

## A marriage of convenience

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Interviews

Gordon Sondland, US Ambassador to the EU, compares US-EU relations to a marriage. He tells Rajnish Singh that “We’re like an old married couple. The kids have left, we still love each other, we’re never getting divorced, but we have some very specific and tough issues to address.”



Gordon Sondland | Photo credit: Giancarlo Rocconi

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It’s been almost a year since Gordon Sondland arrived in Brussels. Selected personally by US President Donald Trump, before his appointment he ran his own hotel business and property investment company- much like his boss.

When offered the position, Sondland was both “honoured and awestruck” believing “he offered me one of the most consequential positions in the US government.”

Not a career diplomat, Sondland believes business skills are just as useful for his new role. “I was deeply grateful that he (Trump) believed in my private sector experience ... so far, I think it has

served me well.”

His family history may also help; in 1938, due to their Jewish background, his parents and sister fled Nazi Germany. His father went on to fight during World War II for both the French Resistance and the British Army in Burma.

Although he has enjoyed being based in Brussels, it has not all been plain sailing. Trade issues, he admits, have been challenging. But he points out “that’s not unusual when you are negotiating over money, even in the private sector.”

“Every dollar that you ask for is a dollar less that someone else gets to keep, so those discussions are always by definition uncomfortable.”

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There are clear and challenging differences between the US and EU, including Trump’s support for Brexit. Have EU-US relations reached a new low? Sondland responds, “Not at all, in fact it’s counterintuitive; I would say on many levels it’s reached a new high.”

He admits, however, “where it has hit a low has been on the trade discussions and on some of the more protectionist endeavours that the EU has undertaken.” Despite the President’s complaints, Sondland stresses that Trump is interested in a fair and balanced trade relationship.

He pointed out that in July 2018 Trump and European Commis-agreed to work together towards zero tariffs, zero non-tariff barriers and zero subsidies on non-auto industrial goods.

“President Trump said there are going to be winners and losers on both sides of the Atlantic, but this will quickly stabilise, the best products and services will win out and both of our gross domestic products will rise.”

Yet as recently as April 2019, Trump threatened to unleash tariffs on the EU. How could a trade war be avoided? Sondland believes the upcoming institutional changes could be a game-changer. “A new Commission, a new Parliament and a new leader in the EU Council will help reset the dialogue.”

He highlighted how he personally tried to reset relations by introducing the EU’s new ambassador to the US, Stavros Lambrinidis, to key players in Washington.

“I hosted a dinner for him in Washington and got a lot of senior White House officials to attend. They generally don’t attend ambassadorial dinners, but they recognised the importance of the relationship with the EU, and I believe that Ambassador Lambrinidis was very pleased with the reception.”

Another area of difference between the US and Europe is the negative security implications of using 5G technology provided by the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei.

Asked if this wasn't simply interference in Europe's domestic market and a way for the US to muscle in, he responded, "Not at all, the EU's Member States are our closest allies; we have an unshakable alliance when it comes to defence and shared values."

"This isn't about the US trying to promote its own interests, because frankly we don't have a large footprint in the 5G technology [market]. In effect, we're indirectly promoting indigenous European or South Korean businesses, not US." Sondland's concern is far broader.

According to him, 5G is not just simply the next 'iteration' of 4G. "Over the next decade, everything is going to be run off or connected to 5G."

"President Trump said there are going to be winners and losers on both sides of the Atlantic, but this will quickly stabilise, the best products and services will win out and both of our gross domestic products will rise"

"Defence, cars, airplanes, hospitals, schools, government - everything. We are concerned that when a malign actor possesses the keys to your country, they can use them in a malicious way, if they so choose."

"We don't want the keys to anyone's country to get into the wrong hands - that's what our concern is." There have also been serious differences in opinion over the US withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal.

Despite growing tensions in the Gulf and fears of a possible war between Iran and the US, Sondland firmly backed his President's decision, "Iranian behaviour since that document was signed has been contrary to the spirit of the agreement."

"The principle [of the treaty] was that Iran would join the community of nations. Instead, their centrifuges continue to spin and their malign activities in the Middle East, and in Europe, remain unabated."

He pointed out that the agreement did not stop the development and proliferation of Iran's missile technology. "Our desire is to choke off the money supply that fuels these activities, bringing them back to the table to discuss how to behave like a real country."

Trump's complaints about the lack of European spending on security and defence and plans for an EU army are well documented.

Questioned whether greater EU involvement in defence policy would undermine Nato, Sondland said, "If that was Europe's intention, I would be very concerned, but I'm constantly reassured by the EU leadership that that's not the intent and I take them at their word."

However, he calls on Member States to fulfil their contribution. "If there are dollars available, they should first go to Nato."

But he also wants to see European armed forces modernising their equipment. "We don't want a bunch of equipment, material, people, that is not in sync with Nato, because we're going to need every piece of equipment and every person to help."

More money, he said, was needed to be spent on R&D to achieve a more modernised force. Whether US or EU technology, the key issue was that money in the EU's European Defence Fund was not only

open to European companies.

As far as energy security is concerned, Sondland said he finds German reliance on Russian gas via the Nord Stream 2 pipeline challenging.

“It’s very frustrating, because Germany is only thinking in terms of its own parochial needs and ignoring those of the US - one of its closest friends and allies - and of the other 27 Member States.”

He believed that the Nord Stream pipeline was dangerous, as it gave too much political leverage and control to President Putin. “Putting energy security in the hands of someone who would easily use that power to influence European politics is just not in Europe’s long-term interests.”

He stressed that US Liquefied Natural Gas was a more reliable source of energy and that the EU and US shared common legal and political values that could sort out any issues.

“The EU’s Member States are our closest allies; we have an unshakable alliance when it comes to defence and shared values”

Sondland saw the recent European Elections as providing new opportunities for developing EU-US relations. Despite no major political group having overall control, he says “I am anxious to engage with new MEPs from all sides.”

“I know there are a number of new liberal and conservative members. While some look at this polarisation as unproductive, I view it as creating strong tensions on both sides that will result in change.”

Asked to explain how these tensions could be positive, he said “When you have someone that’s highly conservative and someone that’s highly liberal, they have to reach an agreement.”

“The natural tension that’s created, assuming people are dealing in good faith and with the interests of the EU at heart, I think ensures that a deal actually gets done, as opposed to a roomful of people always agreeing with each other generally but never specifically.”

He also highlighted how well he had worked with Parliament President Antonio Tajani. “I had a great relationship with him and look forward to meeting his successor.”

The sooner the US and EU can sort out their differences, the sooner Sondland thinks they can “join forces” to take on China, which the US considers a real threat.

He stressed how powerful they could be when they cooperate. “When the US and the EU work together you have a combined GDP of US\$40 trillion and a trading relationship worth US\$1 trillion.”

“We should be protecting intellectual property and creating an environment that China has to respect in a world order that we, not they, have set.”

He also credited the EU’s backing for the Ukraine and encouraged greater cooperation. “The EU has been a huge supporter of Ukraine, and I would encourage the EU to work closely together with the US on more joint US/EU outreach.”

To highlight the importance of this, Sondland hosted a special US Independence Day party and dinner in the honour of the newly-elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky when he visited Brussels in June.

“This was a large but informal event, with a few senior EU officials including Federica Mogherini and a number of other officials. A lot of good work was done, particularly by President Zelensky who was very interested in other country leaders’ views.”

Trump has described himself as ‘the disruptor in chief’. To understand what the EU could expect from Sondland he was asked if he was a disruptor or diplomat; he smiled and said to expect a “disruptive diplomat.”

### **About the author**

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