

Interview – Carisa Nietsche

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Carisa Nietsche is an Associate Fellow for the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). She specializes in European security; China's growing influence in Europe; and threats to democracy in Europe, particularly in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. Carisa previously worked with the Brookings Institution's communications team and the Wilson Center's Global Women's Leadership Initiative. Her internships include time at the U.S. Department of State's Office of European Union and Regional Affairs, the European Parliament in Brussels, the International Republican Institute's Transatlantic Strategy team, and the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States & Europe and Project on International Order & Strategy. Her writing and analysis have appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest*, and *The Hill*, among others.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I was lucky to have excellent mentors in graduate school. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, my current boss and former professor, is a master at bridging the academic and policy worlds. Her work on how democracies backslide, how autocrats use technology, and how autocracies fall has shaped my thinking on trends in democracies and autocracies. Abe Newman, my former thesis adviser and professor, always encourages me to think beyond security and defense in transatlantic relations and to consider trade, investment, and technology policy. Specifically, his work on weaponized interdependence, transatlantic debates over privacy, and the EU's regulatory power has shifted my thinking. I also frequently find myself revisiting concepts from Bob Kagan's work on transatlantic relations, Steve Levitsky and Lucian Way's work on hybrid regimes, Cristóval Rovira Kaltwasser's work on populism as a corrective for democracy, Kristine Lee and Alex Sullivan's work on how China is reshaping international organizations, and Seva Gunitsky's work on how autocrats use social media.

How do you expect US-European relations to change, now that Joe Biden is the new US president? What are the implications of Biden's election for European security?

President Biden's core message is the importance of working with U.S. allies and partners. After four years of the Trump administration castigating allies, Biden needs to convince Europe that the United States is a predictable and reliable ally. But, there are two lingering questions in the back of Europeans' minds: Does Biden's victory mark the death knell of Trumpism, or will Europe have to work with a Trumpian candidate in another four years? Does Biden's victory represent a mere change in rhetoric or a change in policy?

In the European security realm, Biden's first move was to restore trust in allies. In his first call with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, Biden reaffirmed the United States' commitment to Article 5 and described it as a "sacred commitment." Despite the shift in rhetoric, the Biden administration has indicated that they will continue to encourage European governments to meet the 2% of GDP pledge and to spend more on their defense. However, the administration's approach will be significantly different: they will no longer call NATO allies "freeriders." The

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administration should pair their call for greater European defense spending with a promise for greater European strategic autonomy. As the United States focuses on competition with China, Europe will need to do more in its own backyard, including with respect to Russia.

Another significant shift in European security will be a greater emphasis on non-traditional security issues, such as climate change, pandemic management, and hybrid threats. Biden's National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, mentioned in his first speech that "foreign policy is domestic policy and domestic policy is foreign policy." This suggests that the Biden administration will place a greater focus on how NATO can adapt to address these nonconventional security issues – a number of which will require greater EU-NATO cooperation.

What were the most important moves China made in Eastern Europe during the Trump administration? Do you expect the Biden administration to counter them?

The tides have turned in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with respect to China's influence. While China advanced its Belt and Road Initiative through the Budapest-Belgrade Railway, the 17+1 format, Huawei 5G, and mask diplomacy – these initiatives largely fell flat. There are two examples that highlight China's failed overtures in the region. For one, Xi attempted to reinvigorate the 17+1 format earlier this month. It was met with a frosty response in a number of CEE countries, and six countries did not attend. Similarly, the call for CEE countries to adopt Huawei 5G kit fell flat. In this case, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Estonia banned Huawei from their networks. A notable exception is Hungary, where the government has made no such promise to ban Huawei from the networks.

The Biden administration has a number of tools to counter Beijing's overtures in CEE. In the past few weeks, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the Three Seas Initiative, which could provide an alternative to Chinese infrastructure and investment in the region. Further, CEE presents an opportunity to explore alternatives to Huawei 5G. U.S. lawmakers should reintroduce the Transatlantic Telecommunications Security Act and advance 5G alternatives, such as open RAN (Radio Access Network), in CEE.

What are the strategic goals behind the Chinese Communist Party's activities in Europe?

Beijing has a few strategic goals in Europe. The first is to compete with the United States as the global superpower. This goal plays out in Europe by picking off U.S. allies and attempting to fracture consensus between the United States and Europe. Another way this goal is realized is by fracturing consensus within the European Union. Beijing has bought political influence through economic influence. For example, shortly after Chinese shipping company COSCO invested in Greece's Piraeus Port, Greece blocked an EU proposal in the U.N. Human Rights Council criticizing China's human rights abuses. Finally, Beijing aims to remake the world in its image and to set the rules of the road. In pursuit of this goal, Beijing exports its digital authoritarianism, advances unfair trade practices, and takes leadership positions in international organizations to reshape the international system in its favor.

Does the 17+1 initiative (the economic partnership between China and Central and Eastern European countries) have an impact on peoples' rights to participate in democratic processes in these countries?

Not directly, but it does have other effects on democracy. As mentioned before, the 17+1 initiative hobbles EU consensus. On the national level, China's Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 initiative have had effects on a few dimensions of democracy. My CNAS colleagues argue that in countries with high levels of corruption, BRI projects have only fuelled that corruption due to payoffs to politicians. CEE countries are not immune to this, especially given the high levels of kleptocracy in the region. For example, 150-km of the Hungarian part of the Budapest-Belgrade Railway will be built by CRE Consortium, a unit of the holding company Opus Global that is controlled by Lorinc Meszaros, a loyalist of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This is yet another example of the Orbán regime securing public tenders to enrich his friends and family. Another adverse consequence to democracy is that BRI projects are disengaged from local economic needs. A number of the projects primarily use Chinese firms and laborers, which prevents the projects from boosting local economies and transferring skills to local workers. Additionally, the Budapest-Belgrade Railway is an example of a project that is not financially sustainable for the host government and that can strain national finances.

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What are you currently working on?

Along with Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, I am currently working on a project examining personalism in democracies. The project specifically looks at the uptick in personalism – the extent to which leaders exert greater influence than other actors in key institutions and political parties – and leaders creating their own political parties. Our analysis shows that personalism is on the rise in democracies, and countries with personalist leaders are at greater risk of democratic decline.

I am also working on the Center for a New American Security's Make Room Initiative, which seeks to empower and equip underrepresented populations in the national security field to pursue and develop their professional goals and leadership skills. I have been developing Make Room's mentoring network, which will connect newcomers, entry-level, and early-career professionals to specific offerings provided by volunteer mentors, including opportunities to co-author op-eds, informational interviews, and resume reviews, among others. The initiative aims to diversify the national security workforce and make it look more like America.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Get your voice and ideas out there. Write that opinion piece. Speak up in that meeting. If you're having a hard time getting started on an article, write one with a colleague or classmate. Co-writing is one of the best ways to get started and to fine tune your ideas and arguments. Once you've started writing, consider your audience. If you're writing an opinion piece, write clearly and ditch the academic jargon. Your grandma should be able to understand your argument. Our generations – millennials and Gen Z – will be left with a number of the world's most pressing challenges, so now is the time to inject fresh, new ideas into the policy space.