

Opinion – Can Joe Biden Revive Transatlantic Relations?

Written by Kareem Salem

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KAREEM SALEM, JUL 22 2020

The bulk of European leaders hope that in four months time Joe Biden will be victorious in the next American presidential election, given the unilateralist and isolationist foreign policy pursued under Donald Trump. Transatlantic relations have been strained on numerous occasions by the current American leader's reluctance to place NATO at the centre of American foreign policy. This has recently been demonstrated by Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty and his decision to pull 9500 American troops from Germany. With the very foundations of transatlanticism undermined by Trump, Europeans, notably the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron, are calling on their European allies to deepen European defence integration in the face of growing threats to Europe's external and internal security. Heightened geopolitical competition in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, including the growing risk of the resurgence of jihadist groups in the Sahel and the Levant, are part of the central argument of Paris and Brussels for securing greater European support for defence autonomy.

If Joe Biden is serious about resetting transatlantic relations, it will be imperative that his administration addresses these concerns. Yet evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region could impede Joe Biden from focusing fully on improving ties with European allies. China's growing military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific poses a serious threat to U.S hegemonic interests in the region. Tensions between Washington and Beijing have simmered over the coronavirus pandemic, the South China Sea and human rights violations in Xinjiang province. Democratic party centrists therefore see the need for U.S foreign policy to be conducted on the basis of defending U.S values and interests by standing up to China's hardening authoritarianism and military assertiveness.

Equally centrist Democrats will expect Joe Biden to counter China's geopolitical assertiveness by leveraging U.S ties with like-minded and like concerned countries of the Indo-Pacific. They will expect Joe Biden to invest in strengthening U.S diplomatic engagement with the region's democracies, particularly Australia, Taiwan, India and Malaysia in order to maintain U.S strategic advantage.

Centrist Democrats do not only see American interests and values threatened by Beijing's growing assertiveness, on the contrary, they will also expect that American foreign policy remains committed to keeping in check Russia's military assertiveness in Eastern Europe. Democratic Party centrists will particularly hope that Joe Biden will seek to leverage U.S financial and diplomatic support to the Ukrainian government while also keeping tough on Russia through economic and financial sanctions for its interference in Donbass and Crimea.

These pressing strategic priorities could spell out the gradual decline of U.S foreign policy presence in the Middle East. This is plausible given that centrist Democrats are now openly questioning whether the region is worth the high levels of military engagement that the U.S has maintained for decades. While Democratic Party centrists want Joe Biden to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal, they would also want him to cease American defence support to Saudi Arabia. Centrist democrats aligned with South Bend, Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg, are also calling for U.S troops to return without delay from America's post-9/11 wars. As for Israel, while there is consensus among centrist Democrats that it remains in America's national interest to support the security of the Jewish state, its survival is no longer in question, given Israel's military power to defend itself.

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While European leaders are convinced that a Democrat led federal administration will result in the departure of Donald Trump's hawkish and reckless foreign policy, not all Europeans will be aligned with their foreign policy direction. France and Germany will be particularly concerned that centrist Democrats are questioning the future of U.S foreign policy engagement in the Middle East. This apprehension is amplified given that the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic risks having severe consequences to the stability of countries in the region and thus the security of European countries. The economic implosion in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon from the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to increase regional instability as well as associated migration and terrorist flows, if left unchecked.

It should also be stated that France and Germany both believe in reengaging dialogue with Russia over major geopolitical issues. In January, Chancellor Angela Merkel invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to an international conference in Berlin to create international alignment on the way forward in Libya. With regard to Ukraine, both President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Angela Merkel have renewed dialogue with the leader of the Kremlin with the aim of achieving peace in the Donbass. The Normandy Format has so far yielded the mutual release and exchange of detainees between the pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government. Emmanuel Macron intends to go even further. The French leader is seeking to establish a structured dialogue with his Russian counterpart focused on sharing expertise and intelligence, including support for Russia's concerns over future NATO membership for countries in Russia's orbit.

However, European countries that lived under Soviet repression and who continue to experience the threat of Russian expansionism, are opposed to the growing overtures led by Paris. Leaders of Eastern Europe and Baltic states do not believe that Vladimir Putin is interested in more constructive relations and have complained that Emmanuel Macron does not take their security interests to heart. Over the past year, Latvian and Estonian authorities have expressed concern about the increase in Russian intelligence operations in the Baltic region. The Estonian President, Kersti Kaljulaid, has also expressed concern about the level of Russian troops at the Estonian border, claiming that they are at a level comparable to the military exercises carried out in 2009. These factors indicate that these states would welcome the foreign policy commitment of centrists Democrats with respect to Russia.

All in all, Joe Biden, if elected, will face the difficult challenge of satisfying the interests of all European allies while seeking to contain China's growing authoritarianism and geopolitical assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Paris and Brussels will continue to push their European allies for greater European strategic autonomy at the expense of NATO.

About the author:

Kareem Salem is a freelance journalist. He has a Masters in International Relations from the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. His research interests are focussed on European defence and security issues as well as transatlantic relations.