Interview with Stephen Szabo

Perinovic: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

Szabo: Of course, it’s my pleasure.

Perinovic: Let me start with a background question. Was there anything in particular that pushed you to study Transatlanticism, Europe, and/or Germany?

Szabo: My family came from Eastern Europe, and I came of age during the Cold War when Europe and Germany were the center of foreign policy. So, at the time you had to know something about Europe to really become an expert in foreign policy.

Perinovic: Germany has long been Europe’s economic and political fulcrum point, with Angela Merkel being positioned as a stable power-player in German, European, and Transatlantic politics. However, given the rise of extremist parties like the right-wing AFD (Alternative for Germany), the continued woes of the SPD (Social Democratic Party), and the difficulties that Merkel’s CDU(Christian Democratic Union) has faced in its various attempts at forming coalitions, do you feel that Germany no longer stands as Europe’s stable political base? Is Merkel’s legacy in jeopardy?

Szabo: People will always reassure you that the institutions are strong, and the economy is doing well, so Germany’s by no means a basket case. The German government and economy are stable while the parties are in flux. Germany itself won’t go off the rails but its ability to project leadership will definitely go off the rails in a seven party parliament. Merkel lost her party and public on the refugee issue, and if you look at recent polls the number of Germans that think she should be chancellor again has plummeted. She may want to hang on for a year or two and have a graceful exit, but I can’t see her playing a continued role in German politics.

It will be really interesting if the CDU and SPD go in together on a coalition. The SPD is openly anti-Trump, and it will be hard for Merkel to have a balancing role if the foreign minister is a Social Democrat. So far she’s avoided doing what Schroeder did in escalating tensions with Bush over Iraq. While the CDU/SPD Coalition is very pro-Europe, a growing Europe fatigue is taking hold among Germans who are getting tired of sending money to the EU to prop up countries like Greece. The AFD now has about 90 seats in the Bundestag, which renders them the main opposition group if the SPD and CDU do form a coalition, which gives an outsized role to the party with perhaps the most overtly anti-European views since 1949.

Perinovic: Prior to 2016, there was frequent talk during the Obama Administration about a strategic pivot away from Europe and toward the Pacific. At the time, many Transatlanticists expressed concern about the long-term implications that this pivot would have for U.S.-Europe relations. Do you feel that this pivot is still in effect and if so, does it still represent a challenge to American relations with Europe?

Szabo: I don’t see a re-pivot to Europe, as China has really shifted America’s focus toward Asia and the Pacific. That said, the Trump Administration hasn’t changed or reduced the Obama Administration’s policy of reinforcing the Baltic States. The Trump/Bannon view was to not get pulled into places like
Korea or Afghanistan, but he's since doubled down on that. Further, American strategic elites are much more focused on China now than on Europe or Russia.

Every administration has felt that Europe should be doing more for their own defense. Look at the Germans, they're increasing defense spending slowly, but if they took the threat more seriously they would be doing more. Russia is absolutely a direct threat to its immediate neighbors, but Germany and France don't consider it as such. They're much more focused on counter-terrorism and border security. In cases like this the U.S. is helpful, as we provide deterrence and play a balancing role in nuclear security.

To what extent has the security situation been altered? If we should have a more aggressive security stance in Europe is yet to be seen. Russia is a regional power, yes, but it's a region that's extremely important to the U.S. Much of Russian foreign policy is domestically driven, and Putin frequently turns to nationalism to compensate for a weak economy.

The shift in how Republicans and Democrats view Russia is also very interesting. How deep that change goes is hard to tell, as it's so mired in partisan politics, but on the surface it's been a paradigm shift.

**Perinovic:** You wrote a book in 2004 entitled *Parting Ways: The Crisis in German-American Relations*. Where do you think German-American relations are 14 years later? Are we still parting ways?

**Szabo:** The first parting of ways (featured in the book) was between Bush and Schroeder over the Iraq War, in which case you had a very neoconservative government that couldn't care less about Germany and “Old Europe.” The Obama years were of course defined by increased closeness, but I think we're back to where we were under the Bush Administration, only this time it's much worse. The Bush Administration wasn't anti-EU; they believed that European unity and the European Project were firmly in the American interest. Today you have a belief that we're in a zero-sum competition and that we should use the military to leverage the Europeans. This is a very different attitude to what we've seen from any U.S. administration since 1945. People in the Administration are openly anti-European. I think that Trump can do substantial damage to the relationship if he gets a second term.

Germany's fringe parties have all been soft on Russia (AFD, die Linke, and the Green Party), and when Merkel goes there's a big question on how German foreign policy changes its approach to Russia. Germany's party system is becoming unworkable as there isn't a majority party governing from the center due in large part to the continued failure of East Germany's incorporation. The Bundesrepublik is definitely not going to be as stable or predictable, but it won't become Weimar by any means. For one, it has a great economy and strong private sector, whereas Weimar was an economic nightmare.

**Perinovic:** There has been a great deal of nationalist bluster on both sides of the Atlantic, with openly nationalist candidates winning seats and positions of prominence. Do you view this as a long-term threat to Transatlanticism, or do you see this more from a longue durée perspective as a blip in an otherwise stable seven-decade partnership?

**Szabo:** Well that's the topic of my talk, so I won't give too much away. I'll argue both sides, but I'm still basically an optimist. The American public hasn't shifted as much on foreign policy as it appears, but I think there's a lot of damage being done by Trump to America's image in Europe especially among younger Europeans. The question is when he leaves office if the polarization will follow him. That said the
notion that the U.S. is a bastion of liberal order has absolutely been weakened, and perhaps fatally flawed. The fact that the makeup of the U.S. population is less European than it used to be has perhaps weakened the cultural ties.

As much as Europe wants to take on its own responsibility, it still needs the U.S. The future of the relationship is all going to hinge on leadership and what comes after Trump. We're in a time of great change and we could be entering a period in which we see a new Europe. The Continent’s leaders are becoming younger, so it will be interesting to see where they direct policy going forward. That said, I don't think that Germany is capable of filling a U.S. leadership vacuum due to its complicated history and that the current political class isn't as pro-Europe as prior generations.

The rise of this strong-man form of politics is worrying, and it has come up in part due to slow economic growth and immigration. In addition to our security relationship we still share values. I think we're going to see a much less open Europe, and you're even seeing that even in German elections, which are in large part a reaction against globalization. When Trump says awful things about refugees there are leaders in Europe that openly agree with him. The liberal order is in big trouble, and if the West splits we're all in trouble.

Perinovic: Is there a definitive moment in postwar history you can point to that bears any similarity to what we are currently experiencing between the United States and Europe?

Szabo: There was a big debate over the Marshall Plan and NATO in Congress and at the time there were many people in Robert Taft’s camp that didn't want to get involved in Europe again. However, I think the present more closely resembles the Interwar period in that we’re seeking a strong economic approach to Europe in favor of the diplomatic approach.

Since 1949, U.S. policy has long been dominated by the idea that we don't want a Soviet/Russian hegemon dominating Europe, and that was the strategic glue that held us in Europe. Once the strategic glue of the Cold War ended you began to see some fracturing. It’s almost always centered on economic issues, but generally they've always been kept within bounds. I think the rise of neo-conservatism with Reagan began to create a split in diplomatic cultures between the U.S. and Europe, as few Europeans thought in those terms.

We've had indications that things began to slip after the Cold War and the cracks really began showing in 2003 when France and Germany lined up against us over Iraq. However, we've never had an administration that's been so reckless and gone so far out of its way to alienate Germany. U.S.-German relations have never been smooth, but if you had a break with Schroeder and Bush then we're currently seeing a chasm.

The rise of China is a new factor that is really affecting Transatlanticism. The Germans are actively trying to prevent Chinese acquisitions of German firms, and given Trump’s positions on economic protectionism, we could find much common ground on intellectual property and economic security. On the flip side, Germany is one of the biggest globalized powers in the world, and half of their economy is based on exports. Now they’re seeing a Chinese government that also wants globalization whereas the U.S. is getting belligerently protectionist, and that represents a real threat to German interests.
**Perinovic:** As a political scientist, has your field changed in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election? How do you think the field can or should change moving forward?

**Szabo:** I think that those of us in the DC area looking at foreign policy are really thinking that everything is up in the air. There is a feeling that this administration doesn’t care about what scholars, experts, and think tanks have to say.

The idea that ideas matter in foreign policy is under great stress. I think we're going to see a shift away from a constructivist mentality back toward economic realism or economic mercantilism. We're seeing a return of geo-economics and viewing the world as a zero-sum economic arena instead of a positive sum-one, and I think unfortunately we've reached the limits of public acceptance for globalization.

**Perinovic:** Thank you very much for a fascinating chat, I'm looking forward to your talk next week.

**Szabo:** It was my pleasure.