

The Consequences of a Trump or Biden Win for European Security

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Transatlantic Policy Implications of the 2020 U.S. Election

The outcome of the U.S. presidential election is of major importance for European security. For decades, the United States' involvement has been a main factor in Europe's stability and prosperity—not only through NATO, but also by providing Europe with a largely stable broader environment: a “free and open order.”

In the last four years, the United States has partly disengaged from this role, leading to a deterioration in European security, as some regional powers feel incentivized to step up their role and compete for influence.

A Biden victory would bring the United States back to its former leadership role, at least partly. And with a Biden administration, chances would be high that Europe and the United States could find new ways to deal with the new challenges they both face.

Another Trump term by contrast would be far more difficult for Europe. The fragmentation of European security would most likely continue, and it would be harder for European countries to achieve unity on major foreign and security policy issues.

Introduction

This policy brief considers the implications for European security of the outcome of the U.S. presidential election. While there is a multitude of factors shaping the United States' foreign policy and security, the vastly different foreign policy outlooks of Trump and Biden means that the choice of U.S. voters will have a significant impact on European security, directly and indirectly. The first section identifies four major trends in European security of particular relevance to the discussion of this impact: continued pressure from Russia, new tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, uncertainty about the U.S. commitment to European security and the broader U.S. global role, and the deep European divide on security matters. The next two sections look at what a second Trump term or a Biden presidency could mean for European security. The final section draws some conclusions.

Security in Europe: Recent Trends

Over the four years since the last U.S. presidential election, Europe has become less stable and less secure.

First, Russia has kept putting pressure on NATO's eastern flank by modernizing its forces, threatening NATO allies and partners with nuclear attacks, and conducting large exercises directed against Poland and the Baltic states.¹ Despite considerable diplomatic efforts from France and Germany, Russia is unwilling to end its military intervention in Ukraine, seemingly intent on keeping Crimea occupied while also moving toward a quasi-annexation of Donbas, similar to what happened in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and in the Moldovan region of Transnistria. With a broad protest movement in Belarus, a new geopolitical flashpoint seems to be emerging there, with Moscow ensuring the survival of President Alexander Lukashenko's regime and European countries siding with the opposition to him. The political awakening of Belarusian society makes it hard to see

how political life will remain stable with the continuation of this Russian-backed regime.

Russia's autocratic elite also appears increasingly nervous about its own future. As the political analyst Alexander Baunov writes, "The regime—certainly its most hard-line elements—feels more endangered than ever."² Although the West is very careful not to validate the narrative of it encouraging a "color revolution" in Russia, geopolitics and regime survival are two sides of the same coin for the Kremlin. The more the regime is embattled at home, the more it will display hostility toward the West, maintain military pressure, and remain unwilling to compromise.

Second, over the past few years, Russia has used the war in Syria as an entry point to a larger role in the Eastern Mediterranean. As the main external protector of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, together with Iran, Moscow is playing a decisive role in Syria. In recent months, Russia has similarly expanded its role in Libya, where it continues to support General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army. According to a recent United Nations report, "Moscow flew 338 cargo flights from Syria in the nine months to 31 July to aid Wagner Group fighters backing ... Haftar."³ Russian military forces have actively participated in the war.⁴ In the view of the U.S. government, Russia is trying "to gain a foothold in Libya."⁵ Consequently, NATO now faces Russia not only on its eastern flank, but also on its southern flank.

Unlike in Eastern Europe, however, in this new "great game" over influence and resources in the Eastern Mediterranean Russia has to deal with several other powerful players: the United States (which remains active in the region, although less so than previously), Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, France,

1 Ben Hodges et al, "[NATO Needs a Coherent Approach to Defending its Eastern Flank](#)," War on the Rocks, June 12, 2020.

2 Alexander Baunov, "[Where Navalny's Poisoning is Taking Russia, at Home and Abroad](#)," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 8, 2020.

3 "[Moscow Steps Up Support for Pro-Haftar Russian Mercenaries in Libya: UN](#)," Middle East Eye, September 3, 2020.

4 Eric Schmitt, "[Russian Attack Jet Backs Mercenaries Fighting in Libya](#)," New York Times, September 11, 2020.

5 "[Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya](#)," U.S. Department of Defense, July 24, 2020.

and Italy. The risk of escalation is also increasing, as demonstrated by the recurring clashes between Russia and Turkey (though both countries are quite eager to balance confrontation with cooperation), and by the renewed Turkish-Greek dispute over maritime borders and resources. The recent resumption of fighting between Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh adds to the complex Russian-Turkish relationship, as Russia supports both sides and has used the conflict in recent decades to keep a certain degree of control over the region.

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The third significant trend is the changing role of the United States. Although its role as a strategic leader and a European power has diminished, it remains vital for European security. Under Trump, the United States has continued its investment in the security of NATO's eastern flank and reaffirmed the reorientation of the alliance toward defense and deterrence against Russia, a policy that began under the Obama administration in reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine.

In parallel, however, Trump's constant negative rhetoric about NATO and verbal attacks on its members have led many observers to question his commitment to the alliance. Despite the fact that NATO has strong support in Congress and in U.S. public opinion, Trump, according to some reports, has toyed with the idea of a U.S. withdrawal from the alliance. Further contributing to distrust of Trump's commitment to European security is his attitude toward Russia. He has shied away from criticism of Russia and pushed for rapprochement, as evidenced, for example, by his repeated wish for Russia to rejoin the G7.

Transatlantic relations are further strained by what many in Europe perceive as the Trump administration's bullying tactics with regard to trade relations, its disinterest in international agreements and insti-

tutions, and its lack of support for the entire "global governance" agenda, from climate change to cooperation on fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, under Trump, the United States has turned its back on arms control. It has withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty while the New START Treaty is likely to expire without a follow-up agreement. And it has abandoned the Iran nuclear deal without trying to put anything else in place.

Yet despite these changes, European countries have neither closed ranks nor made joint, forceful responses to the changed strategic environment. While there are many efforts underway to align national policies in Europe, they largely fail to bridge the gap in perceptions, interests, and attitudes on key issues. Germany and France, as the central powers in the EU, have different approaches to NATO, Russia, and Turkey. The United Kingdom has its hands full with the consequences of Brexit. The extent to which the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU will impact security cooperation and what a post-Brexit foreign and security strategy will look like remains unclear.

The assumption that the reduced presence of the United States would almost automatically lead Europe to become a more unified actor has been proven wrong so far. In the past decades, the U.S. presence and leadership allowed Europe to move closer together, as Washington largely took responsibility for the continent's security, providing it with a broader environment that allowed European countries to focus on the economy and on social issues. Now they have to deal with security issues themselves, often without U.S. support. As a consequence, differences in views and attitudes on foreign and security policy that were less visible before have come to the surface. How to translate the internal coherence achieved in the single market and with the euro into a more powerful joint foreign and security policy remains an unresolved challenge.

Trump II: Instability and Fragmentation

Over a second term, Trump would most likely continue with his current strategy of U.S. primacy. His

readiness to break with tradition and the consensus of the U.S. foreign policy community might increase, making him perhaps more disruptive. He would probably be increasingly inclined to follow his instincts and to rely even less on advice by experts, feeling vindicated by re-election and unrestrained by further electoral concerns. However, the erratic, unsystematic character of his policymaking as well as the checks and balances built into the U.S. system of government may limit the effectiveness of his initiatives.

In any case, with four more years of Trump, the “free and open order” that the United States has built since the end of World War II would likely be further damaged. Rather than operating as a guardian of this order, the United States would continue to move toward the pursuit of its own narrow interests, driven by a perception of the world as an anarchic, competitive environment where every country must fight for itself.

For the EU, this would lead to more trouble. Itself an embodiment of the “free and open” order—as a union based on the gradual opening of borders as well as on strong institutions of cooperation and some supra-national elements—its past success has been conditioned on the existence of a broader international order based on similar principles and trends. The more this order is damaged, the more difficult it will be for the EU to continue with its *modus operandi*.

In a second Trump term, transatlantic relations would likely deteriorate further, become more fragile, and be based on a more transactional logic. The United States would put more pressure on European countries to follow its lead, particularly on China. It would expect more from countries that depend on its security umbrella, in terms of buying U.S. military hardware and falling in line with U.S. policies. NATO might lose relevance with the United States focusing more on bilateral relations. A more dramatic scenario would even see Trump pulling the country out of NATO.

At the same time, Trump might pursue a reset of the U.S. relationship with Russia, which the Kremlin might interpret as giving it a free hand to increase

pressure on Eastern and Central Europe. This would have a deeply destabilizing effect on Europe’s east and partially reverse the stability gains spurred by NATO enlargement. In turn, such a development could deepen splits in Europe, with some countries quietly supporting a Russia reset while others remain scared of the prospect of a more powerful, less constrained Russia and push back against its expansionism.

In the Middle East and North Africa, Trump would continue his policy of very selective engagement rather than working toward a broader regional order. Mid-sized and smaller powers, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirate, would continue to compete for influence and resources in the region, increasing the risk of miscalculation and military clashes. The conflict between Greece and Turkey over resources and borders in the Eastern Mediterranean could, given the absence of a powerful hegemonic player, get out of hand, with severe consequences for NATO, of which both are members.

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Trump may also return to his aggressive stance on trade relations with the EU, using sanctions and other instruments to support U.S. companies and pushing back at EU efforts to regulate U.S. tech giants more tightly. German businesses would likely be hit especially hard, further alienating Berlin from Washington. A second Trump administration may also see the post-Brexit United Kingdom less as a partner in global leadership and more as a dependent client, turning negotiations about a trade deal between the two countries into a very imbalanced affair.

As in the last four years, different European countries would most likely draw very different conclusions from the further deterioration of transatlantic relations. Some would see this as an advantageous moment to turn the EU into a geopolitical player,

positioning it to better compete with the United States and China. Others might focus on global multilateralism as a way to save elements of the old “free and open” order, in the hope of transforming it into a new system capable of stabilizing global trade and cooperation on global public goods. In countries that feel massively threatened by Russia, a possible third reaction would be to double down on the bilateral security relationship with the United States. A forceful and united European reaction to a further deterioration in transatlantic relations during a second Trump term is unlikely. Greater fragmentation is more probable.

Biden: New Transatlantic Partnership?

A key message from Biden and his team on foreign and security policy is their willingness to return to multilateralism as a core organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy. “Working with allies” has become a mantra of the campaign. In the same spirit, Biden has said he would focus on a renewed “free world” alliance in which the United States would work with allies and partners, especially in Europe and Asia, and push back against increasingly assertive and powerful autocracies, namely China and Russia.⁶

Another key theme of the Biden campaign is a return to the global governance agenda. He has promised to rejoin the Paris climate agreement immediately while also pushing for more ambitious climate goals. On the coronavirus pandemic, he would support a joint global effort and the restoration of the key role of the World Health Organization. He has also said that diplomacy would again be at the forefront of U.S. efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons rather than unilateral diplomacy and “maximum pressure,” which the Trump administration has pursued with North Korea and Iran respectively. He would also undertake new efforts to reach arms control agreements with Russia and China.

While a Biden administration would pursue both paths, it is less clear how it would balance confronta-

tion and cooperation in relations with the United States’ main geopolitical opponents, China and Russia. Biden’s recent attitude, calling Chairman Xi Jinping a “thug” and condemning the treatment of the Uyghurs in China as “genocide,” suggests he will be a China hawk. He is also considered a true believer in human rights and democracy as essential dimensions of U.S. foreign policy. And, as a decades-long Atlanticist, his commitment to NATO would be unquestioned.

On the other hand, Biden says he wants to “end forever wars” and is wary of military confrontation. And to tackle global challenges—climate change, arms control and non-proliferation, global health, and a host of other issues—he would need some degree of cooperation with China and Russia. There is a potential tension between restraining the global and regional ambitions of China and Russia and collaborating with them on joint approaches to global issues. Whether Biden would rather come down on the “liberal” side, uniting liberal democracies and pushing back against powerful autocracies, or on the “realist” side, prioritizing efforts to cooperate, is an open question.

The overall direction of a Biden administration would be supportive of European views and interests on diplomacy, partnerships, alliances, international institutions, and global governance.

In any case, most European countries would very much welcome a Biden victory given their widely shared perception of the Trump presidency as marking the lowest point in post-World War II transatlantic relations. A Biden victory would by itself immediately restore the idea of a joint West in the view of many policymakers. A broad dialogue between European capitals and the new administration would quickly be established and channels of communication would open up again.

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⁶ Joseph R. Biden, “Why America must lead again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

ests on diplomacy, partnerships, alliances, international institutions, and global governance. On many policies, the United States and Europe would either be in or near alignment. A transatlantic approach toward China would likely be within reach. European countries are as disenchanted with an increasingly autocratic and aggressive China as the United States, yet Trump's erratic personality and his strong unilateralism stand in the way of a joint approach. These obstacles removed, it would be likely that both sides would agree on a joint China strategy, at least in broad strokes. It should be equally easy to reconfirm the role of NATO to deter and defend Europe against Russian expansionism, removing the ambiguity of the U.S. position over the prior four years. Returning to a joint approach toward Iran would be relatively easy too.

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Yet, despite such an improved relationship, a Biden administration would not solve all of Europe's security problems. The United States would probably not resume its position as an all-encompassing leader with the answer to every problem. It would work closely with Europe on Belarus and Ukraine, as both issues have a direct impact on Western relations with Russia and on the future of NATO, but it would likely maintain a selective approach to engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. It is likely that the process of disentanglement from military conflicts in the region would continue, with the United States seeking a far lighter footprint. "Ending the forever wars" is one of the few areas where Trump and Biden broadly agree. Yet even here, on the level of diplomacy, the United States would be more present, leaving less space for the power competition that has emerged in the last years. Alongside that of European and other partners, a stronger U.S. diplomatic presence would probably reduce the risk of escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Outlook

A Biden victory would be far more advantageous for Europe than a Trump victory. With Biden, the United States would again orient its foreign policy toward the management of global and regional order in a broader strategic perspective, whereas Trump looks at foreign policy as an arena in which the United States must "win" against other countries rather than seeking solutions that are in a broader interest.

Biden has promised to make the restoration of alliances and partnerships a key goal of his presidency; this would open plenty of opportunities for European countries to rebuild transatlantic relations on every level. Jointly, the United States and Europe would have the chance to reverse the advances made by China and Russia in the last years in their efforts to "make the world safe for autocracy." And they could again put the fight against global threats such as climate change and nuclear proliferation at the top of the global agenda.

A Trump victory, by contrast, would deepen the current challenges to European security. It would lead to more instability in Europe's neighborhood, to more opportunities for Russia and China to play divide and rule in Europe, to a further deterioration of transatlantic relations, and potentially to a greater divide among European capitals.

Yet whoever will be the next president, the longer-term challenges for European countries remain: to build a more joined-up foreign and security policy; to develop a common approach to major challengers of the "free and open order," namely China and Russia; and to project more stability in Europe's eastern and southern neighborhood. With a Biden administration, they would have a benevolent partner in all these endeavors, making a joint transatlantic approach quite likely. A second Trump term, by contrast, would make European unity far more necessary and far harder to achieve.

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