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EU China agreement

A sign of European geopolitical awakening*



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The images of an incited mob laying siege to the US Capitol will remain etched in our minds for a very long time to come – in the United States, of course, but also in the rest of the world.

The Washington events of 6 January 2021 cannot be regarded as merely the last gasp of Donald Trump's term, nor dismissed with charitable but hollow statements such

as “this is not America”. This attempted coup d'état was driven by many underlying dynamics that have been burgeoning in the US for several years now, including conspiracy theories, glorification of secessionist idols, and social and racial chasms. The reality TV star turned president in 2016 was a symptom of this decline, not its cause.

In the rest of the world, we took note of this downward spiral earlier and with more clarity. It was therefore fascinating to see the US intellectual elite witness these events with stupefaction. Richard N. Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations, the dean of

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US foreign policy circles, wrote right after the Capitol events on Twitter: “No one in the world is likely to see, respect, fear, or depend on us in the same way again. If the post-American era has a start date, it is almost certainly today.” America’s exceptionalism – the manifest destiny deeply anchored in the country’s collective consciousness – has received a fatal blow.”

And there will be considerable consequences for us in Europe.

As the first president to have truly begun to disengage the United States, Donald Trump has broken with US imperialism. In so doing, “America First” has accelerated the momentum of European strategic autonomy. Since the election of Joe Biden, there has nonetheless been some hesitation and foot-dragging, not least from Berlin. What if things just went back to the way they were?

The Democratic Redeemer and his staff have promised to put America back at the “head of the table”, from the very first day of his administration, making it the leader of the free world once again. This is the mantra of Biden himself, as well as his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and important advisors on European affairs, such as Victoria Nuland.¹

In the coming months and years, this ambition will generate major transatlantic tension. We are seeing this already with regards to China, the greatest geopolitical challenge. In the last hours of 2020, the European Union reached an agreement in principle on investment with Beijing. The European quartet of Michel, von der Leyen, Merkel and Macron met via videoconference

with Xi Jinping, the Chinese president. The agreement gives European companies better access and protection on Chinese markets, but analysts were mainly struck by its strategic importance – the EU, on its own, accomplished a geopolitical act.

Washington took offence. How could Europe enter into an agreement with the US’s big rival just three weeks before Biden’s inauguration? Couldn’t it have waited a bit to arrive at a common position against the “thug” Xi? While the EU seemed to be quite relieved at Trump’s exit, Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security advisor, said on Twitter that the new administration would have appreciated “consultation” with its European allies on China. That is one thing that has not changed from the Trump era – the White House continues to send out orders via Twitter.

The European Union did have good reasons for sticking to the timetable. The investment agreement had been under negotiation with China for the past seven years. The 31 December 2020 deadline was set at the 2019 EU-China summit and reiterated solemnly since. In the run-up to the German presidency of the Council of EU, Chancellor Merkel had publicly pledged to meet this deadline. So Washington can hardly say it was surprised. Moreover, China had made some major 11th-hour pledges of its own. Any foot-dragging by Europe at this stage would therefore have sent a bad signal by suggesting to the entire world that it did not have the courage to act on its own, but only after getting the green light from the US. That would have done great harm to the EU’s standing on the world stage – with regards to Beijing, but also Moscow, Ankara, London and Tehran – eroding the political and economic leverage at Europe’s disposal by standing firm on its own interests and values.

It may be useful to remember that the US also entered into “Phase One” of its own trade agreement with China, early in 2020. In certain ways, the EU-China agreement merely closes the gap, as European companies are obtaining guarantees that have already been promised to their US counterparts. It would be hypocritical

1 Victoria Nuland, incidentally, is the wife of Robert Kagan, a neoconservative ideologue. She briefly rose to fame in February 2014, when she was put in charge of negotiations in Ukraine by President Obama. During a phone conversation with the US ambassador to Kiev, she dismissed the Europeans’ attempts at mediation with a scornful “*Fuck the EU*”. Moscow leaked the conversation shortly thereafter.

to deny them to us. In some areas, Chinese concessions to the EU go further, concessions that the US could potentially obtain in turn, thus opening the door to a subtle new transatlantic cooperation, to which European leaders have already invited the new US administration.

But Washington had no patience for such nuances. In its issue of 6 January, *The New York Times* called out the EU's "greed" and "naïveté". So did the news website Politico, which is widely read in Brussels circles. *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman accused the EU of handing China a "strategic victory" with this agreement, putting it in the context of Beijing's recent autocratic outrages – repression in Hong Kong, intimidation of Taiwan, military confrontation with India, and economic sanctions against Australia. In his view, Europe is undermining democratic forces in the world.

In this mindset, which harkens to a new cold war, everything becomes absolute, each situation is black and white. And yet, any diplomatic interaction is full of contradictions and dilemmas. Do we want to buy masks sewn by Uyghur forced labourers? No, and we won't do so. That's why the EU asked China to ratify the International Labour

Organisation's Forced Labour Convention; Xi promised to do his best. Is that enough? For the European Parliament, which must sign off on the agreement, probably not. Should we therefore cut off all dialogue with China on climate change, human rights, trade and the Middle East? Is Washington doing that? We share the same planet with China, a country with 1.4 billion people that is not simply going to go away.

The Capitol events of 6 January show clearly that we can't outsource our own security and tie it to a four-year US election cycle.

It is also in the Americans' interest not to disrupt the dynamics of Europe's geopolitical awakening, but to join with it in creating a new transatlantic relationship. As things now stand, Europe clearly cannot do without US military protection; Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron are perfectly aware of this. But our interests and values are not always aligned with those of the US. To be strong and united on essential democratic issues, Europe must possess its own capacity to act. If the US sees "consultation" as simply blowing a whistle and having Europe fall into line, it is ignoring the extent of the world's new balance of power.

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