

INVENTING EUROPE'S SOFT AND HARD POWERS

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After Trump, can Europe be the new beacon for democracy in the world?

President Trump's election was received in the Western world – Europe in particular - with a sense of apprehension about the future of democracy. Initially, the alarm was mostly a consequence of the peculiar personality of the new president who used scathing tones in dialogue, was disrespectful to the formalities of confrontation in the democratic context, as well as allergic to constraints, checks and balances.

Trump's vision of America as a nation rapidly taking distance from international fora and obligations increased the sense that the new political frame of mind prevailing in Washington was pointing to a break from the traditional role of America, viewing itself as the beacon of democracy for the rest of the world. By doing this, Trump has been eroding his country's soft power: the ability to shape the preferences of others, attracting and co-opting them through appeal and attraction rather than by coercion or military hard power.

Losing America's soft and hard powers as the cornerstone of the Western Alliance is particularly critical at the current juncture of global affairs. New powerful economies are disputing the Western leadership and, in most cases, they hold democratic requisites in little respect. The Western idea that the spread of capitalism would go hand in hand with the affirmation of civil rights, freedom of speech and an open public discourse, at a national as well as international level, does not seem compelling.

Europe, which is already dealing with the consequences of Brexit, is now confronted with an unprecedented situation where its main ally could turn much less cooperative than ever before in the past. Thus Europe's own responsibilities on security and trade must be subject to deep rethinking in not only terms of effectiveness, but under the perspective of making Europe the last bulwark for the defense of democracy at the global level.

Is Trump's America less democratic?

For the fifth time in American history, the presidential candidate with the most votes lost. This does not represent a significant prejudice for the elected president, although Americans seem to believe that majority rule is the criterion that legitimates political decision-making. As James Madison said: "the vital principle of republican government is the *lex majoris partis*". In a letter to Alexander von Humboldt, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "The first principle of republicanism is that the *lex majoris partis* is the fundamental law of every society of individuals of equal rights; to consider the will of the society enounced by the majority of a single vote as sacred as if unanimous is the first of all lessons in importance, yet the last which is thoroughly learnt. This law once disregarded, no other remains but that of force, which ends necessarily in military despotism." In fact, most of the democratic systems require a candidate only to earn a plurality, not a majority, of the votes cast to win election. Democracy does not require that the majority rules, because majority voting schemes do not necessarily reflect combined voters' preferences when there are more than two candidates. Indeed, Ken Arrow's well known theorem suggest that there are no voting schemes that can produce results that accurately reflect in the social choice the exact sum of individual preferences beyond binary choices. Moreover, in some cases, a majority could rule autocratically by passing legislation that empties the rights of the minorities. Trump's victory with less than a majority of votes is not a prejudice for his legitimacy but it's a relevant factor for the democratic quality of American public life, in particular, the respect of minorities.

According to Robert Dahl, democracy is sought as an ideal because we accept a fundamental moral principle that the good of every human being ought to be considered as intrinsically equal to that of any other. By extension, when making decisions, a democratic government must give equal consideration to the good and interests of every person bound by those decisions. The moral principle of equality implies also a principle of political equality whereby

every individual is equally qualified to participate in making the policies, rules, laws or other decisions that citizens are expected to obey. Dahl argued that the American system challenges the principles of political equality and, in this regard, could be considered as the least democratic when compared to the other longstanding democracies in the world. But America can still claim legitimacy if it provides a useful governmental framework. Trump's governing capacity – challenged by most observers - will thus be important also as a legitimation of the current presidency.

Dahl, as summarized in an article published on “Constitutional Commentary” (vol.20:631), proposes five criteria for judging a system's consistency with the tenets of democracy. “Citizens cannot govern themselves if the system is unstable or if the military poses a credible danger to civil government. Second, a constitution must protect fundamental democratic rights, by which Dahl means basic civil liberties like freedom of speech and of the press. Citizens must have these liberties to understand and weigh in on political issues (“enlightened understanding”) and to have some influence over the political agenda. Third, it must ensure democratic fairness among citizens. Fourth, it must help form democratic consensus. Fifth, it must create a government embodying these characteristics that can also solve problems effectively.”

The five principles are by no means a prescriptive, exclusive and cogent list of what distinguishes a democracy from anything else. However, the list provides for a useful orientation for anybody who wants to have a clear mind on whether the Trump's presidency represents a break from the democratic tradition of the United States. Barring the radical views of Steve Bannon, the influential proto-fascist but self-proclaimed Leninist ideologist behind the Trump's campaign, we do not have a consistent ideological framework that contains all of Trump's statements. We are therefore forced to connect the single pieces. The stability of the country has not been put in doubt by Trump's election. Although the role of the military is overwhelming in the new Administration, the generals now working at the White House are widely acknowledged as capable and sincerely democratic. A different judgement emerges on the second point of Dahl's requisites: Trump has frontally attacked the press and communicated through synthetic and aggressive statements, while his spokesmen have theorized “alternative truths” as a legitimate deviation from factual information. Under this regard one may conclude that Trump endangers the citizens' rights to understand and weigh in on political issues. In fact, he himself has given reason to believe that he is not accurately informed on issues he is called to decide on. The third issue is one of the most controversial:

According to statistical analysis of the electoral outcome, the most effective predictor of voters' behavior is the degree of racist reaction against the Afro-American community by white, low-educated, male voters. No doubt, in his victorious campaign, Trump has leveraged on divisive sentiments often recurring to ethnic distinctions. It is probably too early to judge whether there will be a serious prejudice of the way democratic consensus is formed in the U.S., however it looks increasingly possible that minorities' rights will be sacrificed by the harsh confrontational language stoked by the president's rhetoric. Finally, although the first four months of the presidency have represented a basket case for indecisions and mistakes, it is still too early to judge whether the current Administration will be able to provide effective solutions for the American society or for the American economy. All in all, there are signs of a weakening in the democratic texture of the United States - although not a clear departure from a democratic system - that could erode the credibility of the American leadership when stepping the moral high ground in the international community and represent the American interests as a defense of universal democratic values. In very simple terms, the U.S. is throwing away a good part of the soft power that forged its influence across the world.

What Trump's first visit to Europe revealed

If U.S. soft power is taking a hit, what about the hard one? President Trump's first visit to Europe coincided with a NATO ceremony in Brussels and the G7 meeting in Taormina (Italy). NATO leaders met in Brussels on May 25, to participate in a ceremony to dedicate the new headquarters of the transatlantic alliance. During the ceremony, President Trump unveiled a section of the World Trade Center, officially named *The 9/11 and Article 5 Memorial*, signifying the only time in its history that NATO invoked Article 5, the mutual defense clause, causing the death of over 1,000 soldiers from America's NATO allies in the subsequent Afghanistan War. President Trump is the only American president since NATO's founding who has not explicitly endorsed Article 5. By refusing to do it in Brussels, he raised grave doubts about the credibility of the American security guarantee.

As a colleague at Brookings Institution observed recently¹, Donald Trump's first major statement about NATO came in March 2016 in an interview with *The New York Times*, when he said the alliance was obsolete for several reasons. The first was that Russia no longer

¹ Thomas Wright "Trump's NATO Article 5 Problem" Wednesday, May 17, 2017

posed the threat the Soviet Union did. The second is that NATO was not focused on counterterrorism. The third is the financial cost of NATO to the United States.

In the year that followed, Trump doubled down on this critique, particularly on terrorism and burden-sharing. He repeatedly argued that NATO members must pay up if they were to receive U.S. protection. In July 2016, he said, I want to keep NATO but I want them to pay. I don't want to be taken advantage of...We're protecting countries that most of the people in this room have never even heard of and we end up in world war three...Give me a break." When he met the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in April, he said: "I complained about that a long time ago, and they made a change — and now they do fight terrorism. I said it was obsolete. It's no longer obsolete." The crucial nuance, observes the Brookings' foreign policy analyst, is that Trump did not say that NATO's original mission of countering Russian power in Europe is no longer obsolete. Indeed, he has never acknowledged this.

Defense Secretary Mattis and Vice President Pence explicitly endorsed Article V of the NATO Treaty at the Munich Security Conference in February of this year. But ultimately the decision to uphold U.S. commitments lies with the commander-in-chief. Trump alone decides whether and how the United States will respond to an eventual external attack on a NATO member. In simple words, if Trump has eroded the U.S. soft power, even the American hard power may be now less credible than it ever was.

Europe needs to draw conclusions on soft and hard powers

Europe needs to strengthen its soft power. First, showing that its democratic commitment is credible within its own borders. This means that the European governance must be improved and its decision-making process made more democratically accountable. This is particularly important for the euro-area, which is suffering from a deficit of transparency and accountability. Requests of institutional deepening – essentially setting up a euro-area Parliament - have already been advanced by the new French President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron.

Accountable institutions are only credible if they elaborate and correspond to common objectives. This means that the governance of the euro-area needs to be more political, sharing sovereignty and taking a stance about the need for more convergence in the euro-

area. This would make the emerging democratic personality of the euro-area more friendly and more convincing, increasing Europe's "soft power".

For cultural and linguistic reasons, China and other Asian countries struggle to be attractive for the rest of the world. While the U.S. and the U.K. are closing their doors to foreign students and to foreign workers, Europe could fill the huge hole that is opening between the East and the West and invest heavily in academic education of high quality and open to the rest of the world.

To be credible, Europe's openness needs to be accompanied by a consistent strategy on migration. Angela Merkel's experiment with open doors has backfired, so a new strategy needs to accept a gradual absorption of refugees and a convincing strategy for improving living conditions in the countries of origin.

A European strategy on migration from Africa and the Middle-East inevitably requires a capacity of intervention abroad, that is also hard power. Military capacity needs to be pooled and focused on Europe's strategic priorities. Financial resources must be invested in Africa. However, the process needs to be preceded by an open-hearted reflection on the values presiding over the deployment of Europe's role in the world. Peace, democracy and human rights need to prevail on everything else. A clear commitment could come via a constitutional process or via a protracted and shared public debate.

It is Europe's great opportunity to come clear with its past and become the responsible adult toward its best cultural legacy and toward the world, defending those principle that one day America will again be willing to share.