

# Europe and Biden's America: Making European Autonomy and a Revamped Transatlantic Bond Two Sides of the Same Coin

by Nathalie Tocci

Never could I have imagined discussing voting patterns in Nevada and Pennsylvania with my mechanic.

Indeed, never have Europeans followed with such passion and anxiety the counting of votes in the United States for four sleepless nights and days.

Beyond the psychodrama, why has the 2020 US presidential election been so consequential for Europe?

## Democracy in America

This election has been, no more, no less, about democracy in the United States. This is true for its citizens, but it is also true for liberal democracies and authoritarian states around the world. With the US being, *volens volens*, the leader of the democratic world, a crack in the US democratic system would represent a lethal blow to liberal

democracies elsewhere, emboldening homegrown autocrats to follow suit. It would vindicate illiberal narratives promulgated by authoritarian leaders concerning the instability, ineffectiveness and moral bankruptcy of liberal democracies. This is a story that Vladimir Putin has explicitly advocated and Xi Jinping more subtly implied.

The risk has been and to an extent is still there. An incumbent President who pre-emptively claims victory, denounces fraud, calls for a halt in vote counting, and mounts an all-out legal battle to reverse the election result has done much damage to US democracy. Donald Trump's tweets and press conferences during the election count made one wonder, is this the United States or Belarus? The contrast between Trump's plain lies and the elegance of Senator John McCain's

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2008 concession speech could not be starker: a nostalgic reminder of how low the country has fallen.

However, the depth and duration of the damage will depend on how events will pan out in the coming days and weeks. If street violence were to spin out of control, or courts, up to the Supreme Court, were to be poisoned by politicisation, undermining the sacrosanct principle of the separation of powers, the damage would be irreparable. Thankfully, early signals point the opposite way, with Trump's appeals largely falling flat with judges in Nevada, Michigan, Georgia and Pennsylvania.

Joe Biden's victory represents a defeat for European nationalist populists, who saw in Trump a leader and role model. The fact that the democratic system in the US is holding, notwithstanding Trump's attempts to undermine it, bodes well for the future. How the dust eventually settles in the US will be hugely consequential for liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere.

### Working with President Biden's United States

As the blue wave began sweeping across the map, most Europeans sighed in relief. It is no secret that the last four years have been a rough ride for Europe. Over the decades, there have been plenty of transatlantic differences and disagreements, frustrations and misunderstandings, as there are in every family. However, these unfolded within the contours of what was always unquestioningly seen as family.

The United States has always been the guarantor of European security, the first and foremost supporter of European integration, and the go-to partner for the EU and its member states in global affairs. Over the last four years, for the first time in post-World War II history, a US president questioned NATO's collective defence, treated the EU as an adversary in trade, threatened secondary sanctions because of Europe's adherence to international law and deliberately undermined multilateral institutions and agreements so integral to the European DNA. President Trump viewed and treated Europe as anything but family.

Under a Biden administration, much of that nightmare is gone. The US commitment to NATO will be reaffirmed, and transatlantic discussions over European defence will veer away from the mercantilist obsession with trade imbalances and towards a healthier US concern about European risk and responsibility sharing and the resilience of NATO.

A Biden administration will seek genuine partnership across the Atlantic. It will work alongside, and not at cross-purposes with the EU in the Balkans, it will coordinate with Europeans over Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, Russia and Turkey, and it will welcome European facilitation to ease its way back into the Iran nuclear deal.

From pandemic response to climate, non-proliferation and economic recovery, with Biden, Europeans will have a US partner again in global governance. The United Nations,



the G7, the G20 and COP26 will become multilateral formats in which Europeans and Americans will mostly play in the same team.

### The good old days are gone

It would be a terrible mistake for Europeans to believe that President Trump was an aberration, however, and that the good old days of the transatlantic relationship are back. The 2020 US election itself tells us otherwise. Some in Europe will now be tempted to stick heads in the sand and pretend otherwise. Doing so would be plainly irresponsible.

Trump lost the elections, but Trumpism is alive and kicking. Joe Biden won by a comfortable margin in the Electoral College, but did so with razor thin majorities in several swing states. True, Democrats won back key Rust Belt States, with Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. Georgia too made the momentous switch from Red to Blue. However, Trump received close to seventy million votes, and Europeans cannot afford to ignore this.

It is not just because in 2024 the US President may be a new incarnation of what Donald Trump represents today. Neither is it only because in all likelihood – depending on the run-off for Georgia's Senate seats – President Biden will have to accommodate a Republican-majority Senate.

More fundamentally, it is because the values and interests that Trump incarnated are organic to an important segment of US society, which cannot be dismissed as a dwindling group

of angry white men in the Midwest. Trump impersonated a worldview that has made inroads across generations, genders and ethnic backgrounds. This is a reality we cannot ignore.

It has three principal implications for Europe.

First, protectionism in the US is here to stay. The Biden administration is unlikely to revert to the Obama days in which the US agreed on a Trans Pacific Partnership and negotiated a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

That agenda was reversed by President Trump and Biden's administration is unlikely to U-turn again. Whereas a pandemic and post-pandemic economy will likely see shortened supply chains, notably in critical supplies, making a renewed case a more regionalised globalisation and thus for a stronger transatlantic economic bond, re- rather than near-shoring is more likely to win the day in public debate, notably in the US. While Biden will likely step back from trade and aluminium tariffs on the EU and refrain from threatening secondary sanctions, Europeans are unlikely to see an immediate reversal in US trade policy, either bilaterally vis-à-vis Europeans and possibly multilaterally within the World Trade Organisation.

Second, the US-China confrontation is here to stay. In fact, it may aggravate under Biden. Antagonism towards China is shared across the aisles in Congress and widespread in US public opinion. The tone and tactics may change now, but the overall view of



China as a competitor and an adversary will remain constant.

The US–China confrontation will be a defining feature of 21st century international politics regardless of who sits in the White House. There will, of course, be differences, and these will be consequential for Europeans. But these may put Europe in a more difficult spot than over the last four years. This is both because the US–China confrontation may deepen, with President Biden being less inclined to strike deals with authoritarian leaders and more genuinely concerned with democracy, human rights and rule of law issues, from the domestic situation in China to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Furthermore, whereas Biden's administration will likely coordinate its China policy with Europeans, the goal of that coordination will be to veer Europe towards its understanding of what decoupling should mean. For Europeans it will be infinitely harder to turn down Joe Biden than Donald Trump. Saying no to a friend is never easy.

Third, the Biden administration will be torn by the desire to reengage the world and the need to deal with existential problems at home. Joe Biden is cognizant of the need to rebuild bridges to the world, well aware of the damage done to US reputation and credibility during Trump's tenure. However, Biden will struggle to seal and above all ratify international agreements with a Republican-majority Senate. Recommitting to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, for one,

will be easier said than done.

Moreover, the new administration will be absorbed by domestic priorities. The magnitude of the domestic challenges facing Biden makes Obama's predicament at the height of the global financial crisis pale. Fighting the pandemic and reviving the economy will come first. Beyond COVID-19, the Biden administration will be preoccupied with healing the toxic political polarisation, social divisions and economic inequalities poisoning the country. Addressing these is existential for the future of democracy in the United States.

In turn, Europeans will certainly have a friendly ear in Washington, but not necessarily a much more active US hand in our part of the world. The US expectation that European problems in and around the continent are primarily for Europe to handle is not only likely, it is reasonable too.

### A renewed case for European autonomy and a strengthened transatlantic bond

The most serious risk that Europeans face under a Biden presidency is that of neglecting all of the above, and conveniently setting aside their quest for strategic autonomy. The pandemic has already led Europeans to change their lenses. Whereas the last five years were marked by an instinct to look outwards and think security, the coming five years will be driven by an instinct to look inwards and think socio-economic.





In recent years, we watched our world crumble, from the wars in our surrounding regions, to the threat of terrorism in our cities, from the resurgence of great power rivalry on the world stage, to the anxiety of uncontrolled migration. The liberal international order that had served us so well started fraying, and its ultimate promoter and protector – the US – was missing in action.

It was a cold shower, but one which woke Europeans from their seventy year-long sleep. Hence, despite – or perhaps even because of – the EU's inability to get its act together internally, be it on the economy or on migration, it began making timid steps on foreign policy, security and defence. The debate on European strategic autonomy surged in those years.

The momentum for European strategic autonomy has already sapped, as evidenced by the fate of the funds destined for EU security and defence under the upcoming EU budget, or the European passivity in addressing conflicts, from Libya to Nagorno Karabakh.

With President Biden, some Europeans will be tempted to stick heads in the sand, putting global ambitions to rest, wrapped in a chimera of a comfortable return to a past that is fast disappearing. Others will argue that pursuing European strategic autonomy is incompatible with a strengthened transatlantic bond, and with Joe Biden in the White House the priority should be the latter, certainly not the former.

European autonomy is not incompatible with a stronger transatlantic bond, but is rather the precondition for it. Only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Biden's US to make multilateralism great again. From pandemic response to trade, security and climate, Europeans and Americans will be back in business, but in order to deliver, European autonomy is a must.

Given the profound transformation in the international system, we cannot afford to see European strategic autonomy and a revamped transatlantic bond as a binary either/or. That the international liberal order underpinned by US hegemony is fading is only too painful to see. We already live in a non-liberal world in which liberal and illiberal states strive for power. It is a world in which we can no longer flippantly claim that democracy is the worst form of government except all alternatives.

As liberal democrats we firmly believe in Winston Churchill's epic quote, but cannot be oblivious to the fact that others disagree and have stronger arguments than ever before. We can no longer claim that economic prosperity can only go hand in hand with political freedom. China proves otherwise.

As China grows having apparently eradicated COVID-19, while Europeans and Americans knuckle under the weight of the second wave, we also have to prove the greater effectiveness of our system of governance in pandemic response. We firmly believe in the non-negotiability of the rights that make up the good life. But in the 21st century, it



will be harder to make our case both to protect our liberal democracies within and to promote liberal democratic values outside, within the bounds of an international rules based order.

We stand a fair chance in succeeding if, and only if, we understand that European strategic autonomy and a revamped transatlantic bond are two sides of the same coin. In the 21st century, one cannot exist without the other.

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