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Towards New Transatlantic Relations?

Cynthia Salloum *

The June NATO Summit has illustrated President Biden's efforts to rekindle hope of renewal in the transatlantic relation and within NATO. In Europe, expectations of a "new beginning" in America's foreign policy were high. After President Trump's protectionist, mercantilist and transactional policy, "America is back", yet with specific priorities, particular interests, and "competing imperatives".¹ Under President Biden, changes are afoot: from the climate change agenda; the World Health Organization funding; freezing of troops withdrawal from Europe... But all these are rather easy fixes. Beyond common values and shared history, long-standing but crucial questions are making a comeback: what are European expectations, and interests, *vis-à-vis* America in Europe, and in NATO? And what do the Americans expect from Europeans in this new bargain? What will the Biden Administration do to further deter Russian assertiveness, or engage in dialogue with Moscow? Will Washington still be the dominant leader in the Atlantic Alliance, one that is credible and persuasive enough to tame nascent disputes and quell open crises among its members? Of all these grand strategy options, what are Europe's preferences, if any?

The challenge of multipolarity

On the international scene, US power – and in particular its soft power – has been diminished, its credibility damaged. Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran, and from climate change commitments weakened the power of America's word. It has been widely acknowledged that during the Trump presidency, relations with Allies have been durably altered. The sense of a collective identity or at least

of a common interest has arguably diminished on both sides of the pond. After four years of erratic policies and exacerbated partisanship leading up to the events of the 6 January 2021 where a mob invaded the US capitol, American prestige and status have been eroded.

On the one hand, the Biden administration is facing a world order significantly changed in its distribution of power and contested in its legitimacy. The United States is now evolving in a multipolar world where it is a *primus inter pares*. Relations among powers are more complex and do not square with a Manichean framework of friend and foe, but rather, reflect continuums and overlays between Allies, associates, partners, competitors, rivals and enemies. In a world

where zero-sum games are seldom the rule, managing the global commons requires cooperation among a wide range of stakeholders. At best, a new concert may emerge. At worst, great power rivalries may lead to open conflicts. Questions therefore linger as to whether this emerging multi-polarity will inevitably lead to enduring competition, or if some modicum of cooperation can be reached. Responses depend much on American behaviour, i.e. on whether it pursues renewed cooperation; retrenches towards more isolation; or favours new coalitions based on values and/or interests, *inter alia* to contain China's rise.

On the other hand, President Biden faces these foreign policy challenges at a time when the domestic agenda of the United States reigns supreme. So far, his Administration has focused most of its energy on domestic

Keywords

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* Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College.

1 E. Labott, "Biden's goldilocks foreign policy: 'America is back' wrestles with the lingering imprint of 'America First'", *Foreign Policy*, 30 April 2021.

reforms. Whilst it is tempting to project a Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the new president, clearly Biden is not Truman – at least not yet. With a foreign policy that is explicitly aimed at improving the middle class, America still comes first. In such context, transatlantic relations may not be prominent, partly because they do not especially challenge the US.

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In Asia, China's rise and the issue of Taiwan will become increasingly important, while Afghanistan's structural weaknesses will not disappear after the US and NATO withdrawal.² Other issues remain unavoidable:

Russian behaviour, Iran's nuclear proliferation, the Israel-Palestine conflict... All demand immediate attention, and not all are likely to strengthen the transatlantic bond.

Euro-American rifts and bridges

Expectations and perceptions of Allies about the current and future role of the US have shifted significantly. President Trump's transactional diplomacy widened the ideological and socio-political gap between Europeans and Americans. Such a movement is not new though. Anthony Blinken wrote in early 2001: *"To European elites, the United States has become a poster child for bad behaviour at home and hegemonic hubris abroad [...] This distaste for American values is matched by concern that the United States acts like a bull in the global china shop, causing a strategic split with Europe over matters such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and national missile defense"*.³

The strategic rift that existed between Europe and the US during the Bush administration, while serious, had been mended, mostly because it dealt with issues linked to the Middle East. The Iraq intervention was opposed by some European countries; but such disagreement did not jeopardize European security *per se*, especially with, at the time, a weakened Russia. Trump's behaviour was entirely different. For the first time, the EU itself was perceived by the US administration as a competitor, and even a foe. Concurrently, the White House seemed to consider the Kremlin as a potential ally, if not a trusted partner. If the rift over Iraq in 2003 was unnecessary – European core strategic interests were not at stake – in 2016, with Trump, the transatlantic gap became unavoidable.

Now, the Biden administration is mindful about the danger of increasingly diverging interests within NATO. Many officials around President Biden are experienced

diplomats from the Obama era. They share an Atlantic mindset, but also disappointments and frustrations about Europe's (in)capacity to deliver, especially in defence and security issues. Nonetheless, US and European preferences are aligning on a wide range of issues. The rhetoric is comforting, yet enduring differences may still render Atlantic cooperation fragile and uncertain.

Russian challenge, Atlantic cohesion

Most importantly, Americans and most Europeans now share the same analysis regarding Russia's behaviour, both at home and abroad. Trump's if not support at least blind eye regarding the Kremlin is now a thing of the past. Putin's crackdown on opponents and his treatment of Navalny have triggered strong condemnation in Brussels and set off even stronger recrimination from Washington, which just handed down a fresh round of targeted sanctions. Russia's advances in the Mediterranean – to be seen more as an opportunistic improvisation than the result of long-term strategic planning – is now carefully monitored. NATO has sent clear signals to Russia, and renewed its resolve and cohesion, at a time when Moscow stationed nearly 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border in the Spring of 2021.⁴ Credible deterrence seems to have been restored. Yet, potential disagreements among Allies – from economic ties to institutional arguments – could surface sooner than later. Anthony Blinken's high-pitched rhetoric could lead to an Atlantic overstretch. Any attempt to move too far on security guarantees to Ukraine would be resisted by Europeans, either because it represents a bridge too far to defend or because such an act would be perceived as too provocative *vis-à-vis* Russia.⁵ As an aside, the appointment of Victoria Nuland as under-secretary for political affairs may have been highly praised in Kiev; but in some European capitals, scepticism could be in order – past experience having been controversial.⁶

In the same vein, even if the rather vociferous opposition to Nordstream 2 aired during the campaign has been muted since the election, disagreements about energy relations with Russia persist. The pipeline, which will deliver up to 55 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Russia to Germany every year, is nearly completed and remains for Germany a profitable joint venture that will increase its energy supply while its nuclear power plants are phasing out. In Washington and in other Eu-

2 A. Bassiri Tabrizi and D. Lewis, "Regional powers and post-NATO Afghanistan", NDC Research Paper 20, June 2021.

3 A. J. Blinken, "The false crisis over the Atlantic", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2001.

4 J. Borell, EU High Representative said that Russia has decided to deliberately "act as an adversary" in N. Gould-Davies, "With Russian-Western relations at a low, what pay-off for Putin?", IISS, *Strategic Comments*, 5 May 2021.

5 With A. Blinken's visit to Kiev in 5-6 May 2021, Ukraine's membership has been again debated. Judy Dempsey, "Should NATO Admit Ukraine", *Carnegie Europe*, 15 April 2021.

6 S. Kaufmann, "Les cinq leçons du 'fuck the EU' d'une diplomate américaine", *Le Monde*, 9 February 2014.

European countries, the endeavour is perceived as a revival of a special relationship and a tool for Gazprom and Putin to hold Europe in their grip. *Vis-à-vis* Russia, there is a difference of emphasis and a divergence of objectives between the United States and the two most powerful countries in Europe: Paris and Berlin. For President Macron, this is a matter of geography; for President Steinmeier, a matter of history. Both leaders have entertained hope for a constructive reset with Moscow, displaying a considerable amount of patience – some call it strategic, others dub it appeasement.⁷ President Biden had not entertained such prospects; yet, his administration has withdrawn threats of sanctions regarding Nordstream 2 and a Putin-Biden summit has taken place on 16 June 2021. Given Russia's recent behaviour, it is likely that Europe and the US will find a new consensus.

In the Mediterranean, American and European interests may converge more easily. If Turkey's actions were praised in the West when they were bent on destroying Daech, its policy in the Eastern Mediterranean has been perceived to challenge Atlantic solidarity and cohesion.⁸ President Biden's recognition of the 1915 Armenian genocide might also be a source of friction between both countries and may reverberate on the transatlantic relationship.⁹

Trade and economy first

Lastly, economic and trade issues will likely constitute the most important and substantial test of transatlantic goodwill. The pandemic has reawakened economic nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic. The Biden administration underlined the need to end the unnecessary "trade war" with Europe. President Biden has taken part virtually to an EU Council meeting in March 2021. Anthony Blinken and John Kerry, the US Climate special envoy, have both visited Europe. To signal the shifting centre of gravity in transatlantic relations, in addition to the NATO summit, an EU-US summit at the leaders' level has taken place on 15 June 2021, in Brussels, the first one since 2014 where a significant step forward has been achieved with the settling of the Airbus-Boeing trade dispute.¹⁰ Yet the same Biden administration

is promoting a "Buy American" agenda and is trying to repatriate American jobs. So far, Biden has maintained some of his predecessor's measures such as tariffs, imposed in the name of national security against European steel and aluminium. Incrementalism and low expectations will probably drive transatlantic economic cooperation.

Overall, relationships between Europe and the US have improved considerably. If consensus is sometimes fragile, under the Biden administration, dialogue will remain permanent. Relations between the two poles are therefore expected to take on much more significance at the global level.

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Global equilibrium

Transatlantic relationships are inherently important but their significance is amplified in a multipolar world. Cooperation between the US and Europe may be less indispensable than it used to be for European security – at least this is how it is perceived on the American side – but it is becoming more necessary for global stability. Two different but interconnected sets of issues must be addressed. The first deals with the rise of China, the second with the management of the global commons, from climate change to nuclear proliferation.

Divergences on China?

As already shown at the NATO Summit, China is likely to become the single most important factor around which transatlantic interests align or diverge. Europeans and Americans do not necessarily share the same strategic position on this. Most of the difficulties linked to the rise of China stem from the country's economic behaviour, democratic standards and human rights issues. These are not NATO-related issues *per se*. Yet, some security concerns may become significant. Taiwan is high on the American foreign policy and security agenda, while Europe's priority is to maintain freedom of navigation. Washington is focusing on geopolitical competition; Brussels is paying attention to trade, as has been repeatedly made clear by Chancellor Merkel. The US opened talks reaffirming the genocidal character of the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, while the Europeans negotiated an important but measured EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in December 2020. Washington seems destined for confrontation;

7 "The European Union must face up to the real Russia", *The Economist*, 13 February 2021.

8 "It's getting hard to describe Turkey as an ally of the US", P. Gordon, foreign policy adviser and former assistant secretary of state who dealt with Turkey during the Obama administration, in S. Erlanger, "Turkish aggression is NATO's 'elephant in the room'", *The New York Times*, 3 August 2020. Moreover, Turkey's actions have been deemed "unfriendly" by some European leaders, most notably President Macron. Cf. Atlantic Council, *Transcript: President Macron on his vision for Europe and the future of transatlantic relations*, 5 February 2021.

9 Just before President Biden's announcement, Turkey was officially removed from the F-35 program. C. Candar, "Biden's recognition of Armenian genocide exposes Erdogan's weakness", *Al Monitor*, 26 April 2021.

10 J. Brundsen, "EU and US end Airbus-Boeing trade dispute after 17 years", *Financial Times*, 15 May 2021.

Europe is betting on cooperation.

Yet, underlying common interests exist. First, China's rise is not a zero sum-game; therefore, talks of a new Cold War are rather misplaced. Given current divergences of perception regarding China, a "NATO 2.0" based on a China threat is a precarious proposition.¹¹ Second, precisely because Europe has limited hard power, Brussels should aim at persuading Beijing to respect the rule of law and international agreements. So far, Eu-

rope's normative power has been limited. Regarding rules and norms, working with Washington is the best way to improve the likelihood of success. Third, Europe's interest also lies in a balanced world with a tamed or restrained China. Within Asia, China's strength is balanced by Japan, India, and Australia, and most importantly,

Increasingly, China is likely to become the single most important factor around which transatlantic interests align or diverge [...] Washington seems destined for confrontation; Europe is betting on cooperation

by the US. With a preserved and reinforced transatlantic Alliance, China's prospect of hegemony recedes. Along with the loosening of these ties, a bipolar confrontation, where Europe's interests remain unheard, is much more likely. Europe could find itself more isolated with diminished diplomatic influence and economic weight, just as was the case during the Cold war.

The management of the global commons

Vis-à-vis the global commons, cooperation on climate change is the most important, by far. On the leader board of CO₂ emissions, China stands alone with twice as much emissions of CO₂ pollution as the US and, in 2020, over three times as much new coal power capacity compared to the rest of the world, building thus more than one large coal plant per week.¹² Persuading Beijing

to change its dirty habits will demand skilful diplomacy and credible signalling. For as long as the US had denied global warming and escaped international cooperation, China had a free pass. With Biden's return to climate change sanity – and hopefully delivering on it – EU-US partnership and coordinated efforts will be crucial. The same pattern should apply for the management of less visible but all too important global risks, such as Big Data regulations, cyber-security, and internet regulation. The US and the EU may not always be in sync, but the need for regulations is now a shared priority.

Finally, in a multipolar world, consensus about non-proliferation has weakened. The risk of decreased "enlightenment" regarding nuclear weapons is real. China did not take any significant measures to stop North Korea, and Iran continues to be a major test. With some goodwill and constructive engagement, an acceptable even if temporary solution should be found. The alternative, *i.e.* preventive war, is too awful to be contemplated. The Biden Administration has fulfilled its promise to re-engage diplomatically with Teheran. Despite a tangible willingness to find a solution, timing is difficult and constraints are high on both sides.

Conclusion

The biggest risk for transatlantic relations lies in different points of focus and priorities rather than in diverging interests. President Biden's focus is on domestic issues. Still, by so doing, he might reinforce the transatlantic partnership more than expected: reforming America's governance toward a more European system, could well indeed be the best guarantee for cooperation in a world where democracy, transparency and accountability are in retreat. In this respect, a league of democracies may be an appealing format to strengthen cooperation between like-minded peoples. Yet, because such a diplomatic endeavour would inevitably be perceived as anti-Chinese or anti-Russian, it may unleash security dilemmas, the negative consequences of which would be far reaching. Short of a democratic league, a parallel and coordinated reinforcement of democratic values and institutions, alongside economic growth, in Europe and the US, should suffice to keep transatlantic relations on track and the world in balance.

11 S. Bjerg Moller, "China's rise is exactly the kind of threat NATO exists to stop", *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2021 versus T. J. Christensen, "There will not be a new Cold War", Council on Foreign Relations, 24 March 2021.

12 Figures by Global Energy Monitor, <https://globalenergymonitor.org/projects/global-coal-plant-tracker/>



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Research Division

Thierry Tardy, PhD, Series Editor
@thierrytardy
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int

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