What Biden’s Win Means for Europe

Sunday, 8 November, 2020 - 11:15

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Through the past days and weeks, the governments of Europe have found the US electoral suspense as gripping and fearful as any American. After four years of White House insults and snubs, they are hoping desperately for a reversion to alliance diplomacy and politics, a return to the pursuit of stability and order.

Europeans are nonetheless not foolish enough to suppose that a Joe Biden presidency will signal a renewal of the post-World War II Pax Americana. The liberal international order is sundered for good, even if portions of it can be saved.

Back in the spring, Francois Heisbourg, the French former director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, wrote, “The best that NATO can hope for after Trump is a rattled set of allies engaged in more hedging than they ever have before.”

There is a recognition that US strategic priorities are fixed on China. Biden will be willing to engage with Europe’s fears and sensitivities only if there is substantial European support for American determination to resist perceived Chinese ambitions, incursions and expansionism.

This should not imply a European willingness to become engaged in any sort of shootout in the Pacific, or to be obliged to make an outright choice between the US and its Asian rival. But the cold reception given to Wang Yi, China’s foreign minister, during his August tour of European capitals showed that the continent’s leaders are no longer willing silently to acquiesce in his government’s excesses. Heisbourg again: “The trend is no longer to view China as a bigger Japan with a few human rights problems.”

The principal European anxiety is for a coherent Asian strategy, which is today lacking. US policy is perceived as a series of lunges, interspersed with exchanges of insults. The British, especially, would like to see a new version of George Kennan’s famous Long Telegram, written from the US Embassy in 1946, which became the template for containment of the Soviet Union through the ensuing four decades.

There are hopes that a new administration will act swiftly to revive arms control arrangements and discussions with Russia. As matters stand, within months there will be no East-West limitation agreements, with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement dead, and New START due to expire in February.

It is an extraordinary situation, that after 60 years in which arms control was deemed one of the highest purposes of dialogue between the West and the Soviet Union, then Russia, today we are close to having no constraints at all. Mercifully, it is not too late to retrieve them.

Europeans seek the creation of a new nuclear agreement with Iran. They accept that the Barack Obama administration’s old Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is a dead letter. There is also recognition that any future deal will have to include provisions, critically lacking from the 2015 agreement, for constraints on Iranian adventurism across the Middle East and on nuclear weapons development.

President Donald Trump has not been wrong about everything. The good news is that the Iranian nuclear program is by no means irreversible; there is almost certainly scope for fresh negotiations. A Biden administration, however, is expected to display less enthusiasm for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israeli government, which Europeans consider the enemy of progress toward Middle East peace.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization remains the focus of most European hopes — and fears. It is the West’s only security alliance of real substance. Yet, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has struggled to define a new common purpose. Its role in the 1990s interventions in Kosovo and Bosnia, then in Libya in 2011, kept faith alive, but on shaky foundations.

Many members fear for NATO’s very survival amid the excesses of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Trump’s contemptuous treatment of the institution and French President Emmanuel Macron’s 2019 assertion that NATO is “brain dead.”

In looking to the alliance’s future, we should consider first the condition of Russia, which is entirely different from that of China. The latter is a strong and indisputably rising force. The former is fundamentally weak, incapable of building an electric toaster that anyone save Russians would buy.

Nonetheless, as it is often said, President Vladimir Putin plays his poor hand with skill. He demands a respect for his country that its conduct and achievements — a GDP smaller than that of Italy — do not merit. He exploits its only significant exports: oil, gas and fear. A senior British Army officer told me ruefully that it was easier to manage the Western confrontation with the Soviet Union, the behavior of which was predictable, than Putin’s opportunistic kleptocracy.

The Europeans, and especially the Germans, defend themselves against charges that they are not bearing their rightful share of NATO’s defense costs by insisting that combating today’s Russians requires diplomacy more than tanks. Of course, this argument is self-serving, but the Germans believe Chancellor Angela Merkel deserves more credit than she receives in Washington, for her resolute opposition to the Russian seizure of Crimea and her support for economic sanctions against the Kremlin.

What realistic prospect is there that Europe will increase its defense spending? Britain’s chancellor of the exchequer, facing a frightening level of public debt on the back of the Covid-19 pandemic, is resisting a new three-year financial settlement for defense, which would increase capability.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson will be desperate to secure goodwill from a Biden administration that he knows has no predisposition toward himself, such as Trump displays. My hunch is that Johnson will insist on a visible increase in defense spending, as a signal of earnest intent to Washington, with which he needs a post-Brexit trade deal.

It is almost unthinkable that Germany will strengthen its armed forces, or display more will to fight. Its maxim remains: Never again; never alone; politics before force. France remains a military power, but the rest of Europe lacks both means and desire to raise its warfighting capability.

This is lamentable, in the eyes of those of us who believe that the best way to avoid war is to show ourselves able to fight: If every European nation budgeted 3% of its GDP on defense, this would increase current spending of around 160 billion euros by 50%.

Even though Biden is expected to withdraw Trump’s threat to remove 12,000 American troops from Germany, tensions about the disparity between US and European expenditures will persist, and understandably so.

The keys to successful foreign policy are to say what one means, mean what one says. I worry greatly about the security of the Baltic States, where Russia makes constant mischief. NATO nations send token contingents to exercise in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as a symbol of willingness to defend their smaller NATO brethren from Russian aggression.

It is highly likely, however, that if the Kremlin moves against the Baltics, it will act through subversion and proxies rather than launch an outright invasion. In such circumstances, it could prove extraordinarily difficult to mobilize political will in western Europe for their defense, whatever guarantees statesmen and generals deliver today.

On the eastern side of the Atlantic, there is a widespread recognition that if NATO is to remain a meaningful body, as Europeans devoutly hope, it must address China. In the short term, Russia, essentially a gangster state, is best addressed through targeted sanctions against Putin’s principals and their families. Britain remains notably feeble in this respect, because vast sums of Russian money are laundered, highly profitably, through the City of London.

But to offer a credible riposte to China’s ever-growing strength demands hard military power. A few years ago, I was asked to address a delegation of Chinese generals visiting London about my new book on the outbreak of World War I. One of them asked if I saw any parallels between then and now. Yes, I said. The supreme irony of 1914 was that Germany was then on an irresistible path to dominance of Europe, through peaceful economic, technological and industrial might. Kaiser Wilhelm II’s decision to fight, rooted in a childlike faith in military success as the only measure of power, undid all this.

Should not Beijing consider, I asked, whether anything at stake in the South China Sea merited accepting the risk of a ghastly superpower accident? The general said: “But we have claims!” True, I responded, but the question is still valid. I am not foolish enough to suppose that either those officers or their government are in a mood to take much heed of this argument.

At least as important as all the above issues, in defining European hopes for the new US administration, is a change of style. There is a yearning for a revival of diplomacy, which requires a major restoration project at the State Department. Almost all of us are passionate believers in partnerships and alliances. American participation is desperately needed to breathe new life into climate-change planning, which we view as a crusade, and into the World Health Organization and the United Nations. Maybe it is not too late to get the US back into the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

As an Englishman who has lived and worked closely with Americans all my adult life, I am haunted by the memory of a conversation back in 1991 with Ray Seitz, the last brilliant US ambassador in London. He said, “Always remember that the United States is only interested in Britain, insofar as Britain is a player in Europe.” I thought he was right then, is right now, which is prominent among the reasons I have so passionately opposed Brexit.

His other remark in the same conversation followed a speculation of my own, about America’s new status as the world’s only superpower, and how it would exploit this. He said: “That assumes the US is willing to play such a role.” He recognized, as some of us at first did not, the rising skepticism among Americans about serving as the world’s policeman, guarantor, shield-bearer.

Let us count a few blessings. Contrary to widespread perceptions, large swathes of the world in 2020 remain free of violence — safer than in the late 20th century. The Trump administration seems set to end without a war — at least, a shooting war — which seemed a grave threat four years ago. The great British strategic guru Sir Michael Howard said insistently in 2017-2018, “Trump needs a war.”

Howard feared armed conflict with China, or Russia, or Iran. In reality, the president has confined himself to wars of words with America’s media and traditional allies, together with a trade war against China.

Today, most of us across the Atlantic understand the importance of limiting our hopes and aspirations from a Biden administration; also of coming to terms with an American China fixation that will not go away.

For now, however, we shall be more than content if Jan. 20 signals a renewal of respect, rationality and civility in international relations. These will almost always secure better results for even the greatest global powers than has our relationship with Washington, or rather lack of it, of the past four years.