

EUROPE

Feeling That Trump Will ‘Say Anything,’ Europe Is Less Restrained, Too

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By STEVEN ERLANGER JULY 9, 2017

HAMBURG, Germany — The Europeans have stopped trying to paper over their differences with President Trump and the United States.

Traditionally respectful of American leadership and mindful of the country’s crucial role in European defense and global trade, European leaders normally repress or soften their criticism of United States presidents. Europeans were generally not happy with President Barack Obama’s reluctance to involve the country in Libya and Syria, for example, or his tardiness to engage in what became an international confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, but their criticism was quiet.

But here at the Group of 20 summit meeting, public splits with Mr. Trump were the order of the day. Those rifts have been reflected in European domestic politics, too, from Britain and France to Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that Europe must “take our fate into our own hands” and stop “glossing over” clear differences.

The new French president, Emmanuel Macron, whose election has renewed confidence among Europeans, said bluntly: “Our world has never been so divided. Centrifugal forces have never been so powerful. Our common goods have never been so threatened.”

Mr. Macron, who waved his iPhone around during the meeting as a symbol of global trade, sharply criticized those like Mr. Trump who do not support multilateral institutions but push nationalism instead.

“We need better coordination, more coordination,” Mr. Macron said. “We need those organizations that were created out of the Second World War. Otherwise, we will be moving back toward narrow-minded nationalism.”

Mr. Trump and the British vote to leave the European Union “have proved to be great unifiers for the European Union,” said Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. “There is a renewed sense of confidence in Europe after the French election,” the apparent retreat of populism, an increase in economic growth and the prospect of Ms. Merkel’s re-election in September, he said.

“There is an increased willingness to be assertive toward Trump, who makes Merkel look like a figure of international importance,” Mr. Leonard said. “If the election is about who can save the international world order from Trump,” he added, then Ms. Merkel’s opposition seems unimportant and she finds an eager partner in Mr. Macron. “They egg each other on and feel more self-confident together and help keep Europe together, too.”

Jan Techau, the director of the Richard Holbrooke Forum at the American Academy in Berlin, said: “There is now a more openly confrontational language with the United States. The European public is already outspoken about Trump, but now there is a more outspoken European leadership that won’t paper over these divisions anymore.”

If Europeans had previously felt constrained, Mr. Techau said, there is now a feeling that “Trump has no constraints and will say anything, and now the Europeans feel they can do the same.” And, he said, “that means less respect for each other, and less mutual confidence.”

François Heisbourg, a French security analyst, agreed. “The reticence has gone away,” he said. “On an issue-by-issue basis, there is apparently no penalty for playing hardball with Trump without necessarily affecting security, on climate for example.”

The strains were most visible here on climate policy and trade. Mr. Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris accord was widely condemned, and all the leaders aside from Mr. Trump signed up to language that called the agreement “irreversible.”

“Whatever leadership is,” said one senior French diplomat, who was not authorized to speak by name and insisted on anonymity, “it is not being outvoted, 19 to 1.”

The climate debate in the meeting displayed how hard it is to isolate the world’s richest, most powerful country.

The Americans did try to persuade some countries, like Turkey and Poland, which Mr. Trump visited just before going to Hamburg, to move toward the American position on climate, but they were rebuffed. Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said later that his country might still be in play, depending on money. The American withdrawal, he said, jeopardized compensation for developing countries to cope with compliance.

Australia and Saudi Arabia, which Mr. Trump has wooed, were also leaning toward adopting part of the American position in the final communiqué, especially on “working closely with other countries to help

them access and use fossil fuels more cleanly and efficiently,” European officials said.

One negotiator familiar with the talks said some countries had expressed interest in supporting that American language. Sarah Ladislaw, the director of the energy and security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, noted that a number of fossil fuel countries that want to continue to export more efficient coal and gas technologies might be relieved to see the change in tune

“There is likely a lot of pent-up sentiment that knows it’s probably not the polite thing to say, but they’re really pleased the U.S. is saying it,” Ms. Ladislaw said.

Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain also tried to balance Mr. Trump’s deep unpopularity in Britain with her need for American support for the country’s exit from the European Union and for future trade deals. She was criticized for not making the climate issue one of her four priorities here, and found comfort in Mr. Trump’s promise of a “very powerful” trade deal for a post-“Brexit” Britain that could be completed “very, very quickly.”

Mrs. May even expressed the hope that Mr. Trump might change his mind on the Paris accord, though Ms. Merkel did not agree. And in the end, all wavering members sided with the 19, not the one.

The White House saw progress nonetheless. “The vast majority of the G-20 supports the president’s vision for universal access to affordable and reliable energy, including finding ways to burn fossil fuels more cleanly and efficiently,” said George David Banks, a special assistant to the president on international energy and environment and lead negotiator for climate change during the G-20 conference.

On trade, there was more effort to find compromise, with previous G-20 positions for free trade and against protectionism watered down to secure American support. The communiqué cited, for the first time, the right of countries to protect their markets with “legitimate trade defense instruments” — wording that essentially gives Mr. Trump room to pursue his “America first” policy on issues like steel imports, where Washington is talking about restrictions based on “national security.”

The group agreed to accelerate work on a global review of steel production and sales, though any sanctions must meet the standards of the World Trade Organization.

In a general way, such open disagreements can undermine future coherence in times of crisis, Eswar Prasad, a professor of economics and trade at Cornell University, wrote in an email.

“Trump has put the rest of the G-20 in a largely defensive mode,” he said, as they try to limit the damage on issues like globalization, multilateralism and climate. But “it comes at a cost of eroding U.S. leadership,” he said. “If even in calm times such rifts are exposed, it could make it more complicated for the group to work together in more complicated circumstances.”

Yet politics also matter. The Europeans are determined to punish Mr. Trump for abandoning the Paris accord as a matter of “diplomatic dignity,” said Paul Bledsoe, who was an aide to President Bill Clinton on climate change.

“Because European leaders pleaded with Trump to stay and he rebuked them so directly,” Mr. Bledsoe said, “I think they’re determined to show the administration there’s going to be a price to pay, even if it’s not entirely in Europe’s own interest.”

Lisa Friedman contributed reporting from Washington.

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