How Joe Biden Has Damaged Transatlantic Unity

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Expectations were high on both sides of the Atlantic when Joe Biden won the U.S. presidential election that transatlantic comity and cooperation would be restored, and that Donald Trump's abrasive, destructive diplomacy soon would be merely a painful memory. Biden's initial statements as president reinforced those expectations. In his inaugural address, the new president stressed that "We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again."

A month later, Biden amplified that goal and applied it with special emphasis to Washington's relationship to its European allies in his speech to a virtual version of the annual Munich Security Conference. He stated that "I'm sending a clear message to the world: America is back. The transatlantic alliance is back. And we are not looking backward; we are looking forward, together." He added: "The partnership between Europe and the United States, in my view, is and must remain the cornerstone of all that we hope to accomplish in the 21st century, just as we did in the 20th century." In an unmistakable slap at his predecessor, Biden acknowledged that "I know the past few years have strained and tested our transatlantic relationship, but the United States is determined — determined to reengage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trusted leadership."

The sense of relief in European circles after the Trump years was almost palpable. "Biden gave exactly the speech that many Europeans wanted to hear," wrote Germany's influential Der Spiegel magazine. It was a widely shared sentiment on the Continent.

In the aftermath of the chaotic and humiliating departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, and the reaction of European governments to that episode," the president's promises and confident hopes of transatlantic unity have been shaken to their core. Armin Laschet, a leading German politician, described the situation in especially harsh terms. "This is the greatest debacle that NATO has seen since its foundation, and it is an epochal change that we are facing," he stated bluntly.

Some European leaders explicitly questioned the continued viability of the Alliance. Czech President Milos Zeman charged that because NATO had failed in Afghanistan, its legitimacy was in doubt. He argued that distrust in the U.S.-led alliance "from a number of member

countries will grow after this experience, because they will say – if you failed in Afghanistan, where is a guarantee that you won't fail in any other critical situation?" Even milder critics questioned the wisdom of Europe's continued security reliance on the United States, given the Biden administration's handling of the Afghan withdrawal. "Afghanistan is the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez. We need to think again about how we handle friends, who matters, and how we defend our interests," contended Tom Tugendhat, a prominent Conservative Party leader and chairman of the British Parliament's foreign affairs committee.

European discontent has focused on two points. First, there is the perception that the withdrawal process was handled in an utterly incompetent manner—an amateurish operation that might have been expected from the Trump administration, but was utterly shocking coming from the experienced military and foreign policy professionals surrounding Biden. Second, NATO governments insisted that they were caught off guard both by the administration's decision to adhere to the withdrawal agreement that President Trump had negotiated with the Taliban and by the speed of the withdrawal itself. Leaders in NATO members contended that Washington had not adequately consulted its allies, much less taken their concerns into account.

NATO leaders have directly disputed the latter complaint, however. Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's Secretary General, emphasized that Alliance members had given unanimous approval for the withdrawal in April 2021, weeks before the process commenced. "You see different voices in Europe, and some are talking about the lack of consultation, but I was present in those meetings." He did concede, though, that Washington's notification and consultation "was somewhat artificial, because once the United States decided to withdraw, it was hard for other allies to continue without the United States. It was not a realistic option." Stoltenberg perhaps inadvertently highlighted the main grievance on the part of key European NATO members—that the United States did not treat them as equal partners entitled to a meaningful role in the decision-making process.

The Afghanistan debacle appears to have been the most serious blow to transatlantic security cooperation under the Biden administration, but it is not the only one or even the first one. Signs of impending tensions between the administration and Washington's European allies emerged even before Biden formally took office. The European Union did not respond well to the president-elect's call to form a common front against China. In remarks delivered on December 28, he stated that "as we compete with China and hold China's government accountable for its abuses on trade, technology, human rights, and other fronts, 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." The incoming administration specifically urged the EU to put on hold a major investment agreement that it was negotiating with Beijing. Just days later, though, EU negotiators signed the agreement anyway. Although the agreement still has not gone into effect, the delay is because of resentment at the PRC government's crude bullying behavior toward the EU on other matters, not because of deference to the Biden administration's position.

Increasingly, European governments seek to do the minimum necessary to placate Washington without unduly undermining European interests. The communiques that emerged from the G-7

and NATO summits earlier this year embodied such an approach. The Biden administration pressured both bodies to take a strong, collective stance against Russia and China. It was generally successful with respect to Russia, but the language with respect to the PRC was noticeably less hardline, with the G-7 document bordering on anemic. Biden stated merely that he was "satisfied" with the G-7 declaration—a comment that suggested something less than an enthusiastic verdict on his part.

U.S. and European security and economic interests substantially overlap, but they are far from congruent. Indeed, they have been diverging since the end of the Cold War, and Joe Biden's invocations of transatlantic solidarity cannot change that reality. Europeans have reason to ponder whether signing on to Washington's counter-insurgency, nation-building venture in Afghanistan served Europe's best interests. Biden's mismanagement of the withdrawal process significantly deepened already existing doubts.

Likewise, the administration's continuing pressure on the European allies to join the United States in pursuing a hardline policy toward Beijing underscores a fundamental difference in U.S. and European interests. The United States is a Pacific power with a crucial stake in trying to maintain its hegemony in East Asia, even at the risk of war. The European nations have no similar stake, and maintaining good relations with Beijing logically has a higher priority than helping Washington preserve its regional dominance. No amount of hectoring from the Biden administration is likely to change that calculation.

Joe Biden did not create the divergence of interests between America and Europe. However, his policy clumsiness has served to underscore rather than paper-over the differences. Ironically, he may ultimately have undermined transatlantic solidarity more that Donald Trump's boorish nationalism ever managed to do.

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