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Biden, EUrope and the Challenges of Managing the Strategic Rectangle with China and Russia

Despite continuing political differences, the first 100 days of the Biden administration have shown that the much hoped-for appreciative style of communication has returned to the transatlantic relationship. At the same time, the regained unity of the West pits it even more clearly against rising (and declining) authoritarian powers. An analysis of the ‘strategic rectangle’ of the USA, EUrope, China and Russia allows – especially in a historical and a future-oriented strategic perspective – to identify opportunities and potential stumbling blocks for common strategy-building within the West.

The first 100 days of the Biden administration allow a sigh of relief – globally, but especially among the US’s allies in Europe and Asia. Given the alternative of another four years of Donald Trump, that is no small feat. However, whether the new oxygen supply will be used strategically over the coming years in order to unify and reinvigorate alliances in a more narrowly defined Western context as well as to expand institutional mechanisms of global cooperation remains an open question.

Among the flood of 100-day assessments, the significance of the atmospheric improvements among Western allies is usually, and rightly, highlighted. When asked what had changed in German-American relations, [German Foreign Minister Maas](#) said this week that he was “inclined to say: actually everything”. His subsequent remarks suggested that [conflicts certainly remain](#). However, Berlin is once again able to discuss differences with Washington respectfully, behind closed doors and at eye level. After four years in which – in Donald Trump’s world – Berlin appeared to be ranged among the US’s favorite rogue states, this is a major change indeed.

Coordinated Diplomacy

Two closely coordinated decisions by the US and its allies in recent weeks have particularly showcased just how reassuring the Biden administration’s new posture within NATO actually is – and how much renewed Western unity has irritated both

China and Russia: first, the sanctioning of China by the US and the EU for human rights violations against the Uyghurs, second, the coordinated measures taken by Washington and NATO allies against Russia for interfering in the US elections as well as an attack by the Russian secret service in the Czech Republic that was cleared up only lately, but just as evidently. Since Moscow and Beijing have not frequently been confronted with smart and coordinated Western diplomacy in the last four years – to the contrary: they could almost rely on NATO to take care of internal “divide-et-impera” itself – it is hardly surprising that coordinated diplomacy under US leadership is now demonized as “[selective multilateralism](#)”.

US Strategic Repositioning

This new-found unity leaves no one in the capitals of Europe under any illusion that the coming years will be easy. The dual message of the [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#) (INSSG) – a kind of provisional National Security Strategy – of upgrading US diplomacy while at the same time anchoring US foreign policy more firmly at home already sent a clear message to American allies around the world that much more will be demanded of them in the future than in the past four years. Just think about the combined effect of the following three statements: if the Biden administration does indeed succeed in (a) realizing “smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense and the responsible use of our military” (INSSG, p. 14); (b) pursuing a “[foreign policy for the \(American\) middle class](#)” and (c) achieving the overarching strategic goal of “out-compet(ing) a more assertive and authoritarian China over the long-term” (INSSG, p. 20) America’s allies, especially those in Europe who have been privileged in past decades, will face fundamental structural adjustments.

From a more narrowly German point of view, even highly politicized bilateral disputes, such as [Nord Stream 2](#) or [NATO's two-percent target](#), pale in comparison, important as they may be. They are downgraded to the status of differing views to be dealt with “openly”, i.e., they are marked and articulated clearly in internal exchanges and diplomatic communiqués as divergent interests while emphasizing that they should not stand in the way of focusing on overarching common strategic goals.

New Strategic Outlook: The Emerging Strategic Rectangle

It is precisely these medium- and long-term objectives about which the United States and its allies have yet to start to develop a common strategic understanding in the first place. As a matter of fact this is one of the key challenges which both the US and Europe face in averting “westlessness” since some of the core principles of global order – what used to be called “the liberal world order” when “the West” still called the shots – have increasingly been called into question during the past decade and since accompanying shifts in power have added to the volatility of international order.

One potentially productive way of analyzing the prospects of such a definition of rejuvenated joint purpose of the West is to look at the strategic rectangle between the US (including, to some extent, Canada), Europe (plus the UK), China, and Russia. To frame these relationships in terms of a “strategic rectangle” is to say (a) that these global centers of power are “significant others” for each other bilaterally (granting that the specific significance of each varies for all) and (b) that patterns of (re-) alignment, restrained competition or adversarial confrontation in each bilateral segment will reverberate in the three other bilateral segments for each actor as well as across the strategic rectangle as a whole. Moreover, how relationships and dynamics in this rectangle evolve will have major repercussions for global order.

The Challenge of Translating Biden’s Promise of Co-Leadership into Strategy

Looking at this rectangle might be productive, especially from a historical and a future-oriented strategic perspective, because it might enable the analyst to more easily identify opportunities and potential stumbling blocks for strategic adjustment. For the US and Europe – as well as a few other global actors often associated with these two due to their alignments, such as Canada, the UK, Japan, and Australasia – this is particularly useful now because the new Biden administration promises a major turn in US foreign policy compared to its predecessor while leaving significant questions yet to answered. In his first address to Congress this week President Biden started the foreign policy section of his speech with a reference to his first encounters with 40 world leaders and that he had “made it known (...) that America is back. And you know what they say? The comment that I hear most of all from them is they say, “We see America is back but for how long?””

This how-long question reflects on a deep-seated skepticism among broader allied publics. Biden's answer that "we have to show not just that we're back, but that we're back to stay and that we aren't going to go it alone. We're going to do it by leading with our allies" is certainly as reassuring as many of the policy initiatives of his administration in its first 100 days. Yet, besides the fact that the experience of the last four years unmistakably show that he can, at most, guarantee to "stay" for another 1.360 more days, the more important question remains what "back" and "not going it alone" means in concrete terms and, most importantly, *how* and *where* to his administration will "lead *with* our allies".

Reinventing Multilateralism

One of the most experienced and astute observers of US foreign policy and global politics, Henry Kissinger, reminded the Biden team and European allies in an [interview with the "Economist"](#) a few days ago, that a lot of conceptual and strategic thinking and coordination lays ahead of them if they actually want to follow through with such pronouncements. This is even more so if the Biden administration does indeed develop an operational definition in daily diplomatic practice of what it means to "lead *with* our allies". Co-leadership is not a [leadership concept](#) that America has a lot of practical experience with. Rather, allies are more used to different versions of [ad-hoc multilateralism](#) or even coalition of the willing multilateralism, where the US defines "the mission" and willing allied followers join the coalition. With regard to the anticipated dominant competition with China, for instance, a certain recourse to the conceptual vocabulary of [Cold War bipolarity](#) is observable here and there. However, as Kissinger reminded decision-makers in Washington and elsewhere, efforts to reach "some agreement" on basic principles of conduct as well as "the basic structure" of relations with both China and Russia are overdue.

Lessons from the Cold War

Cold War analogies are instructive to the extent that they help in identifying both commonalities and differences. One similarity certainly is a tendency towards *bipolarization*, meaning that the two dominant powers of the current international system, China and the US, increasingly identify themselves as either being or becoming the overarching rival for each other over the long-term. Perspectivity as far as „being“ and „becoming“ are concerned is usually designated in traditional

„realist“ analyses as status quo orientation (here the U.S.) or „revisionism“ (here China). In that sense speaking of a “strategic rectangle” of *four mutually significant others* needs extra justification.

One key argument in support of it is that the “periphery” of Cold War bipolarity was markedly more marginal in a structural sense. Eastern Europe and Western Europe were tied down in the core conflict between the Soviet Union and the US and what was left for the Warsaw Pact and NATO in terms of *potentially* significant others chose to stay apart: Some were primarily preoccupied with domestic concerns (as in Maoist China), others joined forces in a “Non-Aligned Movement” in order to stay neutral (as in the case of India) or were only marginally affected by the rivalry of the core (as Japan). The Soviets and Americans could rest largely content with whatever limited support they were able to mobilize from these actors or, respectively, whatever limited irritation they caused.

The New Dynamics of Rectangular Strategizing

Today’s global constellation is far from such a bipolar core-periphery divide. EUrope may be in the process of switching strategic positions with Japan as far as a potentially new bipolar confrontation between the US and China is concerned, as [Ivan Krastev](#) recently observed. However, it is not as inward-looking, single-mindedly focused on territorial national defense and anti-militaristic in its regional and global outlook as [Japan](#) used to be in the Cold War. Moreover, neither the US nor China can simply ignore whatever limited economic power and diplomatic leverage the EU as a whole may be able to mobilize. More significantly still, to what extent EUrope stays closely aligned with the US in terms of global strategic outlook or gradually switches to “neutral” stances – as at least half of the electorate in every surveyed EU country, and 59 percent of EUropeans overall, prefer according to a [recent poll by ECFR](#) “if there was a disagreement between the US and China” – will be much more significant for both the US and China in their direct confrontation compared to how Japan positioned itself in the old days.

The Temptations and Strategic Implications of EUropean Neutrality

This should be especially worrisome for the Biden administration since propensities for neutrality combine with expectations among EUropeans that “in ten years’ time, China will be a stronger power than the US”. Two thirds of EUropeans share this

belief according to the ECFR poll. Biden's prominent attempts in his address to Congress to reassure allies regarding their "how-long-are-you-to-stay" worries appear fully justified if you add that more than 60 percent of Europeans also believe that the political system of the United States is either "somewhat" or "completely broken", that "declinist" sentiments, in general, are on the rise throughout the EU and that more than two thirds also subscribe to the statement that "Europe can't always rely on the US; we need to look after our defense capabilities". It also underlines the urgency and the uphill battle which the Biden administration faces in not only keeping allies on board in a supporting role but actually winning them over for their overarching goal to "out-compete China" over "the long-term".

It might also explain why Merkel stays fairly relaxed on Nord Stream 2 and a few other secondary issues still dominating debate among pundits. As few others she seems to grasp the new dynamics of managing the multidimensional challenges of the emerging strategic rectangle. For instance, were China to succeed in neutralizing Europe this could be even more significant in terms of the global strategic balance as if Stalin had succeeded in neutralizing West Germany in the early 1950s. Add the remaining destructive capacities of Russia on China's side (and Putin's readiness to bring it to bear against his Western significant others) and the strategic significance of a grand new transatlantic bargain becomes obvious.

Global "Partners in Leadership"?

This is not precisely Henry Kissinger's argument, yet when he said, in [another recent interview](#), that "the issue arises of a global Germany", that "there is little historical precedent for that role", that "Germany has the resources and the history to be a major factor in the future" and that "it needs to make up its mind on how it perceives its global role" he was at least indirectly also gesturing to the Biden administration to treat carefully *and* act strategically vis-à-vis one of its key allies in Europe. George Herbert Walker Bush's offer to become "[partners in leadership](#)" more than thirty years ago came way too early for Germans. Whether its time has come now remains to be seen and depends (not only, but primarily) on how the Biden administration and the incoming new German government in the fall will coordinate for and navigate in the emerging strategic rectangle. If Biden is serious today about "leading *with* allies", he and his team will have to realize, for a start, what Trump never grasped: treating Germany as a rogue state is not helpful *for the US* strategically.

Yet this is the easy part of lessons to be learned on the US's side – and the Biden administration has already amply demonstrated that it has understood it. Merely stopping stupidity will not suffice, however, in mobilizing whatever resources and political will German elites *and* the German public are willing to bring to the transatlantic bargaining table for what a “global Germany” might look like in the medium and long term. Bilateralizing “partnership in leadership” between the US and Germany will also fall short of addressing the sensitivities of additional significant others in Europe for both, the US and Germany. At a minimum, France and the UK (both veto powers in the UN Security Council besides the US, China, and Russia) will have to be on board in some fashion. Neglecting other Europeans (such as Poland or Italy) would not be wise either.

Multilateral Creativity

Hence new arrangements of multilateral coordination are needed – and they have to take forms which are not yet visible in the context of either Germany's diplomatic brainchild (the “alliance for multilateralism”) or in US diplomatic preferences for ad hoc multilateral arrangements. Following up on Kissinger's advice – that a “basic principles” agreement ought to be considered at least for restraining US-Chinese competition – would be a good start for the central axis of the strategic rectangle. Yet if the analysis above is convincing more long-term and innovative multilateral coordination is necessary for shaping what Kissinger calls “the basic structure of relations” among key centers of power – and these relations have to be conceived in both bilateral and multilateral forms. Consulting the historical record and adapting the lessons learned in earlier settings of great power competition (such as US-Soviet rivalry *and* “détente” or the European Concert of Powers) is useful. Existing contemporary ad hoc multilateral settings such as the JCPOA context also ought to be looked into in terms of building blocks for innovative multilateral tools. The core of the strategic rectangle – encompassing the US, Europe (plus the UK), Russia and China – is already engaged here in an institutionalized minilateral setting. Lessons learned in dealing with a fairly tricky issue of significance for global order in this setting might be used to explore to what extent and with regard to what issues of managing global competition this minilateral tool might be replicated or adapted.

A shorter version in German focusing on an assessment of the Biden administrations first 100 days has been published in the series “Aspen in a Nutshell”.