

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

ALLY TO ADVERSARY? THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE IN TRUMP'S SECOND TERM

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, April 22, 2025

This is an automated transcript that has been minimally reviewed. Please check against the recording for accuracy. If you find any significant errors of substance, please let us know at events@brookings.edu

PANEL DISCUSSION:

MODERATOR: CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER

Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Trans-Atlantic Relations, Senior Fellow, and Director,
Center on the United States and Europe, The Brookings Institution

FIONA HILL

Senior Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, The Brookings Institution

MELANIE W. SISSON

Senior Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology

TARA VARMA

Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

STELZENMÜLLER: Good morning everybody listening in America and good afternoon to anybody listening in Europe and good whatever other time of the day it is to anybody listening outside of the zone of interest of this morning's panel, which is titled ally to adversary, the United States and Europe in Trump's second term. I have with me three distinguished panelists, Fiona Hill, senior fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe, Melanie Sisson, senior fellow in the Strobe Talbott Center on Strategy, Security, and Technology, and Tara Varma, visiting fellow on France, and also in the Center on the U.S. and Europe, which I direct. My name is Constanze Stelzenmüller, and I have the privilege and the pleasure of moderating this morning's discussion. I may occasionally moderate it or insert my own opinions, but then my colleagues will be able to shout me down. We have 60 minutes for this discussion. And I'm going to jump right in with questions.

And I will be inserting questions from people who have asked questions, who have put in questions online. That is something that they can still do. And let me preface this by saying that all four of us really are trans-Atlanticists to varying degrees, by which I mean that we have lived in the American and European spaces for much of our working life. We have friends on both sides of the Atlantic and family. We have, I think, all been impatient for Europe to do more for its own defense and the defense of Ukraine. And we have been sympathetic for quite a while to U.S. critiques, but also really want Europe to do more for its own sake. I hope I am not misrepresenting any of you. I know we have differences on specific aspects of that, but I think on that we mainly agree. And I think we're probably also on the same page when I say that after the really close collaboration we saw between the Biden administration and the Europeans.

In the past presidency, we did also see the odd defect of that, including a degree of incrementalism, a fear of escalation that perhaps some of us felt worried about, but we were expecting certainly the Trump administration to be far more confrontational. There were rumors of troop pullouts, concerns about the return of [inaudible.] This does at this point at 100 days feel a bit different than that. Certainly there were a lot of things that I did not have on my European strategy bingo card and with that I'm going to turn over to my dear colleague Fiona Hill and say Fiona can you perhaps give us a sketch in a broad brush the difference between the first and second Trump administrations regarding policy vis-a-vis Ukraine and Europe.

HILL: Yes, I'd be delighted to, Constanze, and really pleased to be here today with everyone. As most of the audience is probably aware, I had the unusual position, at least on this panel, for serving in Trump 1.0 in the first administration. Also unusually as a dual citizen, although not so unusual in the broader context, which is relevant to the discussion today of the trans-Atlantic alliance and of the Five Eyes, you know, particular core to the trans-Atlantic alliance of the UK, Australia, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in addition to the United States being part of intelligence sharing, which also meant that dual nationals of both countries could also be embedded in their governments.

In this case, I'm a U.S. citizen, naturalized citizen, and that gave me a particular vantage point in the first Trump administration, I had Russia as well as all of Europe under my purview as the senior director in the National Security Council, and as Constanze has already alluded to and also suggested in the way that she framed the question, also the things that we're actually seeing come to fruition this time around were more than prefigured in the first administration. It's just simply I think that in Europe from the perspective of then moving from a one-term presidency of President Trump to the Biden administration that there was a kind of feeling that this perhaps was a blip when in actual fact, there's a lot of continuity in the direction of travel in views, not just of President Trump, but people around him, that it was time for the United States to basically slough off Europe, or certainly to attenuate the very close and tight ties. So in Trump 1.0, as Constanze already suggested, there was a lot of discussions of tariffs. The European Union, if not the United Kingdom, was very much in the crosshairs of those tariffs particularly when it came to auto tariffs against Germany.

Troop withdrawal was also very much on the docket to discussion, especially from Germany, and there's kind of a certain theme here of a certain animus towards Germany that percolated through the first Trump administration has become, you know, even more clear this time around. And at NATO, people will recall that President Trump was very reluctant to talk about Article 5 and to invoke it as his first speech in front of NATO, despite the fact that Article Five was only ever called into action after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States with Europeans coming immediately to U.S. defense and in fact also joining in U.S. retaliatory action in Afghanistan and then later expeditionary action in in Iraq.

Common funding, President Trump wanted to pull away from that funding for NATO as well. It apparently is on the plans for pulling back of State Department commitments to Europe this time around and Ukraine right from the very beginning President Trump wanted nothing to do with Ukraine. In his first phone call with Angela Merkel the Chancellor of Germany she most famously asked him "Donald, what are you going to do about Ukraine?" He said no Angela, it's got nothing to do with me, what are you going to do about Ukraine? And he's been very consistent and his idea of trying to distance himself from the war in Ukraine and frankly equally consistent in his desire to reset the Russian relationship with the United States, as many previous presidents have also done, so he's not unusual in that regard.

But what he is unusual in the regard is his close and personal would-be relationship with Vladimir Putin. I wouldn't say that they're friends, but President Trump is determined to turn that relationship into a close friendship with Vladimir Putin, and has highly personalized the presidency in ways that previous presidents hadn't even managed to do either. So a lot of consistency here, but I think what the difference is that President Trump is unbridled now in his ability to put these things into action. Presidents always have more leeway in foreign policy but the first time around, a lot of obstacles, there was a sense that somehow the Russians had got him elected into the White House, which actually wasn't the case, but there was a perverting sense there was backlash from Congress about any kind of effort to have a rapprochement with Russia because of Russian interference in the elections, and there was of course the Mueller investigation into purported links between the Trump campaign in 2016 and the Russians, all of which you know didn't actually pan out in the way that people might have anticipated, but certainly that puts a lot of obstacles in the way of President Trump pursuing the relationship with Russia that he's really trying to now.

STELZENMÜLLER: Fiona, thank you for reminding us just how much of what we're seeing now was prefigured in one way or another in the first administration and was simply stopped either by deficiencies of execution or by actual resistance. We are now seeing, I think, much less resistance, at least until now, and I think we're still seeing some deficiencies of execution, but we're also seeing a much greater degree of organization and determination to push things through. Still, it seems to me that there are some things here going on that we didn't really envisage or that I, you know might have

floated around in this sort of amoeba-like fashion in somebody's remarks at some point in the first four years. But I mean, the predatory imperialism towards allied countries, the endorsement of European hard right countries, is that not a qualitative difference?

HILL: I think it's just a step difference. There was already a lot of attention being paid to populist far-right parties in Europe. Others may recall that President Trump had a propensity for tweeting out videos from all kinds of reactionary parties and movements in Europe, including those from Britain First. That was an episode in Trump 1.0 that I was directly involved in trying to roll back and it didn't succeed. And also in terms of going after the State Department, all kinds of other institutions that are engaged in foreign policy, those trends were already there. The difference is of course that the Heritage Foundation Project 2025 has really coalesced over the four years in which President Trump was out of office.

And also, we've had a sea change in terms the Congressional Republican Party. It's now stuck with loyalists to President Trump. There's no real pockets of resistance in the Republican Party in the way that they frankly were in Trump 1.0 to any of his efforts to have a rapprochement with Russia and to cut the ties with Europe. Now the action, predatory action towards European countries, I think we've got Greenland in mind, President Trump was already interested in Greenland and Trump 1.0 and people might also remember that he told the Danes that he wanted Greenland the first time around, it was just you know dismissed and of ongoing office. Canada is a bit of a change. He was and of course is part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He always was somewhat hostile towards Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada, but this is obviously a dimension which is much greater than simply anonymous towards the Canadian leader.

I mean very clear that he didn't think too much of Canada and he was very hostile towards Canada because of its lack of spending on defense. You know, I think that this also comes together and the President Trump believes that sovereign countries are only those countries that can defend themselves. And, you know, he very much believes that a country is not sovereign if it isn't spending sufficient money on defense. And also, if in his view, the United States is somehow subsidizing it by that country having a major trade surplus with the United States, all of those, the security and

economic links come together very clearly, did the first time around, but are now, you know, coming, I thinking, to the focus.

STELZENMÜLLER: I want to go to Melanie with that. I will just put in there as a tiny footnote that countries that spend less than the promised goal of 2% on defense can clearly make up for that by being ideologically on the right side, as we saw in the most recent visit by European leader to the Oval Office, Giorgia Meloni. But Melanie, I'd like to come to you and ask you... How do you... What is actually going on here in this period between the Trump administration and Europe? Is this driven by impulse, by attitudes, by ideology? Is there actually a strategy? Are there maybe several strategies? What are we actually looking at here?

SISSON: Well, thanks, Constanze. And I think that is right now the overriding question in the strategic community generally. And there are a lot of things happening. I don't need to tell you that. So a lot of indicators, data points, things sort of popping up all over, whether those are statements or actual changes in policy. But it's not yet clear what they add up to in terms of a picture. I do think there are some... In addition to some of the continuities that Fiona just mentioned, I think there are some things that we can piece apart in the broader idea of how the administration is thinking about the world. I don't wanna go so far as saying a cohesive or comprehensive worldview at this point, but I think that there are ways we can think about it that give it a little bit more structure.

So when I look at the administration, I think they're some competing camps right now. Um, and they have to do with how they think the world has been working for the, for the post world war two era, the last number of decades. And I think there are some, uh, even in the Republican party and inside the Trump administration who think that that structure overall worked well for everyone, that globalization and, um, U.S. forward presence and posture overseas, including, and especially in Europe was a good thing. Like this, like I said, I think that there's a view that it worked well, for everybody. Um, No, I don't want to put names to that. I will let all of our viewers do their own scouring for the individuals. There's also a view of some that that structure didn't work for America. It didn't work well at all.

And I think it's very clear, I'll give a name for this one, that Trump is in that camp, that he thinks that globalization and the structure of US military alliances didn't do well for how Americans are able to live here at home. And then there's yet another camp, I think, that think that that structure worked too well for China. And so they're dissatisfied in particular with some of the trade relationships, some of state of the US military, some of state of US alliances. And their concern is that we need to reprioritize, perhaps not entirely reshape or reconfigure, but reprioritize the way that the United States engages in the world and especially in the Indo-Pacific region. So I think those camps overlap in various ways. And it's not yet clear to me which one will end up being ascendant and it might be none of them for some period of time. We might have sort of popcorn and policies that are suggestive of each of these influences and impulses inside the administration for some time yet to come.

STELZENMÜLLER: Right, thank you. I think that that's a very helpful way of divvying it up. It does seem to me, though, that this is, um... Let me put it this way, that if you wanted to tie all of this together, notwithstanding the differences on specific point, you could say, as our colleague Tara Besh, sorry, Tara Varma and our colleague at Carnegie's, Sophia Besch have written in a terrific recent paper for Survival, this is a revisionist, a revisionists strategy. Their paper is called An Alliance of Revisionists. Which points out that the Trump administration is actively fostering relations with revisionists and nationalists in Europe, right? Hungary, not least, but also other political movements and parties, including in Germany, the Alternative for Germany, the Marine Le Pen's party in the Rassemblement National in France, and so on.

There is, and if I take this a step farther, where we're going to come to Tara to talk about the European reactions, but before that, I want to ask you, do you not get a sense that this administration appears to be doing several things at the same time, refashioning, revising the American domestic order, revising, the international security order, revising the trade order, the technology order, the currency order. The international order writ large. It's an astonishingly ambitious approach. Or am I going too far here? I'm basing this on my reading of Stephen Moran, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and his very deliberate linkages between security, trade and currency orders.

SISSON: I think that you're not wrong, it's just not clear to me that that project is going to be achievable. So the way I can think about it at the moment is I think President Trump in particular, and many around him, have a vision for how they would like the United States to operate domestically. And so the approach to foreign policy is to create the supportive conditions for that system here at home. And so this is as it ever has been in foreign policy. It's just now that the difference between that we've sort of been able to operate under this, you know, domestic policy and foreign policy are connected because of course foreign policy is meant to support the health, wealth and wellbeing of Americans here in the United States and wherever else they are living abroad.

But we could kind of keep them separate, you know, we could treat them a little bit more distinctly. Now, as you're describing, I think the Trump administration sees them as needing to be much more closely intertwined because the prior system didn't do well for the domestic population. And so they're having to change some things to create those conditions here in the United States, and they're to do some things, as you say, make outreach and connections overseas. They're trying to find common cause, as we have done in foreign policy in the past. So I don't think you're wrong to see that connectivity. I don't think you are wrong to highlight that it's an incredibly ambitious kind of project. And so I think it's useful to be aware of it and to consider the ways it might work, the ways that might not, and sort of all of the implications along the way. That's not a very heartening sort of response, I suppose. But again, I think a lot of where we are these couple of months in is watching and waiting and recognizing that there are a lot energies and they're often pulling in different directions. And so again, it's just not clear which one is actually going to get the most traction or if any of them will at all.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right, understood. Let me move in this first round to Tara Varma, our visiting fellow from France, who, as I said, has written this terrific paper, *An Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the trans-Atlantic Relationship*, together with Sophia Besch of the Carnegie Institute next door. Tara, do you want to give us a little bit of an outline of European reactions so far? I mean, as you know, I've been shuttling around Europe a lot, as you have been there recently as well. I think the shock and awe has been very real. Tell us more.

VARMA: Sure, thanks, Constanze, it's great to be here. As you said, the shock and awe is real, especially because I think after Donald Trump's election last November, the Europeans tried to prepare themselves, trying to draw lessons and conclusions from the first Trump administration, trying to think about a deal to put on the table, which would be palatable to Donald Trump and the administration. And I think in a way they were both right and mistaken to take that route. Because it's important for the Europeans to present a united front to be prepared. But at the same time, as we've just discussed in this panel with Fiona and Melanie and you, the Trump administration now, Trump 2.0 is fairly different from Trump 1.0. I think there are a number of differences.

The first one being that the impulsivity and unpredictability that are characteristic to President Trump are now really weaponized by him. He is very conscious of these personal traits that he has, and he uses them. And so when you form a deal or when you're thinking that you're presenting a deal to him, it's a very short time deal in a way. And this is where it's going to be hard for Europeans because they'll find themselves basically having to face two challenges amongst many other. But I'll say one, which is that they have to identify personalities who get along with President Trump or who can talk to him. And these are individual heads of states or heads of governments from the European Union. He doesn't want to talk to leaders of the European Union as an institution itself. He hasn't been willing to talk to European Commission President Jocelyne von der Leyen, but he has spoken to French President Emmanuel Macron, to Italian Prime Minister Giorgio Meloni, to Finnish President Alexander Stubb. Of course, to Keir Starmer, the UK Prime Minister.

So I think having these personalities basically playing the role of a shuttle between Europe and the US is essential. But in a way, the Europeans have to face a second challenge here, which is a challenge even harder than building a European defense union, which I'll come to later, is that because these deals are very short-timed. European Union will have to become nimble and agile in basically understanding that any deal it passes with the Trump administration might be obsolete 24 or 48 hours later. So it will have to learn to basically respond much faster to any proposition that the administration makes. And in the midst of all this we find ourselves as Europeans being completely in disagreement with the Trump administration when it comes to the war in Ukraine.

I think as you referred to the fact that there was similarity of views between the former US administration and the Europeans, and I think that's true, I do think there were some differences even at the beginning of the war in that the US I think always perceived Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an international or regional security issue, when for the Europeans it had immediately to do about the existential nature of the European project and multilateralism. And so there were some differences there, but of course, we're in a totally different situation now where the current administration has adopted in a way some of the speaking points that are provided by the Kremlin, there's almost an alliance reversal. And if we go back to what the trans-Atlantic relationship is based on, it's based on shared values and we can develop that. Defense of liberal democracies, defense of open societies, it's based on trade. And I think it's helpful to remind our viewers here that.

The European Union is the first trading partner of the US. And it's also based on defending a collective security and belief in multilateral institutions. I don't think we are in accordance of views on any of this right now between the Trump administration and the European Union, all these major pillars that form the relationship. So we find ourselves in a situation where there is not only a withdrawal of the U.S., a military withdrawal of U. S. From Europe. But there is actually a political re-engagement of the US in a way that's quite antithetical to the shared values that form the basis, the foundation, of this relationship, which is really not something that we had been expecting as Europeans. The military withdrawal we had expected, because criticism of NATO and of US troops in Europe is something that was already prevalent in the first Trump administration. But the fact that the current administration actually wants to get closer.

To far right parties and governments in Europe and form in a way possibly a new trans-Atlantic relationship is really something that Europeans were not prepared for. I think Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference really came as a wakeup call for Europeans and that is helping them to prepare themselves a bit more to the current situation. But there is a real difficulty for Europeans in that there is huge discrepancy right now between the pace at which the Trump administration wants to withdraw from Europe and the pace at which Europeans can actually coordinate their views and act today.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right, Tara, thank you very much. You've raised a whole menu of things that I want to discuss with you in the remaining a little more half hour that we have. But let's briefly stay with the leaders issue. The- I actually thought that that Georgia Maloney did what she did quite well. Um, I've been, probably the assessment right now is that, um, uh, fine finish, um President Stubb was the most successful early engagement of Trump because he went golfing with him. And because Stubb apparently is a really good golfer. Maloney, from what I've seen, is coordinated carefully with Ursula von der Leyen, has of course absolutely nothing to negotiate on herself and on trade issues because that is the exclusive competence of the European Union.

But one leader that you haven't mentioned was the Irish tea shop, Michael Martin, who came to the White House, got a wonderful meeting in the Oval Office on St. Patrick's Day. Um, and then two days later, I think, um, the president invited it, um, Connor, uh, McGregor, the, the wrestler, um and sort of right wing, um, leading right wing figure in Ireland who wants to become Ireland's next president and speaks of Trump as his explicit model. I was in Dublin recently and that did not go down well with the Irish, except possibly with his fan, but, but um, that has that and of course the famous Zelensky meeting in the Oval Office has I think designated the Oval Office as a political danger zone for visiting Europeans.

But let me return if I may to the question of Ukraine and go to Fiona. Fiona, I think at this point, we all have fairly low expectations of these negotiations between Mr. Witkoff and the Kremlin. And I think there, if I'm not completely mistaken, there is a sense of resignation in Europe that the options that we have been fielding, such as European troops deployed to Ukraine as a quote unquote reassurance force are unrealistic because they will be resisted by the Kremlin and that therefore the only remaining option that we have is to help Ukraine basically weather and battle it out by arming it and enabling it to produce its own weaponry. Is that correct or do you see any sort of additional opportunity or an opportunity in the negotiations for Europe and for Ukraine that I haven't highlighted? Am I being too pessimistic? Sorry, you're muted Fiona.

HILL: Yeah, I thought I'd unmuted myself, you'd think I'd know by now. I must have muted and unmuted in. Exactly. Yes, it's probably a metaphor in there somewhere for what we're talking about.

Look, I think that this situation is highly complex. It's very fluid. So I think we shouldn't rule anything out. And it may be that something actually comes out, perhaps not what's intended out of these negotiations. But, you know, because they're really only a negotiation for a ceasefire. And that obviously has not succeeded in any way. We've seen, you know, obviously the ceasefire in Gaza. There's also fallen apart. So ceasefires are simply that, a ceasing of fire for a period of time and we haven't even got there yet. But I mean, the fact is, you now, Melanie and Tara and you and, you we're all speaking about the fact that Europeans have now got a very different perspective on everything, you could well mean that the parallel discussions that Europe is having that intersect with the US discussions and engagement with other parties that are also interested in this, could actually leave somewhere over a period of time.

I just wouldn't expect anything immediately out of the upcoming talks. What I mean by that is that there are not two sides to this war. There is Russia, obviously, that has invaded Ukraine and there are other countries that have been supporting Russia in that effort. There's China, perhaps not with weapons, but certainly with political and other material support in allowing Russia to access goods that it couldn't otherwise that have allowed it to keep in the fight.

There's obviously North Korea and Iran, and we can see the United States already engaging with Iran in a separate set of discussions as if, you know, Iran isn't even now, you know kind of a factor building drone factories for Russia, you know, for use in European geopolitical space and with North Korea, you know, we saw Trump 1.0. Trump very much wanted to engage with North Korea and we can see signs that he wants to do that again, you know for example, which you know kind of creates another dimension because the North Koreans are absolutely 100,000 percent including thousands of North Korean troops fighting for Russia in its war with Ukraine.

So there's all kinds of other dimensions there have to be factored in, which has got South Korea, Japan, a whole host of other countries are very concerned about what's happening on the ground in Ukraine. They will have a say in how things go. India has been supplying the Russians with weapons, and India has its own separate sets of relationships with Ukraine and also with Europe. And this is an issue about European security. It's not just a conflict that can be resolved by Steve Witkoff traveling

around here, there, and everywhere in the Middle East and trying to combine everything and just having Trump sit down with Putin. The relationship between Putin and Trump, I think, is now decoupled completely, even from US-Russia relations over the longer trajectory, and absolutely from whatever's going on the ground in Ukraine. So there's lots of complexity here. But I do think that there is some prospect for actually helping the Ukrainians on the European side to dig in and deny Putin and Russia the possibility of going further on the ground in Ukraine.

And over time that might lead through that denial of a complete victory because Putin is talking all the time about finishing Ukraine off and denying Putin the ability to finish Ukraine off could eventually lead to some form of ceasefire that might give some space for more negotiations and more diplomacy but frankly it's going to be on the part of Europe and I think the big question you know for us to be thinking about and this gets into the areas that Melanie and Tara also work on is how can the Europeans integrate, and I just mean all of Europe, I just mean the EU or you know kind of all of the European members of NATO even, but how can the Europeans through various modalities, bilateral arrangements, you know sub-NATO and other region relations like the Nordic Baltic countries in the UK for example, factor Ukraine into their long-term security thinking to basically make it possible for to defend itself. And have new formulations of European security. And I think that's already on the agenda right now. And that's gonna be where most of the action is.

STELZENMÜLLER: Do you think it's possible that the White House and the Kremlin would strike a deal over the heads of Ukraine and Europe? This is coming from Keith Meeker.

HILL: Of course. I mean, yes, but it depends on what kind of deal it is. I mean that's, you know, Trump wanted to do that the first time around. He wanted to sit down with Putin. He wanted a strategic stability discussion. They have to negotiate the new START Treaty because that's expired and Tara has written quite a lot about the nuclear aspects of things as well. So has Melanie on the US side and... You know, Trump is thinking all the time about nuclear negotiations with Russia, with China, with Iran, North Korea, all of those things are going on. So, yes, absolutely. He's shown every willingness to do things like this in the past. And he also wants to have business deals, economic deals. That's really why Whitcoff is there.

I mean, Whitcoff is a real estate mogul who specializes in condos. You know? So presumably, you know, that's the kind of another, you know, direction of travel. Trump thinks about things in that real estate, mogul frame. Greenland, Canada, these are all kind of Panama Canal, these roles of extensions of him thinking about real estate and he's had a lot of aspirations for doing business with Russia, including trying to start off a roundtable with Russia through the U.S. Embassy when Ambassador Huntsman was in Moscow in the wake of the rather disastrous bilateral encounter at Helsinki. This was always. You know what he wanted to do was talk about opportunities for business people in that very tight circle of people around him. This isn't really about the U.S. And Russia and their economic relationship overall. So of course he'll be doing it over the heads of the United States as well frankly. This is all very personal and very personalized.

STELZENMÜLLER: What that does sound like, and I'm going to come to you with this, Melanie, is that there is, I think we're all used to looking at government, right? And two of you are practitioners, I haven't been one, Tara, you haven't one, as far as I know. But what we admire about the practitioners is their sort of distinct sense of how the machinery of governance works, right. The implement, the careful, exquisitely methodical articulation of policy and then its implementation. I may be romanticizing how it works and I suspect that Fiona and Melanie are smiling for exactly that reason, but there has always been a sense to me about the American machinery of being very, very, especially in questions of war and peace, very carefully constructed and implemented, and I sense that it is being replaced by something that is far more theatrical and performative, but where the cogs either no longer sort of connect with each other, right, or disappear. Is that a sense that you have as well, watching this?

SISSON: Well, look, what I'll say is you used the word revisionist before in terms of the approach in foreign policy, but, you know, where it's most stark, and you alluded to this also, is here at home. There it's, so, you, know, I mentioned there's Trump and others who felt like the general order of international affairs didn't work well for the United States. They similarly have the view that a lot of the machinery that you just mentioned didn't work well for the United States. That it's irreparably broken and not fit for purpose. It doesn't do what we need it to do. And so, yes, absolutely, as we've seen in many facets of what the Trump administration has done here with governance at home, they are

certainly also doing, for example, in the Department of Defense. And the, you know, the, the question that the experiment that they're running, I guess, or the question we will soon see answered is, can you really throw sand in all of the gears of the Department of Defense and expect it still to its limbs essentially to still to continue to be able to operate and function properly.

People can arrive at their own sort of conclusion about that, but it seems to me that that is what is well underway right now. And my view on the on Secretary Hegseth achieving that position is that it was fundamentally to do exactly that, to demonstrate to the domestic audience that even the Department of Defense or especially the Department of Defense is not immune from needing to work better. And by better, you know, it means in the ways that Trump and many around him think it needs to work. And that includes removing DEI, that is going to include shrinking in number of the workforce. All of the things that we've seen happen in other agencies as well. So we shall see whether the cleaning of the machine actually allows it to work better or not.

STELZENMÜLLER: I think it's a completely fair point to say that very large bureaucracies tend to have a need to sort of self-reinforce all the time, right, and at some point, begin seeing their legitimacy in their very existence. And as Europeans, we know what we're talking about, because that is true to a large degree about the bureaucracy of the European Union as well, although that is much smaller than a lot of Americans think it is. With that, I'm going to come to you, Melanie, with a question about one very large transit landing institution, which is NATO. Are you surprised that the Trump administration so far has shown no desire to withdraw from NATO? Or do you think that we're seeing a partial withdrawal here? I'm reminded of Secretary Hegseth remarks at the NATO Ministerial before the Munich Security Conference. Where he suggested that there were some question marks about US participation in conventional deterrents, which is mainly strategic enablers, but that the nuclear deterrent would remain in place, the nuclear extended deterrent, would remain place. What's your take on that? Do you think that that has been born out?

SISSON: Well, so first, let me say that I don't I'm not surprised that we haven't seen any kind of expression of formal intent to withdraw from NATO from NATO, because that would be a very costly endeavor in any number of ways and is completely unnecessary to what it is that the administration

might or might not wish to do with the alliance overall. You can think about it as they always have the option and have started to exercise it, although the ultimate determinant will be the European perspective of withdrawing in spirit. If not in fact, right? And that's something that only the Europeans will be able to assess completely to say, the withdrawal is complete whether or not the forces remain, whatever the titles might be and so forth. So in the meantime, it also does continue to give the administration a hook into Europeans, into the psyche, but also into the political machinery itself to keep on with that metaphor.

So, I think they stand to lose more by officially withdrawing than they stand to gain from it. I will say, and I don't think it's a surprise to you, that my view is that it is not possible to decouple the conventional deterrent from the nuclear deterrent. I think that is a fantasy. Well, so what a conventional deterrent essentially says is United States is willing to pay the price in blood and treasure to defend our allies. We're willing to position ourselves accordingly and accept the risk that we might actually have to follow through on it. That can be explained in a rational way. When you see the signals line up with a logic, you can find it to be a believable position.

The nuclear argument has always been one step removed from that, because what it is saying is that the United States will take the risk of launching a nuclear weapon to defend a European ally against a nuclear armed adversary, full well understanding that that adversary can launch a nuclear weapon back at the United States. And so this is the famous sort of question of, are you really willing to trade New York for Paris. Um, and so it is difficult to see how an ally or an adversary would believe that the United States is willing to accept the risk of a nuclear strike, but not willing to except the risk, uh, a conventional fight, um, and the loss of service members, um those two ideas can't stand the, the nuclear can't and rationally without the understanding that we would be willing to make a sacrifice at a lower level of cost. So the nuclear questions do get convoluted, and I hope I haven't done worse by trying to get into them. But that's why I think it's just, you can't separate these two things in a meaningful way.

STELZENMÜLLER: I think that makes complete sense and that is, you know, that's the, I think, that that reflects decades of doctrine and practice in the trans-Atlantic arena and decades of shared

understanding between American and European allies. But it does seem to me that this administration is willing to question this in ways that undercut the political credibility of the commitment, even if as you say doctrinally it's unfathomable why that would be a rational proposition. But let me ask you one last thing before I go on to Tara. What are your expectations for the June NATO summit? That will be in The Hague this year between the 24th and the 26th of June. Europeans are spending a great deal more on defense, but I think their nerves are jangled by the attacks on Denmark for not relinquishing Greenland, by the attack on Canada, by the endorsements of hard right parties, by the tariffs, by everything. What do you think Europeans should strive for at this summit, and what do you expect the Trump administration to pursue?

SISSON: I'm going to be a grave disappointment. I can't, I'm not going to hazard a guess about what the Trump administration is going to pursue. That seems like a dangerous occupation to make such predictions. What I will say that I would look to the Europeans...

STELZENMÜLLER: I tried.

SISSON: You did, and no one can blame you for that. But I think from the European perspective, look, it's going to be what it has long been, which is, you know, there needs to be some sense of cohesion. There needs to be some demonstration of a plan and there needs to some spine and some backbone put into it. There needs be some firmness. In the absence of that, I don't see what good can come of the summit no matter the direction that it takes.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, that tees Tara up perfectly for the next segment, where I'd like to dig in a little more about what we are doing to make ourselves credible in defense and security. Let's start with the nuclear debates. I mean, one of the more astonishing aspects of this moment is that there is now suddenly a serious debate about a European nuclear deterrent. And one of our, um, one of ours. Watchers sent in a question beforehand, Barbara Bishop from Stanford, ACT. Do you believe France will assume the US mantle within NATO? Is Macron going to become the new leader of NATO?

VARMA: So I think if we think of it in those terms, I'm not sure that it's going to work. I think cohesion and unity are key here. Already the fact that France may be thinking about joining the NATO nuclear sharing group, which it isn't part of right now, is a massive sea change. It's not such a sea change that France wants to have a discussion about nuclear deterrence in February, 2020, just days before the COVID pandemic and global lockdown. Actually, Macron gave a speech saying that he was willing to have a conversation. With European partners on this, not saying that he was going to extend French nuclear deterrence to partners, but start a strategic debate. And that was completely lost, of course, in the pandemic and the rest. And the debate started anew, actually, relaunched by the incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Scholz, as well as Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister.

At a time, I mean, I think we need to understand what's happening here. We find ourselves at a moment where the UK, which is not part of the European Union anymore, but a key European strategic actor, France, Germany, and Poland have converging views on what Europeans need to do to defend themselves. This hasn't happened in the past eight years, not in a moment, where the four of them would want to lead and they would want to lead together. So it's not just about France, not just about Germany, but it's about a number of countries deciding to have this conversation in the open. Because what is happening is that the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella has been put into question. And it's been put in question by what the administration has done. It's been putting into question because of the firm belief of President Trump that alliances have been detrimental to the US as a country, has been detrimental to the U.S. Population.

He firmly believed that in his first term, he believes it even more in his second term. So we need to understand that the Europeans are undergoing this massive sea change at a time where there's, of course, still a war going on in Europe and the future of Ukraine as a country, the future Ukraine being part of the European continent, the European Union is also in really part of that larger debate. So I think. To me, it's not that surprising that it's happening, but it's happened mostly because of US actions. I don't think there would be such a prominent debate about what a European deterrent could look like if the US position hadn't shifted so much.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you, Tara. I am noticing you not saying that the French will become the new leaders of NATO, but I think that that is....

VARMA: They want to be part of it much more though, and I think that's absolutely true.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, exactly, and that's a really important point, exactly. And I think, that is actually the better question.

VARMA: And I think, and maybe just on that, because one of the debates also that's been happening right now is whether there can be a Europeanization of NATO, whether basically Europeans could take over the mantle of American leadership and whether they would be credible enough as a deterrent force to Vladimir Putin, because that's also what NATO is for. It's to be a credible deterrent. And I do think if they do come together, if France actually is part of the nuclear sharing group, if Franz speaks very openly about European interests being part of French interests and having a vital element and European interests being a vital elements of French interest, I think that's a major shift too. And yes, you know, we can have larger debates about escalation management, whether Vladimir Putin considers the French deterrent and the UK deterrent as credible enough, whether he's scared of them or not.

I think, that's one small part of the issue. There's a larger part, which is whether Europeans want to trust the French and the it's to do that for them. And to build a much larger force. And I think this was put into question a few years ago. I think, this is being a very serious discussion right now and we've come a long way, but there's still a lot more to be done. But at least the fact that this is happening in the open, that it's part of the public debate, that there's in a way a democratization of this really key foreign policy issue, to me is something actually quite positive, maybe one of the silver linings of these pretty dramatic moments that we're living.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, let's just remind viewers that we have seen in the past since the Trump administration took, since the inauguration, a number of steps taken in Europe that would have been inconceivable half a year ago or several years ago, right? The European Union putting on a very

serious program for funding defense spending, the Safe Act and the Germans loosening their constitutional debt break, probably the most sacred cow in the German national universe. We are of course still waiting for the German government to come into power with a vote on May 7th, but all indications are that they mean this quite seriously. We are seeing a loosening of the banking rules for the European investment bank so that it can fund defense investment. But of course there is, I do want to put one quite serious warning on the table, which is that the market turmoil that we saw after the imposition of tariffs on liberation day is if it returns after the end of the suspension period on July 9th, could undercut the economic impact of all these political and financial packages.

And in fact could undercut if it creates a real turmoil on world currency markets. It could put European central banks, national central banks and the European central banks into serious jeopardy. That is, I think, the great question hanging over all of us. And so let me spend the last round, we've got seven minutes to finish, let me spend this last round having put this warning on the table. What do we need to do in the short term, in the time that we have between now and the re-opposition of tariffs, to get our act together? In the time where we are most vulnerable, what do we as Europeans need to, what would be your advice from all three of you, well-meaning Americans, former double passport holders, French colleagues? I'll add my own thoughts and I'll go and reverse with you, Tara.

VARMA: So I think we need to spend a lot more on defense R&D and actually build the European defense industrial base in a way the European commission with the white paper that it launched last month in March, 2025 is giving us some key elements to do that. As you said, loosening the rules for the European investment bank to actually invest into technology. The European investment bank actually forbids to invest in military investment but it's overcoming these rules right now. I think understanding the sea change moment that Europe is going through. Getting a lot more private capital to invest into defense industrial equipment, which is not something that Europe has been so strong at until now, really relying on the US. And in a way, Europe is going through this moment of trying to free itself from its dependency on the US defense industrial base. And it will take time to build all of that. It will take time to build it in a cohesive way, not for every member states to build.

STELZENMÜLLER: Hard question for you. Hard question. Open this. Open this to the user.

VARMA: UK, Norway, and Turkey open it to the West? Yes, that's already planned. I mean, the European Commission said that it was going to, you know, build these deals with all these countries that are part of the European ecosystem. So I think, yes, absolutely.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right, that was a really, really important point and point to make. Let me move over to Melanie.

SISSON: Well, I certainly can't add much to what Sara has said. So I think that's all very clear. Mine is more sort of on the softer side of things, which is to say, in part, Europe needs to be very serious about doing those things because there is not going to be a way to coax this administration back into the kind of trans-Atlantic relationship that existed before. That is done. And so trying to reconstruct it is not gonna be successful. And I think that. Needs to be communicated very clearly to European publics. I imagine, and you all know better than I do, that that sensibility is probably growing. The leaders need very much to cultivate that sensibility and explain what that means for all of the various measures that Tara has just described.

STELZENMÜLLER: Can I follow up there with a question about China, which you raised early on. You noted that there are disagreements about the relevance of China as a competitor and as a first order strategic priority for the United States. There is, of course, a temptation and perhaps a risk for Europeans to replace one dependency with another. What would be your advice there?

SISSON: Well, I wouldn't recommend anybody replace dependencies in that way. I think as we do in our ordinary lives, we think about diversification. What I would say when it comes to China is there is gonna be a temptation Not just to do that supplementing of the one for the other, but for looking at the far ends of the spectrums of all bad or all good. And really what you're gonna be working in is the messy middle. I think there is a productive space for European engagement with China. There is still a productive for European engagement with the United States, albeit very different than it has been before. And so the strategic task is to identify in the specific places that those kinds of ties like both. The United States and China can work well and which ones create too much risk.

STELZENMÜLLER: Fiona, you have the last word. In this very tense and vulnerable moment, and as somebody who's worked with this president before who knows European and American debates intimately, what would you advise Europeans to do now in the lead up to the, during this period of terrorist suspensions and in the lead up to the Hague NATO summit? What should we do? What should we not do under any circumstances?

HILL: Well, I think the final admonition from Melanie there about being very careful about rupturing relations entirely, and you and others have made this point with the United States, is worth keeping in mind. I mean, there's a risk of swinging in a way over to the other side as a result of everything that's happened. But I think that absolutely one should not assume that the United States is going to come back in any way into the kind of relationship that it was previously and it should not in fact. I mean, we've all been saying for some time that Europe needed to reduce its dependencies. We've had, you know, the words vassal states thrown around. Vladimir Putin and, you know, probably perhaps President Xi also think that Europe are the vassal states of the United States. And I think it's Europe's time to show that that's not the case. This also means a completely different relationship with China. China has been a party to a European war.

China was on the same side as Europe in World War Two. It's not now. And Europeans writ large bilaterally and through their regional frameworks need to have a completely different discussion about China, about what the implications of all of this are, and I think Europe, as Tara has suggested, has the basis for a comprehensive plan, a completely different way of thinking about security. It's a different mindset, as Melanie's also suggesting, needs to be a national dialog. Each country needs to have national dialog about its security and there needs to be regional dialogs. And Europe just needs to be on a completely different footing. It needs to restore deterrence on its own. And it needs to have its own populations prepared for a whole new world in which there is no longer any dependency on the United States. And Europeans are going to be working this out among themselves. And hopefully they'll get away from petty fights over fisheries and all kinds of other issues and start focusing on the real important tasks ahead about homeland defense for each individual country as well as regional posture.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, thank you very much. I think what you three have outlined suggests that it is indeed time for Europe to rise to the occasion, to live up to the promise of a European project. That's the only way in which we can hope to be an example of others. And it requires two things, really. Dedicated statecraft and the trust of voters, right? It requires politicians, business, and civil society to pitch in. It truly is an all hands-on deck moment. And it is that now, not just at some time in the future. Thank you very much for this terrific discussion with Brookings Fellows, Tara Varma, Melanie Sisson, and Fiona Hill. It's been a pleasure and the privilege. Apologies to all of those whose questions I have not referenced. I read them carefully. I got carried away. It's my fault. Have a wonderful day, everyone. Thank you and come and watch us again when we do our next event.