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Renewal, Revitalization, New Start?

The Transatlantic Partnership and the Start of the Biden Administration

“America is back. The transatlantic alliance is back. And we are not looking backward, we are looking forward, together” (Biden, 2021).

Biden’s statement on the restoration and future of the United States’ alliances and the transatlantic partnership during his remarks at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) reiterated earlier assertions at his inauguration and at the State Department that the United States will diplomatically re-engage with the world and especially with its allies. These speeches, combined with executive orders on, for example, the Paris climate agreement, confirmed many European leaders’ hopes that transatlantic relations would normalize under his leadership, that the EU would no longer be a foe of the U.S. president and that NATO would no longer be continuously called into question.

Normalization does, however, not mean renewal, but rather a way back to the status quo of the Obama administration. Although this return seems like a milestone and a positive development after the last four chaotic and difficult years, it is far from a return to a successful partnership. In his long-awaited memoir on his years as president, Barack Obama referred to Europe as America’s wingman in global affairs (2020). This metaphor, although not far-fetched, shows one of the most pervasive issues in transatlantic relations – it is not a partnership on equal footing. President Biden in his MSC remarks reflected this perception by stating that the U.S. wanted “to earn back our position of trusted leadership” (Biden, 2021). The reasons for this imbalance go back to the founding of the transatlantic security structure in the wake of the Second World War and the emerging Cold War, a time during which Europe needed the United States’ security protection. However, the bipolar world order came to an end over thirty years ago, NATO has been enlarged to the East, and while it is important to remember the shared roots of the partnership, it is vital to face the present and future and reimagine transatlantic relations. In addition to this imbalance, the relationship is marked by different expectations, strategic concerns, and geopolitical consid-

erations on the two sides of the Atlantic. These observations are not new but they remain valid and highlight the continuing problems in transatlantic relations.

The creation of a partnership on equal footing is needed to address not only the issues within transatlantic relations but also the many challenges that the world is currently facing. Both sides need to come to terms with the fact that times have changed and the Western hegemony is coming to an end. Rosa Balfour rightly observed that “[t]he West’s weakness lies in the privilege it used to enjoy thanks to its global hegemony, which was maintained so long as the West provided the dividends of peace and prosperity to the rest of the world. That world is long gone, and the transatlantic relationship needs to reflect the shifting balance of power away from the West” (2020). These changed circumstances make it vital to address the pervasive systemic issues within the transatlantic partnership.

After four tumultuous years in the transatlantic relationship, it is a first step to have an internationalist and transatlanticist president and to see both sides of the Atlantic confirm their commitment to each other. It is obvious that the transatlantic partners are not lacking a potential agenda for cooperation which ranges from global health during and following the Covid-19 pandemic, the nuclear deal with Iran, strategic competition with China and Russia, and technological advances. Additionally, both sides of the Atlantic would benefit from strengthening their democracies against populist and right-wing attacks. It must be recalled that not all European leaders welcomed the election of Joe Biden. Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński – with whose deconstruction of democracy in their respective countries the rest of European Union has been struggling for years – had a good relationship with the Trump administration and shared ideological beliefs with the former president. The storming of Capitol Hill on January 6 demonstrates that U.S. democracy is also being challenged from within. In addition to this, there seem to be shared perceptions of global issues on both sides of the Atlantic,

as can be seen in the respective speeches of President Biden, President Macron, and Chancellor Merkel at the MSC (Biden 2021; Macron 2021(b); Merkel 2021). The European Commission's and High Representative's "proposal for a new forward-looking transatlantic agenda" also reflected these shared challenges while reaffirming common interests and values (European Commission 2020). The European Commission's publication also shows that it is ready to take the initiative and propose a transatlantic agenda. Thus, there is both the need and the willingness to work together to tackle the challenges of our times for which the U.S. and Europe need each other. The two sides of the Atlantic still share a similar world view and these issues cannot be resolved by one country alone. Besides, these issues could offer the two sides of the Atlantic possibilities to work together and through that to find new means of interacting.

Looking at the transatlantic partnership from a systemic perspective shows that the Biden administration can only do so much. The pervasive issues in the relations between the two sides of the Atlantic cannot be solved single-handedly by the new administration and there is no quick fix. Few observers doubt that transatlantic relations will improve under the new U.S. administration, which has an experienced foreign policy team with an internationalist outlook and a willingness to consider multilateralism under Secretary of State Antony Blinken. But President Biden also has to deal with massive domestic issues that will dominate his agenda. In a recent interview with NPR, Blinken talked about U.S. foreign policy goals and highlighted the importance of security, prosperity, and values that the American people share. He spoke about Iran, China, and the improvement of relations with allies, but did not emphasize Europe or transatlantic relations (2021). The Biden administration will not only be focused on the domestic agenda, but transatlantic relations do not seem to be a focal point of its foreign policy despite promises to work together with partners and allies to tackle the challenges of our age and Biden being the first sitting president to attend the MSC. Although the administration has pledged to revitalize transatlantic relations, Biden's remarks since taking office do not give the impression that his administration will be working towards changing the transatlantic dynamics but, rather, towards a return to the 'normality' of the U.S. leading and Europe following. At the MSC, President Biden stressed that the U.S. supported "a Europe whole and free and at peace," an expression going

back to George H.W. Bush and having played a central role in the Clinton administration's foreign policy in the 1990s (Biden, 2021). This also does not sound like a new approach to its European partner but more of the same old: American leadership and Europe as junior partner.

Thinking about Europe and the United States as opposites needs to be done carefully. Transatlantic relations scholar Mary Nolan's assessment that "America and Europe are not equivalent entities, for America refers to a politically unified, territorially delimited entity, while Europe denotes an idea, an aspiration, and a contested identity" remains valid (Nolan 2012, Location 277). Although many steps have been taken with regard to European integration and the establishment of the High Representative and the European External Action Service, European foreign and defense policy remains largely in the hands of nation states. The return to the familiar discussions and phrases within the transatlantic partnership can also be seen in Angela Merkel's remarks about Germany working towards the two-percent-goal within NATO, the well-known discussion of burden-sharing within the Atlantic alliance. However, the chancellor also affirmed that Germany was ready for "a new chapter in the transatlantic partnership" (2021). This oscillation between the affirmation of a new start in transatlantic relations and well-known rhetoric marks the current period. The discussions on burden sharing have been present for a long-time without leading to a substantial change in the transatlantic dynamics but rather renewing frustration on both sides on the Atlantic, making finding a solution to the issue vital. There is no doubt that European countries – and Germany should be leading this effort – need to take on more responsibility for their own defense and security and their connected interests, and they also need to share the burden of security and defense costs if they want to be viewed as an equal partner by the U.S.

The only one to continuously address the need to reform the architecture of the transatlantic security structures is Emmanuel Macron, with his calls for European strategic autonomy. Yet, he also affirmed the common destiny and historical role of the transatlantic partnership (2021(a), 2021(b)). France standing in for European defense and security capabilities is not novel, but can be seen throughout the Cold War and ever since. However, the present might be the opportune time to address French ideas regarding Europe's strategic capabilities. That

the topic of stronger European capabilities is still contentious could be seen in the French president's conflict with the German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer who has called strategic autonomy an illusion while confirming that Europe needs the United States (Zeit Online 2020). This argument, however, misses the point because strengthening European capabilities to act does not mean abandoning the relationship with the U.S. Rather, it would allow for the European Union to develop into a partner on equal footing, leaving behind the old dynamics of the transatlantic partnership. However, there seem to be signs that there is a consensus growing that Europe needs to develop a stronger security and defense profile. Angela Merkel highlighted that NATO and European defense are cohesive and complementary (2021). In a joint contribution, the foreign ministers of Germany and France argued that there are no better, closer or more natural partners than the United States and Europe, calling for a transatlantic new deal for the preservation of "our way of living" and the pursuit of individual liberty and collective progress. For them, Europe had already started to change for the better because Europeans no longer ask what America can do for them, but what they can do to defend their own security and to create a more balanced transatlantic partnership. Maas and Le Drian called these the two sides of the same coin which are needed to strengthen both the European Union and NATO (Maas/Le Drian 2020). This could be a sign that Europeans have understood during President Trump's years in office that they need independent security and defense capabilities – to define and pursue their own security interests and to be a reliable partner for the United States. Now, they need to find the political and strategic momentum to act.

The call for a transatlantic partnership on an equal footing is neither new nor innovative, but it remains the only solution to its pervasive and long-lasting issues that have plagued the relationship for many decades. Bloch and Goldgeier called for the U.S.-Europe security relationship to "evolve from one of the dominance and subordination to one of supportive partners" (2020). Calling for a balanced relationship does not call either NATO or European defense capabilities into question, but demands the strengthening of both. This means that Europeans need to start taking on more responsibilities and to develop their own capacities in order to be able to act as an equal partner in NATO. Simultaneously, the U.S. needs to accept that the EU is not its junior partner anymore and needs to face European inter-

ests and goals on eye level.

It is time (as it has been for a while) for both sides of the Atlantic to reconsider the transatlantic partnership and work on solving the inbuilt systemic issues. The first step in changing the dynamics of the transatlantic partnership is accepting and admitting that there is the need for renewal – and not only paying lip-service to the idea of transatlantic allegiance based on shared history, values, and interests as can be seen in nearly every speech on the relationship between the U.S. and Europe. Depending on the location, the speaker, and event of the speech this ranges from the 18th century revolutions, Enlightenment values, and the founding narrative in the wake of the Second World War. These experiences remain the basis for the relationship, but the focus needs to be on the future with a mutually supportive and equal partnership. The second step on this journey is to acknowledge that things need to change and to start actively engaging with each other on both commonalities and divergences. The U.S. needs to stop thinking of Europeans as their junior partners, an effort Europeans can support by stepping up their game. To solve the issue of continuous frustrations in Europe and the United States with each other, expectations need to be managed and addressed. Despite the challenges on both sides of the Atlantic and in the world, there is the feeling of opportunity in both the United States and Europe to renew transatlantic relations and this moment should be used to consider changing the dynamics of the partnership for the long-term success of an enduring transatlantic link.

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