



# Transatlantic relations after the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

This article analyses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the relationship between Europe and the US, and provides suggestions on how transatlantic cooperation should be taken forward. The pandemic has increased public distrust of the US in Europe due to the way the former has chosen to respond to COVID-19. However, this article argues that the pandemic has mainly accelerated existing transatlantic differences rather than creating new ones. To restore the transatlantic relationship, Europe and the US should strengthen their cooperation on common challenges such as climate change, health security, China, terrorism and migration. COVID-19 has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges. It may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity.

## Keywords

EU, US, Transatlantic relationship, COVID-19, China, International relations

## Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has not outright caused changes in international relations. Rather, it has reinforced and accelerated fundamental characteristics of the international system that had already appeared before the crisis (Haass 2020a, 2). The same holds true for its effect on transatlantic relations.

The reputation of the US has declined sharply over the past year, even among its key allies and partners. For example, just 41% of the public in the UK express a favourable opinion of the US. In France, only 31% see the US positively, and in Germany only 26% (Wike et al. 2020). Never in the history of Pew polling has the US ranked this low. This

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decline has been the result of its handling of the pandemic and of concerns about racial injustice following the 25 May killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which led to massive protests in major cities of the US. Views of the administration of President Donald J. Trump have also deteriorated further, with a median of only 16% expressing confidence in him in the 13 countries surveyed (Wike et al. 2020).

Attitudes and public opinion aside, the pandemic is the latest in a series of mutual grievances between the two sides of the Atlantic over defence spending, trade, lack of consultation and much more. National responses to the pandemic brought about more grievances and tension.

In the face of medical supply shortages, both the United States and Europe turned inward. Washington ordered the 3M company to halt its export of N95 masks and to reroute its overseas production to the United States as part of a broader effort to meet domestic demand. The European Union banned the export of face shields, gloves, masks, and protective garments for the same reason. (Donfried and Ischinger 2020, 1)

This transatlantic disarray opened a window of opportunity that Russia and China rushed to exploit. China, in particular, saw a chance to improve its image, which had been tarnished by its disastrous initial reaction of denial and cover up that had helped to spread the disease. It engaged in a massive public relations campaign, sending medical staff, gloves and masks to many European countries.

This article argues that, although COVID-19 has affected the transatlantic relationship negatively, US and European positions on several major issues had been diverging even before the pandemic. These include policy disagreements over Iraq, the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, the Paris Climate Agreement, the nuclear deal with Iran, tariffs, digital taxation and the relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (Brattberg and Whineray 2020, 2). Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic, and his refusal to join an international vaccine effort involving more than 170 nations has made things even worse. To restore the transatlantic relationship, Europe and the US should strengthen their cooperation on common challenges such as climate change, health security, China, terrorism and migration. Given that COVID-19 has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges, it may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief overview of transatlantic relations under the Trump administration. The second looks at how the transatlantic alliance oscillates between 'strategic dependence' and a future of 'strategic autonomy', even though the most sensible and mutually beneficial posture would be 'strategic complementarity'. The third looks at the increasing strategic significance of China, and how US and European policies towards Beijing shape the transatlantic relationship. The fourth and final section concludes the article.

## Transatlantic relations under Trump

The Trump administration has widened the rift between the two sides of the Atlantic. Trump's offensive and divisive rhetoric has alienated Europeans. His comments on the EU being a 'foe' or 'competitor', Germany being 'very bad' and a 'captive of Russia', NATO being 'obsolete' and so many others have insulted European leaders and offended European public opinion. He is perceived as impulsive and unpredictable, making unilateral decisions such as the withdrawal of US forces from Syria or Germany without prior consultation with European Allies (Brattberg and Whineray 2020).

Europeans loathe Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy with its emphasis on making gains in short-term deals rather than in managing long-term relationships. They have a hard time understanding his antagonising of America's allies and dismantling of international institutions that were built under the leadership of the US and, for the most part, have served American interests well. His rhetoric and policies have sapped confidence in his leadership in general and his commitment to the transatlantic partnership in particular (Arvanitopoulos 2019).

His handling of the pandemic has further eroded trust in his leadership. The belief in Europe that the 'adults in the room', that is, the seasoned professionals that occupy key positions in the administration, would temper his erratic behaviour came crumbling down with the pandemic. Trump has shown total disrespect for science and scientists in his handling of the pandemic and thus has exacerbated the crisis.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the 'spillover effect' of Trumpism in Europe. Views of Trump are more positive among Europeans who have favourable views of right-wing populist parties. Consequently, positive ratings of America's response to the pandemic are linked to support for right-wing populist parties and political ideology within several countries. 'Those on the extreme right are more likely to think that the US has done a good job handling the outbreak' (Wike et al. 2020).

The Trump Presidency and the evolution of American public opinion have created significant political uncertainty in Europe about the future of transatlantic relations. European policymakers are trying to understand and assess whether these recent developments reflect a permanent change and divergence between the two sides of the Atlantic or whether they represent temporary trends. Differences on policy issues, quarrels over 'burden sharing' and clashes in the personalities of the leaderships have often appeared along the trajectory of the transatlantic partnership. They have not, so far, managed to create a permanent and irreparable rift between the two sides of the Atlantic.

The US reaction to the pandemic, however, has reinforced the notion that the direction of the Trump administration reflects a structural change in US foreign policy and American public opinion. The first to express this concern was German Chancellor Angela Merkel with her statement on 'taking our fate into our own hands' during the first skirmishes with the Trump administration and Trump's visit to Europe. Following

Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, Merkel came back with a stronger statement: 'it is not the case that the United States of America will simply protect us. Instead, Europe must take its destiny in its own hands. That is our job for the future' (Merkel 2018).

And so the concept of 'strategic autonomy' has become the focal point of European policy. EU member states have signed a new defence agreement for Permanent Structured Cooperation, a legally binding framework for the most willing and able member states to work on project-based joint capability development. In addition, they have established a joint European Defence Fund, for which the European Council proposed a €7.014 billion budget for 2021–7 in July. They have also created smaller EU Battlegroups to respond to and prevent crises (Nováký 2017).

### **Strategic complementarity**

The asymmetry in power between Europe and the US, the notion of the 'uneven barbell' in the defence area, created a European dependence on the US for its security during the Cold War which continues to persist. American pre-eminence was conceded by the Europeans in return for American nuclear protection. Both sides of the Atlantic benefited from this arrangement. The EU could not have sustained its pan-European dream without the American security guarantee, and the US could not have maintained a strong global reach without a powerful and self-sufficient Europe. European free-riding in defence was allowed because a united Western Europe was considered vital in the overarching American Cold War strategy.

The eclipse of the Soviet threat after the collapse of the USSR and the rise of China have led the US to increasingly abdicate its responsibilities for Europe and 'pivot to Asia'. Trump's hostility to NATO and the EU has sent Europeans back to the drawing board. The European vision of 'strategic autonomy', on the other hand, has raised scepticism in the US. 'US policymakers would prefer Europeans to spend more on military power within the confines of NATO, an idea that is based on the assumption that a more capable Europe would still follow the United States' lead' (Polyakova and Haddad 2020). It is unlikely, however, that Europe with a defence capability will blindly follow the US.

US policymakers face a dilemma: 'do they prefer to maintain a weak and divided Europe that is aligned with their interests and dependent on US power? Or are they ready to deal with a more forceful and autonomous partner that will sometimes go against their favoured policies?' (Polyakova and Haddad 2020). Aside from legitimate fears of unnecessary duplication with the NATO alliance, the Trump administration's negative stance towards European defence cooperation is counterintuitive. Increased European spending on defence addresses the 'burden sharing' issue, and the strengthening of European forces benefits both NATO and the EU.

The strengthening of European defence should gently situate the transatlantic alliance, which oscillates between a condition of 'strategic dependence' and a future of 'strategic

autonomy', in the sensible and mutually beneficial posture of 'strategic complementarity'. This outcome would be more easily facilitated by a new US administration. For many Europeans, Trump, with his 'America first' slogan and his antipathy towards the EU and NATO, has forfeited his ability to bring unity to the transatlantic partnership.

## **Pivot to Eurasia**

There seems to be an additional reason for the growing psychological distancing between the US and Europe. Europeans are concerned that the eastern American establishment, which had traditionally been dominant in US policy formulation, is no longer in control. US foreign policy has shifted towards Asia, bringing to power people of political influence without a strong European orientation. This estrangement is not only due to high politics, but also to trends in demographics and public opinion. European immigration to the US is declining and, consequently, the role of Europeans in shaping the US political landscape is also declining (Ganesh 2020).

The lack of interest in Europe is a trend particularly evident in the falling interest in European studies at American universities. This declining interest in Europe has come about as a result of the fact that Europe is no longer the strategic theatre of geopolitics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, its succession by a declining Russia and the rise of China have moved the geopolitical pendulum to Asia.

China poses a serious challenge to American and Western interests. It is not only challenging American geopolitical interests in South-East Asia, but with its grand geopolitical design of the 'One Belt One Road Initiative', it is trying to alter the balance of power in the Eurasian landmass. It also poses a challenge to the global economic system and the Western liberal order (Arvanitopoulos 2019).

The US 'pivot to Asia' preceded the Trump administration. It was a policy created under the Obama–Biden administration and will certainly not be reversed by a Biden Presidency. The truth of the matter is that since George W. Bush all presidents have followed a policy of disengagement from Europe that has differed only in scope and style.

Concern with Asia is not a new element of US foreign policy. There has always been a strong tradition of US involvement in Asia, dating all the way back to Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt. In 1906 Roosevelt was the first American president to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his backchannel efforts to broker the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese war. The US, a continental nation reaching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, has always kept one eye to the west, like the Roman god Janus. The shift to the Pacific is here to stay. The Quad, the new security forum formed of the US, Japan, Australia and India, is a response to the rising challenge of China. 'The call of Asia is too loud in Washington' (Ganesh 2020).

The US–China feud under the Trump administration has mainly been about trade issues. His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement was a result of his

fixation on the idea that every transaction ought to be a zero-sum game, with a winner and a loser. Trump was eager to strike his own bilateral trade deal with China and sell it to his electorate in glowing terms. It was only after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US that Trump's rhetoric towards China became bellicose. Now that the 'Chinese virus' was threatening his presidency, the rhetoric of his administration shifted to pitting the 'free world' against a new 'tyranny'. A Democratic administration is more likely to put values and human rights at the centre of its foreign policy towards China.

On the other hand, China's increased economic and political footprint in Europe has led to growing concern among policymakers. The absence of a unified policy approach has given China increased leverage on a bilateral basis with EU member states. The size of Chinese investments has led some critics to suggest that Chinese money could replace Russian energy as a source of significant influence in Europe. In response to these concerns, the European Commission promoted, and the European Parliament adopted legislation requiring transparency and screening of Chinese investments, more controls over potential Chinese dumping, and more scrutiny of China's offers to provide debt-based infrastructure financing and low-cost loans (*Congressional Research Service* 2019). In March 2019, the EU released a new EU–China Strategic Outlook, which stated that China is an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This document requires all member states doing business with China to ensure compliance with EU law, rules and policies (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019).

Europe will not strictly follow the US lead when it comes to defining its relationship with China. As Macron put it, 'we have the right not to be outright enemies with our friends' enemies' (*Economist* 2019). When Europeans were asked in a poll, which side, if any, their country should take in a US–China conflict, their overwhelming answer was neither (Ganesh 2020). At the same time, there is a security concern in Europe with respect to its technology base and its 5G networks. China's role in connecting billions of sensitive information and communication technology systems in crucial sectors has become a concern not only in the US but in Europe as well.

If security concerns in Europe and the US are one aspect of a common approach regarding China, the other is the issue of values and democracy. It is the alternative political model that China presents, and more importantly, the revenue it offers to struggling governments that give weak democracies the capacity to pull away from the West. This dynamic is most apparent in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where China has made major infrastructure investments (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2018). This became particularly evident during the pandemic crisis, when China engaged in a massive public relations campaign by airlifting medical equipment to win the hearts and minds of the citizens of these states.

The defence of the Western ideals of democracy, freedom and human rights; a free market economy; and the security of the West are better served by a common approach

and a strong transatlantic partnership. The US may be pivoting to Asia, but China has been pivoting to Europe through a series of bilateral agreements with member states and heavy investments. The Belt and Road Initiative exceeds regional ambitions and is indicative of China's global aspirations. America's 'pivot to Asia' is a regional response to a global challenge that defies the geopolitical concept of Eurasia as an undivided space. To meet the challenge of China, the two pillars of the West, the US and Europe, need to form a unified response across Eurasia.

## Conclusion

Since 1985, the world has faced a number of pandemic crises, from Aids, SARS and Ebola, to H1N1 and COVID-19. Despite the nationalisation of the immediate response to the current crisis, citizens and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic increasingly realise that an effective response to the problem requires more, rather than less, cooperation. Europe and the US need to work together to tackle this and future pandemics. This cooperation must be based 'on an agreed transatlantic pandemic strategy that defines what constitutes a pandemic, explains protocols for early containment and mitigation, and details how to manage the outbreak collectively if it spreads globally' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020).

The US and Europe should work together to reform and strengthen the World Health Organization so that it can provide 'an early warning commitment not only by national governments but also by regional health authorities, research labs, and companies to report outbreaks of epidemic diseases' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020). Pandemics, however, are just one of the many global challenges that require enhanced cooperation between the two sides of the Atlantic. Climate change is becoming the defining issue of the twenty-first century, and one that no single country can tackle on its own (Haass 2020b, 192). Terrorism, cybersecurity and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are some of the other global challenges that we face today that require a strong transatlantic partnership.

Migration and refugee issues are becoming a serious problem in world affairs. Whether people leave their countries for economic reasons, to avoid conflicts and civil wars or, increasingly, because of climate change, the numbers are rising. Currently, there are some 250 million migrants in the world (Haass 2020b, 123). This is another global problem that requires increased cooperation. This holds especially true for the EU and the US, since they have the capacity to address the causes and conditions that lead to migration and it is in both their interests to do this.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges. The pandemic and the numerous other global challenges we face may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and 'build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity that can last through this emergency and beyond' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020).

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