



Americans choose their president: Europe must live with the consequences

by Ian Bond and Luigi Scazzieri
2 November 2020

Europeans do not get a vote in US elections, but the outcomes can affect them profoundly. This year European political leaders and pundits are watching more closely than usual, to see if Joe Biden can stop Donald Trump winning a second term in office. This election could prove terminal for the 75-year-old transatlantic partnership, or give it a new lease of life.

Before Trump's 2016 campaign, Democrats and Republicans broadly agreed on the need to uphold the multilateral world order, to promote free trade and the free market, and to nurture democracy. Trump's isolationist economic and foreign policies smashed this consensus.

In his first term, Trump's approach to both allies and adversaries has severely damaged US and European interests. He is no fan of NATO, having suggested frequently that other NATO members are ripping off the US by failing to spend enough money on their own defence and (particularly in the case of Germany) that they owe the US or NATO enormous sums of money – claims that are at best extremely misleading. In his 2016 campaign and subsequently, he [cast doubt](#) on whether the US would defend an ally that had been attacked. This year, Trump announced the withdrawal of some troops from Germany, without consulting his allies or even his own military chiefs, and without any apparent rationale other than a desire to punish Germany.

Trump has undermined the international arms control regimes that have contributed to European security and imposed some constraints on Russia's military ambitions. There were legitimate grounds for thinking that Russia was in breach of its obligations under the [INF Treaty](#) not to develop medium-range missiles, but Trump's decision to scrap the treaty left Europe more vulnerable to the deployment of new Russian nuclear missiles near its borders. His withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty makes it easier for Russia to conceal its military activities from Western eyes. And Trump is even more hostile to the EU than he is to NATO, describing the Union (according to former National Security Adviser John Bolton) as "worse than China, but smaller", and using dubious national security justifications to impose tariffs on European steel and aluminium.

Trump has made no effort to uphold, let alone promote, the human rights and democratic values that the US shares with Europeans. According to Bolton, when the rest of the world was putting pressure on China over its repression of the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region, Trump told Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019 that building concentration camps for the Uyghurs was the right thing to do. His cultivation of North Korean ruler Kim Jong-un led him to cancel important US-South Korea joint military exercises, but North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear weapons and missile programmes. Trump has been notoriously reluctant to criticise Russia's Vladimir Putin, [appearing](#) to believe Putin's denial that Russia had interfered in the 2016 US election, despite extensive US intelligence evidence that it had.

In the Middle East, Trump has had some foreign policy successes. Most observers – including CER experts – predicted that moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would cause violent unrest and damage US standing in the Arab world; in fact, it caused few protests, and several Arab states have now normalised their relationships with Israel. But Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement has encouraged Tehran to expand its nuclear programme and to increase its use of sabotage and proxies to hit back against the US and its allies, destabilising the region. Despite some efforts to rescue the nuclear agreement, Europeans proved powerless to prevent its demise. Trump has done little to stabilise Syria, assisted Saudi Arabia in pursuing its destructive war in Yemen, and stood back as Libya's civil war intensified. More broadly, the US's military withdrawal from the Middle East has allowed Russia to gain influence in the region, and created the space for regional rivalries to intensify, for example between Turkey and many of its neighbours.

If Trump wins a second term, European doubts about the future of NATO and the US's commitment to their defence will grow. Congressional control of the budget might make it harder for Trump to pay for removing troops from Europe. But, even if some stay, NATO's deterrent value will diminish because America's president is clearly unwilling to defend all treaty allies. At best, Trump would defend countries like Poland that he perceives as sharing his world view. Many European states will have no choice but to curry favour with him, as long as the EU itself remains an ineffective defence player.

A second term would probably see an increase in tensions with the EU, including over how to handle China. Rather than working with the EU to respond to China's rise, in his first term Trump has either ignored the EU and acted against China unilaterally, or [used threats and coercion](#) to force his European partners to decouple from China in areas such as 5G. He would probably step up the pressure in a second term, knowing that his tough stance on China has broad bipartisan support in the US. European public trust in the US, which has [declined](#) considerably under Trump, would fall still further, making it harder for European leaders to align themselves with the US even when it made sense to do so.

A second Trump term would probably lead to greater transatlantic friction in the Middle East. Trump is likely to redouble his attempts to secure a stricter nuclear deal with Iran by tightening sanctions on Tehran. Tehran is likely to respond to further American pressure with increased resistance, including through attacks on US forces in the region. This could lead to escalation and eventually a major regional conflict that would greatly harm European security.

In a second term, Trump's hostility to multilateral organisations and refusal to accept the reality of climate change would cause increasing problems for European states – and would also allow China to enhance its global influence and to portray itself as a more constructive partner than the US (without Beijing's behaviour necessarily changing). At the start of his first term, Trump was restrained to some extent by

establishment Republicans like Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who have since left his administration. Another four years of Trump, surrounded by compliant advisers who go along with his more destructive ideas, might be fatal for the transatlantic partnership and for the US's global leadership role. It could lead to the fragmentation of NATO and increased intra-NATO and intra-EU strife, as the US attempts to develop separate bilateral relationships with individual member-states.

Biden would be an altogether easier partner for Europe to work with. With his long experience on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as Vice President, he would take a much more traditional approach to US partnerships. Policy would be more coherent and predictable than under Trump. Biden's campaign team is full of experienced, competent former officials who could be expected to take senior government positions. He is a committed Atlanticist. He was the Obama administration's most senior interlocutor with the Ukrainian authorities during and after the Euromaidan crisis. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get Obama to take a tougher line with Putin, and would certainly be firmer with Russia than Trump has been. At the same time, he supports nuclear arms control agreements with Russia; he would try to extend the New START treaty that limits both sides' strategic nuclear weapons (which is scheduled to expire in February 2021).

Biden would be likely to re-engage with international efforts to combat climate change – an important issue for the British government, as it prepares to host the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow in November 2021. While trade disputes would not disappear, the immediate threat of a trade war with Europe would recede, as our colleague Sam Lowe has [written](#). In general, Biden would be more likely to favour multilateral solutions to international problems, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Iran, Biden has said he would re-join the deal if Tehran returns to strict compliance with it. Iran might be persuaded to reverse the expansion of nuclear activities beyond the deal's limits in exchange for the US gradually removing sanctions. Such an agreement could produce the trust and momentum necessary for talks about extending restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme beyond the expiry date of the original deal, and limiting Iran's development of ballistic missiles and its support for proxies across the region. Progress will not be easy: regardless of who is in the White House, Iran distrusts the US. It will hold its own presidential election in June 2021, and moderate forces have been weakened by both the nuclear deal's failure and US sanctions.

Biden would also recalibrate the US's relationships with American allies in the Middle East and North Africa. Biden has said he wants to reassess the US's relationship with Saudi Arabia, and [pledged](#) to end support for its war in Yemen. He has also [made clear](#) that he does not have a positive view of Turkish President Erdogan and his government's policies. Biden would probably be more willing to pressure Ankara to change its behaviour in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the Israel-Palestine question, Biden would be less pro-Israel than Trump. He would re-engage with the Palestinians, providing them with some aid. But Biden has already [stated](#) that he will keep the US embassy in Jerusalem, and is unlikely to put much pressure on Israel to halt its construction of settlements that undermine the two state solution.

For all the upsides of a Biden victory, there is a danger that Europeans might take it as an excuse to relax their own efforts to contribute more to international peace and security. Biden will want to improve America's image in the world and its relations with its allies, but his first priorities are likely to be domestic: Trump's failure to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic will leave the new administration facing both an economic and a health crisis. If there are conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, Biden may expect Europeans to deal with them in the first instance, while being willing to support their efforts

from behind. Biden would be politer than Trump in pressing Europeans on burden-sharing; he might be readier to see the advantages of more EU defence integration, provided that it resulted in greater European defence capability; but a Biden administration, like its predecessors of both parties, would want Europeans to contribute more to their own defence.

Biden will also, inevitably, have to deal with the challenges posed by China, and these are likely to be a higher priority for him than the situation in Europe or its neighbourhood. The EU has to decide its own strategy towards Beijing. As CER authors have [argued](#), Europe should not get sucked into a contest between China and the US for global hegemony. At the same time, European governments have to stop thinking of China in entirely economic terms, whether as a market or a competitor. China's human rights record is bad and getting worse; and its actions on the international stage are becoming more aggressive. Europe has sought to start a dialogue on China with the Trump administration; it should persist with the Biden team. But Europe should not assume that whenever China threatens European interests, the US will always deal with the problem.

Even if Biden wins the election, Europeans should [consider the long-term changes](#) underway in America, and not make the mistake of seeing the Trump era as a unique aberration. More than 40 per cent of American voters are likely to support him in this election. If Biden cannot get to grips with the pandemic or restore the economy to health, the Republicans, now tinged with Trumpian isolationism, could return to power in four years (or control Congress in two years). The last four years should have been a wake-up call for Europe. A Biden victory should not be taken as an excuse to hit the snooze button. Instead, Europeans should use the next four years to ensure that they are better prepared to protect their interests, regardless of who is in the White House.

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