



Why the US-Europe ‘front’ against China is pure fantasy

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January 5, 2021

One unmistakable goal of the incoming Biden administration is to repair the damage that the Trump administration inflicted on America’s relations with its traditional diplomatic and strategic partners, especially the European allies. Biden and his advisers have explicitly criticized Trump’s “America First” approach with respect to both economic and security policies. Instead, they emphasize strengthening multilateral efforts to achieve common objectives in those arenas.

Biden himself has made it clear that one of those objectives is to induce Europe to join the United States in a common front to deal with China. “As we compete with China and hold China’s government accountable for its abuses on trade, technology, human rights, and other fronts,” he said in remarks delivered on December 28, “our position will be much stronger when we build coalitions of like-minded partners and allies to make common cause with us in defense of our shared interests and values.”

Biden added that “on any issue that matters to the U.S.-China relationship,” including “ensuring security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, [we]are stronger and more effective when we are flanked by nations that share our vision for the future of our world.”

Biden’s quest is likely to fail. Indeed, just two days after the president-elect’s comments, the European Union signed a major investment deal with Beijing. RealityChek blogger Alan Tonelson contended that the EU’s action constituted a “punch in the mouth.” That may be an exaggeration, but negotiations had been going on for seven years, and there was no reason why EU leaders could not have held off and consulted with the Biden administration after it took office before taking final action. Their failure to do so indicated that the EU will chart its own course regarding economic relations with China based on an assessment of European interests, not U.S. policy preferences.

Evidence is even stronger that Washington cannot count on European solidarity with the United States if it comes to a diplomatic confrontation with Beijing over human rights or other issues. That point became glaringly apparent last year when the Trump administration tried to enlist Europe in a united response to the PRC’s imposition of a new national security law on Hong Kong. U.S. leaders wanted a joint statement of condemnation as well as the imposition of some sanctions in response to Beijing’s brazen erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy.

Allied backing was tepid and grudging, at best. Among the major European powers, only Britain (Hong Kong's former colonial ruler) joined the United States in embracing a hardline approach. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas argued that the best way for the European Union to influence China on the Hong Kong dispute was merely to maintain a dialogue with Beijing.

The European Union's response was anemic and evasive as well. Apparently determined to avoid becoming entangled in America's escalating rivalry with China, EU foreign ministers embraced Germany's approach and emphasized the need for dialogue about Hong Kong. After a videoconference among the bloc's 27 foreign ministers, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell emphasized that only one country bothered to raise the subject of sanctions. Borrell added that the EU was not planning even to postpone diplomatic meetings with China.

Such actions suggest that European governments have little interest in being part of a U.S.-led common front to deal with Beijing even on diplomatic and economic issues, much less security problems. In adopting that stance, they accurately reflect European public opinion.

Europeans want no part of a possible confrontation with China. When a September 2019 survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations asked, "Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and China?" the results were emphatic against backing America.

Support for Washington was meager even among the usually Amerophile populations in Central and Eastern Europe. Just 19 percent in the Czech Republic, 17 percent in Romania, and 13 percent in Hungary supported the U.S. position. The outcome among Washington's long-standing economic and security partners in Western Europe was similar. Only 18 percent of French respondents, 20 percent of Italians, and 10 percent of Germans chose solidarity with the United States in a showdown with China. Overwhelming majorities in all countries surveyed favored neutrality.

Such a stance is unsurprising. The United States is a Pacific power with extensive economic and security interests in East Asia. China's economic and military rise poses a serious challenge to the status of regional hegemon that the United States had enjoyed since the end of World War II.

Europe's situation is fundamentally different. The European powers have limited economic interests and even fewer security concerns in the region. The risks associated with waging even a diplomatic feud with China — to say nothing of a trade war or a military confrontation — would appear to most Europeans to outweigh any conceivable benefits. From the standpoint of European interests, discreet neutrality regarding relations between the United States and China is the prudent course.

Given that reality, the Biden administration is likely to be disappointed in the probable European response to calls for a joint response to China's transgressions. The new president may scorn the "America First" doctrine and seek to revitalize the coalition of Western democratic powers. But at least when it comes to policy toward China, Biden will find that the United States is a leader with few followers.

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