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## **US “Core” Interests in Europe and Central Europe at Risk?**

Understanding the enduring qualities – and conditions – of US “core”<sup>2</sup> interests in Europe, as well as in Central Europe, is key to understanding whether such interests are sustainable in a climate of increasing challenges to the prevailing world order and decreasing confidence in the viability of American commitments. That there is no alternative for the US to sustaining the present core interests is *not* a foregone conclusion. The forces tearing at the postwar world order and challenging the value of those interests, however, may also open opportunities to balance and strengthen those core interests.

This essay reviews both the historical context of US core interests in Europe — and Central Europe as a consequence — during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, as well as competing US political traditions that influence foreign policy decision-making in today’s White House. The cross-section of the two raises questions about the unshakable nature of those core interests, particularly as their sustainability is tied directly to the resilience and continuity of the prevailing postwar world order. While this paper does not include specific recommendations, it does touch on vulnerabilities that could put US core interests at risk.

### **I. The Postwar Legacy**

Central Europe today is one of the most dynamic regions in the world, politically as well as economically, and has become so in spite of a relationship with the United States that, in recent years especially, has suffered both from inconsistent levels of engagement as well as neglect. Rarely having been the focal point of American foreign policy, particularly since the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the region today neither attracts robust US engagement nor suffers

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<sup>2</sup> The “theory” of core interests maintains that such interests are primarily associated with large states that maintain substantial interests outside of their own borders. These interests are normally non-negotiable and involve the very existence of the state. Circumstances that significantly affect the value of such interests may involve geopolitical or technological changes, as well as domestic upheaval. See Fred Warner Neal, “The Theory of Core Interests and U.S.-Soviet Cold War Rivalry,” Paper delivered at the Second Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Boulder, Colorado, March 29, 1961.

irreparably from the neglect that comes from cyclical American retrenchment. Indeed, this “targeted engagement” is a consequence of the post-World War II legacy that denied Central European states the same pathways to liberation, reconstruction and development that brought stability and prosperity to Western Europe. Instead, Central Europe’s postwar legacy is one of isolation, subsistence, and Soviet domination.

While America briefly sought relief from its newly inherited global commitments after the war, hoping that its \$15 billion in recovery assistance for Europe (1945-48) would be sufficient, its retreat was short-lived.<sup>3</sup> Devastated by war, torn by resurgent divisions in European societies, and facing an uncertain future with a looming Soviet hegemony across the Eastern bloc, it was clear by 1947 that a stable, prosperous and secure Europe -- and one that would not harbor or become a threat to the US -- would not emerge so easily from the ashes of war. The values and interests that forced a reluctant US into the war were still at risk in the very shadow of victory, but would now compel the US to re-engage to continue to safeguard those very values and interests.

The turning point came on June 5, 1947, when Secretary of State George Marshall announced that the United States was prepared to engage more actively on the European continent, to invest more meaningfully in Europe’s recovery and its future, but would only do so if Europeans worked together to take the lead.<sup>4</sup> This was the essence of the Marshall Plan -- America would help fuel Europe’s recovery, and America would stand with Europe, but Europeans had to work together to chart their way forward.

The success of the Marshall Plan was a testament to the importance the United States placed on sustainable security and economic stability in Europe, by Europeans, in the face of compelling Soviet expansionist ambitions.<sup>5</sup> The USSR blocked most Central European states (those occupied by Soviet troops) from participating in the Marshall Plan, except Austria (which was only partially occupied by Soviet forces). Austria’s postwar economic recovery would have

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<sup>3</sup> *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1949* p. 846, <https://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1949-12.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "Milestones: 1945–1952 - Office of the Historian". *history.state.gov*. Retrieved 2018-05-28.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that the first substantial aid was delivered to Greece and Turkey is testament to the fact that the Marshall Plan was supporting a front line battle against communist expansion. See Denise M. Bostdorff, *Proclaiming the Truman Doctrine*, (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2008), p 51.

been unimaginable without it. Former Austrian Chancellor and Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky even credited the Marshall Plan for turning the Austrians into Europeans.

The Marshall Plan actually cost some \$2 billion less than the initial \$15 billion the US invested in Europe's recovery after the war, but the real investment was in Europe's unified future.<sup>6</sup> Access to the US funds required that participating countries first agree together on how the funds would be used – a requirement that helped fuel the formation of a practical European community, the first expression of which in 1950 became the Schumann Plan, which created the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the forerunner of the European Union.

Of course, none of this unfolded in isolation. The European continent was gradually becoming polarized between east and west. Indirectly, the Marshall Plan was fueling the divide by stimulating the pace of recovery for participating states, leaving those who could not participate behind. In addition, the building blocks of what we now know as the postwar international world order were being assembled as the pace of economic recovery stepped up<sup>7</sup>. The monetary order established at Bretton Woods in 1945 had already helped to create the basis for constructing a world favorable to American interests and an expanding American economy, and also made possible a global American role.

The political momentum for creating this new world order was driven by a mix of pragmatic economic considerations and security concerns arising from Soviet behavior during Stalin's final paranoid phase. Indeed, even the Truman Administration's realists who promoted a balanced approach to the USSR even while petitioning Congress for a stronger economic dimension to meet American security concerns, became victims of increasing anti-Communist sentiment in Congress.<sup>8</sup> During the first Eisenhower Administration (and the height of McCarthyism), in the wake of Stalin's death, the realists' efforts to forge a more pragmatic approach to Stalin's successor also were thwarted by the ideologies. By this time anti-Communism in Washington had become dangerously rigid, committing the US to a more ideological path for years to come. The failure to intervene in the course of the Central European

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<sup>6</sup> Noam Chomsky & Greg Ruggiero, *The Umbrella of U.S. Power: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Contradictions of U.S. Policy*, (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> See "Understanding the Current International Order," RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California (2016), ISBN: 978-0-8330-9570-1.

<sup>8</sup> See Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986).

uprisings in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and the unnecessary insistence on intervention in Vietnam were the consequences of this doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

Besides Bretton Woods, which spawned the International Monetary Fund (1945), the immediate postwar years also gave birth to the United Nations (1945), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1948), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1949), and the ECSC (1951), among others. These core postwar international institutions provided a framework for stability and common engagement, while the United States, directly or indirectly, was underwriting much of the capacity of these institutions early on, largely based on the promise of a strong alliance with both Europe and Japan.

On the security front, NATO, backed by its Article V guarantees, helped to provide the security umbrella that allowed the European member states not only to recover, but to develop their economies at an unmatched pace for over 50 years. Of course, this was the course taken by the 16 Western European countries (14 of which were also NATO members) that participated in the Marshall Plan. The strength of the Plan, however, was not in its economic success, but in its political success. Like NATO, which transformed the security framework of member states by adopting a common security platform and an interoperable strategic approach, the Marshall plan ushered in the political reconstruction of Western Europe by modernizing European industrial and business practices, reducing trade barriers, fostering self-reliance in a collaborative environment, and enlisting participating states in the nascent world order.

By the time the Marshall Plan was launched in 1948, economic recovery in most of the states that joined the Plan was already well underway. In the four years that the Plan delivered its assistance, economic performance in all participating states exceeded prewar levels by more than a third. However, there is no conclusive evidence that the Marshall Plan provided the economic impetus for such performance.<sup>10</sup> It is more likely that the Plan provided the means to achieve it and the “critical margin” that attracted other investment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Crafts. "The Marshall Plan: A Reality Check," Working Paper No. 49, University of Warwick, August 2011, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Hogan *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1987), p. 189

Unfortunately, in spite of America's best efforts to extend its offer of Marshall Plan assistance to all of Europe, including the USSR, little of this touched the Eastern bloc as the continent succumbed to the divisions of the Cold War. The legacy of the bipolar divide -- including Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968 -- left political, economic, and social scars on former Warsaw Pact states that continues to hamper their political and economic development and performance, in spite of the dynamic pace of change and economic activity in the region.

The Cold War experience also exposed certain realities about US priorities in the face of the east-west rivalry that are hard to ignore. For both Washington and Moscow the Cold War brought a certain stability and predictability that prevailed over the often harsh rhetoric, provocative activities, human rights abuses, and endless propaganda. The realist would argue that, in the interest of avoiding catastrophic confrontation, rival superpowers had to be pragmatic and prepared for reasonable accommodation. This, in turn, would ensure continued stability and security based on mutual recognition of each other's core interests -- or, at least, mutual fear of mutual destruction. Hence, in spite of strong verbal support for Hungary and Czechoslovakia from the US in 1956 and 1968, the US made no overtly threatening moves or provocative actions against Soviet forces in Central Europe. American core interests, in the context of prevailing Cold War realities, were not sufficiently threatened by not responding, but could have been threatened by a forceful response.

After the protracted retrenchment during America's post-Vietnam "malaise", as Jimmy Carter described it, a more robust foreign and defense policy emerged from Ronald Reagan. It dramatically increased US global presence and fortitude, and rallied domestic and international support against the "evil empire" of the USSR. Reagan's sometimes provocative rhetoric, along with his substantially increased defense budget, materially challenged the continued formula for east-west security and stability.<sup>12</sup>

## **II. Post-Cold War Turmoil**

By the time the Hungarian and Austrian Foreign Ministers came together to tear open the Iron Curtain on June 27, 1989, they were already at the leading edge of a new era for what was then

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<sup>12</sup> For an informative analysis, see Earl C. Ravenal, "Reagan's 1983 Defense Budget: An Analysis and an Alternative," Policy Analysis No. 10, CATO Institute, April 30, 1982, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/reagans-1983-defense-budget-analysis-alternative>.

still known in the West as “Eastern Europe”.<sup>13</sup> Their action, while it did not reverse the stagnation of the previous decades of Soviet domination, did represent the first tangible opportunity to introduce a new security formula for Europe as well as new concept for a common umbrella of peace and economic opportunity.

The fast pace of developments in Central Europe brought unrestrained optimism in the West regarding the future of Europe.<sup>14</sup> But there was lingering uncertainty in the White House about the implications of these unforeseen events during the early months of the George H. W. Bush Administration. The US was not prepared for the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union. Indeed, even as the warning signs became more and more visible and harder to ignore by 1989, when the Cold War ended, the Bush Administration carried on implementing a Reagan legacy, heavily invested in the successful transformation of the USSR into a true democracy – and fearful of a possible global security crisis in the wake of a Soviet collapse. No outcome other than a continuing transformation process -- based on the existing borders of the Soviet Union (minus the Baltic States) -- was foreseen or even welcome.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike his predecessor, however, Bush was less focused on supporting successful regime transformation in Moscow than on ensuring the preeminence of US global power in a post-Cold War era.<sup>16</sup> Even after the collapse, the Bush White House, although not contesting Boris Yeltsin as a legitimate successor to Gorbachev, did not rush to his support, concentrating far more on the consequent international political challenges arising in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Complicating this, not unlike the period after World War II, once it was clear that a feared global security crisis was not imminent, a new cycle of retrenchment began as domestic

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<sup>13</sup> For two generations of Americans, as well as many Western Europeans, there was no “Central Europe”; Europe was divided only into Eastern and Western, falling along the lines separating the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the “shock therapy” of economic liberalization imposed enormous and challenging burdens on the fragile economies of the former Warsaw Pact states. A case can be made that these countries lost some substantial measure of their economic autonomy as a result of large scale privatization and capital liberalization required by the “Washington Consensus”. The consequence was and continues to be a massive an expectation gap that is virtually impossible to overcome.

<sup>15</sup> The growing momentum of the social and political forces unleashed in the USSR as a result of Gorbachev’s “glasnost” and “perestroika” severely challenged the Kremlin’s ability to manage them and of Soviet security forces to contain them. Nevertheless, the Bush White House stood by Gorbachev, dismissing reports warning of growing uncertainties and risks in the Kremlin. Even weeks before the August, 1991 coup attempt, in his last official visit to the USSR, Bush urged Ukrainian lawmakers in Kiev to reconsider their determination to break away from the USSR in remarks that have come to be known as the “Chicken Kiev” speech.

<sup>16</sup> See James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*, (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 2003), pp. 9-11.

pressure for America to withdraw from many of its Cold War era commitments around the world intensified.

Meanwhile, even as steps were well underway to reduce America's global footprint, the US and its partners continued their vigorous engagement across Central Europe, working to help unify Germany, to facilitate the entry of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into western institutions, and to create new security relationships that would contribute to the "whole and free" concept of a new European continent. Indeed, the Clinton Administration stepped up a broad range of efforts to accommodate early accession into NATO for these three countries, including through careful diplomatic maneuvering with Russia.

Unfortunately, while this new course for former Warsaw Pact countries was being charted, Yugoslavia was collapsing under the weight of long simmering ethnic tensions that had been contained by Tito, and the momentum for change inspired by events in Central Europe. The subsequent violence that engulfed the Balkans failed, at first, to attract meaningful interest in Washington, where the momentum for retreat, even as Bill Clinton was taking office, was at least as strong as the desire for Europe to shoulder this burden without the US.

The turmoil in the Balkans, sparking the first shooting war on the European continent since the Nazi defeat, was unfolding at the very time the neighboring states to the north were trying to consolidate their independence and rejoin Europe. At risk was not only the notion of a Europe whole and free, but of a continent able to resolve differences among its constituent states without the use of force. The US also was facing its first real test in the post-Cold War period. The great power rivalry that had divided east and west was no more. Instead, America confronted the reality that it could not walk away from a half century of continued active and visible US commitment to European security. It was forced to accept that the US had become an essential part of European security, and not simply a postwar guarantor.

The US-driven 1995 Dayton accords did more than deliver a formula for ending the Balkan conflicts. US full engagement with its European partners in this crisis helped to redefine the post-Cold War US role in Europe – a role which was tested again during the 1998-99 Kosovo War. America was no longer the ever present nuclear umbrella safeguarding Western Europe from Soviet aggression. Instead, it had become, virtually by default, the only credible, commonly accepted power balancer to keep the peace throughout Western and Central Europe.



By the end of the millennium, however, serious doubts were being raised on both sides of the Atlantic about Russia's democratic path and its place in Europe. Russia was becoming increasingly isolated by its failures to implement lasting democratic and economic reforms; the near bankruptcy of the state appeared to have left much of Russia in the hands of oligarchs or criminals. Moreover, in spite of the good personal rapport Boris Yeltsin enjoyed with Bill Clinton and many European leaders, Russia was becoming increasingly suspicious of US and European intentions, particularly after NATO's decision on enlargement and its intervention against Serbia in the Kosovo War. Of course, suspicions of Russian intentions among Central European and Baltic states never genuinely subsided. For them, as well as others, continued US engagement with and commitment to Europe remained essential to keep Russia at bay.

Needless to say, the aftermath of 9/11 brought another US reassessment of its place in the world. Initially, following NATO's first invocation of Article V in response to an attack on a member state, members and partners alike rallied around a unified position in support of the US. Nevertheless, later, as the US strategy under George W. Bush began to evolve into a "with us or against us" warfighting stance, cracks started to appear in the otherwise "unified" European support for the US.<sup>17</sup> Bush's Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, further aggravated the dilemma by trying to distinguish "old" Europe from "new" Europe -- an approach that praised new Central European Allies for standing firmly with the US and discredited traditional Allies for their criticism, but which also served to underscore deeply rooted suspicions about Russia that Rumsfeld shared with the new Allies.<sup>18</sup>

The US response to the 9/11 attacks ultimately left US global leadership tarnished and dependent on a unilateralist "fortress mentality" foreign policy approach that was both out-of-step with the post-Cold War environment and unsustainable in an increasingly interdependent world. Nevertheless, the continuing global threat of terrorism and the increasingly adversarial challenges from Putin's Russia made any other approach unrealistic, even as Barack Obama took office.

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<sup>17</sup> Bush: 'You Are Either With Us, Or With the Terrorists' - 2001-09-21, Reported by *Voice of America*, October 27, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-09-21-14-bush-66411197/549664.html>

<sup>18</sup> Peter H. Merkl, *The Distracted Eagle: The Rift between America and Old Europe*, (London & New York, Routledge, 2005), p 54.

In spite of this reality, America's appetite for active engagement in global affairs was waning in the face of so many challenges. Obama's cautious approach to foreign policy ushered in a new period of US retrenchment from global leadership. However, Obama's "lead from behind" approach to American international obligations created a vacuum of leadership that weakened US global presence, raised questions about Washington's resolve, and may have made European Allies more vulnerable to the growing pace of political polarization emerging in Europe and rising instability in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as the EU welcomed more new members from the east into the fold, it became painfully obvious that growing income inequality across the EU was going to be impossible to bridge in the foreseeable future, creating, ultimately, a crisis of confidence in local governments -- a "governance gap" that fueled further polarization.<sup>20</sup>

That said, on matters related to common security, throughout this period, as before, NATO solidarity, although sometimes stirred, appeared never to be shaken. While the unifying goal of common security appears to have survived the post-9/11 turmoil, as well as the uncertainties of the 1990s, the past decade has seen new challenges emerge, as well as the continued proliferation of terror.

The unity and formidable momentum that seemed to consolidate the EU's pan-European stature and ambitions early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has weakened under the pressure of terrorist threats, separatist movements, imbalanced economic growth, debt crises, the rise of populist movements and nationalist leaders, and, more recently, a migration crisis that has spread like wildfire. Moreover, the untethered growth of polarizing politics – and the proliferation of all forms of information warfare that fuels it – has shaken the foundations of European governance and eroded public confidence in political, economic and security institutions and practices in many states across Europe.

There is no doubt that Russia, and its surrogates, were and continue to be behind most efforts to sow confusion and mistrust of political leaders and institutions in Europe. They are actively fueling the campaigns of both far left and far right candidates and their policies in order to

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<sup>19</sup> See Roger Cohen, "Leading from Behind," New York Times, October 31, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/opinion/01iht-edcohen01.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Critics cite this "governance gap" as an important element in the failure of globalization. That such a "governance gap" exists is not in doubt, nor is there any question that it is a consequence of economic globalization. What is uncertain is whether or not such a gap can be overcome or is simply a fact of the prevailing world order.

weaken not only national democracies, but European security and solidarity as well. Indeed, in spite of its official denials, the Kremlin has done little to conceal the multiple threads of Russian involvement in almost every key national election during the past decade. The results of these elections seriously jarred the European body politic, not to mention the impact of Russia's interference in America's election. Russia's "active measures" practices, while not new, can now be carried out on such a scale that they can impact the political and economic courses of nations and, if left unchecked, perhaps the political landscape of an entire continent.<sup>21</sup> This represents a game-changer in the context of what defines security – and, by implication, the nature of core interests -- in Europe and how to sustain them.

While it may be the fox in the hen house, Russian troublemaking across Europe is not the death knell of European democracy, nor does it necessarily put at risk the long-standing security relationship the United States shares with European Allies – at least not yet. The threat from the rise of nationalist and populist governments, and the multiple circumstances that gave rise to this threat, the blame for which cannot be placed solely at Russia's doorstep, could represent a far more profound challenge to the prevailing international order that keep the foxes at bay. Nearly 30 years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, and the numerous attempts to bridge the divide to build "an ever closer Union," European unity and solidarity appears to be increasingly challenged under the weight of powerful forces that are putting future expectations in doubt and fueling protectionist sentiments, including the consequences of the financial and debt crisis, and the continuing turmoil created by migration.

Needless to say, Europe is not alone in its growing inability to speak with one voice. Anti-establishment fever in the United States has delivered the Presidency to a self-described economic nationalist who has not only challenged the basic tenets of the trans-Atlantic partnership, but the international world order as well. That said, in spite of Donald Trump's threatening and obstreperous statements, the United States has yet to undertake any actions that depart from American commitments to European security and is unlikely to do so, although confidence and credibility in those commitments will likely suffer.

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<sup>21</sup> See "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security," Minority Staff Report, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, U.S. Government Publishing Office, January 10, 2018.

### III. The US Domestic Political Context

It is important to understand that the victory of Donald Trump, whether or not Russian meddling was a factor, should neither be seen as the end of American democracy, nor be simply dismissed as an aberration. It reflects another facet of American political life and history that rarely surfaces to the top leadership, but is often in the wings. It has roots in America's formative political rivalries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when competing visions of American values and identity were taking shape, unfolding on the political scene as populist movements.

Among these groups, each of which believed it was the true guardian of the America's destiny, were the Hamiltonians and the Jeffersonians – the original big government versus small government rivals – and the Jacksonians, a more conservative outgrowth of Jeffersonian Democrats. The most influential political thinkers and activists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century coalesced around these three trends, all of which embraced rival economic interests that fueled them.<sup>22</sup>

These competing schools of thought had a powerful influence on America's 19<sup>th</sup> century political life and foreign affairs that left lasting effects on the American political system. Hamiltonians believed it was America's destiny to replace Great Britain as the keeper of world order. In contrast, Jeffersonians believed it was best to narrowly define America's foreign interests, advancing them only in a cautious and cost-effective fashion. Jacksonians, on the other hand, favored Laissez faire economics, driven by the individual freedom of the common man, and placing America's interests and defense first.

Emerging after World War I as an outgrowth of Hamiltonian thinking, Wilsonians embraced a liberal global order as a vital American interest, seeing peace as the most important dividend and the promotion of human rights, democratic governance, and rule of law the most valuable investments in national and economic security. Some political scientists and historians convincingly – and helpfully – describe mainstream and minority national political activity in the context of these historic schools of thought.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that political leaders, parties and activists in 21<sup>st</sup> century America are actually guided by these historic political movements. Rather, those

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<sup>22</sup> See Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order," in Foreign Affairs, March/April 2017.

populating today's political clusters, empowered by social media and the unrelenting weight of information (real or fake), may rationalize their choices with the chewed cud of inherited 19<sup>th</sup> century wisdom, but they make their choices based on many of the same 21<sup>st</sup> century social, economic and political realities – as well as fears – also confronting people in Europe.

Growing income inequalities, decreasing employment for unskilled labor, falling confidence in civil society and central governing authorities, unchecked cycles of drug abuse, the decline of US unilateral freedom of action, the rise of social elites and cosmopolitanism, and a crisis of national American identity all contribute to the fodder that fuels growth in Jacksonian-like thinking and its inherent suspicion of US global engagement and liberal order building. That Donald Trump has been able to ride a wave of Jacksonian-inspired activism is a testament to the success of an unexpected marriage of convenience rather than a match made in heaven. What is more challenging for US foreign policy, however, is understanding how high and how far the wave will last.

It is tempting to view Trump's foreign policy through the prism of Jacksonian democracy. Jacksonians, after all, are fundamentally unilateralist in their thinking, but, nevertheless, are rarely swayed by foreign policy considerations, generally viewing international entanglements with deep suspicion. With regard to Europe, Jacksonians would likely view European Allies as only potentially valuable assets in bolstering an American unilateralist agenda, but the opposite would be true if those very Allies were seen as constraining US freedom of action, or freeloading on American defense spending and commitments.

Jacksonians can be likened to extreme versions of modern realists at heart, uninterested in proactively promoting or defending democracy or human rights around the world, viewing international relations almost exclusively through the lens of reciprocity, investing heavily in a strong military, and unwilling to confront despots and dictators who do not tread on the Jacksonians' narrowly defined global interests. In this context it would be easy to conclude that Trump's "Jacksonian impulse" would compel him to view American commitments to and engagements with Europe more critically, particularly if he viewed those relationships only in the framework of NATO and the EU.

#### **IV. A World Order under Stress**

The reality that molds the choices the US electorate makes regarding America's global engagement, however, is more complex than the so-called Jacksonians would have you believe. The global disarray we face today is not a result of Donald Trump's election; he is just the latest expression of it. Nearly 30 years ago, the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union spawned multiple massive, well-meaning, but dangerously simplistic Western efforts to introduce democratic practices and market economies to populations which had few, if any, tangible ties to such traditions in their recent histories.

Moreover, after nearly half a century of building a "Cold War world order" underwritten by democratic systems and market economies as an alternative to a rigid communist order, the West had not only left the East far behind, but later had given them little choice but to open their fragile economies to "shock therapy" -- the unforgiving forces of market economics, and the social, economic and political upheavals that followed.<sup>23</sup> The prevailing world order -- the living legacy of the "Cold War world order" -- continued to be the only game in town, but had started to show signs of strain in trying to accommodate countries for which it was not intended, in an increasingly globalized world in which they had little invested.

The developments that followed, from the rise of Putin, to 9/11 and the war on terror, to the global financial crisis and the surge of populist nationalism, challenged popular expectations about the benefits of globalization and the promises of the information revolution. Indeed, many critics have blamed untethered globalization and unrestrained technology for the socioeconomic ills that now put at risk the very pillars of the inherited international world order that helped sustain postwar prosperity and the spread of liberal democracy during the Cold War. At the same time, the altruistic assumptions about the good that comes from cosmopolitanism and a world without borders are quickly eroding, victims of the very forces of economic and social development that cosmopolitanism and globalization have provoked.

The long-term impact these developments may have on America's core interests is uncertain, but in the short term, those interests remain grounded on the prevailing global system, a system

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<sup>23</sup> Graham Allison, "The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom," Foreign Affairs, July-August, 2018.

that rests on the continued stability and prosperity of not only the United States, but of Europe as well – a Europe that is welcoming both to democracy and to American goods and investments. In this regard, even Jacksonians would acknowledge the pragmatic value of what was a cornerstone of Bill Clinton’s foreign policy – that American democracy and prosperity are more secure in a world where other democracies are allowed to flourish.<sup>24</sup>

But it is not enough for Jacksonians that Europe is open to US goods and services, it must also be capable of defending itself, rather than relying on the US to do so. While the entirety of Europe has not been tested in war since 1945, its capacity to keep order in its own house (without US intervention) since the collapse of the Iron Curtain has been tested repeatedly, and the record does not inspire confidence. That Europe has shown itself capable of acting is not in doubt, but that it has shown itself politically unwilling to act is a matter of record. The Balkan wars, the Russian-Georgian conflict, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine are all cases in point. The ongoing migration crisis, the rise of populist nationalism, and growing separatist tensions are testing this record of failure even further.

Whether or not the present occupant of the White House is inspired by Jacksonian ideals, a lasting American core interest in Europe will likely continue to be one that embraces Europe as a bulwark of democracy, as a staunchly reliable trading partner (although that may well be at risk at the time of this writing), and as a community of allies that responsibly acts to meet its own security and defense needs (a work in progress, but a consistent US priority), and is prepared and willing to act in the defense of its allies. Of course, the weakness of this proposition is that it remains dependent on an enduring, well-grounded and accepted international order (and, by implication, a stable geopolitical environment where security as a core interest has lasting value).

## **V. A Way Forward?**

Ultimately, in the face of possible further erosion of the current global system, the future challenge may be to revise the “social contract” with states that find themselves trapped in a permanent limbo under the prevailing international world order, unable to break out of a continuing cycle of dependence. Finding a better balance between the haves and have-nots, as

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<sup>24</sup>See David and Sharon Rivera, “Yeltsin, Putin, and Clinton: Presidential Leadership and Russian Democratization in Comparative Perspective,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 2009.

well as for those states whose systems of governance may not always align with those of the strongest economies, could do more to strengthen the global system than branding as outcasts states that have national priorities to protect.

The global system may well be overdue for a diversity check in this regard. This may be particularly relevant for Central Europe. Revising the “social contract” may require, for example, redefining or otherwise establishing a common understanding of the essential elements of the international world order, including, for example, what constitutes security in a world increasingly dominated by cyberthreats; and, how to interpret what the concept of “fair play” means in an environment where the level playing field now benefits both those who play by the rules as well as those who do not. Some may see unrestricted migration as a threat to their security and may argue that this – and the accompanying economic consequences – must be considered. For others, balance of trade may be a higher priority. Still others may believe that the global system needs to be able to accommodate more diverse forms of governance.

Today, the peoples of Central Europe span two divides, one that is westward looking, fully integrated with the Western European and transatlantic mainstream (recent turbulence notwithstanding), and one that is eastward looking, struggling with the continuing turmoil of economic and political reforms, as well as festering ethnic or nationalist tensions, and also wary of Moscow’s looming presence. Collectively, they not only stand in the way of the decades old hope for a continent whole, free, and at peace, but they also call into question whether or not today’s White House believes America’s core interest applies to them.

Of course, abandoning Central Europe, or any part of it, to the wolves (or bears, perhaps) is not a viable option if the White House continues to see value in protecting American interests in the region. Ultimately, the readiness of regional governments to address these issues, and the willingness of Europe and the US to work together constructively -- with Russia, as needed -- may determine whether or not Europe can truly be whole and free. America, in spite of Trump, still has no expedient alternative to the status quo and will continue to view Europe, and particularly European Allies, in the context of its core interests.

The forces tearing at the postwar world order, both domestic and international, and challenging the value of those interests will likely take their toll on American commitments and well as the US interpretation of the meaning of security. However, challenges to American interests and to



the prevailing world order will present opportunities to make “mid-course corrections” to balance and strengthen both. These opportunities may be lost, however, if Europeans don’t step up to the plate by taking a more proactive approach to identify, in a unified voice, core interests that they share in common with the US, and to discuss how future US and European interests can align more effectively to meet tomorrow’s challenges.

As with the Marshall Plan, America’s core interests will be served best and sustained enduringly by Europeans working together, charting their own course on a path America is prepared to support. Similarly, even if America cannot resist the temptation to turn inward as it does so regularly, sustaining US core interests ensures that America’s commitment to remain engaged with Europe continues to be a commitment to America’s own security and prosperity.