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## Time To Rebalance The U.S.-Europe Relationship

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With the election of Joe Biden, America may soon have its most pro-European president ever. Alas, though Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Council, said she hoped for a “renewed partnership,” Biden will not find Europe to be the most pro-American ever. Shrunken by the departure of the United Kingdom, battered by fights with the populist right, and awash in COVID-19 cases, the continent is in anything but a friendly mood. The incoming president should internalize some of his predecessor’s skepticism toward Europe.

America’s relationship with the continent always has had a love/hate character. The original colonies were established by one European power and for decades were largely populated by immigrants from other European nations.

Yet until becoming wartime allies a century ago, America’s relationship with the United Kingdom was “special” mostly in a negative way. Border disputes over Canada, blockade policy during the Civil War, and British debt and border controversies with Venezuela sparked bitter confrontations.

Moreover, European immigrants often brought their loyalties and antagonisms with them. When Woodrow Wilson needlessly took America into the European killfest known as World War I, he raged against “hyphenated Americans,” mostly meaning German-Americans, who were not enthused about being drafted to fight indirectly for His Majesty’s government (of course, Wilson considered British-Americans to be unhyphenated Americans). Moreover, people fleeing European oppression, like the Irish, were not always well-disposed toward their former oppressors.

At the end of World War I, with Wilson debilitated and discredited, most Americans turned their back on what they saw as the blundering, selfish fools across “The Pond.” Subsequently some historians suggested that the U.S. should have garrisoned Europe, a curious notion since the allies had disarmed Germany, while the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires had collapsed. That the victors made disastrously bad decisions, most spectacularly refusing to make concessions to the democratic Weimar Republic and then abandoning restrictions on Nazi Germany, was neither predictable nor Washington’s fault. (The U.S. did deserve blame for irresponsibly entering a conflict not its own and setting up the failed peace settlement.)

Unfortunately, French Gen. Ferdinand Foch was prescient when he complained of the Versailles Treaty: “This is not peace. It is an armistice for 20 years.” Only one person really wanted war in 1939, but tragically he was chancellor of Germany. America came back, though had Adolf Hitler not foolishly declared war on the U.S. after Pearl Harbor the Roosevelt administration could not

have justified fighting in, let alone focusing on, Europe. The continent was duly “liberated,” with the east ruled by the Red Army, which imposed Soviet-compliant governments. Washington then sensibly provided a security shield behind which the rest of the war-ravaged continent could recover and reintegrate Germany.

Fast forward 75 years: Europe is economically prosperous and politically cooperative if not exactly united. Only militarily does it remain a juvenile power, at best. For years Washington’s policy toward the continent has been confused and inconsistent.

The U.S. desired a European economic recovery, which was aided by creation of the “single market.” Nevertheless, that resulted in an increasingly potent competitor in commerce, trade, investment, standards, and more. Greater political unity—though the European Union still has three presidents, go figure!—helped answer Henry Kissinger’s famous question, what is the phone number for Europe? However, this institutional cooperation strengthened Europe’s typically more leftist and collectivist approach to issues, which often conflicted with Washington’s view.

As for defense, every U.S. administration wanted the continent to do more, but only under America’s direction. The result was particularly disappointing: Europe took full advantage of the opportunity to cheap ride, while demanding that Washington act but not act badly. Persistent U.S. whining about inadequate continental military spending was more pathetic than effective.

Then came Donald Trump. He treated the EU as an adversary, celebrated Brexit, launched a trade war against Europe, and insisted that NATO members pay more, all the while insulting most everyone he dealt with. As geopolitical theater it was grand, but as foreign policy it was wanting. Indeed, his officials undermined him at every turn, especially when it came to the transatlantic alliance, into which they poured more American money and personnel.

What now when Joe Biden takes over? Europe is Washington’s most important and powerful international collaborator. Aimlessly warring on the Europeans achieves nothing. And failing to enlist them in dealing with China is foolish.

The best approach for the new administration would be to welcome cooperation with the EU, while recognizing that there always will be important disagreements: the continent has a larger collective economy than America and increasingly is willing to use that clout. Nevertheless, the EU is not a consolidated government like the U.S., and only imperfectly speaks for its members, all 27 of which have a veto over its actions, especially on foreign policy.

The status quo is unsatisfactory but isn’t likely to change much, irrespective of permutations in the EU’s internal battles. So long as the Euro creates a common currency amid separate fiscal policies the economic system will be unbalanced, risking another debt crisis, with Italy perhaps in greatest danger. However, turning the EU into a debt union would require approval of fiscally responsible states, starting with Germany and the Netherlands, which fear becoming ATM machines for the profligate. Portugal would eliminate this barrier by tossing out the fiscally frugal states, but then who would pay the bills?

Moreover, though talk of a possible Poxit (of Poland) has quieted, populist resistance to turning the EU into a substitute nation-state remain strong. Eurocrats are influential and passionate but relatively few. Decades into “the European project” most people still follow national football teams, fly national flags, and sing national anthems. The EU’s benefits are appreciated, but the

organization generates little loyalty. Which means it will remain much more an economic than a political actor.

Washington should work closely with the EU while avoiding internecine political disputes—just as Americans would bridle at European interference in U.S. affairs, Europeans do not appreciate being lectured by Washington about their internal policies and relations, such as Brexit. (President Barack Obama was opposed, while Trump took the opposite stance.) It would be similarly advantageous not to wander into the European thicket of Brussels' contentious relations with the populist Hungarian and Polish governments, recently roiled over efforts to condition fiscal aid on adherence to continental "rule of law" standards.

In practice, the American experience should offer a caution to the demand of Eurocratic elites for what amounts to a United States of Europe, in which the identity and authority of historically sovereign states would be further subordinated to even more powerful EU agencies filling even larger buildings with even more officious meddlers in Brussels. America's central government is much too strong and distant, which helps explain why so many people feel dangerously disconnected from the national government, as was dramatically demonstrated last week in Washington.

On economics the U.S. has valid complaints against Europe, but Trump's trade offensive proved ineffective, and undermined his effort to confront China. Indeed, the EU and China have just agreed to an investment treaty. The former argues that the pact merely puts its members on an equal footing with the U.S., but the timing, with a friendly president a week away from taking office, sent an unmistakable message to Washington. Many Europeans see the U.S. as a rival and are less inclined than before to follow Washington's lead.

The new administration should accept competition when inevitable while building coalitions when useful. Especially in dealing with China, joining with Europe (as well as select Asian allies and friends) could help create more favorable global commercial rules. That kind of cooperation also could be useful in agreeing on non-military steps to take in response to specific Chinese actions, such as an attack on Taiwan. No American should expect continental involvement in an Asian war, but European governments might join in economic retaliation.

The divergence between America and the continent is greatest on military affairs. Trump mixed insults with demands for increased military outlays. He achieved little more than did the pleading and whining which characterized previous presidents. NATO allies, led by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, played Trump brilliantly, making him believe that he was responsible for small spending increases that began back in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Then Trump's unfaithful aides reassured the Europeans that all was well as they expanded America's military commitment to the continent.

Germany's failure to do more has been particularly glaring. In November German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer warned that French President Emmanuel Macron's push for "strategic autonomy" with an independent military "goes too far if it nurtures the illusion that we could ensure Europe's security, stability and prosperity without NATO and the U.S." The continent might be populous and prosperous, but no matter: "Without America's nuclear and conventional capabilities, Germany and Europe cannot protect themselves. Those are plain facts." But also ridiculous facts, given the continent's human and material resources. Even

worse, though, are polls which indicate that most Europeans do not want to fight on behalf of each other and want to remain neutral between the U.S. and China.

Certainly, European members of the transatlantic alliance have no plan to ever shift rather than share burdens. Which is fine with the vast pro-NATO network in Washington. For instance, the Atlantic Council recently issued a paper of supposedly bold new ideas for the alliance, including adding Mexico as a member and beefing up the organization's PR capabilities.

Thus, the tension over security policy will persist. The Europeans like the current system, by which the U.S. will forever hobble itself economically by underwriting its chief economic competitor's economy. Washington policymakers, most living well in the unique bubble of the nation's capital, are only too happy to oblige: money always is abundant for groups which promote a stronger and bigger alliance with newer and expanded responsibilities.

Almost certainly the president-elect and those around him feel comfortable with this system, despite its evident disadvantages for the U.S. However, it will become ever less tenable given Washington's tenuous fiscal situation. Debt levels are headed for the stratosphere; when interest rates eventually rise so will debt service payments, at a time when entitlement outlays also are likely to be jumping dramatically. Adding subsidies for Europe's welfare state to Americans' economic burdens is not likely to find favor across the U.S., especially among retirees worried about the solvency of Social Security and Medicare. The best approach would be Joe Biden as a kinder, gentler Donald Trump, who appreciates the continent but nevertheless insists on ending European cheap riding.

Despite the abundant ill will evident between Europe and America over the last four years, the continent remains this nation's most important foreign partner. However, the current relationship is badly out of balance, primarily on the security side. President Biden should adapt to a rapidly changing world and put America first despite his Europhilia.

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