

Commentary

Making the World **Great** Again: Europe, the United States and China



Radek Sikorski

The [Comprehensive Agreement on Investment \(CAI\)](#) – a deal signed by the European Union and China in the last days of 2020 – was lambasted by some media on both sides of the Atlantic as “cynical,” “shortsighted” and a “strategic victory” for Chinese President Xi Jinping. Most often, it was described as a “snub” to the incoming administration in Washington. Did it mean that on the eve of Joseph R. Biden’s presidency, Europe and the United States were parting ways? Far from it.

First, the merits of CAI aside, there is still a long and winding road ahead to its ratification. All EU member states’ legislatures as well as the European Parliament must give their consent. And since many of my colleagues argue that the European Parliament was kept out of the loop during the negotiations, that the deal lets Beijing off the hook with human rights abuse and does not go far enough in levelling the playing field for European companies operating in China, it may require revisions.

Secondly, even if all the above objections are eventually addressed and the deal comes into force, it should not impair European eagerness to reestablish our “special relationship” with the U.S.

As far as relations with China and the U.S. are concerned, European citizens are not making it easy for the political class. Analysing recent opinion polls at times feels like taking a Rorschach test – one can see different patterns in the same ink stain of data. On the one hand, the pandemic has rendered many Europeans much more cautious about, if not openly hostile towards, China. In recent months, the number of Europeans with unfavourable views of China has skyrocketed in virtually every researched country. [According to Pew Research Center, 85% of Swedes, 71% of Germans, 70% of French and 63% of Spaniards, express reservations about Beijing’s policies](#) – three to four times outnumbering those with an opposite view.

On the other hand, growing weariness of China has not made the old continent enthusiastic about America. Four years of Donald Trump’s presidency tarnished the image of the U.S. all over the world and Europe is not an exception. Although many of us welcomed the change in the White House with a sigh of relief, the fear of another Trump-like president has not receded. The rampage at the U.S. Capitol Building and the unbelievable scale of political polarisation it revealed will only add to this sentiment.

“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,” said Richard N. Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, in a 06 January 2021 tweet. It appears many Europeans share this view. [In a recent poll commissioned by the European Council for Foreign Relations \(ECFR\) – an international think-tank – more than 60% of respondents in 11 European countries \(ten EU member states and Great Britain\) said the American political system is completely or somewhat broken. A majority of 59% believe that in ten years China will “be a stronger power than the U.S.” And asked about where their country should stand in case of a conflict between Washington and Beijing, almost two-thirds claimed they would prefer to remain neutral.](#)

Given these sentiments, the erosion of trust both towards Beijing and Washington and the instability of the American political scene, Europeans seem

eager to look for a third way. Developing our own capabilities – our “strategic autonomy” as the French President Emmanuel Macron calls it – will not only take time, but also a significant amount of political will, which is yet to be awakened. Although military spending has steadily grown in many countries, cooperation at the European level leaves a lot to be desired. The European Defence Fund, for example – established in 2017 to increase research spending and enhance cooperation between the member states – has seen its budget slashed in half to just over €7 billion, down from the originally proposed €13 billion, for the seven-year period. The whole amount is roughly 1/100 of what the U.S. spends every year. No wonder the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, published last year by the European Defence Agency, stated explicitly that “the EU Common Security and Defence Policy’s military level of ambition is currently not achievable.”

Defence of multilateralism, its institutions and the rules-based order is in European self-interest. To achieve such an ambitious goal, however, the EU needs to work on reviving its alliance with the U.S. as well as other democracies in the world, many of which are dependent on trade with China yet concerned about the rise of its “wolf-warrior diplomacy.” In its relationship with China, the EU must therefore tread a fine line between falling prey to Beijing’s alarmingly growing ambitions and simply falling in line with U.S. interests, which are not always identical to ours. In order not to be squeezed by these two great powers, the EU must develop a foreign policy both principled and pragmatic.

One idea to explore is to draw on the legacy of the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom), the cold-war era vehicle which succeeded in depriving the then Communist bloc access to modern and dual-use technologies. Documents of the European Parliament have incorporated amendments I have tabled that envisage its reincarnation covering not only technology transfers but also investments, trade, research and production standards. Democracies would pledge to exchange information and not to compete to lower criteria in dealing with systemic rivals.

“Humility and confidence should be the flip sides of America’s leadership coin,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in his nomination hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “Humility because we have a great deal of work to do at home to enhance our standing abroad.” These wise words might

as well come from a top European diplomat. The EU and the U.S. may not always see eye to eye, but only by working together can we defend the values we hold dear and create a world we want to pass on to our children.

Despite all their reservations about the U.S. after Trump, Europeans are open to making relations with Washington great again. Asked what change Joseph Biden's presidency will bring to their own countries and to the EU, the majority of respondents in the ECFR poll – 52% and 59%, respectively – expect a brighter future. I am one of these Europeans.

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