



Tackling Los Angeles' homelessness crisis requires an Ambitious reform agenda

Michael Tanner

October 21st, 2021

Expectations were pervasive on both sides of the Atlantic that Joe Biden's election as US president would usher in a new era of vigorous transatlantic cooperation. Biden made every effort to encourage that perception. In his February 19th speech to a virtual version of the annual Munich Security Conference, he stated flatly 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 apparent slap at his predecessor, Biden acknowledged that "the past few years have strained and tested our transatlantic relationship," but he affirmed that "the United States is determined to reengage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trusted leadership."

Such optimism was on full display again at NATO's June summit meeting in Brussels. The summit communique proclaimed that the leaders of the 30 alliance members "have gathered in Brussels to reaffirm our unity, solidarity, and cohesion, and to open a new chapter in transatlantic relations, at a time when the security environment we face is increasingly complex." A later portion of the document emphasized that "We are bound together by our common values, enshrined in the Washington Treaty, the bedrock of our unity, solidarity, and cohesion. We commit to fulfilling our responsibilities as Allies accordingly."

President Biden's remarks at a press conference following the session conveyed a similar message, with an additional emphasis on his administration's firm commitment to those values as well as a determination to provide renewed US leadership after the proclaimed "America first" orientation of Donald Trump's presidency. Biden warned that "the democratic values that undergird our alliance are under increasing pressure, both internally and externally. Russia and China are both seeking to drive a wedge in our transatlantic solidarity. We're seeing an increase in malicious cyber activity, but our Alliance is still a strong foundation on which our collective security and our shared prosperity can continue to be built." The most fundamental point was

that “NATO stands together, that’s how we met every other threat in the past. It’s our greatest strength as we meet our challenges of the future.”

Those were bold words, but such declarations of solidarity seemed hollow just a few weeks later. The chaotic withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan shook the confidence of European governments and publics in Washington’s leadership to its foundation. Not surprisingly, the mishandled withdrawal process created grave doubts about the competence of Biden and his foreign policy team. Those officials were touted to be the “adults in the room” – the seasoned foreign policy professionals who had replaced the Trump administration’s ideologues and amateurs. Yet, such supposed professionals had spectacularly failed their first major test in the international arena.

There also was another source of European discontent about the Afghanistan episode. Several policymakers from NATO countries insisted (albeit, many anonymously) 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. Those irritated leaders contended that Washington had not adequately consulted its allies, much less taken their concerns into account.

The Biden administration’s conduct did have some defenders within NATO’s bureaucracy. 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. 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.”

Whether intentionally or not, Stoltenberg put his finger on 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. Moreover, that grievance predated the Afghanistan withdrawal and it has had a much broader application. European countries had been growing increasingly weary of being treated as Washington’s (decidedly) junior partner. Sentiment for Europe to adopt a more independent and dignified role, which had surfaced several times previously over the decades, flared again in the aftermath of Washington’s bumbling departure from Afghanistan. “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. Press accounts noted a spike in discussions among European policymakers about the desirability and feasibility of creating an independent military force under the EU’s umbrella.

Washington’s clumsy diplomacy on a range of other issues has contributed to European discontent with US leadership. An especially bad move occurred when the Biden administration cut France out of a deal Paris had been pursuing to sell submarines to Australia. Instead, the United States finalized its own sale as part of an arrangement to create a new security alliance (AUKUS) with Britain and Australia. The French government erupted, with President Emmanuel Macron temporarily recalling France’s ambassador to Washington and accusing the Biden administration of “lying.” Macron subsequently renewed his call not only for an

independent EU army, but for greatly reduced policy reliance on Washington. European leaders should “come out of their naivety” and defend their independence from the United States, he stated in late September.

The reality is that there are fundamental differences between Washington and most of its European allies on a variety of issues, especially policy toward the People’s Republic of China. True, Beijing’s own clumsy actions have temporarily muted European opposition to hardline US policies. China’s missteps included imposing over-the-top sanctions against EU officials in response to much milder EU sanctions for China’s crackdown on Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the marked contrast in US-EU views about how to deal with China is not likely to fade over the long term.

US leaders regard China as a dangerous rival that must be contained; the European powers view China more as a valuable economic partner, and they are wary of being drawn into a confrontation between Washington and Beijing. There are a few exceptions, of course. Britain clearly has cast its lot with its long-standing, principal ally, even on China policy. A few of Washington’s smaller European dependents, such as Lithuania, have apparently done the same. By and large, though, the European nations are charting a different, more independent course and are declining to sign on to the Biden administration’s campaign to create a “common front” against Beijing.

The Afghanistan debacle brought an array of underlying differences out into the open sooner and with greater clarity than might otherwise have been the case. However, that episode was more of a catalyst than a cause of the intensifying spat. Invocations of undying transatlantic unity increasingly lack credibility, no matter how frequently or loudly officials express them. The evolving transatlantic estrangement is growing and becoming more visible.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, directs the Institute’s Project on Poverty and Inequality in California.