



America Comes and Goes. Trans-Atlantic Tensions Are Forever

Judah Grunstein | Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021

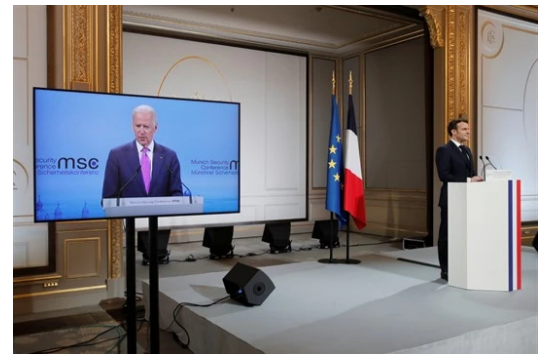
“First thing I’m going to have to do, and I’m not joking,” candidate Joe Biden said last September in a campaign interview about America’s European allies (<https://www.stripes.com/news/us/biden-says-us-must-maintain-small-force-in-middle-east-has-no-plans-for-major-defense-cuts-1.644631>). “If elected I’m going to ... get on the phone with the heads of state and say America’s back, you can count on us.”

In the end, he delivered his franchise tag line not by phone, but in a video address to a “special edition” of the Munich Security Conference during his first round of trans-Atlantic diplomacy last week. And he added a slight twist (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/world/biden-speech-munich-security-conference.html>): “America is back. The trans-Atlantic alliance is back.”

The words signal a welcome shift to European leaders who weathered the storm that was the presidency of Donald Trump. Biden represents the revival of a more conventional and predictable American approach to its closest allies and partners. But as many observers have been quick to point out, the trans-Atlantic alliance that Biden is returning to is in many ways not the same one he knew as vice president.

Some of the changes can be attributed to Trump and the damage he did to trans-Atlantic ties. Others have to do with the inescapable realities of a changing global landscape, both on Europe’s periphery and further afield. And some are driven by dynamics that are internal to Europe as a continent, a market and a collection of nation states.

The European leaders who participated in last week’s event—German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, among others—were all cordial, expressing a desire to work with Biden and the U.S. on common challenges. But the subtle differences in inflection and emphasis of their own remarks highlight the challenges that Biden will face in his efforts to rally Europe to his vision of renewed American leadership in a competitive global environment. Those challenges will center around four principal areas where uncertainty, confusion and division have emerged, both between the U.S. and Europe, and also within Europe itself.



French President Emmanuel Macron, right, attends a videoconference meeting as U.S. President Joe Biden appears on a screen, Paris, Feb. 19, 2021 (pool photo by Benoit Tessier via AP Images).

Trust. The damage Trump did to Europe's trust in the U.S. as its principal security and trade partner is no secret or mystery. In addition to calling into question America's commitment to NATO's collective security obligations, he also introduced an element of uncertainty for European leaders over the long-term dependability of the trans-Atlantic alliance.

But the loss of trust has not been a one-way street. While Trump's open hostility to Europe was an anomaly for an American president, the frustrations he expressed over European allies' lack of seriousness about contributing to their own defense was not. More recently, trust in Europe's willingness to shoulder its fair share of the economic burden in what Washington sees as collective rivalries with Russia and China also suffered. Germany's refusal to abandon the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will expand its imports of Russian gas, and the recent EU-China investment deal (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29381/u-s-eu-relations-and-the-china-eu-deal>), which was finalized over the thinly veiled disapproval of Biden's transition team, are cases in point.

Security goals. For decades, a central question regarding enhanced European security cooperation has polarized the trans-Atlantic partnership: Will it compete with NATO and the U.S.-anchored security architecture, or complement them? One early effort at resolving this tension was to define distinct tasks and areas of operation (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/22204/how-a-middle-ground-on-eu-defense-can-complement-nato-not-weaken-it>). Joint European Union missions were proposed as a way to fill gaps in international peacekeeping, predominantly in Africa, leaving NATO as the uncontested platform for European collective defense. But a lack of appetite for endless stability operations soon took the luster off of Europe's promise as a provider, rather than a consumer, of global security.

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The return of a revanchist Russia, combined with the emergence of domestic terrorism and the migrant and refugee crisis in 2015, subsequently served to re-anchor European security debates to sovereign, rather than post- or supranational, concerns—most of all, deterring Russian bullying, countering terrorist threats abroad and securing Europe's external borders. But while everyone seems to agree that a more strategically autonomous Europe is in everyone's interests, the question now, as Ulrike Framke put it (<https://ecfr.eu/article/what-are-we-actually-fighting-about-germany-france-and-the-spectre-of-european-autonomy/>), is whether Europe should become stronger in order to be a more useful partner to the U.S. or in order to be less dependent on Washington.

Geopolitical ambitions. Feeding into the current trust deficit, and growing out of the different perspectives on security goals, is a similar divergence—both within Europe, and between Europe and the U.S.—on geopolitical ambitions. For four years, as attitudes in the U.S. have hardened against China and Russia, it's been an article

of faith in Washington that as soon as the U.S. formulated a more strategically coherent approach than the one Trump served up, Europe would be eager to rally to America's side. As the EU-China investment deal and Nord Stream 2 demonstrate, this was wishful thinking.

The criticisms of both deals, on both sides of the Atlantic, reflect a fundamental divide over whether geopolitical rivalry outweighs economic integration. Combined with the security issues, it raises the question, as Matthew Karnitschnig astutely observed (<https://www.politico.eu/article/joe-biden-europe-position-munich-security-conference-speech/>), of whether a similar dynamic to what Evan Feigenbaum and Robert Manning posited as the “two Asias” framework (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/31/a-tale-of-two-asias/>)—one structured around U.S.-centric security, the other around China-centric economic integration—is now emerging in Europe. How long the U.S. will be willing to subsidize such a dual-track pathway in Europe is an open question.

Institutions. What is the most relevant institutional arena for trans-Atlantic dialogue? The range of salient issues alone makes it a tough conundrum, rendered more complicated by the effects of Brexit. NATO is the clear choice for security issues, but it leaves unresolved the question of whether European security cooperation should take place as a European pillar within the alliance or under the auspices of the EU. And given the interwoven economic and security challenges of strategic competition with China, in particular, NATO alone won't suffice, even if some argue it can and should play a greater role (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/23/nato-china-brussels-summit-biden-europe-alliance/>). Similarly, the EU is a strong partner to address economic and regulatory issues, but for now has no weight when it comes to security affairs. The U.K.'s departure also makes it problematic. There have been suggestions floated of a G-4 grouping comprising the U.S., France, the U.K. and Germany, but such an exclusive club would create unnecessary tensions among other European partners, particularly in Eastern Europe. And while the G-7 has in the past demonstrated the ability to take on security issues when necessary, talk of expanding it into a G-10 club of democracies would dilute its ability to focus on trans-Atlantic issues.

In reality, there are no easy solutions to these challenges, and all of them will take years to shake out. In the meantime, however, two measures will help ensure that they don't bog the partnership down in endless deliberations over strategic orientations and end goals.

Start with multi-use cooperation. Despite the acrimonious debates over why Europe needs to invest more in defense, everyone agrees it needs to. And while there are competing visions for where to pool newly enhanced capabilities, there is a good deal of consensus on which ones need to be enhanced. The more these discussions are shaped within the framework of the trans-Atlantic partnership, the more likely they will evolve in ways that complement NATO, rather than compete with it. But that's a discussion for another day that needn't prevent progress on objectives that advance both agendas. A comparable area for political collaboration would be in bolstering international institutions, like the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, which serve valuable functions for advocates of both strategic competition and economic integration.

Institutionalize problem-solving. The divergences on China and Russia, but also on economic issues like tech regulation, will remain for the foreseeable future. Establishing a semi-permanent steering committee where these specific concerns can be addressed would help silo these disagreements, so that progress can be made on the fronts where there is convergence, while sidestepping the thorny problems of insufficiently inclusive or ill-equipped existing institutions. A good place to start would be a 3+3 format of foreign, defense and trade ministers of the mooted G-4 countries, joined by delegations from the EU and NATO to represent the interests of smaller states. Such a format would resemble the Western configuration that negotiated the Iran nuclear deal, with the addition of NATO.

Of course, tensions and divisions have always been a part of the trans-Atlantic partnership. So when Biden says that America and the alliance are back, it should come as no surprise that this homecoming will have its share of dramas. For now, Biden kept his promise and delivered his message. That won't be enough to guarantee success, but it was a necessary first step.

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