relations [writes](#), "Washington did not want Europe to become a unified political actor that would challenge the strictly intergovernmental structure of NATO and US leadership within it". This echoes the current contradictory behaviour of the US toward European defence: it demands more-equal burden sharing while

simultaneously criticising EU efforts to achieve a unified and independent military capability.

Transatlantic power imbalances were also pronounced in foreign economic policy. With the US running a balance of payments deficit in the 1960s and increasingly unable to defend the dollar's gold parity, the US sought to force adjustment costs onto western Europe and pressured the Bundesbank not to sell its dollar reserves. The US urged Germany to revalue the Deutschmark relative to gold, open its markets to US imports, and contribute more to collective defence. If these demands sound familiar, they should: the Trump administration's claim that Germany is a ['currency manipulator'](#) and its demand that the EU accept more imports and raise defence spending to NATO's 2 percent targets bear a striking similarity to US policy positions from over a half-century prior.

After negotiations with the other large players in the international monetary system proved insufficient, the US displayed its trademark of withdrawing from international arrangements when it cannot dictate the terms. Following the suspension of the London Gold Pool in 1968, the Nixon administration ended the dollar's convertibility to gold in 1971, and with it the Bretton Woods monetary system. In doing so, the US managed to use the lack of a viable alternative global currency to force adjustment costs onto its allies while keeping the dollar at the centre of the world economy and relieving itself of balance of payments concerns.

American behaviour changed little in the post-Bretton Woods era. Faced with rising imbalances as a result of deficit spending and a strong dollar during the Reagan administration, the US again refused to accept its share of the adjustment costs. In the Plaza Accord of 1985, key European allies and Japan agreed to work toward decreasing the value of the dollar and the US trade imbalance soon improved. When problems resurfaced later that decade, the US again used its primacy in international relations to force allies to adjust. Even inflation-phobic Germany agreed to reflationary measures in the 1987 Louvre Accord.

WHILE THE US AND EUROPE HAVE LONG BEEN IMPORTANT PARTNERS, THEIR RELATIONSHIP HAS ALWAYS BEEN LOPSIDED.

CONCLUSION

This pattern of behaviour was not confined to the twentieth century. As international relations scholar Michael Mastanduno [observed](#) in 2009, the US has rarely hesitated to use “its privileged position within [the] international order to serve its own particular ends” in the post-cold war era.

In recent years, President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate accord and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, threats against NATO, and imposition of tariffs have all shocked European allies and roiled the transatlantic partnership. Through such actions, he has “exposed pitilessly the fact that, while might may not be right, might generally wins”, as Robin Niblett of Chatham House [recently wrote](#).

Based on a narrow understanding of American foreign policy towards Europe, these actions may seem unprecedented. However, by taking a longer view, the continuity in American actions becomes clear. As

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political economist Susan Strange noted in 1987, the US has never hesitated to spring “unilateralist surprises” on its partners across the Atlantic. Trump’s rhetoric may be appalling to European leaders, but his tendency to issue [demands to allies](#) and withdraw from cooperation if they are not met is a time-honoured practice.

Although European leaders may be hopeful that a new US president will usher in a renewed age of transatlantic partnership, to wish for such cooperation is to long for a golden age of the transatlantic alliance that never truly existed. While the US and Europe have long been important partners, their relationship has always been lopsided. America has consistently rejected binding agreements and treated its international obligations as optional. No matter who the next occupant of the White House is, Europe would be wise to examine the past actions of the United States before getting too hopeful about what it might do in the future. ■

FURTHER READING

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