

EUROPE AFTER THE US ELECTIONS: BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE UNKNOWN

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Brussels, the established centre of the EU, Berlin, Paris, and other Member State capitals met the victory of Joseph Biden in a mood of uplift and cheering. The last four years with Donald Trump turned into the most difficult challenge transatlantic solidarity ever encountered. Trump became the personification, and a very rough one at that, of the US policy of strategic decoupling from the European allies of the last decades. For a long time this policy was an undeclared one, more an undercurrent than the waves raging on the surface. Before it was like grass growing slowly and quietly; with Trump it was thrown into stark relief.

There were times when West Europeans themselves were musing on the virtues of going it alone. Then, before 2003 and immediately after, when the words “strategic autonomy” were not yet coined, Berlin, Paris, and numbers of influential British intellectuals urged their countries to acquire more foreign policy actorness, questioning the tradition of following the leader on the other shore of the pond no matter what. The intervention in Iraq and its aftermath were so surreal, indefensible, and bloody that many Europeans were prepared to decouple by themselves. However, the factor of Barack Obama stalled this process and streamlined the geopolitical moods in Europe. Still, for the unbiased observer the fundamentals did not change — the US kept drifting away from the Old World.

In the years of the Obama presidency this drift got its name — “pivot to Asia”. In Russia it is called a “turn to the East”. No matter how we identify this geopolitical shift, in essence it reflects the objective process of the last 30 years — the ascendancy of Asia, first of all China, to the status of a new centre of power and a new axis of world politics.

There is little for Europe to complain about. The euro-centrism of international relations became a thing of the past as far back as 1945. Some European empires were buried by the First World War, some by the Second, or they collapsed in its aftermath. Afterwards, for a long time Western Europe was in the shadow of two superpowers — the Soviet Union and the United States. Today world politics, the structure of which is not any more bipolar but polycentric, increasingly is revolving around interaction between China and the US.

In spite of the ordeal for the US-European bonds of the Trump years, the traditional part of the Euro-Atlantic establishment, the Atlanticists, have preserved strong positions. They adhere to a vision of international affairs as defined by the West, understood as an alliance of (neo)liberal democracies led by the US.

In parallel, in the last years another current in the EU political elites has been gaining strength — autonomists. These are those, mainly West European, who think that it is an urgent necessity to promote the vision of a more politically autonomous and independent European Union. The ideas of a common strategic culture have been spreading intensively, especially since 2016, and the structures of the Common Security and Defence Policy have solidified. The autonomists’ vision of international affairs is based on the principle of strategic autonomy, which implies, beside other things, the double autonomy from the US and from China, although with natural asymmetry in favour of the American ally.

The competition between these two parts of the European political establishment has been growing for a long time, but recently it has sharpened. The personal factor of the outgoing American president played its significant role, but was not the fundamental reason. There is also a third prominent category of the European political class — Eurosceptics of all sorts, but this issue is not a topic of the present piece.

The Atlanticists hold that under Joe Biden US-EU relations should return, figuratively speaking, to the times of Barack Obama. The autonomists agree that the Biden administration will be much more friendly to the EU and NATO, but they think that this is not a compelling argument to jettison the goal of strategic autonomy. They ask a reasonable question: “Fine, under the President elect transatlantic ties will regain some strength. But what may happen in four years’ time when Trump or somebody else like him returns to the White House? Let’s become more independent whoever is at the helm of power in the US”.

Apparently, a staunch supporter of this approach is French President Emmanuel Macron. Paris has been exerting its efforts to look and sound strategic and to acquire the mantle of the European political leadership from Germany. Berlin follows an ambitious approach, seemingly awaiting the moment when sympathetic rhetoric from Biden and his team towards the European allies will take the shape of some concrete deeds.

This caution is well founded, as in 2021 Angela Merkel is vacating the post of Chancellor and Germany will have elections. Moreover, for Berlin the change of the host in the White House does not mean that the problem with the final stage of construction of Nord Stream 2 will somehow ease. This project was the apple of discord between Germany and the US under Trump, but Biden is also its ardent opponent.

Rome and Madrid are watching the behaviour of Paris and Berlin preferring to wait and see. There are states in Europe where the victory of Biden was met not only with relief but also with mixed feelings, even if on the side. Among them the UK, Poland, and Hungary. Their ruling forces have extracted sufficient profits from Trump’s policies. Different variations of Euroscepticism have used Trumpism (which is not the same as its figure-head) for domestic purposes or as a buttress in quarrels inside the EU. Now this leverage is not there anymore.

Obviously, a part of Trump’s legacy will be dismantled. A question is: to what extent, and what is going to replace it? In general, whichever European country we take, there are no overwhelming illusions that Biden’s presidency can deeply overhaul US strategy, which has solidified in the past four years.

Firstly, putting aside the peculiarities of Trump’s character and his eccentricity, a lot in US behaviour has been quite familiar. It would be wrong to say that he is a non-systemic politician, as he represents the views and psychology of half of the US population, and moreover a significant part of the business, political, and military elites. Few people disagree that Trump would have won the election if not for the pandemic. US policy towards the Middle East, excluding Iran, and towards China, Russia, and the EU were to a large extent a continuation of the previous political trends. In a number of cases Trump was over the top, but on the whole he was within the broad framework of modern US foreign policy.

Secondly, in view of Trumpism’s popularity it would be ill-advised to prophesise what kind of a political character will move into the White House in four years’ time and to insist unreservedly that the outgoing presidency was a historical aberration. Is there not a chance that the presidency

of Biden will turn out to be a pause before Trumpism and the Republicans, who continue to control the Senate, are back in the White House?

Thirdly, indeed for Europeans Biden will be a more convenient counterpart than his predecessor, but not necessarily in everything. For example, the president elect is an ideologically driven politician to a much bigger extent than Trump. Therefore, the overall relationship between the US and China will not significantly improve, and can even deteriorate further. Intensifying Washington — Beijing confrontation will make the situation for the EU even more difficult than before, placing it between a rock and a hard place. Of course, the matter is not just Biden's ideological preferences, but the fact that China continues to emerge as the main competitor of the US; the pandemic has made this trend only more pronounced.

Nor are there writings on the wall about any positive shifts in relations between Washington and Ankara. On the contrary, the president elect and his most ardent European allies may close ranks against Ankara, not just on the basis of geopolitics but on the issues of human rights and authoritarianism. In this case, the state of interaction between Turkey and the EU, and the situation in NATO, may go from bad to worse.

Clearly, the continuity between the previous and the new administration is far from comprehensive. If Hillary Clinton or Biden had been the American president in the last four years, the US would not have abandoned the Paris climate accord, ruined the nuclear deal with Iran, blocked the functioning of the World Trade Organisation, and withdrawn payments to the World Health Organisation. On these issues Washington will revamp its policies, which will be welcomed in the world.

The niche in which Biden's victory is expected to improve the present realities in Russia-Western relations is the sphere of arms control. On the one hand, the chain of events which brought the destruction of the Intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty, was launched by the George W. Bush Administration and was followed by Obama. The ABM treaty was also scrapped by Bush, and deployment of the US/NATO Aegis-Ashore missile defence systems has been a constant of the American policy. On the other hand, chances are higher that under Biden the New START (Strategic arms reduction treaty) may be prolonged for the maximum period of five years, instead of one year if Trump had survived the elections.

Also there is a hope that after 20 January 2021 the new presidency will be conducive to the preservation of the Open Skies treaty, which the US left on 22 November. They did not just abandon it, but started to press those allies who still abide by the agreement de facto to sabotage it. In Russia there is an overwhelming consensus that the preservation of both the New START and the Open Skies treaty is in the national interest of the country.

Apart from that, a possibility exists that starting from 2021 Russia and the US might find enough political will to tackle an awful situation in the sphere of conventional arms control in Europe, where Russia and NATO military forces face one another. Given the tensions in NATO-Russia contact zones, regional stabilising measures should be considered. Re-establishing security dialogue and military contacts are urgently needed. There are many specialists and former or current state officials in Russia, Europe, and the US who adhere to this position. One of the fresh products of this thinking process are the "Recommendations of the Participants of the Expert Dialogue on NATO–Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe", a document published on 7 December 2020 and supported by more than 130 well-known signatories.

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