

BIDEN AND EUROPE'S DILEMMAS

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DECEMBER 15, 2020



The election of president-elect Joe Biden has been celebrated in Europe as a breath of fresh air. This is hardly surprising. President Donald Trump really took it out on Europe, having infamously referred to

the European Union as a foe of the United States, and deemed NATO obsolete. In contrast, Biden and his foreign policy team have made much hay of the need to rebuild flailing alliances, and restore America's position as a leader of the multilateral order. They may even go back to the Barack Obama-era belief that a strong and self-reliant Europe is in America's interest. All of this is music to European ears. Indeed, almost two months before the inauguration, the European Union has rushed to put out a new vision for the E.U.-U.S. relationship, premised on the need to revamp a badly damaged multilateral system. For its part, the newly released NATO 2030 report calls for a more political and global alliance. All in all, it appears Europeans may be increasingly receptive to U.S. calls to leverage the trans-Atlantic relationship and the multilateral order to face the China challenge.

Beneath the celebratory surface, Biden's election has reignited old discussions around the concept of European strategic autonomy. For some, an Atlanticist

and multilateralist in the White House may well be Europe's best hope to advance its global objectives. Others, however, insist that Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy cannot be at the mercy of U.S. politics. At any rate, Biden's failure to carry the Senate, Trumpism's deep roots, and its potential embedding in the Republican Party may act as a warning against those who want to simply wish away the last four years and return to the *status quo ante*. More broadly, and for all of Biden's appeals to multilateralism, competition with China is here to stay, and that underscores Europe's downgrading in U.S. grand strategy. Even if Biden wants a renewed West to take on the China challenge, the West is no West of equals.

What may Biden's victory mean for the trans-Atlantic relationship? To what extent may the relationship differ from or resemble the Trump years?

Like previous administrations, Trump has insisted that Europeans should carry a higher share of the trans-Atlantic defense burden. Unlike previous administrations, however, Trump has publicly and constantly lambasted the European Union and Germany, criticized NATO, and even reportedly threatened to exit the alliance. In August 2020, he put out a plan to withdraw some 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany, a decision which he linked to Germany's "delinquent behavior" or "cheap-riding" on U.S. security guarantees. The Trump administration was also highly critical of the European Union's push for greater autonomy in defense industry, technology, and capabilities, as it worried they could threaten U.S. industrial interests.

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More broadly, Trump's attitude towards Europe has been largely affected by his administration's decision to prioritize long-term strategic competition with China. This has confirmed the strategic downgrading of Europe in U.S. grand strategy, and also given way to a systematic U.S. effort to get Europeans in line on all things China. Trump officials repeatedly criticized Europe's references to China as a "partner in multilateralism" as naïve and dangerous, as they warned about China's intent to game the multilateral order, and bend its agenda, norms, and institutions to its liking. Indeed, an important concern for the Trump administration was to ensure Europeans would not actively assist China's technological and economic takeoff. To that end, Trump officials were not shy in leveraging their security patronage to get Europeans to cut back on their ties to China, especially in key areas like 5G.

Trump and European Foreign and Defense Policy

After years of cuts and stagnation, European defense spending actually picked up, even before Trump took office. This, however, is probably due to a worsening security environment (especially following Russia's annexation of Crimea and an uptick of terrorism) and an improving economic situation, and less due to Trump's pressures. It now remains to be seen whether the economic fallout of COVID-19 makes this uptick in defense spending sustainable.

More broadly, political support for the concept of "European strategic autonomy" has risen over the last four years, at least rhetorically. That may be partly due to European fears about U.S. disengagement, and a general frustration with Trump's attitude towards Europe and disinvestment from the multilateral order Europeans hold so dear. Indeed, beyond an uptick in defense spending, the past four years have featured a flurry of initiatives aimed at strengthening Europe's self-reliance in security and defense. Beyond security and defense, discussions on supply chains, data

privacy, technology, and trade have become increasingly central to debates on European strategic autonomy. Support for the idea of an E.U. industrial policy to assist the emergence of European technological-industrial champions has gained traction recently, partly aided by fears of protectionism elsewhere and pandemic-related anxieties. The Trump factor may have been particularly important in rallying support for a European industrial policy and European strategic autonomy in Germany, a country that traditionally sang the praises of open competition and has tried to strike a balance between its Europeanism and its commitment to the trans-Atlantic relationship. For others, like France, European strategic autonomy runs deeper than Trump: It is about asserting the European Union's agency regardless of who is in the Oval Office.

Whereas it is often argued that European strategic autonomy would lead to a stronger trans-Atlantic relationship, the link between these two factors is

neither automatic nor clear. The Trump administration wanted Europeans to spend more on defense, but it wanted them to do it on its own terms (i.e., by buying American and embracing U.S. political and technological leadership). The Europeans, for their part, have insisted that greater defense spending should lead to a prioritization of the European defense industry, and to greater autonomy in foreign and security policy. This was the rationale behind the European Union's push for strategic autonomy, and for the adoption of a European Defense Fund aimed at overcoming fragmentation in the European defense industry.

Last but not least, in the face of the Trump administration's push to take a firm stance against China, Europeans have often played hard to get. The European Union's perception of China has admittedly worsened in recent years, especially since the novel coronavirus pandemic started. Yet, E.U. officials continue to contrapose their own nuanced view of

China — which they define as a partner in multilateralism, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival simultaneously — with Trump's rivalry-only focus. It's not so much about Europe being either equidistant or neutral, but about rejecting the frame of Sino-American competition altogether as a useful referent for E.U. foreign policy, not least as it is a frame that imposes a binary choice on Europeans. Instead, or so the argument goes, Europeans should advance an alternative frame, namely the preservation of the liberal, rules-based order. This is what E.U. High Representative Josep Borrell refers to as the Sinatra doctrine, as in Europe going its own way and not China's or America's way.

Enter Biden

A Biden administration may actually stick to the broad strategic priorities of pushing Europeans to spend more on defense and getting them in line on all

things China. In pursuing such objectives, however, Biden is likely to go about it differently than Trump.

Whereas the Trump administration has systematically alienated Europeans, Biden and his people have already begun a trans-Atlantic healing campaign. Rhetorically, at least, the contrast could not be starker: Trump supported Brexit, labeled the European Union as a foe, and declared NATO obsolete. Biden has warned about Brexit's dangers, spoken of the need to revitalize the E.U.-U.S. partnership, and defined NATO as the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal. Some argue that Biden may even go as far as reversing Trump's decision to withdraw some 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany, in a grand gesture meant to set the trans-Atlantic relationship on new footing.

For all those differences, however, it is unclear to what extent the Biden administration will simply embrace the European Union's push for industrial and

technological autonomy, including in the defense sector. For one thing, Europe's push for industrial and technological sovereignty — an agenda that is bound up with concerns about security of supply, privacy and data protection — threatens the interests of U.S. tech companies on the continent. This is likely to remain a thorn in the trans-Atlantic shoe, and will continue to loom over any discussions on an E.U.-U.S. trade deal. Indeed, Biden's failure to carry the Senate and need to pander to Trump's base may lead to an intensification of U.S. technological and industrial protectionism.

On defense, Biden's likely push to revitalize NATO may well spur greater trans-Atlantic cooperation in areas like technological innovation and industry. In fact, the newly published *NATO 2030* report calls for a joint allied approach to emerging disruptive technologies and goes as far as explicitly urging NATO to develop something akin to the European Defense Fund — which is arguably the only tangible

deliverable in European defense autonomy. Those who take a more contingent, pragmatic approach may see less of a need to push for European strategic autonomy in light of a U.S. administration that is committed to Europe and the trans-Atlantic relationship, and is intent on working with the European Union to revitalize the multilateral order. Those who take a more hard-nosed approach to European autonomy, however, may see Biden's election as a kiss of death. No wonder French President Emmanuel Macron has been doing the rounds to warn about the dangers of European complacency in light of Biden's election.

When it comes to more global issues, the Biden administration intends to portray itself as Europe's go-to partner on multilateralism. It also aims to leverage the trans-Atlantic relationship in support of a normative foreign policy agenda that pushes back against autocracies and human rights abuses.

Whereas Trump saw multilateralism and Europe as

liabilities in strategic competition with China, Biden seems to see them both as assets. Yet, even if Biden's means (i.e., wooing Europe through multilateral channels) may stand in sharp contrast with Trump's (i.e., pulling the plug on multilateralism and coercing Europeans), the ends (i.e., getting Europe in line on China) are not that different. Moreover, trans-Atlantic disagreements on trade, data privacy, digital taxation, or the extraterritoriality of sanctions are likely to linger — these are all highly relevant issues in a context of intensifying Sino-American competition.

Once again, European autonomy die-hards may have reasons to worry that Biden's soft-handed approach may turn out to be more effective in getting Europe in line on China. At the same time, however, Biden's acceptance of the need to work with China on some areas like climate change may signal a more nuanced approach that is more in line with Europe's — even if the Biden administration still perceives China to be a

long-term strategic competitor. More broadly, Biden's appeal to the need to revitalize the World Trade Organization, rejoin the World Health Organization and Paris climate agreement, and reevaluate the Iran deal signal a broader shift towards more Europe-friendly positions. This opens up important opportunities for Europeans to advance their global objectives.

All in all, when it comes to rallying European support in competition with China, Trump and Biden may well look like a bad cop-good cop sequence. Europeans have seen what bad cop looks like: He plays divide-and-rule politics and threatens to leverage security guarantees unless Europeans toe the U.S. line. Now, the good cop still wants European support vis-a-vis China. He will just frame that file in normative (democracy versus autocracy) terms, and as a multilateral endeavor, rather than a naked power contest (United States versus China). Will Europeans bite? In other words, are they willing to tone down

their autonomy musings in exchange for a tier-I partner status to renew their much-beloved multilateral order? That is the essence of Europe's trans-Atlantic dilemma.

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