



## Breaking the Law of Opposite Effects: Europe's Strategic Autonomy and the Revived Transatlantic Partnership

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The post-Cold War transatlantic relations have been marked by something akin to the law of opposite effects. When the relationship is vibrant, Europe's defence cooperation stagnates. When the relationship is in trouble, Europeans pull themselves together to advance their security and defence interests. During the Clinton presidency, Europeans comfortably outsourced military crisis management in the Balkans to Washington. In contrast, a major transatlantic rift over the Iraq war during the Bush administration triggered the adoption of the European Security Strategy and a bulk of EU military operations under the banner of the European Security and Defence Policy. EU-US relations were back on an even keel during the Obama era, the time when Europeans haphazardly reduced their defence budgets and lost a great share of their military capabilities.

Enter Donald Trump. During the deepest crisis of confidence among transatlantic allies in decades, Europeans re-energized their defence integration with a set of new

initiatives, such as permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). It is therefore somewhat logical and far from unexpected that when Joe Biden emerged as the winner of the 2020 US presidential elections, there is yet again a heightened risk that Europeans would fall back into a lazy, self-defeating mindset of dependency on the US military shield. Breaking this pattern of reverse effects and avoiding European complacency is crucial for a healthy transatlantic partnership, but it requires concerted efforts on both sides of the Atlantic.

### DEBATING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Galvanized by their opposition to President Trump, Europeans actively embraced the goal of strategic autonomy. In truth, this ambition had been articulated before Trump even took office, most explicitly in the 2016 EU Global Strategy. The Strategy, however, did not spell out an operational definition of the concept, which made EU strategic autonomy in security and defence a subject of controversy. France, the

most enthusiastic advocate of a stronger and capable EU in world affairs, stressed the need for the bloc to build independent defence capabilities in order to be prepared for a scenario in which the US is not willing or able to guarantee European security. Reducing dependence on the US is a sensible response to the perceived unpredictability of Uncle Sam. Yet, this maximalist articulation of strategic autonomy exposed a fear – especially among the Baltic States – that ‘a hedge can become a wedge’,<sup>1</sup> and produce an irreversible erosion of security ties with the US.

Paris’s push for European strategic autonomy has thus far often been misinterpreted as a call for strategic transatlantic decoupling, even though President Emmanuel Macron made it clear that European defence cooperation should not be conceived as an alternative to NATO.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to Germany, it frames strategic autonomy differently. For Berlin, what counts is an effort to strengthen the European pillar of NATO as a way to further anchor the US in Europe and to commit states on the Eastern flank to both the EU and NATO. ‘We must become more European in order to remain transatlantic’, as Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer summed it up.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the widespread confusion about the meaning of strategic autonomy, one thing is clear – Europeans are in a broad agreement that they have to take more responsibilities for their own defence. The real issue is what Europe can bring to the table in terms of capabilities and willingness to use them. This includes traditional capability shortfalls, such as strategic airlift and air-to-air refueling, and the operational gaps related to new security challenges, be it missile defence, anti-drone capability or warding off hybrid threats. That said, development of defence capabilities cannot be an end in itself; therefore

the ultimate question regarding European defence cooperation remains ‘what for?’. A recent survey conducted among defence officials and experts has revealed a balanced three way split among the preferences for acting worldwide, acting in crises around Europe or acting to protect the homeland.<sup>4</sup> In this context, EU member states started to work on a ‘Strategic Compass’, a new political military document to be adopted in 2022 during the French EU Presidency. The document is a welcome initiative as it intends to refine and harmonize operational goals for EU security and defence policy based on a common understanding of security threats and challenges.

### **A NEW TRANSATLANTIC BARGAIN**

With his ‘America is back’ message, Joe Biden has naturally tempted both sides of the Atlantic to return to ‘business as usual’, in which America leads the world and Europe plays a supporting role. This wish is unlikely to come true. Trump has done considerable damage to the notion of US leadership, while China and Russia have chipped away at the liberal international order, increasing their global clout at Washington’s cost. Europe’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods are in turmoil, and there is the strain of the UK’s exit from the EU. To make things worse, the coronavirus pandemic has had devastating effects on Western economies, pushing many countries to look inward and, as a consequence, pay lip service to security and defence. All these challenges bolster the case for stronger ties between America and Europe, but to remain relevant the transatlantic alliance needs to be reinvented, rather than simply reset.

With respect to the US, the Biden presidency should avoid following in the footsteps of previous administrations’ schizophrenic approach to European defence: simultaneously complaining that Europeans don’t do enough and do too much. The

US would be well-advised to embrace PESCO and explicitly endorse the goal of European strategic autonomy. This would send a powerful signal to sceptics within the EU that a less dependent and more self-reliant Europe is not incompatible with NATO, but rather is a precondition for a revitalized transatlantic alliance. Today, senior members of the US defence establishment prudently acknowledge that America cannot protect itself or all of its interests entirely without the help of others.<sup>5</sup> US allies, Europe included, are a part of America's calculus in terms of its geopolitical competition with China and Russia. It is therefore in the American interest to have more capable European armed forces supported by a more consolidated European industrial base, even though this may imply a certain loss of export markets for US defence companies. The new US approach should be guided by a principled belief that Europeans doing less presents a bigger danger than Europeans doing more.

When it comes to Europe, the critical task is to continue building its strategic autonomy in security and defence in the absence of pressure and head-on rhetoric coming out of the White House. Rather than waiting for signals from Washington, Europeans should actively engage the Biden administration to discuss a new architecture of collective burden-sharing in which France, Germany and others take the lead in certain areas, while the US assumes a supporting role. The European Commission's proposal for a structured EU-US Security and Defence Dialogue is a good start.<sup>6</sup> A more balanced and equal transatlantic alliance implies, at the very least, Europeans taking over the lion's share of responsibilities related to conflict resolution and crisis management in Europe's neighbourhood, including conventional defence and deterrence against Russia. Europeans need to be well-aware about the domestic limits on US global

leadership, given that the majority of American voters wants to reduce the US military presence abroad and is opposed to surges in defence spending.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the idea of 'a foreign policy for the middle class',<sup>8</sup> recently introduced by Biden and his team, signals that the US will exercise its power on the world stage judiciously and selectively, and Europe might not be on its top priority list.

To put such a rebalanced transatlantic partnership to the test, Europeans should take steps towards strategic autonomy in the five geographic areas of great significance for transatlantic security.

**The Baltic region** is at the forefront of defence and deterrence efforts against Russia. NATO's deployment of four battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland has been a breakthrough decision, but questions remain as to how effective these small rotational forces can be in deterring Moscow. It is perhaps not so surprising that the Polish government is actively pushing for upgrading the rotating 4,500 strong US armoured brigade on its soil to a permanent division-size military force. Europeans should step in and consider forward deployment of troops and equipment in the Baltic region on their own. Complementary to NATO efforts, boosting the conventional military presence (troops, battle tanks, armoured vehicles) of Europe on the Eastern flank would arguably be the most direct and effective demonstration of European defence solidarity. It is also likely to be welcomed in Washington as an active measure of transatlantic burden-sharing. The budget line for the European Deterrence Initiative, introduced by President Obama in 2014 following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, has seen a 30% decline since 2019, and it is not for granted that the Biden administration would ramp it up.

**Black Sea.** After the annexation of the Crimea, Russia has multiplied its military footprint in the region, including through the deployment of anti-ship and anti-air missiles. The shifted military balance in the Black Sea threatens to undermine freedom of navigation and opens the door for maritime blockade of Ukraine's coastal areas, as evidenced by the military stand-off between Russian and Ukrainian navy ships in the Kerch Strait in November 2018. Despite pledges to step up their maritime presence in the Black Sea, Western allies are still falling behind.<sup>9</sup> Last year, for example, Germany has sent just one vessel into the area for a total of 10 days. To effectively deter Russia, allies need a regular year-round naval presence in the form of a Black Sea maritime patrol mission, in addition to ongoing air policing. France, Germany and the UK, three countries with significant interests in the region, can take a lead in assembling a multinational European naval force that together with a limited American and Canadian contribution would support Romania and other NATO littoral states and partners in training, exercising and capacity building at sea.

**Eastern neighbours.** The EU should include institutionalized security cooperation in its bilateral relations with members of the Eastern Partnership, foremost Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The trio has frequently been targeted by the Kremlin's coercive measures, with sizeable parts of their sovereign territories being occupied by Russian military. The EU should encourage these Eastern neighbours to participate in PESCO projects (to boost domestic defence industry) and in activities of the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (to build capacity against cyber-attacks and disinformation). There is ample room for EU member states to fill when it comes to military training, joint exercises and contingency planning with Eastern neighbours (mostly undertaken by non-EU NATO states today). As European policy makers reflect on CSDP's priorities while drafting the Strategic Compass, the question of how to resolve the

so-called 'protracted conflicts' in the post-Soviet space should be back on the agenda, as requested by 11 EU member states.<sup>10</sup> Investing in the resilience of Eastern partners is a suitable opportunity for Europeans to make a case for reframing transatlantic burden-sharing beyond a narrow focus on the 2% defence spending benchmark.

**North Africa.** Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, it has become clear that the turmoil in Libya is not an American problem. Disengagement has been a preferred option of the Obama and Trump administrations and will likely remain a favoured policy choice under Biden. Europeans therefore need to take the lead in rallying the international community to stabilize Libya. EU member states should strengthen their support for the arms embargo by allocating more ships to Operation Irini. Moreover, it is important to capitalize on the window of opportunity for peace-building that has been opened after the warring parties reached a ceasefire deal last October. A CSDP mission focused on ceasefire monitoring, demilitarization and disarmament would strengthen ongoing UN peace efforts in the run-up to national elections in December 2021. For its part, the US can provide political and diplomatic support for Libya's post-conflict stabilization in the UN Security Council, as well as employ its space assets to assist Europeans in implementing the arms embargo.

**Indo-Pacific.** The competition with China will be the single most important foreign policy issue during the Biden presidency. Given the bipartisan consensus in Congress, Washington's policy on China is expected to get tougher. While it is unlikely that Biden, in a Trumpian transactional manner, will make the US security guarantee in NATO conditional upon Europe's alignment with Washington on China, it is clear that Europeans 'will be strongly urged to step in line with American preferences'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Europeans will not endorse every US policy choice; and neither should they, if the idea is to build a partnership of equals. But in the realm of security, where their

interests overlap, Europe should demonstrate greater solidarity with the US. Capable European powers need to step up naval operations in the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait to support freedom of navigation and to dissuade China from redrawing borders by military force. If Europe is serious about defending the international rules-based order, it cannot remain neutral or indifferent when confronted with a Crimean scenario in the Indo-Pacific.

To accomplish a new transatlantic division of labour across all the five areas simultaneously will not be easy, and some steps may take longer than others, but none of them can be achieved without collective determination and a united front among Europeans. Regardless of who sits in the White House in four years from now, Europeans should seize the opportunity offered by a new pro-European American government to redefine Europe's place in the transatlantic partnership. Shortly after Biden's

victory, the French and German Foreign Ministers rightly contended that the question now is not what the transatlantic relationship can do for Europe, but what Europe can do for the transatlantic partnership.<sup>12</sup> Now it is time to put words into action, build more capable and self-reliant Europe and break the law of opposite effects in the transatlantic relations.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Keynote speech by the German Federal Minister of Defence at the Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, 19 November 2020. <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/second-keynote-speech-german-minister-of-defence-akk-4503976>
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- <sup>6</sup> European Commission, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: A New US-EU Agenda for Global Change', Brussels, 2 December 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> Mark Hannah and Caroline Gray, 'Diplomacy & Restraint. The Worldview of American Voters', *Eurasia Group Foundation Report*, September 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World, 4 February 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world>.
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- <sup>11</sup> Jolyon Howorth, 'Europe and Biden: Towards a New Transatlantic Pact?', *CES Policy Brief*, January 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean-Yves Le Drian and Heiko Maas, 'Joe Biden can make transatlantic unity possible', *Washington Post*, 16 November 2020.