

Trump's neglect of Europe goes beyond angry tweets

BRUSSELS : Behind President Donald Trump's frequent attacks on European allies is a deeper neglect of the trans-Atlantic relationship: unfilled positions, truncated meetings, missed or crossed signals and confusion over basic policies.

Aides to the president insist that Trump's disputes with Europe are part of a long history of disagreements between leaders who, in the end, are inextricably bound by deeper shared interests and values. Churchill and Roosevelt. Johnson and de Gaulle. Kohl and Reagan. Each relationship had frictions and stumbles, only to yield to a stronger Western alliance.

But as they braced for Trump to barrel into Europe this week with visits to NATO and Britain and a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, senior officials from more than a dozen countries, most of them steeped in decades of experience with the trans-Atlantic relationship, insisted that the breaches under this administration go well beyond the types of policy disagreements of the past. They spoke to POLITICO largely on condition of anonymity out of fear of worsening the situation, or redirecting Trump's ire at their own capitals, which each have different interests and priorities in Washington. Despite those differences, they voiced a consistent message of concern: pointing less to Trump's rhetoric than to a more organic breach of collaboration, a collapse of institutions and, most worrisome to them, the obliteration of any sense of predictability.

For instance, for more than a year and a half into a four-year term, dozens of positions crucial to the trans-Atlantic relationship remained vacant, leaving their European counterparts stranded and grasping for interlocutors, on

everything from trade policy to Russian sanctions. One senior American diplomat in Brussels said European officials, desperate for lines of communication – and thrown off balance by the churn in the White House – pleaded for more visits by members of Congress, especially Republicans.

Only at the end of June did the Senate finally confirm Gordon Sondland, a hotel magnate and longtime Republican Party fundraiser, as ambassador to the European Union, and he just took up the post on Monday. The most prominent envoy Trump has sent – Richard Grenell in Germany – has stirred controversy by seeming to threaten to meddle in European politics, telling the right-wing news site Breitbart: “I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe, other leaders.”

Several key European ambassadorships remain unfilled, including in Ireland, which is at the center of the sensitive negotiations over Britain’s withdrawal from the EU, and Poland, which is in a fierce battle with Brussels over alleged rule-of-law violations. This month, Trump finally nominated an ambassador to Albania, days after a crucial EU summit where leaders decided to postpone membership talks with the strategic Balkan nation for at least a year.

Trump has still not appointed U.S. envoys to numerous United Nations institutions in Europe, nor to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has a crucial role in monitoring the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, the U.S. ambassador in Estonia, a career diplomat, announced he was retiring, partly in response to Trump’s negative comments about the EU.

The disarray has had a direct effect on the delicate process of setting agendas for trans-Atlantic meetings – some of which, such as a NATO leaders meeting in 2017, were foreshortened for lack of an agenda – and others, like the recent disastrous G-7 summit in Quebec, collapsed for what many Europeans regarded as the inability of any of Trump’s

aides and advisers to make policy commitments on behalf of the president ahead of such conclaves.

The State Department, for over a year and a half, has yet to articulate a cohesive policy toward Europe that might fashion some sense of order or a ranking of priorities out of Trump's often impulsive criticism. Trump has cheered Brexit, but his administration has not made clear how it hopes the future relationship between the United Kingdom and Europe will evolve. There is even deeper uncertainty on Ukraine and Russia policy, with Trump's special envoy on Ukraine, Kurt Volker, negotiating directly with Putin's point man Vladislav Surkov, outside the formal Minsk 2 peace process being led by France and Germany, and making no discernible progress.

U.S. diplomats interceded late, and in vain, to try to help persuade EU leaders to formally open membership talks with Albania, and the country that will now be known as the Republic of North Macedonia after settling its name dispute with Greece. European officials said the Trump administration had misread the landscape in Brussels – where there is minimal appetite for expansion – and wrongly thought France could be pressured to change its mind and bring the rest of the bloc along.

All of these missteps, they said, were the result of an alarming lack of communications and disregard for trans-Atlantic institutions, some of which have been in operation since the end of World War II.

One diplomat from a Western European country who recently visited Washington said that in the early months of Trump's administration there was often no one to talk to – not at the White House, or the State Department. But if you reached someone, they tended to be forthright – reflecting the potpourri of views that arrived with Trump in his early days. Now, the diplomat said, dissent has been purged and administration officials merely regurgitate the common line.