

Relationship

Professor Michael Cox **Brexit, Trump and the Crisis of the Transatlantic**

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E-Mail: m.e.cox@lse.ac.uk

Author details: Professor Michael Cox is Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Founding Director of LSE IDEAS. Before joining the LSE he was professor of International Politics at the University of Wales Aberystwyth. He has held positions in the United States Italy, China, Australia and Norway where he was a visiting senior Fellow at the Nobel Institute. An Associate Fellow on the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House, and a member of the Scholarly Advisory Board of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, his most recent publications include a collection of his own essays *The Post-Cold War World* (Routledge, 2018); a new centennial edition of John Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Palgrave 2019); and an introduction to E.H.Carr's *Nationalism and After* (Palgrave 2021). He is currently working a new history of the London School of Economics titled, *The "School": the LSE and the Shaping of the Modern World*.

Abstract: *This chapter examines what might loosely be termed a 'twenty years crisis' in the history of the transatlantic relationship since the turn of the new century. Like the death of Mark Twain the demise of the relationship has been announced many times before, but like Twain himself has managed to carry on, in large part because the interests of both Europe and the US have coincided. In what follows the author takes the continuation of the relationship as a given. What he then attempts to do is explain the many challenges it has faced and why Brexit and Trump taken together constitute the greatest combined challenge it has confronted thus far. President Biden has vowed to repair the damage done. But as the chapter shows he faces an uphill struggle. Divorce is most unlikely. Yet until all the actors – the EU, the UK and the US – can come up with a new grand bargain, the way ahead looks fraught.*

Key words: transatlantic relationship, Brexit, Trump, strategic autonomy, European Union, Biden.

Introduction

“There can be little doubt that the first months of the G.W. Bush presidency have been a rough time for US-European relations”¹

Many years ago as the United States prepared to go to war in Iraq, a former official in the Reagan administration, Robert Kagan (by any measure the most articulate proponent of a Project which aimed to make the 21st century just as ‘American’ as the last one)² wrote a short trenchant piece in a policy magazine reflecting on the state of the transatlantic relationship. The magazine itself was conservative but not known for being controversial. Nor did the title of the Kagan piece – *Power and Weakness* – suggest that anything out of the ordinary was in the offing. Yet within a short period of time the article was being distributed in Brussels, whole symposia were hastily organized to discuss its implications, and facts and figures marshalled to prove that Kagan was wrong to suggest that the transatlantic spat over Iraq reflected a more fundamental divide between Americans and the Europeans. Kagan was unmoved. The divide he noted was real. Indeed, it had even begun to take shape back in the Clinton years, long before the Iraq war.³ Nor was it just about personalities or politics. Rather it was, he insisted, the expression of two very different ways of looking at the world reflecting the fact that the United States was a superpower in possession of the largest military known to mankind while the Europeans since World War II had achieved success by moving beyond war and becoming a zone of peace. Kagan even deployed the planets to make his case. As he put it in one of his more memorable phrases – there were several - philosophically speaking the “Americans” were “from Mars” while the Europeans were “from Venus”; and even if both formed part of something called the West, they agreed “on little” and understood “one another” even less. Moreover, this “state of affairs” he concluded was not the “product of one American election or one catastrophic event” but reflected a profound difference in strategic cultures. To

¹ Ivo Daalder, ‘Are the United States and Europe heading for divorce?’ *International Affairs*, Vol. 77. No. 3, 2001, pp. 553-567.

² *The Project for the New American Century*, or PNAC, was founded in 1997. Among its supporters were a number of officials who later played key roles in the Bush administration. They included Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage; John Bolton, and Zalmay Khalilzad.

³ See Robert Kagan, ‘On Power and Weakness’, *Brookings*, March 30, 2012.

all intents and purposes the United States and Europe had “parted ways” and there was little it seemed that could be done about it.⁴

Unsurprisingly Kagan’s provocation coming when it did provoked quite a firestorm of its own, especially in Europe and particularly amongst those who continued to make a strong case for the transatlantic relationship. The ‘Atlanticists’ were as unsparing in their critique of Kagan as he appeared to have been of them.⁵ His one-sided thesis fell short on several different counts, they insisted. Most obviously, it ignored the simple fact that Europe was not a single unit but was rather composed of different states with different attitudes towards the United States and the use of military force. Indeed, many of the Europeans he seemed to be dismissing for lacking the correct martial qualities (including oddly the British) actually supported the decision to go to war in Iraq. Nor it seemed did he have anything of worth to say about NATO, he virtually ignored the economic relationship altogether, and made no mention at all of values - all of which when taken together suggested a much more enduring partnership than the one he was presenting.⁶ Another critic (an American sociologist rather a student of world politics) even suggested there were hardly any differences at all between the Europeans and the Americans. Indeed, according to Peter Baldwin, the two were not only united on most key issues; together they inhabited what he termed the same space inside and under the same ‘big tent’. In fact, it was precisely because they were so alike that they tended to stress what divided them in order to forge some kind of unique identity of their own. As Freud would have put it, people (and in this case whole nations) sometimes overdid their very ‘minor differences’ in order to define who they were.⁷

I begin this chapter with Kagan not out of some misplaced nostalgia for an age long past but rather to suggest that one-sided though his original article may have been, it did at least have the virtue of generating an exchange of views about an issue which hitherto had not generated much intellectual excitement.⁸

⁴ Robert Kagan, ‘Power and Weakness’, *Policy Review*, No. 113, June and July 2002, pp. 3-28

⁵⁵ See John Peterson and Mark Pollack eds; *Europe, America and Bush: Transatlantic Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, London, Routledge, 2004.

⁶ Erik Jones, ‘Debating the transatlantic relationship: rhetoric and reality’, *International Affairs*. Vol. 80, Issue 4, July 2004, pp. 595-612.

⁷ Peter Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe are Alike*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁸ For my own interventions at the time see Michael Cox, ‘Kagan’s World’, *International Affairs*, Vol 7, Issue no. 3, 2003, pp.523-532; ‘Death of the West: Terrors in Transatlantia’, *European Journal of International Relations*,

Certainly, if the purpose of the original piece was to bring about a public discussion about an important policy problem, then by any measure it succeeded brilliantly.⁹ Henry Kissinger no less claimed the piece was “seminal”, while another reviewer regarded it as a “penetrating effort” to understand why Americans and Europeans so often talked “past each other”. One reviewer even compared Kagan’s effort to provoke a “fuller comprehension of contemporary international relations” with Frank Fukuyama’s hugely influential *The End of History* (written in 1989) and Sam Huntington’s equally important *The Clash of Civilizations* published only four years later in *Foreign Affairs*.¹⁰ Clearly Kagan had scored a hit. His piece also turned out to be quite prescient too. Indeed, as time passed and the transatlantic relationship moved from one divisive argument to the next - caused in part by a rising tide of anti-Americanism in Europe,¹¹ in part by European complaints about American unilateralism,¹² in part by US complaints about Europe not shouldering its burden,¹³ and during the Obama years by oft-expressed European worry that Europe had lost its privileged place to Asia¹⁴ - it began to look as if Kagan had not merely identified a problem: he had in his own overstated way (and possibly for the wrong reasons) predicted the future as well!

What Kagan could not have predicted however was how deep the transatlantic crisis would later become. Writing at a moment in time when America was sitting astride the globe his analysis was, in its own distinct way, a celebration of US power. Within a few years it was impossible to be so bullish. A failed crusade in Iraq, a profound shock to the US economy in 2008, and the shift from what had been a definably unipolar world at the turn of the century to a more

Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 203-233; ‘Let’s Argue about the West: Reply to Vincent Pouliot’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2006, pp. 129-134;

⁹ Robert Cooper whose analysis of Europe as a ‘post-modern space’ influenced Kagan’s thinking, later observed that “Europe may have chosen to neglect power politics because it is militarily weak; but it is also true that it is militarily weak because it has chosen to abandon power politics”. See his *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Atlantic Books, 2003, p. 159.

¹⁰ For a selection of favourable reviews of the book *Of Paradise and Power* spun out of Kagan’s original article go to https://www.bookbrowse.com/bb_briefs/detail/index.cfm/ezine_preview_number/2300/of-paradise-and-power.

¹¹ Adam Quinn and Michael Cox, ‘Fear and Loathing in Brussels: The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism’, in Richard Higgot and Ivona Malbasic (eds.), *The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 93-107.

¹² David Skidmore, ‘Understanding the Unilateralist turn in US Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2005, pp. 207–228.

¹³ Jens Ringsmose, ‘NATO Burden Sharing Redux: Continuity and Change after the Cold War’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2010, pp. 319-338.

¹⁴ Simon Luis, ‘Europe, the rise of Asia, and the future of the transatlantic relationship’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 5, September 2015, pp. 969-989.

complex international system in which China was assuming greater importance, slowly but surely knocked away the props supporting American self-confidence. America may not have been about to fail; it still retained formidable structural power. But the world order - in the words of one well known pundit – writing was fast becoming ‘post-American’.¹⁵ Then came the shock of Brexit followed shortly thereafter by the election of a President openly hostile to the liberal world order. At a stroke the world was turned upside down in which, to paraphrase Marx, all that we had once held to be solid melted into air as old certainties - including the certainty provided by the transatlantic relationship (however divided members of the Atlantic club may have been) - were thrown out the window. A new world disorder beckoned.¹⁶

In what follows I will try and explain how we have arrived at the critical position we find ourselves in today. To do this I touch only very briefly on the Obama years (in retrospect a relatively uneventful period compared to what came next)¹⁷ and spend most time examining the Trump phenomenon and the impact his victory preceded by Brexit was to have (and still has) on the transatlantic relationship. I then go on to reflect on the uphill tasks facing the Biden administration. President Biden has certainly done a great deal in a very short space of time to try and settle European nerves.¹⁸ But words alone will not be enough for the very simple reason that since 2016 the transatlantic relationship has gone through what can only be described as a trauma like no other in its long history. The question then arises: can the West put Humpty Dumpty back together again? Divorce which at times seemed a very real possibility under Trump may no longer be on the cards. On the other hand, something rather critical appears to have been ‘lost’ over the past few years and as a result a

¹⁵ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York, Allen Lane, 2008

¹⁶ 2011 seems to have been the year in which at least three narratives coalesced together to produce a sense of crisis in the West: one relating to the problems facing the liberal order, another to the world economy after 2008, and a third to China’s growing power. See for example G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America’, *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2011, pp. 56-68; Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2011; and Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2011.

¹⁷ Michael Cox, ‘Too Big to Fail? The Transatlantic Relationship from Bush to Obama’, *Global Policy*, Vol. 3: 1, December 2012, pp. 71-78.

¹⁸ In his speech delivered at the Munich Security Conference on 19th February 2021. Biden confirmed that the ‘transatlantic alliance was back’ and remained the ‘cornerstone of all we hoped to accomplish in the 21st Century’. <https://securityconference.org/en/>

return to the 'good old days' looks most unlikely. Some very testing times lie ahead yet.¹⁹

Brexit 2016: The year of living dangerously

*"It is perhaps ironic that our two countries, with a reputation for stable political systems, have delivered political revolutions of such importance"*²⁰

Between the 'blunder' that was the Iraq war²¹ and the tipping point year of 2016, the world was turned on its economic head by the greatest financial catastrophe since the Wall Street crash of 1929.²² Like most significant events over the past thirty years – including the end of the Cold War itself - the majority of experts failed to see 2008 coming. Undeterred however they then went on to examine the causes of the meltdown they had not foreseen in numerous learned articles, several well footnoted books and at a number of hastily convened conferences. Even Hollywood got in on the act producing at least two (hugely popular) movies on the subject. Yet in spite of all this frantic intellectual activity there was very little consensus amongst the experts about the deeper reasons for the crash or who might be held responsible for having precipitated it.²³ There was however some agreement that whatever specific factor may have led to the crisis – belief in the 'efficient market' hypothesis, complex derivatives, the housing bubble, cheap money, a lack of regulation or simply the idea that such a crisis could never happen - globalization had made the situation a whole lot worse by spreading the disease around the world in double quick time.²⁴ Thus far this new or not-so-new economic order had had more defenders than critics.²⁵ 2008 made it almost impossible to be so defensive again. With the world economy reeling, unemployment rising, global trade on hold, foreign direct investment falling and livings standards in decline, the focus now shifted from talking up the benefits of globalization to discussing its downside consequences. Building on a solid body of work going back to the late

¹⁹ Jeremy Shapiro, 'What we have lost: Trump, Biden and the meaning of transatlantic relations', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 November 2020.

²⁰ Mark Mardell, 'What links Trump's victory and Brexit?', *BBC News*, November 19, 2016

²¹ Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

²² Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London, Allen Lane, 2018.

²³ For useful summary of the contested reasons for 2008 see Howard Davies, *The Financial Crisis: Who is to Blame?* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010.

²⁴ *Economic Globalisation – The 2008 financial crisis – a crisis of globalisation?* OECD Insights.

²⁵ Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004.

1990s,²⁶ a new generation of writers now took the debate forward pointing to the decidedly negative impact globalization had had, and was continuing to have, in the West leading, amongst other things, to a loss of manufacturing jobs, stagnant incomes and increased inequality.²⁷

There was of course no direct connection between what happened in 2008 and what came to pass eight years later in the UK and the United States when sufficient numbers of people decided to tear up the script that had been prepared for them by voting against the system. Indeed, looking forward at the beginning of 2016 there was little reason to believe that by the end of the same year serious analysts would be talking in ever more dramatic terms about the ‘twilight of the liberal world order’²⁸ or even worse its ‘collapse’.²⁹ Few doubted that the West was facing some serious challenges. However, the assumption was that these were largely coming from without in the form of illiberal states like China and Russia and not from inside the West itself. Nor did anybody really anticipate that when the storm finally broke it would occur in two western countries hitherto known for their stability and moderation. Indeed, most pollsters anticipated that Prime Minister Cameron would win a narrow majority in the upcoming referendum. It was even more widely predicted that Hilary Clinton was bound to beat her rival in the shape of political outsider Donald Trump. As we now know, things did not quite turn out that way. Brexit won by a significant margin in England and Trump –in part inspired by the Brexit victory in June - won where it counted most: namely in the rust-belt states around the Great Lakes.³⁰ The political storm surge known as ‘populism’ about which academics had been writing for some time, had finally turned up on the shores of the UK and the United States with consequences that were bound to be deeply disturbing for world order.³¹

No sooner had the dust settled than analysts started to think through what all this might mean for the international system in general and what

²⁶ See in particular for Dani Rodrik, *Has Globalization gone too Far?* Washington D.C, Institute for International Economics, 1997.

²⁷ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017.

²⁸ Robert Kagan, ‘Twilight of the Liberal World Order’, *Brookings Institution*, January 24, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order/>

²⁹ Stephen Walt, ‘The Collapse of the Liberal World Order’, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, June 26, 2016. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/collapse-liberal-world-order>

³⁰ Lizzie Dearden, ‘Donald Trump says his victory would be “Brexit plus, plus, plus”’, *Independent*, 8 November 2016.

³¹ See my ‘The Rise of Populism and the Crisis of Globalisation: Brexit, Trump and Beyond’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 28, 2017, pp. 9-17.

consequences there would be for the wider transatlantic relationship in particular. Perhaps one of the first writers to reflect on this was Tim Oliver in a much cited piece written before the referendum focusing on what Brexit might mean for the relationship if (though only if) the voters in the UK referendum decided to vote leave. He was in little doubt that the impact would be significant. He accepted that it would not lead to “a breakdown in transatlantic relations” simply because the ties between the two were so important to both. On the other hand, it was bound to alter the balance in the relationship. Britain leaving the EU was certainly not something which Americans favoured. Indeed, as Oliver pointed out, ever since the early 1960s US policy-makers had favoured the British being an integral part of the European project. Americans knowledge of, and interest in Europe might have been limited. That said, Washington understood only too well that on the big issues – free trade, liberalisation, EU enlargement and EU cooperation on security and defence – the positions of the UK and the US were closely aligned. In fact, long before he warned the UK in spring 2016 that it would move to the ‘back of the queue’ if it voted to leave, Obama outlined America’s official position. He could not have been clearer. As he put it, “having the United Kingdom in the European Union gives us much greater confidence about the strength of the transatlantic union.....and we want to make sure that the United Kingdom continues to have that influence...not just for ourselves but for Europe as a whole and the world as a whole”.³² The implication was clear. If the UK were ever to depart the Union (something that must have appeared beyond the bounds of possibility in the year before it actually happened) it would not only mean that Washington had lost a reliable big voice pushing policies in the EU with which it was in broad agreement: the UK would have taken a decision that could very easily weaken America’s position in Europe itself.³³

Nor did what happen in the European Union immediately following the Brexit vote do a great deal to dampen down American concerns. Though by no means opposed to Europe doing more in terms of contributing to global security, there was a lingering fear on the American side that the EU - or at least some of its more independently-minded members - may start thinking ‘outside the box’. It was of course a coincidence that the EU published its new strategy document

³² Full Transcript of BBC Interview with President Barack Obama’, BBC News, 24 Jul 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-33646542>, accessed Feb 2016.

³³ For fuller version of the original argument see Tim Oliver and Michael John Williams, ‘Special relationships in flux: Brexit and the future of the US-EU and US-UK relationships’. *International Affairs*, Vol. 92. No. 3, 2016, pp. 547-567

only a few days after the Brexit vote.³⁴ But putting the idea of ‘strategic autonomy’ at its heart very much looked as if Europe (however tentatively) was beginning to strike out on a path of its own. The idea of strategic autonomy in of itself may not have caused great alarm in Washington. The majority of EU members would after all remain in NATO while the countries of Central and Eastern Europe would always be there to balance off those potentially more wayward nations to the West. On the other hand, coming at a time when US policy-makers were only just beginning to come to terms with Brexit, the idea of the EU becoming ever more autonomous was a cause for concern. France and Germany would no doubt continue to stress their commitment to common western values and the American connection. Still there remained a worry that as they came to define what autonomy involved in practice, over time this could lead the EU to adopting policy positions that did not readily line up with those being promoted by the United States.³⁵ When the UK had been sitting at the high table in Europe there was less for Americans to be worried about. But now that their loyal ally had departed the Union, there was. Americans may have welcomed a stronger Europe willing to “take greater responsibility” for their own security by doing more. But it remained to be seen what ‘doing more’ meant: and this, as we shall now see, was going to be as much determined (if not more so) by events across the Atlantic as it would be by developments within Europe itself.³⁶

The Trump disruption

*“Mr Trump takes unknownness to a whole new level”.*³⁷

In a poll conducted many months before the US presidential election, it was discovered that if Europeans had been able to vote, then Hillary Clinton would have won by a landslide.³⁸ As it was they had no say in the election and Trump (for other reasons) went on to win much to the chagrin of European leaders who could hardly hide their animosity to someone who during his campaign had not only talked of the EU in entirely negative terms, but of alliances as being

³⁴ *Shared Vision, Common Action, A Stronger Europe*. June 2016.

https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

³⁵ See Sophia Besch and Luigi Scazzieri, ‘European strategic autonomy and a new transatlantic bargain’, *Centre for European Reform*, December 2020.

³⁶ See Dusan Fischer, ‘All grown up – European Union on the path to strategic autonomy’, *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 3-4, 2017. pp. 56-67.

³⁷ Robert Cooper, LSE Blog, November 10, 2016. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/11/10/sir-robert-cooper-trump-victory-europe/>

³⁸ Will Dahlgreen, ‘Europe would elect Hillary Clinton by a landslide’, *YouGov*, 31st March 2016.

more a burden than an asset and the plucky British of having shown their true island courage by leaving a defunct organization in terminal decline. Convention dictated that European leaders had to utter the usual diplomatic words welcoming the new incumbent in the White House. But they could barely contain their despair. Indeed, some of its members convened what amounted an informal emergency meeting to discuss the situation, a meeting which the British (significantly) refused to attend declaring that it was “rude, arrogant and stupid to think the EU had to have a meeting because of the outcome of a democratic election”.³⁹ Meanwhile, EU Commission President Juncker warned that Trump’s election risked upsetting EU-US ties “fundamentally and structurally”, while the head of EU Council Donald Tusk warned that Trump and the “Americans” not only took “no interest in Europe” but that Trump himself had made statements during his campaign that called “into question the trans-Atlantic alliance and thus the model on which Europe’s defence rests.”⁴⁰ Nor was Angela Merkel backward in coming forward, pointedly reminding Trump that even if Germany could always be found alongside the United States, the relationship was not just instrumental but based on solid democratic values which (he needed reminding) included “freedom and respect for the law and the dignity of man independent of origin, skin color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political view”. The warning could not have been clearer: deviate from these norms, which on past form Trump would very likely do, and the relationship would be in trouble.⁴¹

Of course, not all European politicians were as worried as Merkel or as morally repelled as President Hollande of France who had much earlier said of Trump’s views on Muslims that his “excesses” made him “want to retch”.⁴² On the contrary, a number of right-wing populists like Le Pen in France, Kim Wilders in Holland and Orban in Hungary could hardly contain their enthusiasm for this new American leader who shared their views on sovereignty, had no qualms about being critical of Islam, and even less when it came to attacking immigration. Nor were they unaware of the fact that a victory for Trump in a country as powerful and influential as the United States might give them a boost. As Le Pen put it, Trump’s victory

³⁹ Quoted in Patrick Wintour, ‘EU Ministers meet to discuss Trump presidency’ *The Guardian*, 13 November 2016.

⁴⁰ ‘Trump election: Juncker warns president may upset US ties with Europe’, *BBC News*, 11 November, 2016.

⁴¹ Carol Giacomo, ‘Angela Merkel’s Message to Trump’, *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016.

⁴² James MacAuley, ‘The French President seems to be suggesting Americans vote against Trump’, *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2016.

“has made possible what was once considered “completely impossible,” and indeed should be seen by all who shared her viewpoint as “a sign of hope for those who cannot bear wild globalization [or] “the political life led by elites”.⁴³ Modern populism may have started political life in Europe. However, now that it had achieved success across the Atlantic there was every hope on the European right that it would now act as a catalyst and encourage even more voters to move into the populist camp. Whether in the end Trump’s victory in the US made much of an electoral difference in Europe is unclear.⁴⁴ The elections to the European Parliament in 2019 certainly saw a marginal increase in the populist vote. However, the surge which many had expected and feared failed to materialize.⁴⁵

Meantime, Trump set about fulfilling his electoral promise of making America great again, and one of the ways he hoped to bring this about was by adopting the toughest stance possible both towards rivals like China – a policy that proved to be popular at home - while calling out America’s more traditional allies in Europe for all sorts of economic and ideological sins. In fact it was clear that he did not even regard the EU as an ally at all; indeed at one point declared that it was a “foe” which had only been set up in the first place “to take advantage” of the United States. He even compared the European Union to China suggesting that in terms of exploiting American good-will it may have actually been “worse than China”, though added for good measure, that it was (fortunately!) “smaller”. It followed of course that he showed little or no inclination of striking any kind of trade deal with the EU. On the contrary. He allowed TTIP to wither on the vine, called out the Germans for their large trade deficits, imposed tariffs on certain European exports, and then in 2020 got his supporters in the Senate to threaten “devastating legal and economic sanctions” against any European country involved in the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ben Jacobs, ‘Donald Trump: Marine Le Pen is “strongest candidate” in French elections’, *The Guardian*, 21 April 2017.

⁴⁴ See Gilles Valdi, ‘Populist Voting in the 2019 European Elections’ .

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340942805_Populist_Voting_in_the_2019_European_Elections

⁴⁵ Mark Lazar, ‘2020: A Turning Point for European Populists’, *Institut Montaigne*, 11 December 2020.

⁴⁶ ‘Challenging Germany: US opens way for sanctions on Russian pipeline’, *Euractiv*, July 16, 2020.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/challenging-germany-us-opens-way-for-sanctions-on-russia-pipeline/>

But it was not just specific policies directed against the EU that caused such concern.⁴⁷ Trump's whole approach to international affairs ran directly counter to that espoused by the EU. He saw the world in purely transactional terms where, to paraphrase Thucydides, the strong did what they wanted and the weak simply had to suffer the consequences. The EU on the other hand based its strategy on adherence to rules within a wider multilateral system of treaties and legally-binding agreements. Trump not only did not comprehend such an approach. He saw it as disadvantaging the United States. It was thus no great surprise when he decided to take the US out of the Paris climate accord while at the same time pulling America out of the nuclear arms deal with Iran. Not only were they based on the false liberal premise that international agreements were a substitute for power and coercion. Neither in his view served the US national interest: the Paris accord because it was bound to hurt the US economy; and the Iran nuclear deal because it did nothing to contain the biggest threat to stability in the Middle East. Nor of course did his burn and pillage approach to multilateralism end there. Opposed as he was to the very idea of international law and indeed to any attempt to take away "power that should belong to domestic institutions" during his four years in office he must have set something close to a world record effectively pulling the US out of several international fora including UNESCO, UNRWA, UNHRC and the World Health Organization, not to mention the INF Treaty and the Treaty on Open Skies.⁴⁸

There is little doubt then of the impact which Trump's four years in office had both on perceptions of the United States around the world and more directly on the transatlantic relationship itself.⁴⁹ When he came into office there were clearly some "cracks" which had opened up in the relationship. However by the time he left the White House these had turned into a "chasm".⁵⁰ There had of course been big transatlantic differences before. But as those who were old enough to remember pointed out, even if there had been disagreements in the past these had largely been over "policies" (such as the Iraq War) whereas now "the very concept and value of

⁴⁷ Brian Burgoon, Tim Oliver and Peter Trubowitz, 'Globalization, Domestic Politics, and Transatlantic Relations', *International Politics*, 54, 2017, pp. 420–33.

⁴⁸ Oona Hathaway, 'Reengaging on Treaties and Other International Agreement (Part.1): President's Rejection of International Law', *Just Security*, October 2, 2020.

⁴⁹ Cristina Burack, 'US election: How Donald Trump has changed global foreign policy', *Deutsche Welle*, 24 October, 2010.

⁵⁰ Luke McGee, 'Cracks in the Trump-Europe relationship are turning into a chasm', *CNN*, July 4, 2020.

transatlantic unity” was being questioned in Washington.⁵¹ The obvious occupant of the White House with whom Trump could be, and was, regularly compared was of course G.W. Bush. But even Bush never doubted the value of the transatlantic relationship, had not for one moment thought of NATO as being ‘obsolete’, asked searching questions about Article 5, or unilaterally announce the departure of 13,000 US troops from Germany. Bush could hardly be described as being popular in Europe. But at least the decline in his standing only happened by the time he left office, whereas Trump was already unpopular even before he had entered the White House.⁵²

Perhaps most worrying of all however was not just what Trump said or did but the fact his policies were seen by many in Europe as being less aberrations from a norm to which the United States would one day return and more a reflection of deeper changes that had been taking place within the United States for some time. Trump in this reading therefore was not so much the cause of the new transatlantic crisis but more symptomatic of a wider American retreat from internationalism and multilateralism.⁵³ Moreover, if this were the case, then it behove the European Union not just to wait for a political change at the top in Washington but to begin making good on the idea of ‘strategic autonomy’ and striking out on one’s own without due regard for what the United States might think. Indeed, faced with the twin challenge of both Brexit and Trump it made perfect sense for the EU to circle the wagons. Indeed, far from disintegrating as some predicted it would following Brexit and the Trump victory in 2016, the EU not only became more united but also more popular across Europe.⁵⁴ Looking at the political chaos that was unfolding across the Channel as a result of Brexit, not to mention the disunited state of the Union when Trump finally left office in 2020, most Europeans drew the not illogical conclusion that whatever its many faults the EU offered a safe

⁵¹ David Whineray, ‘Trump has irrevocably changed American Relations with Europe – and Biden Probably Can’t Fix it’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May6, 2020.

⁵² See Carroll Doherty, ‘6 things we’ve learned since the 2016 election’, *Pew Research Center*, January 20, 2017

⁵³ See Peter Trubowitz and Brian Burgoon, ‘The Retreat of the West’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 2020. pp. 1–21.

⁵⁴ Jon Stone, ‘Support for EU membership above 80% in most member states amid Brexit mess’, *The Independent*, 26 April 2019.

harbour in a sea of troubles and a degree of security they would not have been able to enjoy otherwise.⁵⁵

Biden: Saviour of the transatlantic alliance?

*“For their part, Democrats must recognize that they defeated Trump but not Trumpism”*⁵⁶

There is little doubting the widespread relief felt in nearly every European capital when Trump lost the election in November 2020 to be replaced by a tried and tested transatlanticist in the well known figure of Joe Biden. Ursula von der Leyen even felt moved to quote the great German poet Heine in a speech she made only few hours before his inauguration. This was not just a transition she suggested; it was rather a magical moment that would not only heal a “deeply divided nation” but send a “message of hope for a world that is waiting for the U.S. to be back in the circle of like-minded states”.⁵⁷ Even Boris Johnson, that “physical and emotional clone” of Trump according to Biden who had led the charge to take the UK out of the European Union, felt moved to join in the chorus of approval. This is a “moment of hope in a dark time” he declaimed, though some wondered that if it had been that dark why he had not been more critical of the US leader whose support he had been courting for at least the last four years.⁵⁸

The Irish Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, had no such skeletons in his particular cupboard. In fact, he could hardly contain his joy, for not only had a “great grandson of Irish emigrants” become President of the United States but one with whom Dublin would almost certainly enjoy (as Biden hinted it might) a close and warm relationship. Certainly with Biden in the White House and Nancy Pelosi leading in the House there would be no backsliding on the Northern Ireland Protocol and no chance of any British concessions to Northern Ireland unionists.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ ‘New research shows that Donald Trump’s election spurred European unity’, August 24, 2018. *LSE US Centre*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2018/08/24/new-research-shows-that-donald-trumps-election-spurred-european-unity/>

⁵⁶ William A. Galston, ‘In the popular vote, why wasn’t Biden’s victory bigger?’, *Brookings*, November 12, 2020.

⁵⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, Speech. *European Commission*. 20 January 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_167

⁵⁸ The quote about Johnson being a ‘clone’ can be found in Thomas Colson, ‘Joes Biden’s administration doesn’t trust Boris Johnson because of his ties to Trump’, *Business Insider*, January 30, 2021.

⁵⁹ Jack Beresford, ‘Ireland “was considering” contacting Joe Biden to force the EU to backtrack on border plan’, *Irish Post*, January 31, 2021.

Nor did Biden lose any time in reassuring the Europeans that America was now back and would make the transatlantic alliance the bedrock upon which it would build a new foreign policy. As he stressed in what was to be his first major speech on foreign policy (significantly delivered in a State Department which Trump had sought to undermine) his administration would begin to “reforming the habits of cooperation and rebuilding the muscle of democratic alliances that have atrophied over the past few years of neglect, and I would argue, abuse”.⁶⁰ Two weeks later, in another keynote address delivered to the Munich Security Conference, Biden was more forthright still. Trump’s ‘America First’ policy he announced in a direct attack on his predecessor had severely “strained relationships with European allies and NATO partners”; it was therefore now up to the US to make up lost ground and “earn back our position of trusted leadership”. He could not have been more forthcoming, going on to reassure America’s allies that the “United States” was “determined to reengage with Europe” – but not on what he called a “transactional basis” (as had Trump) but on the more secure basis of upholding democratic values and democratic principles. Finally, as if to drive the point home, he openly declared support for something about which Trump had been decidedly ambiguous: Article 5. “An attack on one is an attack on all” Biden announced with conviction. “That is our unshakeable vow”⁶¹

Biden’s commitment to the alliance and speedy reversal of a number of Trump policies which had so upset US allies – the most significant being on climate change – certainly went some way to reassure the majority of European leaders. But as one survey showed the problem now facing the alliance was not just personal but reflected something deeper: namely a growing belief that the United States was no longer a model that Europeans should aspire to emulate, let alone follow. Graphic images of police brutality directed against African-Americans, the failure of America’s health system to cope with the COVID pandemic, pictures of right-wing militias storming the Capitol on January 6th, and last but by no means least of the Republican party remaining loyal to the despised Trump, may not tell us everything we need to know about the United States. Nonetheless,

⁶⁰ ‘Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World’, *U.S. Department of State*, 4 February, 2021.

⁶¹ Amanda Macias, “‘An attack on one is an attack on all’ – Biden backs NATO military alliance in sharp contrast to Trump”, *CNBC*, February 19, 2021.

to many in Europe it did appear to point to a system in deep political crisis.⁶²

All this of course would help explain why, in spite of everything Biden tried to do in his first few weeks, there remained a degree of resistance in Europe to rekindling the transatlantic relationship along lines determined by an America whose future was uncertain. Nor did at least two European leaders miss the opportunity to push back, including the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who in his address at Munich significantly made an impassioned defence for the idea of “strategic autonomy” arguing that Europe could and should no longer be overly dependent on the United States. Even German Chancellor Angela Merkel tempered her praise for Biden’s decision to cancel plans for a withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country with a warning that “our interests will not always converge.”⁶³ Nor in fact did they seem to on at least one big issue. Indeed, if an early move by the EU to sign a controversial investment agreement with China was anything to go by, it very much looked as if Europe was diverging from the US before the two sides could arrive at some common approach. As American critics hostile to the agreement pointed out “U.S. political parties and across the U.S. government are perplexed and stunned that the EU is moving towards a new investment treaty right on the eve of a new U.S. administration.”⁶⁴

Thus in spite of Biden the future for the transatlantic relationship remained uncertain and its future direction unpredictable. There is no doubting Biden’s sincerity to make good on the damage done to the alliance by Trump while at the same trying to work out some new arrangement with the UK now that it was outside the EU. However, neither task was going to be especially easy. Indeed, given the many outstanding international challenges facing the US,

⁶² Pew Research September 2020

⁶³ Cited in David Sanger et al. ‘Biden Tells Allies “America is Back”, but Macron and Merkel push back’, *The New York Times*, 20 February 2021.

⁶⁴ Natalie Yu, ‘EU-US Investment Deal Threatens US-Europe Relations’, *VOA News on China*, January 1st 2021.

not to mention problems Biden was facing at home it was not all certain that either Europe or the UK would be his main priority.⁶⁵ European leaders were obviously delighted that Trump had gone. But given how much water had flowed under the bridge since 2016 they were bound to remain cautious in their approach to the US. They were unlikely however to display such diplomatic caution when it came to the UK or its leader whose actions over the past few years – actively supported by the despised Trump – had taken up so much of their time and caused the EU so much trouble. Biden no doubt would prefer not to choose between America’s so-called ‘special relationship’ with Britain and rebuilding bridges to the twenty seven countries who made up the other main player in the transatlantic relationship. However, one suspects that if he was forced to choose there is little doubting which way he was likely to go. If some difficult times lay ahead for the US relationship with the European Union they may prove to be even more challenging for Britain’s relationship with both.

⁶⁵ For an early assessment of UK options post-Brexit see Benjamin Martill and Monika Suss, ‘Post-Brexit EU/UK Security cooperation: NATO, CDSP+ , or French connection?’ , *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, September 2018, Volume: 20 issue: 4, pp. 846-863