

**The EU's Strategic Adaptation to Trump's  
Transatlantic Trade Policy**

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# The EU's Strategic Adaptation to Trump's Transatlantic Trade Policy

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## Abstract

In 2003, the EU's *European Security Strategy* called for the development of 'strategic partnerships' with established and emerging powers to support and reinforce the advancement of European goals and values globally. The extent to which relations with the identified partners are genuinely strategic has been widely debated in both the policy and academic communities. This paper assesses how the EU's strategic partnership with the United States has been impacted by the Presidency of Donald Trump as a significant aberration from the 'normal' condition of the transatlantic relationship. Even in the domain of trade politics – arguably where the EU enjoys the greatest scope to act strategically – the *status quo ante* has been disrupted. Drawing on Smith's (2016) framework for assessing different elements of strategic partnerships, I argue that since 2017 the EU has faced a stern test, but shown signs of strategic adaptation. Yet it falls short of an 'ideal' strategic approach to relations with the US, evincing tendencies towards concentrating on managing the relationship at a technical level and/or belatedly reacting to Trump's behavior.

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## **Introduction**

The nature of the European Union's international presence remains a contested concept. Since the Maastricht Treaty entered force and created the Common Foreign and Security Policy intergovernmental pillar, the EU has increased the scope of its ambitions to affect global affairs. The 2003 *European Security Strategy (ESS)* affirmed that the EU was "inevitably a global player" and thus "should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world" (European Council, 2003). To facilitate this important role, the *ESS* called for the development of "strategic partnerships" with established and emerging powers to support and reinforce the advancement of European goals and values (European Council, 2003). In subsequent years, the extent to which relations with the identified strategic partners are genuinely strategic has been widely debated, with considerable criticism directed at the EU for failing to act in a strategic manner from both the academic and policy communities. Nevertheless, EU policymakers continue to endorse the 'strategic actor' and 'strategic partnership' concepts and invoke them within policy discourse when referring to relations with other major international players. The 'strategic' nature of the EU has become a core concern for scholars of its external relations.

This paper makes a contribution to the literature on the 'strategic' nature of key partnerships and on the actual presence of the EU in the contemporary global system. To that end, I employ Smith's (2016) typology of two central mechanisms that he persuasively argues are crucial to the conduct of strategic relations – framing and negotiation. The paper in which Smith developed this typology focused on the EU-China relationship, but it is applicable to any of the EU's strategic partnerships. This facilitates consideration of the evolving nature of the EU-US strategic partnership. The US stands out in its importance to the EU in all external policy domains, and has been claimed as the only partnership that can be designated as truly 'strategic' despite

lacking the official designation bestowed upon others (Renard, 2016; Smith, 2019). Arguably, since the relationship has historically featured extensive strategic interaction, an official announcement would be primarily performative/ceremonial.

US policy under President Donald Trump represents an aberration in the general trend of transatlantic relations. Rejecting his predecessors' support for the EU as a political project, Trump has questioned its value and framed it as a threat to US national security in order to justify certain tariffs. This dramatic change in behavior in a crucial relationship should provoke a response from the EU if it is to be considered as a credible strategic actor. Moreover, the extent to which the response is coordinated and comprehensive can be considered as an indicator of the *extent* of strategic behavior that the EU is capable of producing.

Thus, the contentious politics of the Trump administration offers the opportunity to generate insights into how the EU deals with adversity in a key bilateral relationship. Trump's presidency can be viewed as akin to a natural experiment – the changing of a key independent variable (favourability of the US president towards the EU) and examining its effect on the dependent variable (EU's handling of the strategic partnership). Trump presents a genuine challenge to much of what has been taken for granted about the transatlantic relationship, representing an important – and academically interesting – test for the EU as an international actor. I argue that since 2017 the EU has faced a stern test but shown signs of strategic adaptation. Yet it falls short of an 'ideal' strategic approach to relations with the US, evincing tendencies towards concentrating on managing the relationship at a technical level and/or belatedly reacting to Trump's behavior.

In the next section, I introduce Smith's (2016) concept of mechanisms within strategic partnerships, explaining how they are operationalised in the context of this paper. I also justify the

selection of the EU-US relationship as a case study. I then turn to the empirical analysis, tackling the EU's approach to the transatlantic trade relations. Specifically, I consider how the EU has adapted to the Trump administration's confrontational approach and whether its behavior reflects an effort to be more strategic. The paper closes by reflecting on the findings and mapping out possible avenues for future research.

### **Analytical Framework and Case Selection**

Within the literature, how the EU is conceptualised as a strategic actor – and what constitutes a strategic partnership – remains an open question. Yet the EU clearly considers itself to be some form of strategic actor and uses the 'strategic partnership' concept within its foreign policy language towards external actors (Blanco, 2016) and, in some cases, that becomes the dominant lens through which a relationship is viewed (Brown, 2018). To explore the question of whether the EU is able to act strategically in the context of a strategic partnership, it is helpful to narrow in on specific dynamics of these otherwise nebulous arrangements. To do so, I concentrate on the 'mechanisms' identified by Smith (2016) as central to the conduct of the EU's strategic partnerships: framing and negotiation. Framing is concerned with the EU's discourse around a relationship, while negotiation is concerned with how the EU engages with the partner to determine the framework in which the relationship operates. Smith identified a third mechanism, management, which looks at the processes of communication and action embedded in the routine operation of the relationship. However, this mechanism focuses more on day-to-day processes within the relationship. The current paper is concerned with the 'big picture' aspects of the trade relationship, hence I will concentrate on framing and negotiations only. Although each strategic partnership is unique in terms of organisation, degree of institutionalisation, and importance (to



either side) these mechanisms are common to all and therefore offer the basis for an analytical framework.

Smith's (2016) article first developed these concepts, and the intention in this paper is to harness their analytical leverage with respect to another strategic partnership. This paper uses a variety of methods to gather relevant data. Starting with the ways in which the EU attempts to frame a strategic partnership – that is, “the ways in which the EU has set out to establish and articulate the key requirements for strategic partnerships” (Smith, 2016: 78) – discourse/narrative analysis techniques will be employed to study primary sources. Here, I draw on Larsen's (1998) approaches to EU policy discourse analysis. Framing is a discursive practice, and in the context of the strategic partnerships the EU has approached this through its overarching ‘strategy’ documents. In its framing activities, the EU sets out its objectives, but also its expectations with respect to how the two sides will interact and treat each other. Statements from EU officials in the context of bilateral meetings and official visits, press releases, etc. are included along with joint statements by the US and EU. Using publicly available sources, I assess the extent of change/continuity in discursively-constructed strategic frames when dealing with the Trump administration.

With respect to negotiation - “the ways in which the EU has set out to construct a ‘negotiated order’ in its relations with major partners” (Smith, 2016: 78) - the analysis process traces developments in the domain of trade. This is not restricted to the negotiation of a specific trade deal (such as the ill-fated Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)), but rather the negotiations to determine the broader shape of the relationship within this specific policy domain. This analysis draws on publicly available documentation and media coverage to ascertain how and to what extent the EU's preferences and negotiating strategies changed over time. I assess the extent to which the EU's negotiations with the Trump administration produced outcomes

consistent with the EU's interests. Table 1 summarises the mechanisms and how they are analysed. The 'key questions' introduced by Smith (2016, p.79)<sup>1</sup> were predicated on an assumption of relative stability in the relationship. As I am investigating whether the EU was able to strategically respond to a disruptive change in the relationship, I have modified the questions to fit this purpose.

### *Case Selection*

The US represents the essential strategic partner for the EU; the relationship not only stretches back to the beginning of the European integration project, but arguably underpins it. The EU has benefitted from the US's security guarantee, commitment to an open international trade system, and promotion of multilateral institutions and agreements that advance both sides' interests (Riddervold and Newsome, 2018). In the other direction, "Europe remains Washington's first port of call on security questions and most economic ones" (Peterson, 2018a, p 646). Despite frequent turbulence in the transatlantic relationship, the two sides consistently proclaim shared values, common interests with respect to the international order, and the aims of their foreign policies. Tensions over the likes of the 2003 Iraq war, revelations of the extent of US surveillance in Europe (and targeted at European leaders), and the confrontational approach of President Trump aside, the two are arguably the most 'natural' allies amongst the main powers in the contemporary international arena. Yet the two have never formally declared a strategic partnership in the way that the EU has with others, such as China. Yet if the EU can lay claim to any of its relations being either *strategic* or a *partnership*, it is the one with the US that mostly closely fits the bill.

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<sup>1</sup> Framing: "How and to what extent has the EU been able to establish a consistent framing discourse that has shaped its policies towards its key partners?"

Negotiation: "How and to what extent has the EU been able to shape through negotiation a framework of institutions and norms that can govern its relationship with strategic partners?"

Table 1: Strategic Partnership Mechanisms, adapted from Smith (2016)

| <b>Mechanism</b>   | <b>Definition</b>  | <b>Key question</b>  | <b>Method of analysis</b> | <b>Sources</b>  |
|--------------------|--|--|---------------------------|---|
| <i>Framing</i>     | The discursive creation of expectations for the strategic partnership and wider rhetoric of the state of the relationship.                         | “ How and to what extent has the EU been able to adapt its framing discourse that shapes its policies towards its key partners?”   | Discourse analysis        | Strategy documents<br>Press releases<br>Speeches<br>Quotations from key actors (in the media) |
| <i>Negotiation</i> | The construction of the ‘ negotiated order’ – covering institutions and norms – that provide the framework for the conduct of strategic relations. | “ How and to what extent has the EU been able to negotiate within the established framework of institutions and norms to secure its interests relationship with strategic partners?” | Process-tracing           | Press releases<br>Media reports<br>Quotations from key actors (in the media)                  |

President Trump's attitude toward and approach to the EU stands in sharp contrast to his predecessors. While a presidential candidate, he backed the UK's departure from the Union and expressed general disdain for the EU itself. Since coming to office, Trump has criticised the EU for unfair trade practices, its lack of action regarding Ukraine, its migration and refugee/asylum policies, and general dependence on the US in numerous domains. Although his predecessors were periodically critical of the EU on select issues, Trump's antagonistic rhetoric, broad-ranging criticisms, and apparent disinterest in understanding the EU as an entity singles him out as the most anti-EU president of the US since the integration project began. President Barack Obama had entered into talks for an ambitious trade agreement and warned against Brexit (Asthana and Mason, 2016), George W. Bush praised the EU's 2004 enlargement (Carter, 2004), while Bill Clinton oversaw the launch of the New Transatlantic Agenda and the Transatlantic Economic Partnership (Steffenson, 2005, p.26). Compared to his predecessors, Trump's stance marks him out as a significant break in terms of the US's approach to Europe, providing a test for the EU's capacity to act strategically when a partner switches from a cooperative to antagonistic approach.

Trade is an appropriate policy domain for analysis for three main reasons. First, the rapid shift from working towards "the world's most ambitious trade agreement between the world's two largest economies" (Young, 2016, p.345) to the brink of a new trade war posed a significant strategic challenge to the EU. This was, arguably, the most pronounced component of the challenge of the Trump administration from a European perspective, more so than either climate change policy or Iran policy. Second, trade policy is the domain where the EU has the greatest capacity for strategic action, so in that sense *should* be one where a strategic response is 'easier' to construct. If the EU did not respond strategically to the abrupt change in US policy in trade, we would not expect it to in other policy domains. Third, as the US is the EU's most important trade partner

challenges arising in this area cannot be ignored. In 2019, the US accounted for 15.2% of the EU's total external trade in goods (European Commission, 2020a).

### **Transatlantic Trade Politics during the Trump Administration**

A significant component of Trump's campaign narrative focussed on his business career, centring on his claim of closing 'deals'. Trade was an area where Trump promised to bring the weight of his experience, ending what he saw as unfair practices by trading partners who had been ripping the US off. Trump clearly disfavoured multilateral trade arrangements, such as the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). TTIP was essentially dead in the water with Trump taking office. Although he had said little about it during the campaign, European officials assessed that it was no longer realistic to expect continuation of negotiations, and were more concerned about the prospects of a transatlantic trade war (Borger, 2016). Yet Trump's need to be seen domestically to be living up to the self-promoted image as a dealmaker created an opportunity to keep trade on the table. Early in his administration, Trump suggested bilateral trade deals with a number of EU member states, indicating his lack of awareness of how the EU bloc functioned as a trading entity. Yet this created an opportunity to revisit the idea of a EU-US deal. Ultimately, the failure of such efforts and Trump's imposition of tariffs against EU aluminium and steel, which were justified on national security grounds, represented a significant departure from the historical pattern of transatlantic relations and forced the EU to find a way to limit damage to the partnership.

The abrupt shift in US trade policy provides an ideal test for the EU's capacity for strategic behavior. Unquestionably, the EU would prefer to work with a cooperative US in the international system and made clear its intention to work with the Trump administration to advance bilateral

interests where possible. The strategic objective for the EU is to preserve bilateral cooperation broadly. In trade, the EU has sought to avert a ‘trade war’ that has been threatened by Trump at various points.

### *Framing*

Framing is a key component of a strategic partnership because it relates to recognition of the other actor as deserving of the special status and creates a narrative about the purpose of the relationship. The framing that the EU had developed in its relationship with the US became largely redundant upon the election of Trump, particularly due to his ‘America first’ discourse. If the EU is to be considered as acting strategically, then we would anticipate that it would adapt its strategic framing to deal with the shift in the US’s approach. Indeed, the evidence demonstrates that while the EU’s framing continued to emphasise the importance of the relationship and benefits of the cooperation, new dimensions were added whereby the EU criticised the US’s approach to trade relations and stressed that it did not pose a national security threat.

Prior to Trump, the EU had framed the US as a critical partner. This was revealed in the strategic rationale put forward for TTIP just one month prior to the 2016 presidential election:

In this uncertain world, having close economic partners could help Europe to shape globalisation according to our high standards and according to our vision.... We want TTIP also to be a tool which would help us shape globalisation by agreeing on high standards on environment, labour or consumer protection. If we work together, and only if we work together, we will have much bigger impact (Garcia Bercero, 2016).

TTIP was about more than just trade: it was about the capacity of the transatlantic partners to continue to influence the wider global system in line with their interests even as the ‘rise of the

rest' diminished their relative share of economic, political, and military power. The EU's framing of TTIP thus sought to project the EU as a viable strategic economic partner for the US during a period of global change marked by a redistribution of global power. Trump's 'America First' mantra embodied a framing of the US's new approach to the changing external environment that was at odds with the EU's vision.

The framing of the trade relationship employed by the EU up until this point was now, essentially, defunct. It was clear that Trump had no interest in the EU as a viable strategic economic partner. Trump appeared to view trade through the singular lens of competition, and any deals to be struck were about rebalancing 'unfair' arrangements that were detrimental to the US. His 'America first' rhetoric signalled that he placed little value on strategic partners and did not share his predecessors' assessments that the US needed assistance.

Further, given the heightened emphasis on US interests, values-based arguments were likely to fall on deaf ears. Yet the EU initially continued to push this line on values in the early post-election period. For instance, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's congratulatory message to Trump offered "close cooperation" provided that this was done on the basis of putatively shared "common values – democracy, freedom, as well as the respect for the rule of law and the dignity of each and every person" (cited by Faiola, 2016).

The EU initially adopted a wait-and-see approach to the TTIP negotiations, but sought to lower expectations about prospects for progress. Malmström described the talks as "in the freezer", warning that it might take some time to be "defrosted" depending on signals from the US administration (cited by *Inside US Trade*, 2017). It was reported by *The Times* that the EU was "keen not to appear to plead for the reopening of TTIP negotiations but will discuss the 'economic and strategic rationale' for a deal if the American side does the same" (Dean, Waterfield and

Wright, 2017). This approach demonstrates that the EU's approach to framing the trade relationship had shifted away from active participation on an initiative that would underpin global order; the metaphors invoked suggested that the relationship was, in some respects, on ice.

In a December 2016 speech, EU Trade Commissioner Malmström argued that if the US became “more inward-looking”, there was an opportunity for the EU to “fill the void... show[ing] that walls, that protectionism are not what the world needs right now. We can show that open borders and trade are compatible with sustainable development and high standards” (cited by Inside US Trade, 2016). Just after Trump's inauguration, Malmström (2017) reiterated this theme in a speech on the future of the EU's trade policy by stating – without direct reference to the US – that “those who, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, think that we can become great again by rebuilding borders, reimposing trade barriers, restricting people's freedom to move, are doomed to fail”. The framing employed by Malmström implicitly repudiates Trump's initiatives and highlights differences between the two sides – prior to Trump, emphasis was placed on similarities and congruence of interests and a joint commitment to reshaping the global trade order together. With the ascendancy of the ‘America first’ discourse, EU actors were signalling that they would not change direction, even if this meant effectively going it alone.

Hostility towards the EU was a frequent theme of Trump's public utterances and tweets. As the EU exports more to the US than it imports in return, it ‘enjoys’ a trade surplus in the relationship. This in particular has been a point of focus for Trump, who appears to consider a trade deficit as evidence of being treated unfairly and taken advantage of. He has gone as far as to claim that the EU “was set up to take advantage of the United States” (Galindo, 2018). Transatlantic trade tensions heightened further when it became known that the US was considering tariffs on imports of steel and aluminium from the EU (and elsewhere) on the basis of



a Section 232 investigation into the national security implications of imports. The framing of the strategic trade relationship between the US and the EU is now much more difficult for the EU, relative to experience prior administrations. While the convergence between European and American business interests remained unchanged, the close economic relationship was no longer reflected in the discourse employed by the US administration.

In response, EU actors changed their rhetorical approach by vociferously criticising the US's rhetoric and actions. Malmström reminded the Trump administration that the EU was “a friend and an ally of the US” (cited by Beesley and Donnan, 2017), but made no reference to the mutual benefits of close cooperation. Instead, the EU's framing shifted to essentially ‘rescuing’ the relationship, avoiding confrontation and conflict, and seeking to address ‘problem’ areas of the trade relationship. Around the same time, French President Macron had to directly reject Trump's framing of the relationship, insisting in a phone call with the latter that the EU did not pose a national security threat (Rose, 2018). This became part of the broader framing, as evinced by Malmström reiterating the point several times in 2018 and 2019. For example, she stated that “we cannot see how the European Union, friends and allies in NATO, can be a threat to national security in the US” (cited Von der Burchard and Hanke Vela, 2018), a specific point that was deployed repeatedly (Amaro, 2018; Kim, 2019). The framing thus narrowed from the broader ambitions of shaping the global trade order – emphasised throughout the Obama era - to focus on a few sectoral issues within the bilateral context – a far cry from the emphasis placed by both sides on global leadership through deepening the strategic partnership that the EU employed during the Obama administration.

Juncker's visit to Washington DC in July 2018 marked a key stage in the negotiation between the EU and the US (see next subsection). The framing discourse that emerged from the meeting was also significant for the EU, as the language on both sides changed. The resulting Joint Statement referred to "a new phase in the relationship... a phase of close friendship, of strong trade relations in which both of us will win" (US-EU, 2018). As argued above, reciprocity is key for the validation of a frame developed by one side in a strategic partnership. As the EU had continued to use some components of the old frame – focussing on friendship, mutual values and interests – the Joint Statement arguably revitalised these components. Notably, the statement revived the global trade system as a component of the transatlantic agenda – asserting that the two sides would "join forces" against "unfair global trade practices". The specifics of the agreement are examined below, but the framing within the statement and around this meeting is significant.

Firstly, the use of *friendship* is more positive than the language used from Trump's election win onwards. Earlier that month, Trump referred to the EU as a "foe" of the US (cited by Kennedy, 2018), indicating that the Juncker had successfully won over the President during their meetings. Secondly, the concept of *winning* chimes with a theme that was pervasive in Trump's election campaign. This arguably represents the EU's reciprocal move to validate part of the US's framing of the relationship in turn – by definition, reciprocity must cut both ways, it cannot solely be the US reciprocating to the EU. The agreement on positive language marks a departure from the antagonistic, pessimistic framing of the relationship since the death of TTIP and the onset of the trade 'war' rhetoric. The most significant aspect of this is the extent to which the statement represents a shift in the US's framing, as Trump had personally instigated the deterioration of the trade relationship. Trump's unfiltered Twitter activity even referred to "love" between the two sides.



The EU initial response to Trump’s trade policy was to attempt to maintain the emphasis on values underpinning the trade relationship – commitment to the global multilateral trading system and its rules, free and open trade, the importance of transatlantic leadership within the system, and benefits of a deep and comprehensive FTA. Yet this became less central to EU policy discourse as it started to react to the rhetorical and policy changes enacted by the Trump administration.

Despite new Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan (cited by Palmer and Moens, 2020) calling for a “reset” of the relationship in early 2020, this rhetoric did not translate into further change in the EU’s framing. Ostensibly, trade slipped down the agenda as the coronavirus pandemic took up more attention; thereafter Hogan sought a “truce” with the US due to the economic problems faced on both sides of the Atlantic (Euractiv, 2020). At the announcement of a ‘mini deal’ in August 2020 (discussed below), Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis framed the outcome in

terms of mutual interests, but also made reference to the desire for improved relations broadly, and even revived the concept of the wider global importance of the relationship:

This deal provides both sides with a true win-win outcome, helping us to strengthen our partnership even further... From the EU side, we view this agreement as an important step towards improving our relationship and resolving outstanding disputes. We remain eager to deepen transatlantic cooperation wherever possible as we firmly believe that, when it comes to truly global challenges, the chances of achieving successful global outcomes are improved if the European Union and United States work together (European Commission, 2020b).

This statement encapsulated the EU's framing of the transatlantic relationship that had now consolidated during the Trump administration: the relationship required rescuing through advancing mutual interests, while dialling down the emphasis on the broader goals pertaining to the global system.

Revisiting the central question on framing set out in Table 1, *“How and to what extent has the EU been able to adapt its framing discourse that shapes its policies towards its key partners?”* From the outset, the EU attempted to maintain its framing of the strategic partnership grounded in the key thematic discourses that had been established over decades: commitment to the partnership as a whole, adherence to shared values, and support for a rules-based multilateral trading system. Reciprocity is key for framing strategic partnerships; if the other side diverges, then consistency becomes problematic rather than advantageous.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the EU continued to reference its status as a friend and ally of the US, the mutual benefits of cooperation, and its preference for sticking to WTO rules, it nevertheless sought to counteract Trump's framing by calling out the US's behavior and rejecting the characterisation of itself as posing a national security threat. In short, the framing mechanism was harnessed to adapt to the new situation. Yet, framing was often

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I would disagree with Smith's (2016) singular emphasis on consistency; this case study has shown that there are situations where changing the framing may be necessary in the context of a bilateral relationship and that this can be achieved without rendering the description of 'strategic partnership' inapplicable.

reactive – when there was little noise coming from the US administration, the EU was largely silent.

### *Negotiation*

The progression towards a newly negotiated order of the strategic economic relationship arguably peaked with the TTIP process, even if progress had ground to a halt before Trump took office. Following Trump's inauguration, the EU found itself facing an entirely different situation – bilateral negotiations were out, multilateral negotiations were on neither side's agenda, and instead the EU's single most important trade partner was rapidly pushing the relationship towards conflict. Thus, the EU found itself in a position whereby the existing negotiated order of the relationship was being undermined by its putative partner, and the negotiations towards a new order had ended in failure. In essence, the task of the EU was to negotiate with the Trump administration to prevent a further breakdown of relations and potential slide into a full-blown trade war. The EU's rules-based approach to trade and considerable power in trade negotiations – given the Commission's role as the single voice, backed by an approved mandate – arguably represents one of the greatest opportunities for the EU to devise and execute strategic objectives. In line with the changes to its strategic framing, the EU also changed its negotiating approach after January 2017.

The EU sought to resolve the problems as perceived by the Trump administration, particularly around steel and aluminium. As noted in the previous section, in the first half of 2018 the EU attempted to dissuade the US from implementing the so-called Section 232 tariffs, offering to cooperate on global-level issues of over-capacity and explore options for improving bilateral relations. Yet Juncker made clear that the EU would not engage unconditionally: “as a longstanding partner and friend of the US, we will not negotiate under threat” (cited by European

Commission, 2018b), including under imposition of tariffs. While this stakes out an ostensibly firm position that implicitly recognises the EU's relative trade power and invokes the discourse of partnership, it transpired that this was not a sacrosanct position, as the EU ultimately chose to engage with the Trump administration to prevent further escalation.

Meeting in March 2018 EU-US, Malmström warned the Trump administration that if measures imposed were non-complaint under WTO rules and “like it could, we will of course retaliate,” while urging caution on using the term “trade war” (Beesley and Donnan, 2017). Later, Juncker warned that “we would react with countermeasures within days; we do not need two months. In the hope that this is not necessary but we are in elevated battle mode” (cited by Leonard, 2017), indicating a hardening on the EU's position. The joint press release from the meeting stated simply that:

We have agreed to launch immediately a process of discussion with President Trump and the Trump Administration on trade issues of common concern, including steel and aluminium, with a view to identifying mutually acceptable outcomes as rapidly as possible (European Commission, 2018a).

Despite this more positive rhetoric, the US imposed the Section 232 tariffs on steel (25%) and aluminium (10%) from the EU. Tariffs on cars and car parts were also proposed, with Trump threatening “tremendous retribution” if no agreement was reached on auto trade with the EU (cited by Dawson and Zumbrun, 2018). French President Macron starkly criticised Trump's ‘America first’ platform: “Economic nationalism leads to war. That is exactly what happened in the 1930s” and promised a “firm and proportionate” response (Sandford, 2018). While this contributes to the critique of the US's framing of trade issues in the bilateral relationship, it is also designed to communicate the EU's position publicly, as Trump himself has done through Twitter. Commission President Juncker condemned protectionism, while reiterating that the EU had attempted to

cooperate: “the past months we have continuously engaged with the US at all possible levels to jointly address the problem of overcapacity in the steel sector” (cited by European Commission, 2018b). Malmström pressed that she had “argued for the EU and the US to engage in a positive transatlantic trade agenda”, and promised a “proportionate” response including rebalancing measures “in accordance with WTO rules” (cited by European Commission, 2018b). Juncker stated that “The US now leaves us with no choice but to proceed with a WTO dispute settlement case and with the imposition of additional duties on a number of imports from the US. We will defend the Union's interests, in full compliance with international trade law” (cited by European Commission, 2018b). These statements conveyed, in public settings, the EU’s strategy of pursuing bilateral negotiations to resolve problems, and then relying on retaliatory action and seeking dispute resolution when limited progress was made.

Following through on these stated intentions, the EU imposed retaliatory sanctions, with Commission Vice-President Šefčovič insisting that “The application of the re-balancing duties is fully in line with the WTO rules. It is a measured and proportionate response to the unilateral and illegal decision taken by the United States to impose tariffs on the European steel and aluminium exports” (O’Hagan, 2018). The EU also initiated a case against the Section 232 tariffs within the framework of the WTO’s Dispute Settlement Body (DS548), harnessing the available institutional framework to manage their trade relationship.

The US has initiated a complaint (DS559) (WTO, 2020) in response to the EU’s retaliatory measures, arguing that the EU had interpreted the legality of another WTO member’s measures itself. This action reflects the extent to which the EU’s retaliation against the US marked a departure from its prior approach to transatlantic trade issues. US Trade Representative Lighthizer tried to undermine the action taken by the EU, arguing that “retaliatory tariffs underscore the

complete hypocrisy that governs so much of the global trading system. For months, the EU, China, and others have criticized the trade policy of the United States, while claiming to champion the WTO. But their recent tariffs prove that they simply ignore WTO rules whenever doing so is convenient” (cited by Caporal, 2020). Whether hypocritical or not, the EU clearly sought to use its power where possible to defend its interests with a robust response to the US’ tactics of imposing the 232 tariffs.

This escalation towards a trade war halted following Juncker’s visit to the Washington DC in July 2018. The trip was intended to limit the damage in the relationship and to have the new steel and aluminium tariffs lifted. The resulting agreement – outlined in their Joint Statement (US-EU, 2018) – set out an ambition to negotiate the reduction or elimination of tariffs, barriers, and subsidies across a range of sectors, as well as generally increasing bilateral trade. The statement also referenced discussions on standards. Conspicuous by their absence are the broader strategic issues that the EU had previously sought to link to a deal with the US, such as climate change and sustainability. Talks on agriculture and services were also excluded. Within the context of the EU’s new strategic framing of the relationship – a narrower focus on bilateral interests and rescuing the relationship from an all-out trade war, this omission is indicative of convergence between strategic framing and negotiation on the EU’s part. Further, the agreement’s scope was not comparable to a new FTA, arguably freeing the EU of criticism for abandoning its values given that these strategic issues have been linked only to the ambitious deep and comprehensive deals proposed.

The decision to renege on the position of not negotiating with the US while the 232 tariffs remained in place and more were being threatened may on first consideration appear as capitulation. An alternative perspective is that it demonstrates that the EU remained flexible and responsive. Rather than continuing along a path of deteriorating relations and escalating trade



conflict, the EU used Trump's own preference for in-person meetings, ambitious statements, and photo opportunities to change the trajectory of the relationship. The EU did not have to give much away in terms of substantive concessions at this point – it promised to buy more American soybeans and liquefied natural gas, which would be driven by market forces – but the agreement to refrain from new tariffs provided negotiations continued was a key EU objective, although there were concerns that Trump might live up to his word (Serhan, 2018).

A key move for the EU, which arguably demonstrated a strategic approach to negotiations, was ruling out a comprehensive trade deal, which the US had hoped to secure. This was in line with the EU's new strategic framing – cooperating to advance common interests, while preventing a trade war without conceding to threats from the US. The EU's justification of seeking a more limited deal was based on wider strategic issues, particularly setting out adherence to the Paris Climate Accords as a precondition for a more comprehensive agreement. Trump had already determined that the US would withdraw from the Accords as soon as permitted (November 2020) and was unwilling to concede on this point. While the EU could not use trade in this instance as leverage over the US's climate policies, it has consistently held its position that it will not compromise on this strategic objective for the sake of a comprehensive trade deal. Arguably, this represents adaptation to the realities of dealing with the Trump administration. The EU was able to get back to the negotiating table on some form of agreement - albeit one of significantly reduced ambition compared to TTIP – and avert a worsening of transatlantic disputes, preventing the imposition of further duties/tariffs.

Transatlantic trade negotiations have seen little in the way of substantive progress, although the EU does not appear to be pushing hard for a deal, and instead is hoping to run down the clock on this period in the relationship by banking on Trump failing to secure re-election. The key

objective is, arguably, preventing the worsening of relations and imposition of the car/car parts 232 tariffs which Trump threatened again in June (Alden, 2020). Hogan stated that these threats were indicative of the likely “turbulent period ahead in the context of the US election” (cited by Baschuk, 2020), driven by the Trump administration. This was explicitly confirmed by Republican Senator Grassley, chair of the Senate Finance Committee when asked: “we don’t want to negotiate with them as long as they don’t want to negotiate agriculture” (cited by Monicken, 2020). The ‘mini deal’ of August 2020 – with both sides agreeing to lower tariffs – indicates only marginal progress. Although this represented a departure from the EU’s position in 2019 that it sought a broader deal rather than smaller deals, it was justified by Commission officials as a tactic to calm the tensions in the relationship (Hanke Vela, 2020). It is also consistent with the strategic framing of the relationship established in response to Trump’s approach to the relationship.

Ultimately, the incompatibility of the two sides on agriculture is the main reason for substantive progress, rather than the EU not making effective use of the mechanisms at its disposal. Strategically, the EU has shown its willingness to continue working with the US – and signing deals – to advance common interests, while preventing the relationship from sliding into a trade war.

Returning to the key question as set out in Table 1: *“How and to what extent has the EU been able to negotiate within the established framework of institutions and norms to secure its interests relationship with strategic partners?”*

Arguably, the challenge has been even greater than securing EU interests in a relationship with a (newly) unwilling partner; rather, the objective of negotiations became preventing the collapse of the relationship into an outright trade war. In line with the shift in the EU’s strategic framing demonstrated in the preceding section, the EU’s use of negotiations also changed to deal

with the Trump challenge. Obviously, the TTIP negotiations that the EU and US had been working on prior to Trump's inauguration were not carried forward. Yet negotiated agreements to avoid further tariffs was a key success for the EU in terms of staving off escalation of a trade war that seemed all but inevitable in the first half of 2018. Rather than insist on reviving something akin to TTIP or the lifting of punitive measures prior to talks, the EU focussed on specific, more technical problems and used Trump's predilection for in-person meetings and photo opportunities to its advantage. Although Trump later reverted to threats of tariffs, the EU has staved off the trade war that he relished, with only (at the time of writing) weeks to go until the 2020 presidential election.

Although the US has made concessions on tariffs, its overall approach to the trade relationship has not altered, indicating the limited effectiveness of the EU's levers – as economic superpowers of roughly equal size, there is no obvious mechanism the EU has at its disposal to compel the US. Despite the extent of bilateral interdependence, Trump's zero-sum approach to trade and broader 'America First' foreign policy orientation changes the nature of the game: the EU has not been able to rely on mutual recognition of the importance of the relationship or the broader multilateral trade system which constrains its options for managing the relationship. However, the EU's negotiations have evinced strategic behavior, pursuing an approach consistent with its adapted strategic framing, advancing certain economic interests, and rescuing the relationship for descending into a trade war. As stated above, the stalemate in negotiations towards a larger deal is a consequence of incompatible positions; by mid-2020, the global pandemic had diverted attention and the 2020 US presidential election draws closer, potentially giving the EU an opportunity to run the clock down on the Trump era relationship.

## Conclusion

In Isaac Asimov's (1953) *Foundation* trilogy, the appearance of the character 'the Mule' is used as a plot twist whereby a well-laid plan is disrupted by an unforeseen event; everything that was once considered to be a certainty is thrown into question and the carefully-mapped future plans for the salvation of the galactic empire are almost derailed. Trump can be seen as the Mule of the transatlantic relationship – unexpected appearance (electoral victory), considerable powers (office of the US presidency and a disregard for the norms that would otherwise constrain behavior), motivated primarily by self-interest rather than common interest, and generally disrupting the anticipated flow of events. As with the protagonists in *Foundation*, the EU was not adequately prepared for a dramatic and rapid shift in the status of the strategic partnership, particularly in the economic domain where the relationship is generally understood to be the strongest.

The EU's approach to framing and negotiating the relationship was directly challenged by the arrival of Trump. Despite the scale of the challenge, the EU has pursued actions that are indicative of a strategic response to some scale and have avoided significant damage to the bilateral trade relationship. The EU institutions have shown their capacity to adapt to the new circumstances and leverage the two mechanisms of the strategic partnership.

I argued that for the EU to be considered as acting strategically within a bilateral relationship, it would need to use both strategic mechanisms – framing and negotiation -- effectively. The preceding analysis shows that this was indeed the case, albeit with varying degrees of success. Framing changed in response to the antagonistic rhetoric of President Trump. The EU shifted away from 'big picture' items such as climate change and transatlantic cooperation on the rules of the multilateral trading system, to a framing that invoked the historical ties and reinforced commitment to the same broad set of values and interests. However, the reactive shift intensified

as Trump began invoking the discourse of national security threats. In negotiation, the EU again adapted to the new situation, recognising that a more limited set of objectives was the only realistic possibility while dealing with Trump. It was then able to use policy tools – high-level diplomacy and tariffs – to advance its strategic interests. This is indicative of the EU using both the framing and negotiation mechanisms to adapt to the new reality of the Trump administration. Further, the evidence shows congruence the mechanisms in the sense that the approach of defending itself from Trump’s trade war while remaining open to negotiating limited deals was consistent with the strategic framing of the relationship as essentially about advancing common interests and limiting harm.

This analysis suggests that the EU has behaved strategically in responding to the challenge that Trump’s ‘America First’ approach has posed for trade policy. Trade policy, however, is a relatively easy case for EU strategic behavior given its internal capacity and external power. More research is required to assess whether the patterns of strategic behavior observed here are found in other policy domains of the transatlantic relationship. Climate change and the Iran nuclear agreement would be useful case studies as they are issues of significant importance to the EU, are topics on which the Trump administration has diverged sharply from the Obama administration and from EU preferences, and they reflect different levels of internal capacity and external power from trade policy and each other. These issues would, therefore, constitute harder tests of the EU’s strategic capacity. Through cross-case comparison, it would also be possible to investigate whether there is greater or lesser strategic adaptation to the ‘Trump challenge’ depending on the issue.

Although much of the discussion here has focussed on the unique circumstances of the Trump administration, it is important to acknowledge that difficult issues existed in the relationship before Trump took office, and will still be there irrespective of whether he leaves

office in 2021 or 2025. This indicates the need for longitudinal study across administrations, particularly comparing Trump and his successor, before generalisations can be drawn from the current study. Although Trump might be viewed as a temporal anomaly – a ‘blip’ – for the EU-US relationship, the sudden and extreme shift in US trade policy towards the EU presented a natural experiment to evaluate the EU’s capacity for strategic action in a key bilateral relationship under drastically altered and adverse circumstances. Thus, it is arguably possible to take insights from this current study to think about how the EU might be able to respond in extreme circumstances with other strategic partners.

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