

# How the US and Europe could realign their Russia and China policies after the Presidential Elections

Tony van der Togt

**The past four years have in many ways contributed towards a further unravelling of a liberal-democratic rules-based order supported by US leadership and hegemony. In their thought-provoking book *Exit from Hegemony* American political scientists Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon have analyzed how this hegemonic order was undermined by a number of factors, including the actions of rival powers, and transnational movements and nationalist/populist leaders, like President Trump himself.<sup>1</sup>**

In this context, it is important to note that some trends in the alienation between the US and its European partners long predate the Trump Administration and will influence the relationship, no matter who wins the elections in November. But some factors are particular to the Trump Administration, especially the unilateral approach of *America First* (disregarding allies and partners) and the transactional manner in which relationships are envisaged with a focus on bilateral trade balances and economic cost-benefit analysis. Trump's disdain for multilateralism and his unwillingness to actively promote human rights and democratic norms have widened transatlantic rifts, as have his statements questioning NATO and security guarantees towards those allies, who do not pay enough for their own security.

This article will focus on two areas where objectively speaking the US and the EU have similar or even common interests, but where the present disputes have made partners unwilling or unable to cooperate effectively in dealing with the strategic challenges, posed by two rival powers in particular: Russia and China. As both Moscow and Beijing are following with great interest the presidential election campaign in the US (and might even

be trying to influence its outcome), many European politicians and experts are putting their hopes on a Biden Administration and a renewal of transatlantic cooperation. The article will end with some suggestions on how better to align policies on Russia and China on both sides of the Atlantic.

## DEALING WITH THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE

In recent years the EU has been struggling with the challenge which Russia has been posing to the European security order since the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine. Negotiations to find a political solution in the framework of the Normandy format of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia have stalled, as have French attempts at a possible reset of relations with Moscow. A failure of transatlantic unity in policies towards Russia has also not contributed to any breakthrough and has further complicated effective dialogue and negotiations with Moscow against the background of an increasing number of incidents, including the poisoning of Skripal and most recently Navalny by *novichok*, efforts to hack the German Bundestag and the OPCW and complicity in war crimes in Syria and in support for a repressive regime in Belarus.



Trump's disdain for multilateralism and his unwillingness to actively promote human rights and democratic norms have widened transatlantic rifts, as have his statements questioning NATO and security guarantees towards those allies, who do not pay enough for their own security. Depicted is American President Trump at a NATO summit in 2018 (photo: Gints Ivuskans/Shutterstock.com)

Unlike under the Obama Administration, sanctions policies towards Russia are no longer closely coordinated with European allies, hampering their effectiveness. Basically, decision making on Russia in the Trump White House has often been chaotic and uncoordinated between e.g. the Pentagon, the Treasury and an often side-

lined State Department. The issue of Russian influence operations targeting the 2016 elections in the US and the Mueller investigations have made Russia policies a rather toxic issue in Washington.<sup>2</sup>

Although Russian Duma members had celebrated



Trump's unexpected victory in 2016 as a potential window of opportunity for a reset on Russian conditions, official Moscow soon reached the conclusion that President Trump would not be able to deliver on their wishes: any positive move towards Russia, like the lifting of sanctions, would be blocked by a large bipartisan majority in Congress. Therefore, Moscow's hopes for improved relations with the US were limited to a possible extension of New START and some progress on other agreements related to stability and arms control.

The majority of Russian experts on US-Russia relations expect a continuation of confrontation, irrespective of which presidential candidate wins the upcoming elections. Only recently have some Russian experts started to grapple with the possible consequences of a Biden Administration, which is envisaged with some alarm in light of Biden's past involvement with Ukraine and the existence of more hard-line advice on Russia within Biden's foreign policy team.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Moscow would clearly prefer Trump to remain in power, as it expects its interests to be better served in a situation where there would still be some chance for transactional bilateral deals on the presidential level. In that sense, Trump as "the devil we know" would be preferable to possibly tougher and more coherent policies of a Biden Administration.<sup>4</sup>

This also pertains to NATO, where dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council could contribute little to effective management of the relationship, mainly due to a lack of US leadership and the doubts about the future of this organization, as openly voiced by the US president.<sup>5</sup> In this situation, Moscow has used every opportunity to play on any discord within NATO or the EU by dealing with individual member states, using a broad range of influence operations to undermine unity. A US president who no longer supports European integration and threatens the EU with trade sanctions and European companies with secondary sanctions has ultimately served the Russian strategic interest of weakening NATO and the EU to reach its own geopolitical objectives.

A Biden Administration would have a number of advantages in terms of encouraging stronger transatlantic unity on Russia<sup>6</sup>:

- it would be better inclined to take its allies and the NATO alliance more seriously and would reclaim American leadership;
- it could return to the policy of closely coordinating sanctions policies with European allies<sup>7</sup>;
- it would be more supportive of Ukraine and possibly attempt to join the Normandy negotiations in an effort to reach a political solution to the crisis;
- it would probably return to a policy of the promotion of human rights and democratic freedoms, also in relations with Russia and its neighbors.

#### **DEALING WITH THE CHINESE CHALLENGE**

During the past four years the Trump Administration has engaged in a full-scale trade war with China, which was sometimes interrupted by a temporary cease-fire. This struggle for hegemony could either lead to a G-2 in world affairs or risk descending into a military conflict between

the US and China (the much-cited “Thucydides trap”). In this bilateral contest, allies did not really count for much. Only recently has the US started seriously lobbying its allies to follow its example of decoupling the economies and teaming up against China in multilateral organizations, including NATO. On the other hand, China has been adept at courting European partners with economic deals and has succeeded in including some EU member states in its loose “17+1”-format, connected to the implementation of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This partly explains, why European countries have attempted to refrain from taking sides in the evolving US-China rivalry and continue their own profitable trade relations with Beijing.

However, especially since the COVID crisis European countries have started to become more wary of Chinese intentions and more willing to promote their own “strategic autonomy,” including by screening (especially Chinese) investments for potential security consequences and stimulating their own national champions in digital connectivity. A more geopolitical European Commission, which can decide on market access based on its own norms and standards, has in principle a strong negotiating position towards a China, which is increasingly envisaged as a competitor and even a “systemic rival.” Chinese assertiveness and European concerns about human rights issues, including Hong Kong and the Uighur detention camps, have only contributed further to a new and much tougher consensus within the EU on China.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, US policies towards China could hardly be called successful. Apart from temporary cease-fires in the continuous trade wars, the basic conflicts have contributed only towards some decoupling of the US and Chinese economies and some increase in the number of allies preferring US technological companies (and standards) on 5G instead of Huawei. European allies would agree with the US on issues like Chinese state subsidies, lack of openness in Chinese markets and intellectual property rights. But their rejection of a binary choice between the US and China on trade and technological issues has weakened the negotiating positions of both the US and the EU in dealing with Beijing.<sup>9</sup>

A Biden Administration is expected to continue the confrontation with China, not only on trade issues, but increasingly on human rights issues as well. Therefore, Beijing still seems to prefer a continuation of the chaotic Trump years to a Biden Administration, which would broaden the agenda to human rights and democratic freedoms and work more closely with Asian and European allies in countering Chinese challenges, including on regional security issues.<sup>10</sup>

How far a Biden Administration would also continue the Trump Administration’s policies on decoupling the interconnected economies and put pressure on its allies and partners to follow their lead, remains an open question.

Finally, the US-China rivalry has also effected policies towards Russia. The Ukraine crisis has strengthened Russia’s “pivot to Asia” and boosted its partnership with Beijing. However, this relationship has not led to a full-fledged alliance, and although both China and Russia would like to push back against any efforts to restore US hegemony, diverging interests and Moscow’s unwillingness to become Beijing’s junior partner could open up possibilities for both the US and the EU to deal with these countries more effectively, provided transatlantic unity can be restored.

### RE-ALIGNING TRANSATLANTIC APPROACHES TOWARDS RUSSIA AND CHINA?

For the EU, the Trump Administration has posed a big challenge to the multilateral rules-based order. The US has explicitly attempted to undermine the EU integration process and threatened the EU with trade sanctions, should it not comply with US demands. Also the US withdrawal from multilateral organizations (like WHO) and agreements (e.g. the Paris Climate agreement and the Iran deal) had a serious impact on the EU’s own position as a geopolitical player with policies based on principled (values-based) pragmatism.

After Brexit, France and Germany have attempted to counter the demise of multilateralism by establishing an Alliance for Multilateralism and push for reform of the current (sometimes ineffectual) multilateral organizations. And President Macron’s remarks about NATO’s “brain-death” stimulated a reflection process on the future of the Alliance, which could ultimately lead to a revision of NATO’s outdated Strategic Concept and provide more clarity on the role of European partners within the Alliance.

Both the US-China rivalry and the Russian-Chinese partnership have also had an impact on transatlantic dialogue and cooperation in dealing with the challenges posed by Russia and China to a disjointed and fragmenting West. The unilateral US approach and the EU’s soul-searching about its own geopolitical role have hardly contributed to a search for a joint approach to the wider security challenges posed by Chinese and Russian assertiveness. Partly this was due to transatlantic trade differences, but diverging views on the rules-based order and the importance of the promotion of human rights and democratic freedoms also had a major impact. In this respect, the upcoming US presidential elections will pose some fun-



Unlike under the Obama Administration, sanctions policies towards Russia are no longer closely coordinated with European allies, hampering their effectiveness. Depicted is former American President Obama with European leaders at a NATO summit in 2016 (Drop of Light/Shutterstock.com)

damental questions about the future of global order. In this context, a majority in the EU would prefer a Biden Administration, in which the US would once again provide leadership to a more united West and agree on a more values-based foreign policy.

But at the same time, most Europeans also realize that they will have to take more responsibility themselves for their own defense and security. In that sense, Trump has been a wake-up call, but also a Biden Administration will continue the US pivot to Asia and put pressure on Europe to take more responsibility in dealing with security challenges in their own neighborhood and to provide for better burden-sharing.

In this context, some recent developments have created better opportunities for a transatlantic alignment of policies towards Russia and China:

- the EU's position towards Russia seems to be toughening and even a temporary halt on the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline can no longer be excluded. President Macron's attempt to reach out to Russia has failed, mainly because of a lack of Russian constructive response.
- the EU's approach towards China has also changed, as countries gradually realize the security risks attached to Chinese strategic investments and wider policies.

Therefore, a new US Administration could find more common ground with its European partners in dealing with the strategic challenges posed by Russia and China than before. In principle, there could be a window of opportunity, depending on the US willingness to make better use of its allies and partners in dealing with these challenges together.



Moscow has used every opportunity to play on any discord within NATO or the EU by dealing with individual member states, using a broad range of influence operations to undermine unity. Depicted is Russian president Putin meeting with Italian Prime-Minister Giuseppe Conte (2019) (photo: Alessia Pierdomenico/Shutterstock.com)

However, we need to realize that Russia and China are challenging not only the West's economic and security interests, but also the values embedded in the international rules-based order. In this respect, Western societies (both in the US and Europe) have become increasingly polarized, offering ample opportunities for Moscow and Beijing to undermine Western policies and EU- and NATO-unity. What Russia and China would fear most is the promotion of these very values, which have set the West apart from authoritarian and dictatorial regimes.

If the US and European states could heal the divisions in their own societies and develop a joint policy towards authoritarian challengers, this could re-unite the West as an alliance of democracies. As Biden as a candidate has

committed himself explicitly to uphold such principles, most Europeans hope for his victory.

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