

“Trump, Europe and the wider world”

London, 17th October 2017

CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

This latest seminar, widely seen to have been one of the most stimulating in the series, brought together several distinguished experts in an attempt to evaluate the implications of Donald Trump’s presidency for Europe and the current stresses and strains which his administration is placing on the entire Atlanticist dynamic.

As **Hans-Hartwig Blomeier**, the director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, noted in his introductory remarks, the Trump presidency was an “even bigger challenge than the “B-problem” (Brexit)”. It was difficult to read what “was going on across the Atlantic” and what this meant for Europe.

While the seminar failed to answer this question conclusively it proved more than capable of ventilating many insightful views of the Trump administration and the potential ramifications of its agenda for the EU and the current Brexit orientation of the UK government.

Panel Discussion

Dr Jacob Parakilas (Chatham House)

Dr Parakilas, who is Deputy Head of the American Programme at Chatham House, opened the seminar with the observation that evaluating the Trump Administration presented a challenge for a number of reasons. There was a “disconnect” between the President and the major institutions of the U.S. state, notably the State Department where, as was later pointed out, a significant number of important Assistant Secretary of State positions had not been filled by the incoming President.

The President, according to Dr Parakilas, was capable of saying one thing, for example treating Russia as a “co-equal partner”, (an “unprecedented statement for a U.S. President”) while his latest appointment as chief National Security Adviser, Lt. General H.R. McMaster, clearly had a “more conventional security agenda” with regard to Moscow.

These contradictions permeated Trump’s administration policies. Thus his repeated insistence that the Iran nuclear agreement should be dismantled was not consistently supported in everyday diplomacy by the “conventional advisers” who were still “arguing that undoing the Iran agreement will create chaos”. These opposing views meant that US unpredictability was a major problem for the international community.

Dr Parakilas argued that although Trump might well be “a realist, populist, isolationist or protectionist” to invoke just a few of the most common epithets attached to him by the international commentariat, what was clear was that he was above all a “nationalist” with

an “America First agenda”. This agenda saw the multi-lateral institutions underpinning the post cold-war world order as “relics”. Such a narrative jeopardised the US commitment to these structures leaving partners and allies in a state of increasing uncertainty.

It did not help that Trump was “not ideologically coherent” or even consistent. Twenty years ago he was, (“extraordinary though it might sound today”), pro-choice on abortion, in favour of gun-control and the banning of automatic assault weapons and “even recommending the introduction of confiscatory tax regimes for the wealthy”.

Attempting to construct signposts out of this latest narrative for the direction of the US was a difficult exercise. Trump viewed previous presidents as “incompetents”; he was committed to trying something new which would “always surprise his opponents”.

Such a policy was in Dr Parakilas’s view a “high risk strategy”. As a “global hegemon”, the US derived considerable benefit from being at the centre of multi-lateral institutions. That benefit and role depended above all on being predictable. “The US cannot be unpredictable”. Nevertheless, Dr Parakilas insisted it was perhaps a potentially positive side-effect of such unpredictability that a new impetus might gather momentum for “intra-European integration” and “collective European defence”.

On the negative side of the balance sheet however was “the loss of credibility” for the US. If the US could pull out of the Paris accords, the Iran nuclear agreement and other international agreements painstakingly negotiated then it would become “increasingly difficult to sustain US credibility in the world”.

To the question: “Does Trump mean what he says”? Dr Parakilas could only answer: “Who knows?” Trump was the first President of the United States to “hold in open contempt the institutions which served him” and therefore the messaging from the United States was likely to be confusing for some time to come.

Summing up, Dr Parakilas attempted to determine whether the Trump presidency represented a turning point for the US or whether it was just “a blip”. Dr Parakilas concluded that while it was still too early to tell which of these alternatives Trump represented, his presidency was a “significant moment for US politics”. The last 9 months had been a “harbinger” of “changes in the way the US has operated in the past”. In response to a question from **Brendan Donnelly** asking for clarity on that last point, Dr Parakilas added that Trump should not be seen as “a scapegoat”. He was a symptom of a wider malaise not a cause.

Sir Bryan Cartledge (former UK Ambassador to U.S.S.R., Honorary Fellow of St Anthony’s College Oxford)

The former ambassador began by asking the non-British nationals in the audience to pretend that they were British so that the “rather harsh things” he was about to say about the UK “could be kept in the family”. The influence of the UK was in his view “now lower” than at any time since the early 1970s and the second government of Harold Wilson (1974-76). “We were then weak and confused, so the present situation is sadly familiar”.

The rest of the world viewed the UK today with a mixture of incomprehension and pity (and in some cases even with perhaps a little *Schadenfreude*). “We are confused by our identity, haunted by fears of a break-up of the United Kingdom, governed by a fractious coalition of politicians who are manifestly incompetent and only partly supported by a demoralised bureaucracy. We are slipping to the bottom of the economic league-table in

Europe and our armed forces have been cut and starved of funds to such a degree that they are in danger of losing any major operational capacity”.

The UK had vacated the international stage because influence in foreign affairs required trust and respect but “we have a Foreign Secretary who commands no respect. His German counterpart cannot bear even to be in the same room as him.”

There was also an “opportunity cost” for Brexit. What might a government and civil service be able to achieve if it was not, along with the media, so distracted by Brexit? Many activities had been pushed aside and the UK had vacated not just significant areas of international influence but also domestic priorities. With regard to the United States where British leverage and influence had been hard fought for in the past, the UK was today incapable of protecting “our commercial and other interests where they are now threatened by Trump’s policies”.

On the international diplomatic front, Sir Bryan gave as an example of weakened British influence the fact that “Brexit had removed at a stroke the most powerful voice in favour of sanctions on Moscow”. The Atlantic alliance was “now less solid than at any other time”. Western disarray and the UK’s exit from the international stage might be welcome in Moscow but paradoxically Putin’s power was based on exploiting the rich vein of nationalism and paranoia that exists in the Russian consciousness and for that he needed an enemy.

The options for the UK were now limited. Brexit was in Sir Bryan’s view inevitable. The government therefore “would be well advised to increase defence expenditure and increase the size of the Foreign Office so that bilateral relations could resume from where they had left off in 1972” when the UK joined the EEC. The UK “would have to recover its self-respect - not by dressing up as global Britannia but by coming to terms with its status as a middle-sized power, focussed primarily on Europe where its principal interests will always lie; and by preparing itself for eventual re-accession to the European Union”.

Brendan Donnelly, thanking Sir Bryan, noted that he need feel no reserve in front of an audience comprising of some Germans in criticising the British government because British politicians had certainly not been shy of late in criticising the German government. He also pointed out that Sir Bryan’s analysis while undoubtedly striking a chord with many present at the Seminar was not one universally shared in the UK.

Ansgar Graw (Chief reporter and former US correspondent of *Die Welt*)

Mr Graw began his presentation with a detailed *tour d’horizon* of the latest German election and the implications of the result which he believed would ensure a *Jamaica* coalition government, so-called on account of its combination of party colours, (being made up of Greens (green) and Liberals (yellow) and Mrs Merkel’s CDU (black) party). It was not to be excluded that there would be a Green party Foreign Minister as had occurred nearly two decades ago when Joschka Fischer was appointed Foreign Minister in Mr Schröder’s government between 1998 and 2005.

Mr Graw was of the view that the coalition likely to emerge in Germany was not going to offer as stable a government as that which Mrs Merkel previously enjoyed. There was a considerable risk that the conflicts arising from the *Jamaica* coalition would cause the government to break down before its four year term was at an end.

Turning to the topic under discussion, Mr Graw noted that although Germany prided itself on a very strong and deep partnership with the US, this relationship was today “crumbling”. The twentieth century American post-war reconstruction of Germany, the

support of Presidents Reagan and Bush senior for German reunification: these solid foundations of the relationship had not endured recent storms. Although he believed Trump ironically had probably the “best personal chemistry” with Mrs Merkel, he was unpredictable and this was proving a “huge problem” for Mrs Merkel, hence her summer Bavarian beer hall speech in which she had stressed that Germany “could not rely on others”. This speech had more or less lumped the US and UK together with China and Russia, striking a jarring note for observers of an Atlanticist orientation.

Despite Mrs Merkel’s calls for Germany to spend more on its defence budget, there was in Mr Graw’s view absolutely “no political appetite in any party” to increase defence spending. This and the complexity and imbalance of the US-German trade relationship meant conflicts between Washington and Berlin were inevitable over the coming months.

The relationship with the US therefore needed to be “stabilised”. At the same time Brexit also posed challenges for Germany and would in Mr Graw’s eyes be “more problematic in the long run for Germany than the UK”. The UK had always been, Mr Graw insisted, Germany’s closest and “most important ally” in economic disputes within the EU.

Brendan Donnelly, thanking Mr Graw, questioned this interpretation of the UK, a non-euro country, as a “longstanding ally of Germany on economic policy” especially with regard to ECB strategy.

The seminar was then opened up to a lively **Q&A**.

Discussion

Several members of the audience asked if Trump could, in light of “the disconnect” with his institutions, “simply be by-passed?” **Dr Parakilas** reminded the audience that the President still had formidable formal powers dating from the Cold War era that made it “very difficult” to bypass him on a whole range of security issues. The institutions were being challenged in ways which had simply not happened before. Moreover, there was no chance that “someone might take away his mobile phone or stop his twitter feed”. His grand-standing was set therefore to continue. The “eternal resilience of the global system” was a “glib answer” to the challenges posed by the Trump presidency. In any event peaceful worlds were in Dr Parakilas’s view “an historical aberration” and he did not believe the stability of the post-1945 world order was likely to endure or be repeated.

In response to a question on the Chinese view of Trump, **Sir Bryan Cartledge** observed that China was preoccupied with her current internal arrangements and apprehension over the escalating North Korea conflict. China did not wish to see a US satellite state on her borders and they were preparing themselves for a show-down should the worst come to pass.

Ansgar Graw also referred to what he called “this North Korean thing”, observing that it was a Chinese nightmare to see a reunified Korean peninsular under US control. The Finlandisation of the Korean peninsular might be the only viable solution going forward but this at the present time appeared unlikely.

Mr Graw also noted that “those left behind by globalisation” in the US could not be discounted as a factor in US politics. The welfare state in the US was much larger than many people imagined and was certainly bigger than that in Germany. “Welfare Queens” were a key part of Trumps’s constituency.

Asked if the “liberal world order was coming to an end”, **Dr Parakilas** observed that if “the countries with liberal orders did not quickly put their houses in order” there would “not be a liberal world order for very much longer”.

Turning to the question of the German defence budget, **Mr Blomeier** noted that it was not just a question of “cash and numbers” but also a question of whether Germany was prepared to do the “nasty work” that becoming a fully-fledged military power involved. In response to a question as to whether the UK still dreamt of being a kind of “Global Britannia”, **Sir Bryan Cartledge** acknowledged that there were many “nostalgics” but that even in the 1970s, when things had deteriorated rapidly, there had never been any realistic chance of a British military coup; though “it had been discussed, the point to bear in mind was that it did not happen”.

Finally, **Brendan Donnelly** in response to a question about the passing of the *Pax Americana*, voiced the view that America had been a “rotten global policeman” and that maybe the UK’s departure from the EU would persuade the EU to become finally a “hard power”, freed of UK resistance to any development of a European defence capability outside of NATO. Europe had to “move beyond that”. Mrs Merkel was fully aware of the implications of such a development for Germany’s “emerging leadership” role. But it would be helpful to this process if Germany acknowledged that leadership involved (as the US had years ago discovered in NATO) “taking people with you” and a “degree of sacrifice”.

On the other hand, Germany had built an economic model which was impressive and appeared to have very few “losers”. It could therefore take justifiable pride in that and even try to replicate it elsewhere in the EU so that the majority of the population had a stake in the system.

Conclusion

This seminar, thanks to the wide range of expertise and perhaps the broader than usual scope of the subject matter certainly engaged and stimulated the audience. Included in their number were a party of German grammar school pupils who were clearly impressed by the clarity of Dr Parakilas’s analysis of the Trump administration’s dysfunctionality and the sincerity of Sir Bryan’s damning verdict on the current UK government.

Ansgar Graw perhaps identified the most compelling conclusion of the seminar which was that American “uncertainty posed a big problem” not just for Mrs Merkel but for Europe and the rest of the world. But as Brendan Donnelly pointed out: together with confusion arising from Brexit, US uncertainty offered potential opportunities for Europe as well as risks.

Richard Bassett
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