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Seizing Biden's Pivot to Europe: Time for Responsibility-Sharing

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President Biden's agenda is compatible with Europe being a credible strategic player. He will seek to coordinate policy to tackle global challenges and confront China. This, and emphasizing common values, will push him to pursue a pivot to Europe. The return to U.S. leadership and engagement in Europe is welcome. However, there is little desire to revive the pattern of the United States leading and Europe following. The EU has grown assertive over the last four years and is raising safeguards for a possible return of Trumpism in 2024.

The Biden administration needs to move toward a partnership of full joint ownership, while Europe has to deliver a common vision, credible diplomacy, and capacities. This will enable a move from burden-sharing to responsibility-sharing. This chimes with the French vision of European strategic autonomy, which aims for a more equal strategic partnership.

There is potential for co-leadership in combating the coronavirus pandemic, economic rebuilding through digital transformation, dealing with China, and strategic and security issues. The Biden administration should accept the EU's proposal for "a new transatlantic agenda" and Europe should seize this moment to turn its initiatives into actionable policies.

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Managing Transatlantic Expectations

The United States and its European allies recognize that there will be no "return to normalcy" during the Biden administration, nor a return to President Barack Obama's policies. The Trump years have profoundly changed the nature of the U.S. debate on three key issues—trade, China, and national sovereignty—and deepened a trend already perceptible in U.S. public opinion, especially among the younger generation. The latter is much less inclined to embrace the idea of American exceptionalism and international engagement than older generations.[1] The Biden administration will aim to protect American workers from the negative effects of free trade, including job losses and bankruptcies, and designing a "foreign policy for the middle class."[2] This means that Biden will continue to prioritize U.S. manufacturing exports, returning offshore jobs, and improving American workers' international economic competitiveness. His "Buy American" program, which tightens rules on purchasing by the federal government to boost demand for U.S.-made goods, will make it more difficult for European companies to secure federal contracts.

Transatlantic relations have always been characterized by asymmetric expectations. The United States looks to its European partners for providing more security capabilities (leading to effective burden-sharing) and alignment with U.S. policies and strategic priorities, including by using tariffs or extraterritorial sanctions as coercive tools. European countries look to the United States for global leadership, stability, and security guarantees. These diverging expectations often lead to mutual disappointment: Washington complains that European countries do not do enough, especially in terms of defense spending, and are no reliable allies on China, while European countries perceive U.S. leadership as less reliable, unilateral, and driven by diverging views on geopolitics and trade.

To prevent this, the Biden team and European leaders are managing expectations. The Biden administration will need time to implement real change in Washington and with allies, and it is asking European countries to be patient. It will also limit its expectations toward European countries in terms of security and defense, as the coronavirus pandemic is already impacting Europe's defense ambitions. After four years of Trump, EU institutions have grown more assertive in clarifying their policy disagreements with the United States (such as on climate, Iran, trade, and multilateralism) and in defining their core strategic priorities. The coronavirus crisis has shown that they have learned not to wait for U.S. leadership when faced with a global challenge requiring an urgent response.

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The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment concluded on December 30, 2020 as well as the EU measures to strengthen the international role of the euro to lessen its dependence on the dollar and address the EU's financial vulnerabilities were justified as a demonstration that the EU is serious about its ambition for strategic autonomy. The investment agreement provoked a bipartisan shock in the United States especially because the timing of this agreement is perceived by the Biden team as an un-strategic act of autonomy from the United States by the EU. It has tempered the hope of an ambitious transatlantic consensus on China. As the EU will focus on the implementation of the agreement in 2021, it will have less bandwidth to engage in a fruitful dialogue with the United States. But this will not necessarily prevent future U.S.-EU cooperation on China. Both partners could focus on extracting real commitments from Beijing on increased market access, subsidies to state-owned enterprises, and respect for intellectual property. The suspension of the deal might even come

1 Brendan Helm and Dina Smeltz, OK, Boomer: Youth Hesitant to Use Force, Shun US Exceptionalism in Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2020.

2 Joe Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again", Foreign Affairs, March/April 2020.

from within the EU, with what a potential rejection by the European Parliament.

Biden will look for quick wins with European countries to illustrate his claim that "America is back" and that he is returning to a collaborative approach with allies. The focus will be on the United States' most pressing priorities, such as coordinating international efforts in tackling the coronavirus crisis and its economic implications, reaffirming U.S. leadership on climate change, addressing declining democratic values with like-minded allies, working on a common agenda to reform the World Trade Organization (WTO), and coordinating development aid programs. These issues will be at the forefront of the transatlantic agenda in the first year of Biden's presidency, before tackling more sensitive issues such as technology, data privacy and trade. U.S. expectations will be centered on the normative, economic, and diplomatic assets of the EU.

European Strategic Autonomy in a More Balanced Transatlantic Partnership

This new transatlantic context has already affected the debate on Europe's political and strategic purpose. Last November, France's President Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer displayed diverging views on what it meant for European strategic autonomy. While the latter stressed the necessity to reinvest in the transatlantic relationship as the linchpin of European security, the former insisted on the need to continue to build Europe as an autonomous strategic player, including during a Biden administration. Strategic alignment should not blindly replace strategic autonomy was his underlying message. Both claimed to derive their vision from a "realist" understanding of European interests and the transatlantic partnership.

The political vision behind the concept of "strategic autonomy" or "European sovereignty" is shared by many EU member states: it aims at giving Europe the choice and ability to decide and act autonomously when necessary in areas of key strategic interest. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has offered one of the most straightforward definitions of strategic autonomy: it is a matter of building European capacities to act—in the best case with partners and, if required, independently—in different fields, from pharmaceuticals to the military.[3] Since Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech on Europe,[4] the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Security Task Force[5] has brought together European and U.S. policymakers, experts, and private sector representatives in Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Warsaw, Stockholm, and Washington, and these strategic dialogues have shown that there is consensus in European capitals about the fact that Europe needs to do more, especially in the defense and security fields.

Although the 2016 EU Global Strategy included the idea of strategic autonomy, the concept remains problematic for two main reasons.

First, because it has too often been limited to the defense field. The coronavirus crisis has shown that a broader definition of autonomy—including non-military domains such as medical supplies, supply chains, industrial capacities, and technological competition—is necessary. Today's geopolitical issues require a multifaceted response that looks beyond defense policy. The recovery plan adopted in July 2020 was meant to be a building block for a more sovereign EU in these critical domains. This comprehensive definition may also mean that strategic autonomy cannot be reached at the EU level alone, but with other European partners such as the United Kingdom or Norway. This is particularly relevant in the foreign policy and technology, as reflected, for instance, in the debate on 5G in Europe.

Second, strategic autonomy is controversial when it is perceived as a method of weakening the transatlantic partnership and NATO. Some member states

3 Josep Borrell, Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters, December 3, 2020.

4 Elysée, President Macron gives speech on new initiative for Europe, September 26, 2017.

5 German Marshall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Security Task Force, 2020.

are particularly concerned that the EU's quest for autonomy will accelerate U.S. disengagement from Europe. In reality, strategic autonomy is an attempt to answer this question as expressed by the French and German Ministers of Foreign affairs in a recent joint op-ed: "We Europeans are no longer only asking ourselves what America can do for us, but what we should do to enhance our own security and build a more balanced transatlantic partnership. These are two sides of the same coin."[6] However, the EU is still dependent on the United States, including to address conflict and instability in Europe's neighborhood. Here, the EU is a long way from being autonomous, and even more so with the exit of the United Kingdom and the loss of its military and diplomatic capabilities.

Over the past four years, however, European countries have implemented measures aiming at building their own capacities and mechanisms to promote their global interests in the trade, energy, climate, and digital fields. Whenever the EU and the Trump administration disagreed deeply—such as on the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris climate agreement, or trade—European countries took concrete steps to defend their views and speak with one voice.

The EU can claim leadership in the fight against the climate crisis and identify priorities to address with the Biden administration. Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris agreement on his first day in office and set a target of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 is a move that mirrors the EU's own commitments. The defining issue for the transatlantic relationship on climate change is whether the United States will introduce carbon-pricing policies at federal level. Failing to do so, the EU will introduce a carbon levy at the border, aiming to restore fair competition for EU manufacturers who will be facing growing CO_2 costs as it adopts tighter climate targets for 2030.

On digital regulation, the United States should accept the EU proposal of setting up an EU-US Common Technology Council as a first step in developing a platform for global digital regulation that other countries could join later. The EU's Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act bring forward obligations for large tech players. The proposal also comes after Germany and France have taken enforcement measures against "Big Tech" and related services.

The long-term objective of building autonomous European capacities will not change with the Biden administration.

In other areas, however, the ability of European countries to define their strategic interests remains to be seen. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China illustrates the fact that the EU continues to think and act as a fragmented power, hoping to separate its economic interests from geopolitical considerations. This approach prevents European countries from responding effectively when other powers instrumentalize economic tools to achieve geostrategic and political ends. A truly unified transatlantic stance will emerge only if the two sides reach a common assessment of the various threats China poses and coordinate their policies accordingly across multiple dimensions. Yet many Europeans remain wary of being drawn into a new Cold War, the terms of which are defined by the United States.

The long-term objective of building autonomous European capacities will not change with the Biden administration. The 2020 presidential election confirmed the United States' political unpredictability and extreme polarization, and its allies should anticipate that domestic issues will constrain the administration's capacity to implement several policies. Even when Republican and Democratic views converge, as for instance on confronting China's global ambitions, party politics is likely to prevent efficient coordination between the administration and Congress. Biden will also have to deal with various potentially worsening social and economic issues in the post-coronavirus

6 Jean-Yves Le Drian and Heiko Maas, French and German foreign ministers: Joe Biden can make transatlantic unity possible, Washington Post, November 16, 2020.

context; consequently, European countries might find a more inward-looking administration than they may have wished for.

This new transatlantic context will enable European countries to recalibrate their policy choices. Ambitious defense-industrial projects, support for European technological solutions to data-privacy issues, and the emergence of financial tools to bolster economic growth have all started without a great conceptual framework. This is even more relevant now as the United States will be eager to work with credible and able partners. In the meantime, European leaders should use the terms and concepts that work best for their domestic audience to ensure broad public support for this endeavor.

Seizing Biden's Pivot to Europe

The Biden administration's agenda for the transatlantic relationship is perfectly aligned with the emergence of Europe as a credible strategic player. In fact, U.S. policy and methods under Biden are likely to empower European countries and help preserve European unity. Following four years of transatlantic disputes, his election could create the environment that helps overcome internal divisions in Europe and fosters cooperation in new policy fields. Three main drivers will be at play.

First, the Biden administration will aim at reforming the transatlantic partnership as much as repairing it. The United States will try to find the right balance between reassuring its European allies after the tensions of the Trump years and adapting the transatlantic partnership to meet U.S. priorities and objectives. U.S. officials will build on their experience of the Obama years and will have little patience as they ask Europeans to put more "skin in the game." Biden's ambition to renew engagement with allies will be particularly demanding for European countries: the pressure to coordinate policy on China, support actions against Russia, and overcome trade disagreements will weigh on policymakers from the start. Biden will turn to Europe and expects it to deliver.

This transformation of the partnership will be best illustrated by the evolution of transatlantic defense cooperation. The United States will not leave Europe or stop guaranteeing European security, but its long-term focus on the Indo-Pacific means that European countries will have to take the lead in their eastern and southern neighborhoods. Rather than focusing on burden-sharing, the United States is increasingly looking for burden-shifting by outsourcing crisis management to its European allies in their neighborhoods, especially in Africa and the Middle East where the Biden administration will continue to reduce U.S. military engagement. The current transatlantic division of labor in the Sahel region can serve as a blueprint for future cooperation. Under France's military and political leadership, significant European progress has been made through the EUTM Mali training mission and the Task Force Takuba. At the same time, U.S. logistical and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support enabled France to sustain its Operation Barkhane. Thus, the United States helps European strategic ambitions "through the backdoor" by promoting European leadership and ownership, and it helps France in its own burden-sharing quest with its European partners.

Paradoxically, the Biden administration's expectations of European countries also give them more leverage in the transatlantic relationship. The Sino-American competition makes the United States more dependent on its allies and partners. In fact, Biden will see in NATO the perfect balancing organization to confront China in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, the United States will rely on able and willing powers to tackle transnational issues such as climate change or the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout. On all matters of global governance, European countries will be, along with Australia, Canada, Japan, and a few others, its natural go-to partners. Biden's willingness to invest in multilateralism and international organizations will make European countries indispensable to his administration's foreign policy goals.

Biden's emphasis on working with democracies will translate into a pivot to Europe as a co-builder of this "values-based" agenda. On NATO, Biden's vision for the alliance converges with the NATO 2030 report's main recommendation; that is, to nurture political cohesion within the alliance through ongoing consultations among its 30 members, which often diverge in their threat perceptions and strategic priorities and, in the cases of Hungary, Poland and Turkey, have deviated from a democratic path.[7] This would finally put an end to the debate on a "brain dead" NATO triggered by Macron.

These calls for cooperation concern policy fields of exclusive or at least shared competence of the EU, such as international trade, the environment, or public health. Consequently, Brussels might emerge as the main winner of Biden's foreign policy agenda, and in December the European Commission has proactively presented its plan for transatlantic cooperation with the new administration, ambitiously titled A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change.[8] Following Brexit, the United States will continue to engage with France on defense and Germany on trade and China, accelerating a long-term trend in transatlantic relations. In parallel, the U.K.-U.S. partnership will remain strong, and the United Kingdom's presidency of the G7 and its hosting of the UN's annual climate conference this year will provide it with opportunities to coordinate with the Biden administration on key policy issues.

Finally, the Biden administration could directly benefit European unity, and therefore the emergence of Europe as a credible strategic power. The idea of European sovereignty requires a critical mass of European countries working together toward it. While some European leaders used the Trump administration's rhetoric and policies to advocate European solidarity, the long-term implications of Trump's transactional diplomacy have been detrimental to the European project. Trump did not unite European countries against him: he heightened divisions among them and was opposed to the European project and transatlantic cooperation. Promoting European sovereignty as a response to U.S. unilateralism was never sustainable and a misestimation of the various strategic perspectives in the continent. On the contrary, Biden and his closest advisors have repeatedly underlined that successful European integration is in the interests of the United States. This approach can help alleviate the counterproductive dispute between supposed proponents of European sovereignty and proponents of the transatlantic relationship. In the short term, this positive rhetoric will help better articulate the complementarity of the EU and NATO, as well as cooperation on digital issues.

How the New Transatlantic Agenda Can Empower Europe

The start of a new U.S. administration is always a time to set the priorities of the transatlantic agenda. European countries have been proactive, and the EU's New EU-U.S. Agenda for Global Change presents the key issues of transatlantic cooperation in the coming months and years. President Macron,[9] Chancellor Angela Merkel,[10] and other European leaders have also publicly expressed their desire to work closely with the United States on global challenges. Each priority would not only be tackled in partnership with the United States, but also serve Europe's ambitions to be a more influential actor in the world.

First, the coronavirus crisis provides the early litmus test for translating renewed transatlantic leadership into practice. If the United States and European countries successfully address jointly the short-term challenge of access to pandemic treatment and vaccine dissemination among their own publics and on a global scale, this cooperation can serve as a blueprint for addressing future challenges in global health

7 NATO, NATO 2030, United for a New Era, November 25, 2020.

8 European Commission, A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change, December 2, 2020.

9 Elyséee, Interview granted to Le Grand Continent magazine by the French President Emmanuel Macron, November 16, 2020.

10 The Federal Chancellor, Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel: Outcome of the presidential election in the United States of America, November 9, 2020.

governance. Such cooperation could include the creation of a transatlantic stockpile of medical equipment and medicines, the reduction of protectionism of medical equipment and supplies, strengthening the World Trade Organization, and joint preparation for future pandemics.

Second, cooperation on digital transformation and emerging technologies could help the United States and Europe meet their policy goals in this domain. Concrete recommendations have already been made, such as designing common security standards for information technology and infrastructure, joint support for emerging technology research and development, standards, and creating an EU-U.S. Technology and Trade Council. Despite their different perspectives of some key issues such as data privacy, the transatlantic partners have an interest in setting up norms that can then influence the behavior other international actors.

By offering to coordinate policy on the most topical issues of the 21st century, the Biden administration will force the EU and European states to become active partners.

Third, strategic competition with China will continue to frame U.S. foreign policy for some time and therefore serve as a catalyst for transatlantic cooperation. The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments has triggered disappointed reactions from U.S. experts and officials and will undoubtedly hinder coordination this year. It shows how far the EU is willing to go to safeguard its economic interests despite geopolitical tensions. In the longer term, however, the EU-U.S. Agenda for Global Change draws on transatlantic cooperation to advance its interests. The creation of an institutionalized EU-U.S. dialogue on China will improve mutual understanding and communication.

Fourth, on strategic issues, a small-step approach will be preferable. Biden's offer of a five-year extension to the New START treaty indicates how he will manage European security. He has expressed willingness to cooperate with Russia on disarmament, but he will also have to work with NATO allies on the shortcomings of the treaty. On Iran, European countries expect the United States to return to diplomacy but do not expect it to rejoin the nuclear deal automatically, given that Iran is now much closer to a breakout capability than it was in 2016. All sides are engaged in complex diplomatic effort to increase leverage before negotiations start.

Actively advancing transatlantic cooperation in these fields can enhance European strategic autonomy in different ways. European countries will have an incentive to think more strategically about these challenges, considering political, economic, and security interests. This means that working in silos, as traditionally done by the European Commission and its different directorates-general, will not suffice. Besides, by offering to coordinate policy on the most topical issues of the 21st century, the Biden administration will force the EU and European states to become active partners.

But will this incentivize the EU to be more united? The EU has changed significantly in the last four years and the E3 countries, which used to be a credible interlocutor for Washington on all key strategic issues are now split. The United Kingdom, traditionally the United States' closest European ally, will become both a partner and a competitor of the EU within the transatlantic partnership. Its recent responses to human-rights violations in Belarus, China, Hong Kong, and Russia have been closer to the United States' positions than to those of EU member states. This shared view on the key geopolitical issues means that the United States and the United Kingdom are likely to become still more aligned over the coming years. The United Kingdom will seek to build a strong bilateral agenda with the Biden administration, leveraging its presidency of the G7 and the UN climate conference in 2021. When it comes to Germany, Merkel is preparing to leave the political stage while the Nord Stream 2

pipeline project remains an issue, with pending sanctions having wide bipartisan support in Congress and extensive opposition in Europe, especially in Poland and the Baltic states, but in France as well. France has become the main defender of European strategic autonomy, while seeking to restore a strong transatlantic link and maintaining U.S. military support in the Sahel where it leads counterterrorism operations.

CONCLUSION

The Biden administration's agenda will put European countries at the center of the U.S. alliance system. A value-based foreign policy and the prioritization of global governance and transnational challenges will directly empower the EU, as many of these challenges are already addressed rather in Brussels than in national capitals. European countries can decide to seize this opportunity if they put aside conceptual disputes about sovereignty and autonomy and proactively offer policy solutions. The work of the European Commission to define a transatlantic agenda with the new administration is a promising start and should be supported by EU member states.

On the U.S. side, many questions remain. Whether Biden will be able to devote significant time to international issues and cooperation with allies depends on what happens on the domestic stage in the short-term. It is not yet clear how his administration's effort to better link domestic and foreign policy issues will impact transatlantic relations. In parallel, the economic implications of the coronavirus crisis will also define the ability of all transatlantic partners to engage in ambitious foreign policy initiatives.

Although Biden's election offers a window of opportunity for a new impetus in transatlantic cooperation, this will therefore be limited by major factors that define the coming months. Time and political capital will need to be invested on the coronavirus crisis and its economic consequences. Germany's elections later this year and France's next year will limit the European margin of maneuver. These factors will make a quick transatlantic "win" more difficult to achieve.

In the long run, however, a "pivot to Europe" will be instrumental in the United States in its competition with China. The transatlantic bargain is already being redefined as such: the Biden administration will aim to work with partners and define a common agenda on global issues while reaffirming its full commitment to NATO; in return Europeans will be expected to coordinate their China policy with the United States and better align their economic interests with geopolitical concerns. Thus, the strength and future of the transatlantic partnership will depend first and foremost on what European countries have to offer. This is an additional incentive for them to keep developing their foreign policy, economic, defense and technological capacities to gain leverage and defend their own interests.

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