

## **Transatlantic Relations: Grasping the Biden Opportunity**

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Hajnalka Vincze's essay on the prospects for transatlantic relations during Joe Biden's presidency is thoughtful and provocative. She puts a needed spotlight on key areas of potential divergence between Europe and the United States, offering wise counsel that we should all keep expectations in check.

It has been a very tough and painful four years for the transatlantic relationship and building back will be difficult, not to mention the prospects for Biden's call for "building back better." Europeans understandably question the reliability of their American partner; the oscillations from Clinton to Bush to Obama to Trump to Biden have left us all with whiplash. Biden won decisively in the Electoral College, but the margin of victory in critical swing states was too close for comfort. Democrats lost seats in the House and may well not take back the Senate. If so, Biden will be the first Democratic president since 1884 to take office without a Democratic Senate. The likelihood of continuing polarization and gridlock is high. Steady governance will be hard to come by as Biden navigates between his left and right flanks, facing the ascendant progressive wing of his own party as well as the 73 million Americans who voted to reelect Trump.

The United States and Europe alike will be inwardly focused; both sides of the Atlantic will have no choice but to concentrate on taming the pandemic and repairing wounded economies. Biden will of necessity concentrate on domestic priorities, most likely continuing, not reversing, Trump's pullback from Afghanistan and the Middle East (although he may well cancel the planned drawdown from Germany, which makes no strategic or economic sense). And although Biden could cancel the trade tariffs Trump imposed on allies, a push for trade liberalization with the UK or the EU will not be a priority.

It is also the case that, despite Biden's victory, the political center on both sides of the Atlantic remains dangerously vulnerable. Trump's true colors were on full display for the past four years, but he nonetheless garnered roughly ten million more votes than he did in 2016 – hardly a resounding defeat of his dangerous brand of politics. The UK is bouncing out of the EU, illiberal currents remain ascendant in Hungary and Poland, and the political center has weakened across much of the EU.

The task ahead therefore entails learning lessons from the Trump era, not turning our backs on it. Otherwise, Biden will prove to be only a temporary reprieve from the false allure of illiberalism and autocracy. Europeans and Americans should thus work together to address the underlying

sources of the continuing appeal of the populist extremes. A top priority is reducing economic uncertainty by taming the pandemic and mapping out the future of work in the digital era. Another priority is coming up with immigration policies that meet our moral obligations and economic needs but also secure our borders. Without immigration reform, nativist appeals will continue to gain traction. Conditions are not identical in the United States and Europe, but a transatlantic conversation about beating COVID-19, creating jobs, and managing migration is a must. Building back better means getting our own houses in order. Otherwise, the West will neither cohere as a meaningful political community nor have the political wherewithal to confront global challenges.

The above analysis indicates that I share Hajnalka's cautionary assessment of the transatlantic state-of-play. At the same time, however, I also find her essay too pessimistic. One of the most important impacts of Biden's victory is symbolic – in the world's leading democracy, moderation has prevailed over the populist extremes and the pendulum has swung back to the political center. This result is a shot in the arm for political centrism across the Atlantic community and beyond. Populist nationalism has by no means been defeated, but the tide has turned. The West is making a comeback as the reasoned discourse and liberal values that are its oxygen demonstrate their staying power.

The spirit of the West and its institutions are poised to rebound. Biden is an ardent Atlanticist. Whereas Trump repeatedly questioned the value of NATO, Biden will reaffirm the sanctity of collective defense and invest in the alliance. Whereas Trump treated the European Union as a punching bag, Biden will view Europe as a true partner. Whereas Trump exploited Ukraine for personal political gain, Biden will seek to restore its sovereignty and advance its democratic fortunes.

Biden's preference for international teamwork will extend well beyond the Atlantic community. He fully appreciates that just about every international challenge can be effectively addressed only through multilateral cooperation. Washington will again build coalitions, not pull them apart. America, Europe, and the rest of the world will be better off. The transatlantic community is poised to reclaim its position as the world's anchor (even if a weaker one) of liberal values, practices, and institutions.

Hajnalka is correct that there will be plenty of differences of opinion that will need to be managed. Forging a common transatlantic approach to China, for example, will be an uphill battle. But I disagree that "the more we strive to showcase our alleged harmony, the more even minor clashes will look like a tragedy." Rather, the more we demonstrate and showcase harmony, the better able we will be to manage differences of opinion as mature partners. Indeed, transatlantic institutions and the underlying sense of commonality and solidarity that they rest on have admirably survived the severe tests of the Trump era – a testament to their durability.

In similar fashion, I agree with Hajnalka's call for Europe's ascent as a geopolitical actor, but take issue with her call for Europe's "strategic autonomy." Europeans should without question prepare to shoulder more defense burdens and assume more responsibility for their own

neighborhood. Biden will continue the strategic pullback that Trump began; Democrats and Republicans agree that it is past time to end the “forever wars” in the Middle East. Biden will also want to demonstrate to the electorate that allies are prepared to do more not when they are insulted and lectured to, but when they are respected and listened to.

Countries lagging behind on defense spending – such as Italy and Germany – should pledge to increase their military budgets. The EU should step forward with concrete initiatives to advance stability in trouble spots – including Libya, the eastern Mediterranean, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The more capable and active Europe becomes, the better partner it is for the United States, and the easier it will be for Biden to beat back the stubborn unilateralism that has taken hold among Republicans.

But I disagree with Hajnal's call for Europe to cast its efforts as a drive for “autonomy” – as the realization of a shared European ambition to end strategic dependence on the United States. That ambition is for now unrealistic; Europe has neither the resources nor the political will to emerge as an independent geopolitical pole. Rather, it should get on with the difficult work of becoming a more capable actor on foreign and defense policy. The main impediment is not the occasional (misguided) utterance from Washington warning Europe not to undermine NATO or rock the transatlantic boat. The transatlantic relationship will for the foreseeable future suffer from too little Europe, not too much. The main impediment to a more geopolitical EU is Europe's own internal divisions and its own ambivalence about taking the difficult political decisions and allocating the necessary resources to acquire more geopolitical heft. Blaming Washington for the slow progress is too easy.

Theological discussions about Europe's geopolitical autonomy or lack thereof are a distraction. Instead, Europe should just get on with the task of becoming a more capable and coherent geopolitical actor. When the time comes, what institutional form European action takes will evolve naturally. More often than not, Europe will act in unison with the United States. If transatlantic teamwork is not forthcoming, then the EU or a coalition of the willing should be ready to rise to the occasion. Reasonable people will figure it out; the core issue is the capability, not the political chapeau for the use of that capability.

Moreover, those calling for the EU's strategic autonomy should be careful what they wish for. A good many influential Americans (including the outgoing president of the country) would prefer to wash their hands of European security; overheated European talk of autonomy should not give them an excuse for doing so. With the United States in retrenchment mode and looking to lighten its load abroad, Europe does not want to find itself on its own well before it is ready. Furthermore, in light of prospective global challenges – Russian and Chinese expansionism, the democratic recession, global pandemics, climate change, nuclear proliferation, cybersecurity, to name a few – transatlantic teamwork remains a must for the foreseeable future.