

NEW RULES, OLD PROBLEMS

The US, NATO, Europe,
and the challenges of global
leadership

By Edward Lucas

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POLICY PAPER

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NEW RULES, OLD PROBLEMS. THE US, NATO, EUROPE, AND THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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Even before he takes office, president elect Joe Biden is rewriting the rules. This administration wants allies. It aims to lead, but not alone. The era of geopolitical competition is not over. But the era of “America First” is. This paper examines what this change means for the United States, for its European allies, and for the multilateral organisations to which they belong.

Executive summary

- History matters: European allies should remember that there was no “golden age” in transatlantic relations
- The Trump administration’s approach was difficult for allies, but not catastrophic and in some respects beneficial.
- Europe’s main security threat is the pandemic and the resulting damage. This will make defence against Russia and China harder.
- American disengagement and European irresponsibility create a security vacuum.
- A complete transatlantic breach was and is highly unlikely.
- New, flexible coalitions are needed.
- The Biden administration will be better for allies and alliances. But hard work and hard choices lie ahead.

History lessons

Donald Trump's administration put transatlantic relations under what felt like unprecedented strain. The president's personal style was novel: abrasive, impetuous, personalised, transactional and ruthlessly focussed on his political base. He casually decried NATO as obsolete and the EU as an enemy. He treated the Atlantic Alliance – based on the values that defeated Nazism and Communism – as a mere contractual obligation to the US. Countries that failed to meet NATO's 2% defence-spending target were “delinquent”: language more normally used towards tenants in his property empire than towards peoples that have shed blood for their freedom and for others, not least in US-led foreign wars.

It was easy to conclude from the stresses and strains of 2016-2020 that the Atlantic Alliance faced an existential threat. Yet a historical perspective suggests otherwise, not least because the past was far from perfect either.

Consider, for example, the events of 2009. Eleven years later, this might be seen as a long-lost golden age in transatlantic relations. President Barack Obama was enjoying his electoral honeymoon. US-led multilateral efforts to deal with the 2007-8 financial crisis had been vindicated. France decided to re-join NATO's military command structure, after a 43-year absence. At the Strasbourg-Kehl summit in April, called to celebrate the alliance's 60th birthday, President Obama put the political weight of the United States behind the contingency plans sought by the new member states.

Yet it was in the summer of 2009 that a score of distinguished figures from the countries of central and eastern Europe felt so strongly about the dangers facing transatlantic relations that they published an open letter to the Obama Administration.¹ It was organised by the late Ron Asmus and drafted in part by me. For those believe in a prelapsarian era before 2016, it repays study. While expressing gratitude for past US efforts, it lamented the tendency to take the region's transatlantic orientation, as well as its stability and prosperity, for granted. It highlighted as dangers:

- the fallout from the financial crisis;
- Russian aggression and mischief-making;
- doubts over NATO's cohesion, readiness and deterrence;
- decline in Atlanticist sentiment among elites and the public (on both sides of the Atlantic) the growing importance of the EU vis-à-vis NATO; and
- growing nationalism, extremism, populism, and anti-Semitism, and neutralist sentiment in some big European countries.

The letter did not explicitly complain about diminished US engagement, but called on both sides to reinvest in the transatlantic relationship, calling for:

- the US to reaffirm its vocation as a European power;
- European countries to shoulder global responsibilities in partnership with the United States;
- a renaissance of NATO with contingency planning, prepositioning of forces, equipment, and supplies for reinforcement;

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https://www.rferl.org/a/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html, accessed Nov 20, 2020

- a more determined and principled policy toward Moscow;
- continued commitment to planned US missile-defence installations;
- a better and more strategic US-EU relationship as well, particularly on energy security; and
- liberalisation of visa requirements (which in those days still applied to visitors from, for example, Poland).

The Obama administration dismissed the letter, saying that the criticisms were unfounded, and that it expressed just the “neediness” of the east European allies that US policymakers found so difficult. Yet US actions, and other events, largely vindicated the concerns that the signatories expressed. A few weeks later the administration abruptly cancelled the planned missile-defence installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, and did so on the fateful anniversary (September 17th) of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. That was rather like delivering bad news about Asian security to the White House, and doing so on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Though one of the promised alternative installations was opened in Romania in 2016, the planned Polish Aegis Ashore site has been plagued by delays and is now slated to open in 2022.

The “reset” with Russia was in principle a defensible diplomatic gambit, but one that took little account of political realities inside Russia, or of the historical and practical sensitivities of the central and east European allies. Only after the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014, fully five years later, did NATO start work on a bare-bones tripwire force in the frontline states: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. It took until November 2019 for the US to include Poland in the visa waiver programme. A “pivot to Asia” underlined the feeling that European security was not a priority. So too did the administration’s notoriously sloppy choice of words, with talk of “partners” instead of “allies”, and the president’s own (inadvertent) use of the controversial and wounding term “Polish death camps” to refer to Nazi German mass murder on the territory of occupied Poland.

More broadly, countries such as Poland and (particularly) Hungary have since the signing of the letter moved sharply away from international standards regarding the rule of law. It would have been unimaginable in 2009, for example, that the authorities in Budapest would have found a bureaucratic pretext to expel the Central European University from the country.

On the bright side, European energy worries have somewhat abated, with diversification of supply including Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports from the United States. The US-backed Nabucco pipeline, bringing Azeri and Caspian gas to Europe via Turkey was not built, though Europe now enjoys greater resilience thanks to the building of a now largely completed network of interconnector pipelines. As with the European Commission’s onslaught against Gazprom’s corrupt and exploitative export model, credit for this belongs in Brussels, not Washington, DC.

Leaks from the Obama administration about the complicity of allies (notably Poland, Lithuania and Romania) in the Bush administration’s controversial rendition of terrorist suspects further embarrassed allies and undermined intelligence cooperation. They underlined a new reality in US diplomacy: a deal done with one administration, however costly and secret for the ally concerned, counts for little with its successor.

That experience also highlights another point. The George W Bush administration, though it oversaw a big-bang NATO expansion to the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria in 2004, was not a golden age either. The “Global War on Terror” involved both commitments by allies to costly and eventually futile wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a willingness to appease Russian concerns in return for logistical and intelligence help. Botched diplomacy by the Bush administration also doomed Ukraine and Georgia’s chances of joining NATO, culminating in the disastrous summit in Bucharest in 2008.

The mythic past is equally elusive in previous years. Before 2000, Bill Clinton’s administrations were heavily criticised for its excessive focus on keeping Boris Yeltsin in power in Russia. Though attitudes to and treatment of allies improved once Madeleine Albright became Secretary of State, deep concerns surrounded the Gore-Chernomyrdin commission, headed by the then vice-president Al Gore and the Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. Even before that, the George HW Bush administration was reviled by many in the Soviet empire for its lacklustre approach to Ukrainian independence (the “Chicken Kiev” speech) and for failing to stand up to Mikhail Gorbachev over the issue of Baltic independence.

Indeed, one has to go back to the era of Ronald Reagan to find a US president who was widely liked in eastern Europe (which at the time, of course, was still part of the Soviet empire). And it is worth noting that Reagan was a dramatically *unpopular* president in Western Europe, where he was seen as loose-tongued and irresponsible. Before that, the Carter administration was widely seen as heralding America’s inexorable decline, the Nixon administration epitomised sleaze and thuggery, and LBJ was tainted by the huge unpopularity of the Vietnam War.

In each case, the criticisms levelled are partial and to some extent unfair (a point not lost on Americans, who wonder if anything they do will meet the standards set by the outside world). History tends to judge US presidents, and their presidencies, more kindly than contemporaneous commentators, especially foreign ones. Given that, it is time to turn to the Trump administration and to try to assess its effect on the transatlantic alliance, leaving aside the ferocious partisan criticism that it so spectacularly attracted.

The Trump Administration

Donald Trump’s personality and his tweets are one thing. What his administration actually did is another. Take, for example, the National Security Strategy, published in December 2017.² Leaving aside the Trumpian flourishes in the president’s introduction, this is a sophisticated and thoughtful analysis of the threats facing the United States (and its allies) and the framework – “principled realism” and great-power competition – in which they should respond. It may surprise critics of the administration’s casualness towards the covid-19 outbreak that the NSS highlighted, among other dangers, pandemics and other biothreats. It also explicitly mentioned Russia, using language that would resonate in countries from Finland to Georgia:

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, accessed Nov 20, 2020

Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats. Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including nuclear systems that remain the most significant existential threat to the United States, and in destabilizing cyber capabilities. Through modernized forms of subversive tactics, Russia interferes in the domestic political affairs of countries around the world. The combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing.

On information operations, it stated:

Russia uses information operations as part of its offensive cyber efforts to influence public opinion across the globe. Its influence campaigns blend covert intelligence operations and false online personas with state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or “trolls.”

US efforts to counter the exploitation of information by rivals have been tepid and fragmented. US efforts have lacked a sustained focus and have been hampered by the lack of properly trained professionals. The American private sector has a direct interest in supporting and amplifying voices that stand for tolerance, openness, and freedom

It is hard to square this trenchant and well-informed approach with the notion, widely shared among his domestic critics and many European opinion-formers, of the US president as a Putin fanboy, with an inner circle penetrated by Russian intelligence assets, potentially compromised by his past business dealings in the Russian Federation, and unwilling to countenance any discussion of serious counter-measures against Kremlin aggression.

The answer to the apparent conundrum is that US foreign policy is the product of a complex system of decision-making in which the president’s personal input is only one factor, and in many cases not a decisive one. The State Department, the Pentagon, the intelligence community, and both houses of Congress are among the other participants in this system. They provide great institutional continuity and momentum. It is notable that the President’s own scepticism about NATO was not shared by Congressional Republicans, while even left-wing Democrats who are instinctively doveish towards Russia became particularly hawkish once they espied political vulnerability in the president’s own Russia connections, real or presumed.

The president’s impetuous instruction to pull US troops out of Germany, for example, was constrained by other factors, including the laws of physics and the Constitution. The money for the defence budget comes not from a stroke of the president’s pen, but from the Congress. The Pentagon must obey the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, but their interpretation offers latitude, as does the timescale for implementation.

This is why at the end of the Trump presidency there were slightly more, not dramatically less, US troops based in European NATO allies than at the beginning. These forces are more useful. They train more. They have a higher public profile. The US is spending more

money, not less. During the first three years of the European Reassurance Initiative, launched after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the Obama administration dedicated about \$5.2bn to building up the American military presence in Europe. The Trump administration more than tripled that to a total of \$17.2bn.

Admittedly, much of this is because of plans put in place by the Obama administration — but this underlines the point made above, that institutional continuity in US policymaking often outweighs the political instincts of the presidency.

Furthermore, much of the criticism of European allies is similar in substance, if not in tone, to every previous administration. Most European countries spend too little on defence. What they do spend, they spend badly. Again, a historical perspective is informative. In 2011, the then Defence Secretary Robert Gates lambasted NATO countries for being “apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defence budgets.”

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence.

He also decried national caveats that reduced the usefulness of allied deployments in Afghanistan, and regarding airstrikes against the Ghaddafi regime in Libya, noted that:

The mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country – yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more, to make up the difference.

European allies may have disliked Donald Trump's hectoring tone when he delivered the same message a few years later. But it can hardly have come as a surprise.

Where the Trump administration did make a positive difference was on China. Leaving aside the combative approach to international trade, and the increased naval and security presence in the Indo-Pacific region, it has also made strenuous and broadly successful efforts to push back against Chinese influence in eastern Europe. The Obama administration could be justly criticised for having treated European security as a backwater. The Trump administration devoted time and money to pushing back, for example with the Three Seas Initiative, a western-led scheme to boost connectivity which is a tacit rival to the Chinese-led 17+1 framework for infrastructure development.

Those positive features aside, three elements in particular made the Trump administration unlike any of its predecessors, and in ways that allies found particularly difficult. The first was the president's **spontaneity**. Having defied political convention to win office, President Trump saw little reason to abide by the rules once he was in the White House. In essence, he began each day with a blank sheet of paper. It could be filled by information received from Fox News or social media, or from friends reached by telephone, or sometimes from his circle of advisers. Then he would make decisions, often announcing them on Twitter before most (or sometimes any) of his staff were aware of them.

This was quite different from the predictable, often ponderous information flow and decision-making process of previous administrations. Bureaucratic minutely detailed policy evolution and implementation continued elsewhere in US government. But not at the top, and not on the most important decisions. For smaller countries on the edge of the US strategic landscape, this creates difficulties. It is easier to focus on affecting a particular twist or turn of bureaucratic process than to get your dossier onto an empty desk in the Oval Office. Trump's notorious short attention span and disinterest in detail added to the difficulty.

A second, related difference was that decision-making was **highly personalized**. Previous presidents tried to keep their personal feelings away from policy-making. Trump centred his decisions on his personal likes and dislikes. Favourites came and went, including Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel. Attention-grabbing flattery became hard political currency. For smaller European countries the obstacles to making a personal impact were all but insuperable.

The third hallmark of the Trump administration was its **highly transactional** approach. If you want America to do something for you, you have to do something for America first. Past administrations have bargained hard, even ruthlessly, on trade, security and other issues. But the Trump administration took this to new levels. In offering the president the “Fort Trump” military base, Poland showed brilliantly how the game could be played. But examples of such successful bargaining are scarce. A transactional, short-term approach is inherently antithetical to the idea of a rules- and values-based, long-term alliance. It led to the disastrous (in retrospect) decision to cancel US participation in the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and kill any prospect of reviving the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). These two economic-security projects were already in difficulty (in the case of TTIP, also because of short-sighted protectionist sentiment in Europe). But without them, the US ability to act as a counterweight to China's economic rise was gravely weakened. US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the JCPOA (Iran deal) also stoked criticism in Europe, weakening American influence without providing any obvious benefit.

The best-founded criticisms of the Trump administration's approach focus on its words, not its deeds. Western values are the basis of the transatlantic alliance. The president failed to articulate them. He was notably and perplexingly reluctant to criticise Vladimir Putin. He did not use the “bully pulpit” to draw attention to creeping Russian influence in Georgia or Moldova, or the Kremlin's murderous attacks on critics in Western countries such as Britain and Germany. He indulged in unfounded conspiracy theories involving Ukraine, and drew that country's fragile political system into destructive intrigues in Washington, DC.

The underlying worry about the Trump administration concerns the president's behaviour in a hypothetical European security crisis. Would he respond to a Kremlin provocation with sufficient seriousness, including the use of armed force and even the threat of nuclear retaliation? Or would he aim to deal with the Russian regime over the heads of European allies? The answer is that we will never know. Certainly, the president did a lot to damage NATO's credibility by publicly casting doubt on the Article 5 security guarantee, both

because of NATO allies' inadequate financial contributions, and also because of their supposed irrelevance to US interests.

Yet to be fair to the president, these doubts are not new. Even during the Cold War it was unclear whether any US president would really risk provoking a Soviet nuclear strike on the American heartland in order to protect allies in Europe. Deterrence, particularly nuclear deterrence, rests on bluff. President Trump may have damaged the credibility of that bluff, but he is not responsible for its underlying flaw.

The purpose of the paragraphs above is not to draw a definitive conclusion about the Trump presidency. It is merely to highlight the complexities and ambiguities of the past four years, and to provide a basis for the real question: what do we face now and what should we do about it?

Europe's security future

Europe's greatest security challenge now and in the coming years is not geopolitical. It stems from the extraordinary social, economic and political damage done by the coronavirus. Admittedly, hostile actors, notably Russia and China, have exploited the information-warfare and other opportunities created by the pandemic. But these are opportunistic attacks, not part of a strategic calculus. European countries' failure to match the public health performance of East Asian democracies such as South Korea, New Zealand and Taiwan was not the result of targeted active measures. It was because of our own bureaucratic and other failings. As with the two other hammer-blows to the West's credibility, the Iraq war and the financial crisis, this was something we did to ourselves.

Like these other calamities, however, the pandemic has geopolitical effects. The West's image (or at least the image of European Union countries for exemplary good government) is severely dented. Economies are weaker. Public spending will be squeezed. Social cohesion has frayed. Trust in government has diminished. International solidarity has come under strain. All this makes it harder for the countries of the transatlantic alliance to defend themselves against threats that existed before the pandemic, and will continue afterwards, notably the behaviour of Russia and China.

A notable recent example is that the pandemic has weakened the EU, NATO and US responses to crises in Belarus, following the rigged presidential election in August; and in Nagorno-Karabakh, where a Kremlin-brokered ceasefire has ended a six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In previous administrations, either of these would have attracted intense outside interest and involvement, including diplomatic pressure, mediation, sanctions and humanitarian aid. The West might or might not have succeeded, but nobody could have accused it of not trying.

These failures are symptoms of a bigger problem, of American disengagement and European irresponsibility. Put crudely, the United States is no longer able or willing to micro-manage European security. But the European Union and its member states have so far proved unable or unwilling to fill the gap.

The problem is not of means. The countries of the West (the United States and its allies in Asia and Europe) are bigger and richer than China. Europe is bigger and richer than the United States. Indeed, even the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region plus Poland (the

NBP9) have a GDP bigger than Russia. Their defence spending is around half that of the Russian Federation – and the Kremlin has to run a strategic nuclear programme, a blue-water navy, a military space effort and worry about China. The NBP9 have in essence only one priority: to defend themselves against a Russian conventional attack.

Instead, the problem is of willpower and coordination. One element is generational. The struggles against communism and Nazism provided a long-lasting historical ballast to the transatlantic relationship. Memories, first hand or second hand, of American soldiers storming the Normandy beaches in 1944, of the Berlin airlift in 1948, of JF Kennedy's speech in Berlin in 1961, of the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and of the Prague spring in 1968, and the revolutions of 1989 all created a cultural context to difficult decisions about defence and security. Shared triumphs, shared traumas and shared fears created personal and institutional ties. But those memories are fading. For a generation that came of age after 1989, these past glories are of little interest. We need a new story that makes sense of the transatlantic alliance for the 21st century. Neither Donald Trump, nor the leaders of the European institutions and the member states of the EU, has been able to articulate one.

The cultural vacuum creates the danger of a strategic one. Will the United States maintain an effective engagement in Europe? Will the European countries provide an effective contribution to the Atlantic Alliance? If the answer to even one of those questions is “no”, we face a new security environment in which defence becomes far harder.

A paradox here is that a stronger European role in defence and security has been contentious from an American (and British) point of view. European defence structures are viewed with suspicion. They will slow decision-making. They will create unnecessary duplication. They will weaken NATO. They will displace, in short, American leadership. Put crudely, the US has wanted European allies to pay more, but not to decide more.

Transatlantic suspicions were heightened by talk, particularly in France, of “strategic autonomy”. This plays on latent (and not so latent) anti-American sentiment in some European countries. Freed from American tutelage, the idea goes, European countries will concentrate on their own defence, and not be dragged into Washington's futile or imperialist expeditions or into new cold wars with Russia and China.

The foremost advocate of European strategic autonomy is President Emmanuel Macron of France. His lengthy interview on geopolitics, published in mid-November, outlines his vision.³

Three years ago, when I spoke about European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, I was taken for a lunatic, and these ideas were dismissed as French whims. We managed to get things moving. In Europe, these ideas have taken hold. We have built European defence capabilities, although it was thought unthinkable. We are making progress in the field of technological and strategic autonomy, whereas people were surprised when I started talking about sovereignty over 5G. So first of all, there is ideological work to be done, and it is urgent. It is a matter of conceiving the

³ <https://geopolitique.eu/en/macron-grand-continent/>, accessed Nov 20, 2020

terms of European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, so that we can have our own say and not become the vassal of this or that power and no longer have a say.

He continued:

Europe is not just a market. For decades, we have acted implicitly as if Europe were a single market. But we have not conceived Europe internally as a finite political space. Our currency is not finished. Until this summer's agreements, we did not have a real budget and real financial solidarity. We have not entirely thought through all the social issues that make us a united space. And we have not sufficiently thought about what makes us a power in the concert of nations: a highly integrated region with a clear political given. Europe must rethink itself politically and act politically to define common objectives that are more than merely delegating our future to the market.

Macron admits that European “sovereignty” is overambitious but holds up the prospect of “autonomy” in the sense that Europe can set its own rules and act according to its own interests, particularly regarding its “neighbourhood” (Russia and Africa) and China.

This sounds jarring. Yet the central message is the need to reinvent international cooperation, a multilateralist agenda that will chime deeply with the instincts and approach of the Biden administration. Macron acknowledges the failures of existing structures (highlighting the UN Security Council and the WHO) and advocates coalitions. While demanding a reboot of the “Washington Consensus” in favour of a new “Paris Consensus” that redresses the weaknesses of capitalism, such climate-damaging emissions, excessive financialisation, inequality and the corrosive effects of technology, he also decries Russian and Chinese attempts to play down the universalism of Western values. In short, the French president wants a stronger Europe but within a multilateral framework.

Much of the fuel for Macron's talk of autonomy and European rule-setting comes from past friction with the Trump administration, notably over Iran, and with the Bush administration over Iraq. A Biden administration is far more likely to work with, rather than against, the European Union, making the desire for autonomy less burning. A more cohesive and decisive Europe would not necessarily be a counter or rival to the United States. It would also be a more capable partner.

For the reality is that American and European security priorities increasingly overlap. It was possible to argue that the wars toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002, or Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003, resulted from strategic miscalculations by the Bush administration and were not Europe's business. It is far harder to argue in 2020 that Russia is a benevolent neighbour and that a Chinese-led world order will suit Europe better than an US-led one.

The rhetoric expended on the theoretical issues of European strategic autonomy does not correspond to the essentially trivial practical questions at stake. Until Europe spends more — a lot more — on defence it must rely on the United States. Remember Robert Gates's remarks on Libya, cited above. European countries, having voted unanimously to

intervene to support the beleaguered rebels in Benghazi and to overthrow the Ghaddafi regime, quickly found they lacked the means to do so without American help. On everything from satellites to submarines, via intelligence, logistics, precision-strike munitions and fighter aircraft, European countries lack the capability to project power even in their own neighbourhood.

Even if European countries started now to spend 2% of European GDP on defence (a bare minimum) and devoted it to the right systems and human resources, and even assuming that post-Brexit Britain was willing to throw its weight behind the project, it would still be a decade before Europe was able to meet its own defence needs.

That is not to say that limited, practical European cooperation could not bear fruit (discussed in more detail in the section on leadership, below). A deployable battlegroup, for example, would be

The problem is sharpest in the Nordic-Baltic region. The topography of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania makes them hard to defend. Put crudely, the region is hard to reinforce and there nowhere to retreat to. NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, and increasingly effective local military forces, can sharply raise the cost of a Russian attack, but they cannot alone render it fruitless. The security of the region is therefore particularly dependent on regional cooperation, including with non-NATO Sweden and Finland, and on the overall credibility of NATO's deterrence. This makes the Baltic states a potentially tempting target. A small victory for the Russian Federation would mean a big, perhaps catastrophic, dent in Western credibility. NATO stands or falls by its ability to defend its most vulnerable members. Yet NATO's decision-making is slow. Its members have widely varying threat perceptions. Its ability to respond to an armed attack depends heavily on the willingness of the US president to act speedily and decisively.

welcome, as would stronger maritime capabilities against pirates, people-smugglers or other low-end adversaries. But for full-spectrum warfare and credible deterrence against a high-end adversary such as Russia, especially in the vulnerable Baltic region (see box) US involvement is still essential.

It is similarly fanciful to imagine a full US withdrawal from Europe. Vital American interests in Africa, the Middle East and the high North all require a military footprint in Europe. The 30,000-strong US forces in Europe are not expensive (at least in comparison to the efforts being made in the Pacific to counter China). More fundamentally, Europe is the most important US ally. Jointly with European countries, the US has a chance to set global norms and rules. Alone, it cannot. The greatest strength of the United States in the post-war era has been the depth and strength of its alliances. It is easy to decry them in order to win cheap points with a resentful slice of American public opinion. It is almost impossible to replace them.

The practical questions therefore are not about absolutes. They US engagement in Europe will continue. Europe cannot manage alone. The real issues are about practicalities and priorities as the balance slowly shifts towards greater equality. Where can Europe most

usefully do more? What capabilities can the US deploy elsewhere? Who should lead on what, and how?

Leadership in practice

Europe lacks leadership. What it has comes from what to many are unexpected places. During the crisis in Belarus, for example, the most engaged outsider has been not the European Commission, or other EU institutions, nor Germany, the continent's heavyweight economy, nor France – the country which prides itself on its strategic vision, nor Britain, the supposed security heavyweight, nor even the United States. Leadership came from Lithuania, notably from Linas Linkevičius, foreign minister for the past eight years, and before that a two-term defence minister for a further seven years. Linkevičius not only spearheaded his own country's response, but also chivvied other countries to urge restraint on the regime (and its Kremlin backers) and to offer help to exiled dissidents and others in need. Other Lithuanians, ranging the president to grassroots organisations and individuals, have also offered their help.

In a sense this is to be expected. Lithuania shares not only a border but a deep common history with Belarus going back centuries. But several aspects are striking. One is the relative absence of complementary efforts from bigger, stronger and supposedly savvier countries, notably Poland. The other is the confidence with which Lithuania has moved to centre-stage. A country of three million people – smaller than many American states – has put on a bravura diplomatic performance.

There are other examples. Czech politicians, including the mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib, and the speaker of the Senate, Miloš Vystrčil, have taken the lead in challenging the Chinese Communist Party's taboo on contacts with Taiwan. The result was a geopolitical lesson of world importance: the Chinese mainland authorities threats of retaliation proved empty, clearing the way for other countries, politicians and institutions to follow the Czech lead.

What Europe really needs though is not symbolic, but weighty leadership. The prime candidate would be the European Commission. It talks a good game. The president, Ursula von der Leyen, says that the EU needs to be “geopolitical”. China is now officially a “strategic rival”. But time and again, European institutions, and the individuals that lead them, fail to provide deeds to match their words. One problem is cumbersome decision-making. Another is the way in which individual member states can veto a common position. The EU struggled for weeks to find a common position on Belarus because of objections from Cyprus (which believed it had been promised a tougher line on Turkish gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean). The EU was invisible during the six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan which has cost thousands of lives. European diplomacy on Ukraine is negligible. Bosnia festers. Refugees keep coming.

Covid has also crippled EU defence ambitions. The upcoming seven-year budget has €7bn/\$8.14bn (against a hoped-for €11.5bn) for the European defence (equipment and technology) fund and €1.5bn for military mobility, barely a quarter of the €5.8bn that would be required to improve infrastructure and bureaucracy. Talk is cheap. Defence is not.

The next candidate would be Germany, where public opinion, business interests, institutional inertia and foreign influence-peddling all combine against the development of a threat-aware strategic culture. It is no exaggeration to say that Europe's long-term security depends more on Germany waking up to its responsibilities than on any other single factor.

The Trump administration's unpopularity in Germany did not help this much-needed shift. Advocating for a more robust and strategic approach was easily decried as currying favour with a country that many Germans regard as a greater threat than Russia or China. Conversely, however, the likeable and reassuring figure of Joe Biden may accelerate this change. So too may a pattern of outrages, including a Kremlin-sponsored assassination in the heart of Berlin, the presence of the charismatic Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who is recovering from a near-fatal poisoning, and Chinese human-rights abuses and other aggressive behaviour. Germany's friends and allies can only wait and hope.

In the absence (for now) of German leadership, the other alternatives are Britain and France. Britain is potentially Europe's heavy-hitter, with a strategic nuclear deterrent, a first-tier conventional military and renowned intelligence capabilities, as well as the leverage that comes from London's role as a global financial centre. Britain leads the Joint Expeditionary Force, which includes military contributions from Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway. (This is not the same as the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, created in 2010)

Brexit negotiations and the military's budgetary problems have been serious distractions. But these are temporary. From 2021 onwards, Britain will be able to play a bigger role in continental European security if it wishes. The big determining factor will be the wishes of the United States. If Pentagon military planners want Britain's help against China in East Asia, resources available for countering Russia in Europe will be diminished. If the US wants Europe to shoulder greater responsibilities in its own defence, then Britain will be well placed to fill that gap (perhaps leasing its new aircraft carriers to the US Navy). Strategic clarity from Washington DC will set the framework for Britain's involvement in European security.

The remaining leadership candidate is France, in the form of President Macron. His sometimes-grandiloquent rhetoric about "strategic autonomy", discussed above, is open to criticism. So too was his dismissal of NATO as "brain dead". But France is without doubt a serious force. Like Britain it is a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UNSC. It has founded the fourteen-country [European Intervention Initiative](#) (EI2), which aims to create the capability for ad-hoc missions that might otherwise bog down in the NATO and European bureaucracy.

The problem for France is wariness about its real intentions, partly in Washington DC but chiefly among countries in Europe's east. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 the French president spouted a mixture of clichés, truisms, and wishful thinking about Russia: a self-indulgent (now abandoned) stunt that left other European countries aghast. It followed a petulant (now reversed) block on the start of EU membership talks for hard-pressed North Macedonia. Macron was at pains in his recent interview to praise Estonia's participation in France's Mali mission; he also made a ground-breaking visit to

Lithuania. But leadership is based on trust. Countries for whom Russia is the number one security worry have every reason to doubt that France takes their concerns seriously. Until that changes, French leadership in Europe will be confined to other topics beloved of Mr Macron, such as African security, digital governance, public health, climate change and counter-terrorism. That should be enough to be getting on with.

Given the limited prospects for leadership from big countries, the best hope for European decision-making comes from coalitions. The Nordic-Baltic-Polish nine, for example, share common worries about Russia and could do far more to pool resources and boost capabilities. Finland and Poland both have the stealthy US-made JASSM missile, a conventional weapon able to strike deep inside Russian territory, and therefore a useful element in deterrence. Closer cooperation among and with the non-Baltic six would increase resilience in the Baltic three. Decision-making among these countries — for example on reinforcements during crisis — is likelier to be far faster than within the cumbersome structures of the EU and NATO. Outside involvement, whether from France, Britain or the United States, would add mass and credibility.

The future of European security is likely to rest with these coalitions: of the willing, of the threat-aware, of the capable. The big question for the Biden administration is what role it can play in making them effective.

Will Biden be different?⁴

President-elect Biden is not just predictable. He is experienced. He has transatlantic security in his bones. He has a deep personal interest in European security. It is hard to imagine another world leader (Angela Merkel would be the closest) who grasps issues such as Bosnia, the Good Friday Agreement, or Nagorno-Karabakh more clearly. Unlike his predecessor he believes in, and articulates, the values at the heart of the transatlantic alliance. At his [barnstorming speech](#) to the Munich Security Conference in 2019, I witnessed unfeigned, even teary, appreciation from the normally hard bitten audience. It is easy to see why so many European political leaders have greeted his election with such warmth (and relief).

Yet it would be premature and unwise to imagine that transatlantic relations face a new golden age (or indeed will return to the imaginary one of the past).

For a start, the domestic factors that fuelled Trump's rise have not vanished. But for the pandemic, the president would have won. The next election is only four years away. A Trumpian Republican candidate might win that, making the Biden era seem like an anomalous anachronism. The president's careless words and deeds damaged the US reputation for constancy towards its allies. As I have argued above, the damage was less than it appeared. But damage there was.

Second, even in the short term, European security will not be a pressing item on an agenda in Washington, DC dominated by China abroad, economic woes, and domestic political

⁴ I elaborated some of these arguments in a piece for CEPA in early November 2020 <https://cepa.org/history-lessons/>, accessed Nov 20, 2020

polarisation. Worries about Russia in particular, unless urgent and justified, will receive short shrift in a busy White House.

Third, the West's enemies are not sleeping. Threats are evolving. As well as the military danger from Russia (substantially dealt with by NATO's contingency plans and Enhanced Forward Presence) they include the far harder questions of deterrence and resilience in the face of cyber-attacks, dirty money, information warfare, and other forms of influence operation. These require new forms of cooperation between countries and between participants in our political and economic systems, bridging silos and gaps. Public-private, civil-military and government-third sector ties will have to be rethought, as will rules on secrecy, privacy, data and identity.

Given limited time, effort and money, the administration will prioritise. If the main threat is China, other things will have to be sacrificed. The danger for European allies is that Russia offers to join some broad international coalition aimed at constraining China's rise – perhaps in space, perhaps in the Arctic, perhaps elsewhere – in return for concessions elsewhere. The Biden administration is unlikely to walk into the snare of another reset. But it could repeat the mistake of the George Bush administration regarding Russian help against terrorism.

The strategic answer to this danger for European allies is to make their own efforts to counter Russia, while also making themselves central to US efforts to counter China's destructive behaviour. Whether it is offering naval and military help to US-led efforts in the Indo-Pacific region, or in pushing back against politicised infrastructure, data-gathering, pressure on universities or other aspects of Chinese sharp power, European allies can play a vital role. Perhaps the greatest importance will be the building of global economic governance structures. The failure of the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) were among the greatest strategic mis-steps of the Trump administration. So too has been the failure to strike a deal with European allies on the future of digital governance.

All these problems are fixable. But the window is closing. The Biden administration has to show itself successful in the eyes of voters at home, while rebuilding alliances and trust abroad. European countries must shake off their strategic irresponsibility and grasp the scale of the challenge from China, while not neglecting the continuing threat from Russia. All this must happen at a time when the pandemic has distracted and exhausted decisionmakers, crippled economies and placed untold strains on public patience.

Recommendations

For everyone:

- Innovate.
- Build ad hoc coalitions.
- Show solidarity.
- Take nothing for granted, domestically and abroad.

For European allies:

- Spend more on defence and spend it better.

- Understand the Biden Administration's constraints and priorities.
- Build consensus for transatlantic agreements on economic governance and digital policy.
- Support European Union common security and defence policy, especially regarding Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East.
- Shoulder more of the burden in countering Russia.
- Support US efforts to counter China globally (eg by boosting support for Taiwan)
- Support the Three Seas Initiative, downplay the 17+1.
- Boost resilience to hybrid threats

For the United States:

- Accept Europe as an increasingly strategic partner in global decision-making.
- Encourage Europe to do more for its defence against Russia in return for the US security umbrella and continued gap-filling.
- Do not be tempted to sacrifice European security interests in order to woo Russia into an anti-China alliance.
- Articulate shared values to create a 21st century basis for the Atlantic Alliance.

For France:

- Rebuild trust with countries worried about Russia.
- Moderate ambitions for European strategic autonomy; focus on practicalities instead.

For Germany:

- Develop a strategic culture.

For Britain:

- Play a leading role in European security post-Brexit.
- Deal with dirty money in the UK financial system.

For the NB9:

- Increase joint procurement, training, intelligence sharing, logistics, crisis planning



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