

**Hajnalka Vincze:**  
**Transatlantic Relations: The Biden Opportunity and Its Limits**  
(Hungarian Europe Society, 15 November 2020)

True to form, the 2020 U.S. presidential elections triggered an avalanche of passions in transatlantic relations. Anxiety amounting to the simple question “Will they love us again, will they not?” was widespread on the European side. Unfortunately, this kind of approach only reinforces the decades-long emotional roller-coaster matrix of the Euro-American bond. It feeds into the unending oscillation between resounding “quarrels” and spectacular “reconciliations”. This is a nefarious spiral, because the more we strive to showcase our alleged harmony, the more even minor clashes will look like a tragedy. And the more those clashes are perceived as world-shattering, the more we must insist on harmony, in order to return back to “normal”, i.e. to another round on the roller-coaster ride.

Although the first encounters between the Biden administration and their European counterparts will certainly fit into that pattern (a happy family reunion, after a four-year falling out), all those emotional upheavals are starting to take a toll. Europeans distraught by some Trump-era outbursts still remember having been traumatized during the much-awaited Obama years too, most notably by the so-called Asian pivot. As a result, the widespread relief, even jubilation, in Europe over the change of U.S. administration is nuanced this time by more caution than twelve years ago, when Barack Obama was awaited and greeted as the “savior”. Speaking before the European Parliament in July 2020, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer warned in advance that only the “tone” would change following a Biden win.<sup>1</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron, in his now-infamous “brain-dead NATO” interview, also pointed out: “it hasn’t only been the Trump administration. You have to understand what is happening deep down in American policy-making.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A frozen (més)alliance**

The uncomfortable reality is that thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europeans still let the “West” to be as imbalanced as it was during the Cold War. Most European governments hope to continue to free-ride, as much as possible, on the U.S. for their defense – at the cost of what former American and British high officials called “an excessive deference towards the United States”.<sup>3</sup> Over the past three decades, American observers have continually been amazed at Europeans’ unwillingness to step out of their status as a U.S. “protectorate”.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the 2000’s, Charles Kupchan pointed out: “Despite all that has changed since 1949, and especially since 1989, Europe has remained dependent on the United States to manage its security”. He went on to add: “Control over security matters is the decisive factor in setting the pecking order and determining who is in command”.<sup>5</sup>

Fifteen years later, nothing has changed. As Jeremy Shapiro notes: “The nations of Europe rely on America for its security and America does not rely on Europe. This asymmetric dependence is the fundamental and seemingly permanent feature of the transatlantic relationship, the inconvenient fact at the base of decades of rhetoric about shared values and common history.”<sup>6</sup> It also inevitably leads to the so-called

---

<sup>1</sup> Germany sets up European defense agenda with a waning US footprint in mind, Defense News, 15 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Transcript: Emmanuel Macron in his own words, The Economist, 7 November 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Shapiro – Nick Witney, Towards a post-American Europe: A Power Audit of EU-US Relations, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard, Perseus Books, 1997, p59.

<sup>5</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, The End of the American Era, Vintage Books, 2003, pp152, 267.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Shapiro, Dina Pardijs, The transatlantic meaning of Donald Trump: a US-EU Power Audit, European Council on Foreign Relations, 21 September 2017.

transactional logic. There is no such thing as free defense; sooner or later, in one area or the other, there is always something expected in return. The Clinton administration's Bottom-up Review was rather clear: "Our allies must be sensitive to the linkages between a sustained U.S. commitment to their security on the one hand, and their actions in such areas as trade policy, technology transfer, and participation in multinational security operations on the other."<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, as early as in 1962 U.S. Vice President Johnson threatened to withdraw American troops from the continent, should the Common Market block American poultry exports to Europe...

Although the end of the Cold War did constitute a watershed moment, leaders on both sides of the ocean tried their best to ignore this fact. With the notable exception of French policy-makers who strived to awaken their EU partners to the realities of the forthcoming "multipolar" world order – to no avail. During the 2010's, a unique alignment of the planets (starting with the "Asian pivot" and culminating with the Trump presidency) helped Europeans to open their eyes to post-Cold War realities. German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas spoke about "making plans for a new world order" and warned: "The fact that the Atlantic has widened politically is by no means solely due to Donald Trump. The U.S. and Europe have been drifting apart for years. The overlapping of values and interests that shaped our relationship for two generations is decreasing. The binding force of the East-West conflict is history. These changes began well before Trump's election - and will survive his presidency well into the future."<sup>8</sup>

Maas went on saying: "Let's use the idea of a balanced partnership as a blueprint, where we assume our equal share of responsibility. In which we form a counterweight when the US crosses the line. Where we put our weight when America retreats. And in which we can start a new conversation." The Trump administration's excesses certainly gave momentum in this direction. During four years, Europeans have been faced with a 24/7 demonstration of the disadvantages of their dependency. It remains to be seen whether they will draw the lessons, and if so, what kind of reaction is to be expected from Washington.

### **The Biden moment: hit or miss**

Despite foreseeable speeches about a "new beginning" and a dramatically improved ambience in transatlantic diplomacy, U.S. policy will first and foremost strive to return to "normalcy". This is certainly reassuring to allies, but does not automatically mean they will benefit from it. Even on the most welcome policy changes, on multilateral organizations and alliances, a positive outcome, from a European perspective, is far from being granted. Not to mention the long series of persisting disagreements, or policy gaps, where the best one can hope for is a civil exchange of arguments, maybe some degree of rapprochement, but mostly a polite acknowledgment of divergences.

There is no doubt about the Biden administration's renewed support for multilateralism and reinforced commitment to traditional alliances. Once the U.S. will be back in the game, the question, for Europeans, is whether there will be room for coordination, or Washington only participates in order to lead (some might say dictate). As a recent Congressional Research Service report points out "European officials periodically complain about frequent U.S. expectation of automatic European support."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when they hear Joe Biden say that "I will, once more, have America lead the world", Europeans have mixed feelings. However much they appreciate Washington taking the lead whenever interests overlap, they are less enthusiastic when in other situations they are invited to simply align themselves with the U.S.

---

<sup>7</sup> Report on the Bottom-Up Review, DoD, October 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Heiko Maas, Making plans for a new world order, Handelsblatt, 22 August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Transatlantic Relations: U.S. Interests and Key Issues, CRS report, 27 April 2020.

NATO is a case in point. To hear Joe Biden state forcefully that “NATO is at the very heart of American security” is undoubtedly music to European ears, especially after the past four years. However, they also know that the next U.S. President will push long-standing U.S. priorities, and expect concessions in return for re-engaging with NATO. The problem is: not all allies are eager to expand the U.S.-led Alliance’s remit to other issues (such as space, cyber, energy), and to other geographical areas (enlargement and the designation of new enemies). Add to it the reinvigorated efforts to reduce allies’ free choice through deeper integration (increased common funding and more automatic delegation of authority to the SACEUR/U.S. Commander in Europe), and you come up with a not-that-consensual mix.

Trade is another area where Europeans are happy with Joe Biden’s initial stance declaring that “the rules of international economy should be shaped to be fair”. Yet, they start to become wary hearing statements from the same Biden: “when American businesses compete on a fair playing field, they win.” It reopens old wounds – especially on extraterritorial sanctions – and casts doubts about how exactly the new U.S. government intends to shape those international rules. Knowing that the Boeing-Airbus dispute, as well as the puzzle over GAFAs taxation, are likely to be recurrent themes in transatlantic negotiations.

Pointing out Russia as “the biggest threat” (as Joe Biden did) might certainly sound reassuring to some Europeans, on the Eastern flank, but will definitely not sit well with others, especially Germany and France. While critical about Vladimir Putin’s regime, they also see Moscow as an indispensable strategic (for France) and economic partner (for Germany). French presidents repeatedly underscore that “Russia is not an adversary”, and former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel talked disparagingly about NATO’s activities on Russia’s border as “sabre rattling”.

On China, Europeans welcome U.S. willingness to seriously deal with Beijing’s breaking of international trade rules. At the same time, they are not keen on NATO lining up behind Washington to confront China.<sup>10</sup> The EU’s High Representative for foreign policy, Josep Borrell, says: “We don’t have to choose between the US and China. Some people would like to push us to choose, but we don’t have to choose, it has to be like Frank Sinatra’s song, ‘My way’”.<sup>11</sup> French President, Emmanuel Macron, warned that without an independent policy of their own, Europeans will “only have the choice between two dominations”, by China or by the United States”.<sup>12</sup>

To top it all, the Biden administration will face two, more immediate and more technical, issues in relation to Europe. Both will be scrutinized as a litmus test of U.S. interference versus European autonomy. First, the United States insist on having access to the EU’s recently created European Defence Fund, financed from the Union’s budget. Europeans are not delighted at the prospect of powerful American companies siphoning out money from the EU’s common treasury – one created explicitly with the goal to enhance Europe’s autonomy. Under unrelenting U.S. pressure, they came up with a compromise solution that does grant case-by-case access, while maintaining a general condition of “non-dependence”. Europeans would thereby at least keep control on exportation and intellectual property rights. A compromise vehemently rejected by the U.S. so far.

The second thorny issue is the Russian-German gas pipeline nearing completion, Nord Stream 2. Joe Biden, as Vice President, called it “unacceptable”, and the United States has already imposed drastic sanctions on European companies participating in the construction. Again, this American attitude is seen by many, though not all, EU member states as meddling in European affairs. In 2017, Austria’s Federal Chancellor

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephen M. Walt, Europe’s Future Is as China’s Enemy, in *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Borrell: EU doesn’t need to choose between US and China, *EU Observer*, 2 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> President Macron’s speech at the annual conference of ambassadors, 27 August 2019.

and Germany's Foreign Minister warned: "Europe's energy supply is a matter for Europe, and not for the United States of America." In December 2019, German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz called the U.S. sanctions "a severe intervention in German and European internal affairs", and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that "European energy policy is decided in Europe, not in the United States."

In sum, all the positive change in tone on the U.S. side does not necessarily mean easier negotiations or any benefits for Europe in the long run. Paradoxically enough, the more jovial the atmosphere, the more some European governments will be tempted to make concessions, abandon common EU positions and drop even the idea of self-assertion vis-a-vis the U.S. That would only add to the relationship's asymmetry. The challenge, for Europeans, is to strike the right balance: seize the opportunity of a less confrontational American stance, without reverting back to old reflexes of excessive deference.

### **The 'a'-word curse**

Autonomy has been, from the outset, the crux of the matter in transatlantic debates. The 'a'-word, as it is sometimes referred to, has been setting the pace of Euro-American relations over the past three decades. Whenever outside events (such as the 1999 Kosovo war or the 2003 Iraq crisis) give momentum to the French-led autonomist line, the U.S. starts to display hostility, poses strict limits, and EU members' related quarrels take place in public. Conversely, when the wind is in the "NATO/U.S. primacy" camp's sails, Washington becomes supportive of EU defense initiatives (within the already determined limits), and Europeans spend their time sweeping disagreements under the rug.

Behind these periodic fluctuations the respective positions remain unchanged. On the American side, the advantages of Europe's dependent status are undeniable. First, due to the ever-present transactional logic, U.S. military protection makes Europeans more accommodating in other areas. On trade issues, for instance, a majority of EU members openly call for attenuating EU positions in order to "not put the broader transatlantic relationship at risk". Second, much-obliged European allies are prone to be enrolled in the service of American global strategy. Former U.S. ambassador to NATO, Robert Hunter said: "Very few European countries believe that winning in Afghanistan is necessary for their own security. Most of them are doing this... to please the United States."<sup>13</sup> Finally, American tutelage over Europe is also meant to keep a potential rival under check. In Brzezinski's words: "A politically powerful Europe, able to compete economically while militarily no longer dependent on the United States, could confine the scope of U.S. preeminence largely to the Pacific Ocean."<sup>14</sup>

On the European side, most governments would be happy to not ever have to mention the 'a'-word. However, over the past decade, it became increasingly difficult to hide that U.S. commitment to European security is highly, and doubly, conditional. It is both uncertain (see President Trump's qualms about Article 5) and contingent on good behavior from the Europeans' part. The ambition of autonomy has gained some momentum as a result. The EU's Global Strategy, in 2016, was articulated around the long-time taboo idea of strategic autonomy; Commission President Juncker's "State of the European Union" speech of 2018 was entitled "the Hour of European Sovereignty" and the new EU Commission touts itself from the start on being "geopolitical". That being said, Europeans are as concerned as ever to not take any step that might alienate the U.S.

---

<sup>13</sup> U.S.-NATO: Looking for Common Ground in Afghanistan, Interview with Robert E. Hunter, Council on Foreign Relations, 8 December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, Perseus Books, 2004. p91.

The German chancellor is the perfect illustration of these ambivalences. One day, Angela Merkel says: “The era in which we could fully rely on others is over. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands.”<sup>15</sup> The next, she assures: “Even more than during the Cold War, maintaining NATO is today in our own best interest. Europe cannot currently defend itself alone, we are dependent.”<sup>16</sup> European autonomy is both the problem in transatlantic relations, and the only solution in sight. Within the traditional imbalanced relationship, the “other” is perceived on each end of the Atlantic either as a burden (free-rider versus interfering outsider) or as a rival (“challenger” versus “dominant power”), but most often the two, burden and rival, at the same time. This incessantly creates resentments on both sides. However counter-intuitive it might sound, European strategic autonomy could be the only way out. It is also virtually the only thing left that haven’t been tried so far...

### **Conclusion: the virtues of clarification**

The Trump administration’s four years have been a transatlantic eye-opener in many ways. If anything, his tenure made it clear how deeply the foreign policy establishments are attached to the relationship, on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, a long series of congressional hearings and votes – meant to shield the Alliance against the President’s furor – revealed an overarching bipartisan backing for NATO. They also had the merit to highlight the very rational underpinnings of this support. As Council on Foreign Relations President Richard N. Haass put it: “The United States stays in and supports NATO as a favor not to Europeans but to itself. NATO membership is an act of strategic self-interest, not philanthropy.”<sup>17</sup>

In Europe, allies’ commitment to the transatlantic link translated into tireless efforts to accommodate, or even appease, President Trump. This approach was spectacularly displayed in a high-level simulation exercise, held in 2019. The Körber Policy Game brought together senior experts and government officials from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the United States. Even when Europeans teams had to face a scenario of U.S. withdrawal from NATO, followed by the eruption of crises on the fringes of Europe, most of them were focused, above all, on persuading the U.S. to return to NATO. At the price of “concessions that were unthinkable before.”<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this renewed awareness of both sides’ commitment to the Euro-American bond, the natural reflex could be to enjoy the temporary relief following Joe Biden’s victory, go on autopilot, and continue the same old pattern in transatlantic relations. That would be a fault, and doubly so.

First, if Europeans – out of mere gratitude for not having to deal with Donald Trump – give up their ambition for autonomy and refuse to defend their own position in unison, they would miss an unprecedented chance to put the transatlantic relationship on a more balanced footing. They would only perpetuate the emotional roller-coaster matrix: from jubilation to despair, from despair to jubilation, to eternity. Second, the reception on the U.S. side is the key. All too often, the American reaction to disagreements is to engage “our partnership” as such, claiming that this or that European position puts transatlantic relations in jeopardy (or, as on the issue of the Galileo satellite navigation system, would “make NATO a relic of the past”). Most Europeans have this fear already – that is why they shy away from the very idea of autonomy. Washington might show the way: make sure the two sides can converge on

---

<sup>15</sup> Chancellor Angela Merkel’s speech in Munich, 28 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Bundestag, 27 November 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, on “Assessing the Value of the NATO Alliance”, 5 September 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Körber-Stiftung - International Institute for Strategic Studies, European security in Crisis: what to expect if the US withdraws from NATO, 23 September 2019.

some issues, diverge on others, without the U.S. calling into doubt the entire relationship every time Europeans assert their point.

For this to happen, it needs to be acknowledged that, contrary to routine accusations, the ambition of European autonomy does not come from some mythical Anti-Americanism. Either one preserves their independence in relation to any third country, or one does not. If Europeans decide to give it up once, notably vis-à-vis the United States, the submission pattern it establishes will put them at the mercy of any other power in the future. A Europe that fails to assume its full autonomy becomes an easy prey for anybody. Emmanuel Macron explains: "If it can't think of itself as a global power, Europe will disappear."

Henry Kissinger seems to agree. The living legend of U.S. foreign policy says in the German newspaper *Die Welt*: "I would like to see a Europe capable of conducting a more historic role, which is to say with some affirmations of itself as a global policy maker." Then he adds: "I would hope that Europe would conduct its global role so that there would be a strong parallel between American and European thinking."<sup>19</sup>

Herein lies the Atlanticist paradox. Those who give the most passionate speeches on shared transatlantic values and common interests are usually the ones who most vehemently oppose Europe's autonomy-driven projects. It looks as if, to them, the transatlantic relationship can only hold up as long as Europeans are dependent, it would not work between equal partners. On the other hand, those who seriously believe in the strength of what is common between our values and interests, have no reason to see European autonomy as a threat. They would rather consider it as a chance...

### **Quo vadis Central Europe?**

As a general rule, Central European countries are not defining players on these transatlantic issues. There are some rare exceptions when their position draw immediate attention, as in the case of the Letter of Eight and the Vilnius Letter, supporting the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq – prompting that famous outburst from French President Jacques Chirac: "they missed a good opportunity to keep their mouth shut". Traditionally, on NATO-EU and other autonomy-related issues, they are firmly in the Atlanticist camp, since they consider the U.S. as the main, if not the sole, guarantor of their defense.

Some of them are now uneasy about the next U.S. administration's democracy-promoting stance, especially when it applies within the Alliance. Joe Biden says that "rising authoritarianism, even among some NATO members" is a threat to the Alliance: "As President, I will call for a review of NATO members' democratic commitments."<sup>20</sup> These are not just campaign slogans. In the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the U.S. delegation has already been pushing in this direction, submitting a report that points at "internal proponents of illiberalism", and recommends "that NATO establish a Democratic Resiliency Coordination Centre with the explicit purpose of helping member states strengthen democratic institutions."<sup>21</sup>

That being said, geopolitical considerations cannot and will not be neglected. Central Europe is the buffer zone between the Western edge of Eurasia and the dominant powers on the rest of this vast, combined continent. Some of the countries of the CEE region have been building up increasingly close relations with Moscow, and all are enticed by China's Belt and Road Initiative, signed up for the 17+1 cooperation,

---

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Henry Kissinger, *Die Welt*, 8 November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Statement from Vice President Joe Biden on NATO Leaders Meeting, 2 December 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald E. Connolly, *NATO@70: Why the Alliance Remains Indispensable*, 12 October 2019.

hoping for foreign investment and trade opportunities. That might be frowned upon by the new U.S. administration, whose top strategic priorities will be: isolate Russia, contain China (and of course keep Europe from going on its own). If Central European countries prove to be reliable partners on these issues, their domestic policy will probably be of little interest to Washington. However, if they cozy up to Moscow or Beijing, their internal affairs might receive more attention.

As for their place in the transatlantic conundrum: Central European countries illustrate the easiness of sliding from one dependency to another. The most vocal advocates of the Atlanticist line – consistently sabotaging EU autonomy from within – they are also among the first ones tempted to give in to Russian or Chinese sway. Like a cautionary tale about how thwarting European autonomy might backfire one day.