

The state of transatlantic relations

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Transatlantic relations since World War II have been characterised by a military-power differential between the United States and Western Europe coupled with differences in foreign policy goals among the nations of the transatlantic alliance. Since the Cold War ended, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has struggled to identify a new role for itself, although the newly-independent nations of eastern Europe have looked to it as a shield against Russian territorial ambitions. Transatlantic relations have reached a nadir under the presidency of Donald Trump and, if he is elected to a second term as United States president on 3 November 2020, may continue their downward spiral. Should, however, Joe Biden become the next United States president, transatlantic relations and international governance norms and institutions can be expected to experience a recovery, though with some caveats.

Key words: European Union; North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; United States; transatlantic relations; Donald Trump; Joe Biden.

Transatlantic relations have traditionally been mired in issues that stem from the different positions the United States and its European allies and partners occupy in the international system, and, consequently, the differences in the preference of instruments they use to achieve their foreign policy goals. Where the United States has been seen primarily as a military superpower using all the available instruments at its disposal, the European Union has been known mainly as an economic and diplomatic partner with often a frustrating and cumbersome focus on process rather than objectives.

In the eight decades of transatlantic co-operation, it has always been clear the relations between the two sides of the Atlantic have never been a relationship between equals. Consecutive United States governments lamented the European Union's inability to act decisively and criticised the inadequate contributions of European NATO² member-states to military budgets. At the same time, leaders from European capitals have been equally critical of the United States' *penchant* for unilateralism and its undermining of efforts that were meant to enhance European political and military clout.

These days, it is clear Europe no longer attracts the same level of strategic attention it did during the Cold War era or even during the first post-Cold War decade. Moreover, multiple crises on the home front have consumed a lot of policymaking bandwidth and made the United States and Europe look more inward

over the past decade. The Obama administration managed to patch up the strained relations from the Bush years and deliver significant progress on vital policy issues as a result of transatlantic co-operation. Yet, even though President Obama enjoyed a broad degree of popularity in Europe throughout his two terms in office, his tenure was not spared notable disagreements and even outright divergence with European allies on everything from free-trade deals, surveillance programmes and relations with China³.

Ever since Donald Trump's election, however, it has become commonplace to characterise the dynamics of United States-European relations as on a precipitous downward spiral. The two sides of the Atlantic have found themselves disagreeing on a number of critical policy fronts including trade, climate change, nuclear proliferation and arms control. This has begged the question about the extent to which the nadir in transatlantic relations has been a product of solely President Trump's actions or a symptom of more durable forces at play.

In this paper, I will examine the extent to which clouds over the Atlantic have been a product of agency of a single president, as opposed to the broader structural factors at play.

President Trump as the Source of Transatlantic Discontent

There is no doubt President Trump's actions have been deeply and uniquely damaging for transatlantic

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²North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – a military alliance of North American and European countries, headquartered in Brussels. When established in 1949, it only included Western European nations, but, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has grown to encompass some 30 member-states.

³Pew Research Center (June, 2016). "As Obama years draw to a close, President and U.S. seen favorably in Europe and Asia". <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/06/29/as-obama-years-draw-to-close-president-and-u-s-seen-favorably-in-europe-and-asia/>.

relations. To say that President Trump has been uncommitted personally to the transatlantic relationship would be an understatement. He has called the European Union a foe – ahead of Russia and China – and has passed on a number of opportunities to affirm the United States’ commitment to Article 5 of the NATO treaty⁴. Given his brash style and nativist policies, it has been no wonder that President Trump’s approval ratings across Western European countries remain at historic lows⁵.

Yet, it would be erroneous to say the Trump administration has been friendless in Europe. Those in Central and Eastern Europe who are worried about Russian assertiveness in their neighbourhood, as well as those who share his illiberal principles, have been able to forge and strengthen ties with the United States in initiatives that span military co-operation, energy policy and novel regional diplomatic co-operation.⁶

The Structures that Bind and Divide

On the other hand, to study transatlantic relations is to permanently have a sense of *déjà vu*. Since the creation of NATO in 1949, the history of the alliance has been a history of crises among allies. Some of the issues that have upset the relations between the two sides of the Atlantic have been features, rather than bugs, of the power imbalances purposefully built into the alliance (Thies 2003). Moreover, most of NATO’s contemporary problems are related to its post-Cold War quest for reinvention, as, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the alliance seemed to have outlived its original purpose (Goldgeier and Itzkowitz Shifrinson 2020).

Therefore, from a structural perspective, issues that have been miring the NATO alliance have been related to alliance management more broadly. From the fears of abandonment and entrapment, challenges over the best course of action when allies have divergent views surrounding a vital issue, to the perennial issue of burden-sharing and the concern that junior partners become “free riders”, have been on the agenda for a good part of the past seven decades.

On the United States-European Union relations front, the crux of the problem emanates from the very

fact that the European Union is a strange interlocutor – a veritable economic giant, relatively new diplomatic power⁷ and still a military weakling. The transatlantic space has seen plenty of trade spats even before President Trump took the office – one only has to be reminded of the never-ending saga of the Airbus *versus* Boeing cases in front of the World Trade Organisation⁸. On the diplomatic front, frictions often have arisen due to the European Union’s inability to build a united position and speak in unison in international affairs. Equally, even though the European Union was built as a peace and reconciliation project, it has been abundantly clear that, with its rise as a single political bloc, the impetus to boost its defence capabilities has been growing. Yet, its attempts to achieve strategic autonomy have been blocked by both the member states and the United States (Albright 1998; Smith 2018).

The Impact of 2020 United States Presidential Election on Transatlantic Relations

The presidential election in the United States on Tuesday, 3 November 2020, is shaping up to be not only the most important election in the modern United States history, but an inimitable international event with significant bearing on the state of transatlantic relations.

A Trump Second-term Presidency

Thus far, President Trump has defied a lot of what has been considered orthodoxy in United States presidential history, but a second term will likely follow at least one convention – in their second term and facing an oppositional Congress, post-Cold War presidents have tended to pursue a more active foreign policy.

If so, President Trump’s second term would see the continuation of unilateralism as evidenced in the imposition of tariffs, withdrawal from jointly-negotiated treaties and deals, and a lack of co-ordination with European counterparts on issues ranging from climate change to relations with China. We also would be more likely to see the continuation of his administration’s alignment with European populist leaders and illiberal regimes, thus widening the chasm among European states.

Should President Trump win, protectionist measures would likely continue to be used as bargaining chips in trade negotiations with Europe well

⁴Article 5 provides that if a NATO ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the ally attacked.

⁵Pew Research Center (2020). “U.S. image plummets internationally as most say country has handled coronavirus badly”. <https://www.pew-research.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

⁶Grgić, Gorana (2017). “Who are President Trump’s friends in Europe?” *Stratfor Worldview*, July 20, 2017. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/who-are-president-trumps-friends-europe>.

⁷The European Union was founded on 1 November 1993 and is headquartered in Brussels. It now has some 27 member-states with a total population of about 447 million.

⁸Reuters (2020). “Timeline: highlights of the 16-year Airbus, Boeing trade war”. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-eu-chronology-timeline/timeline-highlights-of-the-16-year-airbus-boeing-trade-war-idUSKBN26Y2MH>.

into his second term. The prospects of coming to a comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union would be extremely slim. It is reasonable to expect, however, that a United States-United Kingdom free-trade agreement would be one of the foreign policy achievements of Trump's second term.

Similar to the previous years of Trump's first term, we could expect more NATO summits ending in *impasse* at best, or worse yet, the alliance seeing a deepening of the greatest internal crisis in the post-Cold War era. There are plenty of accounts from those who have been close to President Trump over the past four years that corroborate the suspicion that he has seriously considered withdrawing from NATO. The odds of him acting on his instincts would be higher in a second term. While Congress has already built in checks against this by linking in to appropriations in the 2020 *National Defense Authorization Act*, the credibility of the administration's commitment to any of its allies would be immediately brought into question.

One of the developments to watch will be the energy diplomacy front. This is a policy area in which the Trump administration has been particularly active – from strong promotion of United States LNG (liquified natural gas) exports to the ramping up of sanctions on those involved in the Nord Stream II project⁹. Key questions, however, remain over how the global slump in energy demand and the European Union's pledge to base its economic recovery on the Green Deal goals¹⁰, will affect the transatlantic LNG trade. Should the global energy prices remain low, the United States' LNG projects will become increasingly unprofitable and result in depressed energy exports. On the other hand, if the coronavirus-induced recession deepens, the European Union's commitment to a green transition might be deprioritised, thus leaving an opening for more United States LNG exports.

A Biden Presidency

On the other hand, should Joe Biden become the 46th president of the United States in January 2021, there will undoubtedly be a lot of sighs of relief around the European capitals. A Biden presidency is poised to have an instantaneous and curative effect on transatlantic relations, at least on a symbolic level. The Biden approach to foreign policy would prioritise restoring alliances, the promotion of human rights, and confronting – instead of revering – foreign

dictators. Multilateralism, rather than unilateralism, would be the default stance of a Biden administration, with a concerted push to resuscitate international organisations and deals that have been defanged and rolled back under President Trump – ranging from the World Trade Organisation and World Health Organisation to the Paris climate agreement¹¹ and Iran nuclear deal.¹²

We should keep in mind, however, that even with the most well-meaning leader in the White House, transatlantic relations are bound to be mired by long-standing issues. Some of them are more *longue durée* as they stem from the different positions the United States and its European allies occupy in the international system, as well as the shifting United States strategic priorities. Others are more acute, and, as such, relate to the imperatives of responding to the public health and economic crises resulting from the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

Nonetheless, these issues will be managed and mitigated through deft diplomacy and focus on areas of policy commonalities. Under a President Biden, we could expect significant and strong action on policy areas where we have seen major U-turns during the Trump presidency. Climate action and arms control are on top of that list. Furthermore, we would be bound to see more effort on co-ordinating policy responses to China, particularly on trade, security and human rights. A Biden administration would undoubtedly have a more coherent Russia policy, which would provide plenty of space for co-operation with European counterparts in realms such as military deployments, arms control, cyber policy, intelligence co-ordination and anti-money-laundering efforts. There is little doubt Biden's political appointees at the State Department would be much better equipped to address complex policy issues, so we would be spared the discombobulation of the past four years on United States foreign policy in places like Ukraine or the Balkans.

Co-operation on trade matters would be one of the policy areas where there would be an early opportunity to develop a more unified front towards China,

¹¹*L'accord de Paris* is an agreement reached in 2015 at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It deals with mitigation of greenhouse gases and was signed in 2016. The Paris Agreement's long-term temperature goal is to keep the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels; and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C, recognising that this would substantially reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.

¹²The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is an agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme reached in Vienna on 14 July 2015 and negotiated with Iran by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (*i.e.* Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States) plus Germany, together with the European Union. Iran agreed to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 per cent and reduce the number of its gas centrifuges by c. two-thirds for 13 years.

⁹Nord Stream is a gas pipeline linking Russia with Germany through the Baltic Sea and enabling Russia to supply gas to western Europe. Stage II was completed in 2019.

¹⁰The European Green Deal is a set of policy initiatives designed to make the European Union climate neutral by 2050.

along with the added benefit of mending relationships damaged by Trump's tariffs on European allies. A more ambitious undertaking, though, such as reviving the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations, would seem to be more far-fetched at the moment as Biden campaigned on a "made in America" platform. Moreover, given that treaty negotiations have to be approved by Congress, much would depend also on the post-election ideological makeup of the Congress. It is equally to be expected the United Kingdom would be actively lobbying for a trade deal with the new administration in the post-Brexit era, although this has not been set as a priority by Biden.

Conclusion

Ultimately, regardless who wins the November United States presidential elections, the policy priorities in the short term would remain firmly with dealing with internal crises on both sides of the Atlantic. European allies are poised to grow more autonomous, but the prospects of transatlantic co-operation would drastically differ depending on the resident of the Oval Office over the next four years.

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