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Article

## “America is Back” or “America First” and the Transatlantic Relationship

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### Abstract

The presidency of Donald Trump represented an unprecedented low point in transatlantic relations. When Joe Biden took power in early 2021, his administration launched several policy initiatives suggesting that the new administration would continue to allow the seemingly long-term weakening of the transatlantic relationship to continue. A significant part of the literature on recent developments in transatlantic relations points in the same direction, namely that a weakening of the cooperation across the Atlantic has taken place. This article proposes an alternative view, arguing that the relationship has strengthened in recent years despite Donald Trump and his erratic policy. The article applies a theoretical framework combining international as well as domestic variables. Based on an analysis of four cases—NATO, the US pivot to Asia, the sanctions policy towards Russia, and the Afghanistan debacle—it is concluded that the transatlantic relationship is strong.

### Keywords

Afghanistan; China; decision-makers; NATO; perceptions; Russia; Ukraine

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) was an unprecedented low point in transatlantic relations because “for the first time in 70 years, the American people have elected a president who disparages the policies, ideas and institutions at the heart of postwar US foreign policy” (Mead, 2017, p. 2). When Joe Biden took office in January 2021, his administration appeared to represent the opposite of Donald Trump as far as cooperation with “like-minded” allies in Europe was concerned. When he was vice president, Joe Biden emphasized that “Europe is the cornerstone of our engagement with the world” and “our catalyst for global cooperation” (Hamilton, 2020). During his first tour to Europe as president in June 2021, Joe Biden participated in the G7 meeting, the NATO summit, and an EU–US meeting, sending the clear signal that “America is back.” The meetings emphasized that Biden’s America was committed to international cooperation, to its allies, and to the defense of democracy and human rights (Chatham House, 2021).

On the other hand, the Biden administration’s decision uncritically to pursue the policy of Donald Trump on Afghanistan and on China, including the Taiwan and South China Sea issues, contributed to questions as to whether the US under Joe Biden’s leadership was really back, meaning committed to upholding the traditional bonds to its Atlantic partners. Shortly after the unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, the US upset not only France but also several European political leaders by signing an agreement with Australia to sell them nuclear-powered submarines (Lau et al., 2021). The agreement meant that a French–Australian contract regarding the sale of diesel-powered submarines to the Australian navy was scrapped. On top of these actions that sidelined the European partners, the US signed a defense agreement with Australia and the former EU member, the UK (Heisbourg, 2021, pp. 51–53; Tharoor, 2021a). Likewise, the EU was sidelined during the severe crisis on the border between Russia and Ukraine, where Russia in 2021 had amassed more than 100,000 troops and where Washington negotiated

unilaterally with Moscow to find a solution to the crisis (Crowley & Troianovski, 2022; Rankin, 2022).

Donald Trump justified his foreign policy decisions by referring to “America First.” Joe Biden referred to America’s “national interests” and maintained that his administration pursued a “foreign policy for the middle class” (Graham, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). In brief, developments during Trump’s presidency and the first year of Biden’s presidency seem to confirm the view in the literature that the cooperation across the Atlantic had been weakening for a number of years and continues to do so (Riddervold & Newsome, 2018, 2022). Mark Schwartz and Michael Smith maintain that this weakening occurred due to structural factors (Schwartz, 2022; Smith, 2022). Bjørn Olav Knutsen observes the same development within the field of defense and security, pointing towards a weakening of the relationship between the US and Europe (Knutsen, 2022).

Nevertheless, this article argues that there is no unambiguous weakening of the transatlantic cooperation on security despite many circumstances that seem to point in that direction. There may be confusion about the traditional American global leadership, but the lack of a clear direction of American foreign policy does not amount to a weakening of the transatlantic alliance. This position is also argued by Pernille Rieker when she focuses on Africa in transatlantic relations (Rieker, 2022). Second, the article argues that American decisions on the transatlantic relationship reflect the perceptions of the incumbent “foreign policy executive” in Washington but that these perceptions cannot be understood detached from public opinion and from the deep political disagreements that characterize the American society. The argument does not imply that public opinion determines foreign policy. The argument only implies that public opinion and the polarization of the American society may limit the foreign policy executive’s room for maneuver.

The remaining parts of the article are structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework is presented, followed by an analysis of four selected policy areas. The policy fields were selected based on the assumption that they are essential to assess whether the consequences of recent US policy initiatives have caused a weakening or a strengthening of the transatlantic relationship. First, a closer look is taken at the debates and policy changes of the core transatlantic institution, NATO. Second, the consequences of the “US pivot to Asia” are analyzed. Third, the consequences for the alliance of the increasingly assertive Russian policies are addressed. Fourth, a close look is taken at the consequences of the unilateral American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.

## 2. The Theoretical Framework

The two arguments of this article address classical foreign policy issues with a focus on security and defense.

The article is inspired by the general reasoning found in neo-classical realism as this framework refers both to the changing international structures and to the domestic environment of the core foreign policy decision-makers (cf. Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998). It is crucial in the neo-classical realist understanding that the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via a limited number of domestic intervening variables and then turned into foreign policy decisions (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 58–79; Rose, 1998, pp. 157–160). As far as the understanding of the international systemic conditions for US foreign policy is concerned, the article leans towards a structural realist position whilst being in line with social constructivism in its emphasis on the importance of perceptions of core foreign policy decision-makers.

There is disagreement about the position of the US in the international system. On the one hand, there is the argument that the US is no longer capable of playing the role of the international hegemon (Ikenberry, 2018; Smith, 2018). Therefore, American foreign policy initiatives are unfocused, incoherent, and do not adequately address its challenges. On the other hand, there is the argument that the US is still a prominent and extremely powerful international actor capable of influencing international developments and changes. The US may be less influential compared to the “golden years” of its hegemony that ended around 2004/2005 (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 32, 28–30). After the golden years, the liberal international order under the hegemony of the US has been going “downhill,” meaning America has become less influential (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 28–33).

As to the most important international systemic variables, this article assumes that they remained the same during the Trump and Biden years. Undoubtedly, China was the most obvious example among the group of countries that contributed to upsetting global power relations (Jones, 2020; Zhao, 2019). Russia and its policies towards the Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Syria likewise represented significant systemic variables. Increasingly, Russia’s soft power politics using fake news directed towards Europe and the EU added to the recent years’ flux in the existing international order (Götz & Merlen, 2019; Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019). Finally, the threat from radical terrorist groups was a component in the international systemic conditions setting the framework for pursuing American foreign policy in the current century. To illustrate the point, the international focus on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and West Africa and the deployment of troops in some of these countries could be mentioned.

When it comes to the domestic factors, neo-classical realism operates with several intervening variables. One refers to the perceptions of core members of the “foreign policy executive,” which is assumed to be relevant because beliefs, perceptions, and misunderstandings of the foreign policy executive can lead to decisions that may also be implemented. “The foreign policy executive” refers to the head of government and the foreign

minister. Often, the concept is expanded depending on the concrete issue area to include ministers of defense, trade, development, economy, and finance and their top civil servants (Hill, 2016, pp. 62–64; Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 61). Christopher Hill argues that perceptions may lead to foreign policy decisions that, if rational, might also be incoherent or inconsistent (Hill, 2016, pp. 12–17).

The second intervening variable applied here refers to “state–society relations” that comprises phenomena like public opinion and, closely related to this, the “polarization” of American politics that seems to extend into foreign policy (cf. Meijer & Brooks, 2021, p. 8). Rachel Myrick argues that many factors sustain the polarization of American politics: the ideological sorting of the parties, growing economic inequality, a fragmented media environment, and not least the general decline of bipartisan norms in Washington (Myrick, 2021; see also Carothers, 2019; Lindsay, 2018). There are profound differences between Democrats and Republicans on which foreign policy issues matter most. In 2020, Republicans prioritized the development of China as a world power and international terrorism as critical threats, whereas Democrats considered Covid-19 and climate change the most critical threats (Smeltz et al., 2020, pp. 2, 5). Also, the two major parties are sharply divided on how the US should deal with international issues and engage with the rest of the world (Smeltz et al., 2020, pp. 4–8).

Summing up, this article applies an analytical framework inspired by neo-classical realism’s dual approach to studying foreign policy and foreign policymaking. On the one hand, the article assumes that the international systemic structures constrain as well as provide opportunities for foreign policy executives. It is a core assumption for the article that the US is still a dominant and influential international actor and, thereby, the article places itself close to the position of John Mearsheimer. On the other hand, there are domestic constraints on and opportunities for foreign policy decision-makers. Here, it is assumed that the deep polarization of the American society and the American political system is a crucial constraint on conducting foreign policy. The four years of Donald Trump’s “America First” policy emphasized polarization (Howorth, 2021), making it difficult to reach any bipartisan agreement on major foreign policy initiatives. As a starting point, public opinion on foreign policy is not an important variable for policymaking on foreign policy issues in the US. In the case of the highly polarized American society, public opinion may, nevertheless, represent some restrictions on decision-makers.

In conclusion, the two arguments imply that the American foreign policy initiatives are the independent variable in the following analysis. The state and the development of the transatlantic relationship is the dependent variable, whereas the reactions and initiatives of the EU/Europe are considered intervening variables. The analyses are built on academic studies and recent journalistic sources published by recognized international media.

### 3. NATO and Tensions in Transatlantic Security Cooperation

This section aims to identify the consequences for the transatlantic alliance that stemmed from the US’ longstanding criticism of the European NATO members for not spending a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defense (Kaufman, 2017, pp. 261–262, 264; Olsen, 2020, pp. 62–65). The American pressure on Europe to spend more on defense was not new and was far from only related to the Trump administration and Trump’s argument that NATO was “obsolete” (Benitez, 2019, pp. 183, 188–190). Nevertheless, the fierce criticism from Donald Trump and his repeated statements about leaving NATO was considered a particularly serious challenge to the transatlantic cooperation on security (cf. Brands, 2017, pp. 16–18; see also Olsen, 2020).

Despite constant public attacks, the actual policy initiatives of the Trump administration did not radically change the American commitment to the transatlantic security alliance. US military services continued to prepare to fight a major conflict on the European continent and in the Atlantic. In late 2018, US forces led the exercise “Trident Juncture,” which took place in and around Norway, involving more than 50,000 allied troops. It was described as NATO’s largest military exercise since the end of the Cold War and was focused on the defense of Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea (Schreer, 2019, p. 13). In September 2018, the US military decided to increase its presence with an additional 1,500 troops in Europe by 2020. The US also deployed new field artillery headquarters, a short-range missile defense battalion, two multi-launch rocket systems, and other supplies (Schreer, 2019, p. 13).

President Trump’s negative statements about NATO led the US Congress to react. During 2018 and 2019, both the House of Representatives and the Senate adopted motions in support of NATO, thereby sending the president a signal that he should not think of withdrawing from the alliance. The motions reflected a broad consensus on Capitol Hill about Trump’s ambivalence about the defense alliance and his commitment to it (Barret, 2018; Gould, 2019). Public opinion surveys indicated that Congress was in line with the American public as 75% indicated they were in favor of the US commitment to NATO. When asked directly in 2017 whether the North Atlantic defense alliance was “essential to US security,” 65% agreed that NATO was essential; by 2020, figures had risen to 73% (Smeltz et al., 2017, pp. 4, 13; Smeltz et al., 2020, p. 3).

The many years of American criticism of the level of defense spending paid off as all European NATO members increased their defense budgets. For instance, Germany increased its defense budget from 1.2% of GDP in 2014 to 1.53% in 2021. In comparison, France increased its defense expenditure from 1.8% of its GDP in 2014 to 2.1% in 2021 (NATO, 2021a). By 2019, i.e., before Joe Biden had been elected president of the US,

combined European defense expenditure was at its highest level for a decade, measured in absolute figures and as a percentage of GDP (Ringsmose & Webber, 2020, p. 303). The slow but increasing defense spending in the European NATO member states confirms the strength of the transatlantic alliance, despite the turbulent years of Donald Trump.

When Joe Biden became president on January 20, 2021, his starting point was favorable for addressing one of his core priorities, which was to strengthen the transatlantic alliance (Smeltz et al., 2019). The backing for Biden and his foreign policy was not unequivocal, with support coming from two quite different constituencies that were not in agreement about what issues to prioritize. One group, the so-called “old-guard Atlanticists,” considered transatlantic cooperation the most important tool in the confrontation with Russia; the second, the so-called “liberal hegemonists” considered Russia a minor challenge. This group argued strongly in favor of the position that US interests overwhelmingly lay in the Asia-Pacific and particularly in confronting China (Howorth, 2021).

The Biden administration launched several initiatives to allay European doubts about the American commitment to European security and address the uncertainty about the reliability of the US as an ally. The new administration reversed Trump’s decision to reduce the number of US forces in Europe and, instead, it provided a modest boost to the American military presence. It launched the US–EU security and defense dialogue, and the Biden administration stepped up its diplomatic engagement with European capitals. The EU and the US also made tangible progress on improving bilateral security and defense cooperation (Stokes & Tausendfreund, 2022, pp. 18–22). At the EU–US summit in June 2021, the two sides expressed support for further strengthening the “mutually reinforcing key strategic partnership” between the EU and NATO (Adebahr et al., 2022). They agreed to establish a dedicated EU–US security and defense dialogue where the main point was to address the challenges of US participation in EU defense initiatives. According to Erik Brattberg, the initiative reflected “the Biden administration’s determined efforts to move beyond Trump’s unhelpful criticisms of coordinated EU defense schemes” (Adebahr et al., 2022).

The Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, proved the strength of the transatlantic alliance by the resolute and common reactions by all the European governments and the US government. Most remarkably in this context was the announcement by the German chancellor Olaf Scholz to raise the German defense budget to the 2% NATO target. In his speech, the chancellor declared that he would immediately grant 100 billion Euros to the armed forces, signaling the start of Germany’s totally new defense policy (Sheahan & Marsh, 2022). Together with the German declaration, several European NATO members also announced their intention to increase the defense budgets. Most remarkably,

for the first time in its history, the EU announced a grant of 500 million Euros for the purchase of armament and defense equipment for Ukraine, a country involved in a bloody war (Baume & Barigazzi, 2022).

Moving beyond the narrow transatlantic cooperation on security, the Biden administration also made several additional contributions to the transatlantic relationship during its first year in power. The longstanding Airbus–Boeing dispute over government aircraft subsidies was shelved. US tariffs on European steel and aluminum were lowered, averting a trade war. The US and Europe committed to a minimum global corporate tax rate, and some progress was made in addressing climate change. Brussels and Washington agreed to coordinate supply chains and technology policies. Perhaps most importantly for the transatlantic alliance, the two sides of the Atlantic shared the same perception of China as “a strategic competitor,” promoting transatlantic convergence in dealing with China (Stokes & Tausendfreund, 2022, pp. 5–21).

In sum, the American policy towards NATO strengthened the alliance by forcing all European partners to increase their defense budgets. It means that despite the unpredictable and erratic behavior of Donald Trump and in spite of the strong polarization of the American political system, the outcome of the American foreign policy decisions was not a weakening of transatlantic cooperation on security when it came to NATO (cf. Møller & Rynning, 2021). Furthermore, the policy initiatives of the Biden administration contributed to strengthening the transatlantic relationship both within the field of defense cooperation and within several other important policy areas. These developments were further strengthened by the common reactions from NATO member states in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022.

#### **4. The US “Pivot to Asia” and the Struggle Against China**

This section aims to scrutinize if the American “pivot to Asia” and especially if the policy initiatives towards China weakened or strengthened the transatlantic alliance. The reorientation of American foreign policy towards Asia started in the mid-2000s under the George W. Bush administration as the conspicuous rise of China clearly had the potential for a re-emergence of great power competition (Silove, 2016, pp. 45, 46–48, 53–55). In 2011, President Barack Obama launched his strategy “the pivot to Asia” to signal that Asia and China were of increasing importance to the US.

When Donald Trump took over power in January 2017, his administration openly declared a new era of great power competition with China and implemented tough trade sanctions against Beijing. The US had both an economic and security approach to China, but under the Trump administration, Washington increasingly took a confrontational stance by engaging in a trade war with

Beijing (Jones, 2020; Liu, 2020; Zhao, 2019). The policy initiatives launched by the Trump administration appeared to have considerable popular backing in the US. When it came to public opinion, the share of Americans who saw China as the great enemy increased from 22% in 2020 to 45% in 2021. Similarly, 63% saw China's economic power as a "critical threat," up from 40% in 2018 (Gallup, 2021; Galston, 2021).

A Pew Report published in early 2021 documented that 67% of Americans had negative views of China, which increased from the 46% who held similar views in 2018. Almost half of the interviewees saw limiting China's power and influence as a top foreign policy priority for the US (Silver et al., 2020). The figures were in accordance with the results published by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs that found 55% of the American population viewed the rise of China as a critical threat to vital American interests (Smeltz et al., 2020). Thus, the Biden administration could expect substantial public support if it placed competition with China at the center of its foreign policy; however, it has also been pointed out that the majority of Americans are not prepared for a possible military conflict with China (Galston, 2021).

The Trump administration increasingly pressured its European partners to take a tough stand on China within the framework of NATO. Washington also became diplomatically more active in Europe by warning against increased Chinese investments, particularly in the technology sphere (Gramer, 2019). Joe Biden appeared to follow the course of his predecessor as the final communiqué issued at the NATO summit held in Brussels in June 2021 declared: "China's stated ambitions and assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order" (NATO, 2021b). *The Guardian* emphasized that the communiqué was signed by all members of the NATO alliance "at the urging of the new US administration" (Sabbagh & Borger, 2021).

In June 2020, the general secretary of NATO outlined a strategy for the organization towards 2030 where it was stressed that the Indo-Pacific was seen as "the center of the most fundamental geopolitical change since the end of WWII" (NATO, 2021c). The ambitions and perspectives of China's Belt and Road initiative linked "the EU-Atlantic security to the Indo-Pacific strategy raising the prospect of a global NATO" (Clegg, 2020, pp. 32, 34; cf. Mohan, 2020, pp. 174, 177). Even before the issue of the strategic reflections in the "NATO 2030" document, France, the UK, and Germany had expressed their concerns about the situation in the South China Sea, and they stated their support for the application of the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea (Casarini, 2020, pp. 87–88). In late 2020, the three big European powers went one step further by jointly launching a so-called *Note Verbale* challenging the legality of China's claims in the region, including its claim to sovereignty to most of the South China Sea based on the nine-dash line (Mohan, 2020, pp. 181–183). The *Note Verbale* was far more

explicit in its criticism of China and its incorrect claims than any previous statements made by the European powers (Cotter, 2019, pp. 478–479).

Next to issuing critical statements, both France and the UK were active sailing naval vessels through the South and East China Seas while publicly announcing the missions aimed to preserve the principle of freedom of navigation (Cotter, 2019, pp. 481–483). The naval diplomacy of the European powers represented concrete steps to side with the US and its Asian allies in countering the growing Chinese military presence across the region (Casarini, 2020, p. 89). Along with the naval show of force, both the UK and France sought to strengthen bilateral cooperation on security and defense issues with Australia, Japan, India, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN; Cotter, 2019, p. 482).

The rebalancing of the EU's Asia policy as well as the Asia policy of the big European powers can only be understood as the result of growing concern about China's power and assertiveness. "There is no other observable driver of change," Andrew Cotter concludes (Cotter, 2019, p. 484). Also, it was growing concern about China's rising power that in September 2021 made the Australian government break its agreement with France about the supply of submarines to the Australian navy and instead turn to the Americans for nuclear-powered submarines. The move by the Australian and American governments, for obvious reasons, upset France and some EU member states leading to harsh criticism of the American move (DeYoung, 2021).

Only a few days after the announcement of the nuclear submarine deal, Australia, the UK, and the US made it public that they had entered into a defense agreement, known as AUKUS. This security pact was announced without prior consultation with France or the EU. The new pact upset the EU camp, and the fact that Brexit-Britain had been invited to participate in the new defense arrangement was seen as provocative. Similar to the case with the nuclear submarine deal, the AUKUS was a bitter blow to France, the only EU member state with a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific (Lau et al., 2021). The AUKUS could be interpreted as another reminder of how Washington's interests diverged from the Europeans', with the EU being relegated to a secondary position in the Indo-Pacific (Heisbourg, 2021, pp. 51–53; Tharoor, 2021a). On the other hand, the unilateral American initiatives were a sign of the increasing American frustration with the EU's softer approach to China (Lau et al., 2021, p. 2).

The anger and the harsh criticism of the behavior of the US mainly came from France (Casarini, 2021; Lau et al., 2021, p. 3). The EU's representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, was eager to make sure that the French reaction did not overshadow the EU's profound engagement in the region as it was demonstrated by the issue of the EU's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" in mid-September 2021 (Grare & Reuter, 2021).

The strategy did not turn the EU into a significant actor in the region, but it did signal that Europe had strong interests in the Indo-Pacific (Grare & Reuter, 2021).

The emerging convergence of EU and US positions on China and the Indo-Pacific was emphasized by the European Parliament's decision to freeze the EU–China “Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.” The decision reflected the growing disenchantment with China among EU lawmakers who were “determined to stand more firmly against China,” it was concluded by Nicola Casarini (Casarini, 2021). Moreover, public opinion surveys conducted in 10 European countries and the US indicated a strong popular foundation for transatlantic cooperation on China-related issues (Casarini, 2021). Despite the nuclear deal and the AUKUS agreement, Nicola Casarini established that transatlantic cooperation on China “has never been as good as it is now” (Casarini, 2021).

Summing up, during the Trump administration, Washington implemented tough measures against Chinese trade and investments as elements in the general reorientation of the US policy towards Asia. Trump was explicit in his demands for a stronger NATO involvement in Asia based on a perception that China was a “strategic challenge.” Identical perceptions and priorities were found in the Biden administration that, during its first year, continued the policies of the prior administration towards China and the Indo-Pacific. The two US administrations acted similarly to the signals that came from rising China, whereas the EU partners and European NATO partners struggled to find a common answer both to the American policy initiatives and China's rise. It seems safe to conclude that convergence of US and EU positions was emerging, and it suggests that the two partners reacted in identical ways to the systemic challenges of China.

## 5. The “West” Against Russia

This section scrutinizes how the American policy responses affected the transatlantic relationship in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's continuing interference and destabilization of Ukraine. The Russian behavior was a serious blow to the liberal world order because the annexation of Crimea was such an obvious violation of state sovereignty and, thereby, of international law (cf. Götz & Merlen, 2019).

The US quickly confirmed its determination to counterbalance Russia in Eastern Europe, whereas the European governments were more hesitant. Nevertheless, shortly after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the US and the EU agreed to adopt a series of visa bans and asset freezes on several dozen Russian and Ukrainian individuals and entities (Archick & Mix, 2015). The tough American policy measures against Russia had a popular sounding board in the US where 90%, in a survey in early 2015, a year after the annexation, indicated that they considered the military power

of Russia a “critical” or “important” threat to the US (Gallup, 2021).

Because Russia and many EU member states were far more economically interdependent due to significant trade volumes, several European states had to carry significantly bigger economic burdens than the Americans (Alcaro, 2019). Despite this, the joint US–EU sanctions remained in place for several years (Archick & Mix, 2015, pp. 439–440; Harrell et al., 2017, pp. 1–3), including during a severe crisis in the fall of 2021 that followed the deployment of more than 100,000 Russian troops on the border of Ukraine. The Ukrainian–Russian border crisis led to strong warnings from both the US and the EU about the imposition of very heavy sanctions in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine (Shagina, 2021). Before the 2021 crisis broke out, the transatlantic partners in 2019 jointly slapped new sanctions on several officials and businesses in response to the “continued Russian aggression in Ukraine” concretely based on the Russian seizure of Ukrainian vessels in the Kerch Strait (Jozwiak, 2019).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in additional and tougher sanctions against the aggressor. Most surprising was that the new German chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that Germany had put the final recognition of the Russian gas pipeline “Nord Stream 2” on hold (Oltermann, 2022). The EU and the US agreed to close down many of their commercial activities in Russia and Moscow; it was also decided that Russia should be excluded from large parts of the international financial system, including the SWIFT system. On top of the economic sanctions, Russia was hit by sanctions within sports and culture (Holland et al., 2022). “Nord Stream 2” was a serious issue of disagreement between the US and Germany during the Trump administration, which threatened to sanction private companies involved in the project (Mackinnon, 2020). The US criticized Germany and the EU for allowing themselves to become heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies, and even during the Obama administration, the US tried to stop the Russian pipeline project. The American opposition to the project was broadly bipartisan and not only an administration-run initiative (de Jong, 2020; Pifer, 2021).

The bipartisan critical approach to the Nord Stream 2 project seemed to align with American public opinion of Russia. In the wake of the 2014 annexation of the Crimea, the percentage of Americans who held unfavorable views of Russia increased from around 50% to 77% in 2021 (Gallup, 2021). It was consistent with the downward trend in American feelings towards Russia that in 2021 reached their lowest point since the final years of the cold war (Smeltz et al., 2021a). Nevertheless, in May 2021, after a few months in office, the Biden administration declared that it would waive sanctions on the companies involved in the Nord Stream 2 project. It was seen as a clear signal to Europe and particularly to Germany that Washington wanted to mend

the transatlantic ties. Easing the tensions with Russia found support from the majority of Americans (Smeltz et al., 2021b).

On the other hand, the Biden administration was highly active in finding a solution to the Russian–Ukrainian border crisis until the Russian invasion started on 24 February 2022. President Joe Biden had telephone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov met face to face on several occasions (Crowley & Troianovski, 2022; Rankin, 2022). The Europeans were basically reduced to being bystanders in the face of the growing crisis. The lack of unity among EU member states only confirmed the Russian perception that there was no need to engage with the Europeans (Shapiro, 2022). The perception was in line with the aims of the Russian foreign policy towards Europe, to split the European governments by using cyberwar and “conservative soft power” (Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019; Shapiro, 2022). However, the bottom-line for the transatlantic alliance was that the EU and the US went on to agree to impose severe sanctions and other reactions once Russia invaded Ukraine.

Summing up, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought the EU and most European governments closer to the US after a period of European fears of American abandonment in the wake of the US pivot to Asia. It is possible to argue that transatlantic relations were strengthened because of the assertive Russian behavior and despite disagreements on the financial aspects of the tough sanctions on the Russian regime. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to new developments in transatlantic cooperation as far as Russia was concerned. The brief conclusion is that the transatlantic relationship was strong, and it was clearly strengthened by the Russian aggression. As in the case of China and the South China Sea, the US reacted to the international systemic stimuli, whereas the EU was sidelined. In brief, the transatlantic relationship was not weakened by the stronger American involvement in the confrontation with Russia. In some ways, it was back to the state of affairs of the cold war.

## 6. Afghanistan and Transatlantic Cooperation

This section aims to briefly discuss the consequences for the transatlantic alliance of the unilateral decision by the Trump administration to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan. The new Biden administration only postponed the implementation to withdraw the last American soldier until 31 August 2021. The US decision to pull out after 20 years of war in Afghanistan was taken without consultations with the European NATO allies. The American decision was “a blow to European prestige” as the mission was perceived as “NATO’s most legitimate mission, the one that was most central to our understanding of ourselves,” it was argued by Constanze Stelzenmüller of the Brookings

Institution (Tharoor, 2021b). Benjamin Haddad, director of the European Center at the Atlantic Council, stated: “The recent week is a real trauma in Berlin and London. It signals a shift in priorities for the US that runs deeper than the presidential personalities and rhetoric” (Tharoor, 2021b).

To many European decision-makers, the American behavior suggested that the difference was negligible between “America First” and a “foreign policy for the middle class.” It is important that around 70% of the Americans supported the withdrawal of US combat troops from Afghanistan. The figure reflected the attitudes immediately before the messy withdrawal from Kabul. The chaotic withdrawal did not change the American opinion figures to any significant degree (Edwards-Levy, 2021; Smeltz et al., 2021b).

The withdrawal came 20 years after the US launched its unilateral invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. The European NATO members soon after deployed troops in the multilateral International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission invoking Article V in the NATO treaty (Olsen, 2020, p. 62; Sperling & Webber, 2011). ISAF was deployed to defend Afghan government institutions and to carry out institution-building or state-building. To a large extent, these goals were undermined by the unilateral American policy focusing on fighting al-Qaeda and terrorism (Carati, 2015, p. 215; Garey, 2020, pp. 214–220). The outcome was not just poor coordination but also a lack of communication. These challenges sometimes resulted in open conflict between the US-led mission and the ISAF because there was no agreement about what the goals of the Western engagement in Afghanistan were (Carati, 2015, pp. 203, 207; Sperling & Webber, 2011, p. 355).

Initially, the unilateral American decision to withdraw from Afghanistan seemed to weaken the transatlantic relationship simply because Washington did not pay respect to its European partners by consulting them before it implemented the Trump administration’s far-reaching decision. On the other hand, the Americans pursued their own agenda during the entire campaign in Afghanistan. After a short period, sentiments seemed to calm down in the European capitals, and the former relationship between the US and its European NATO partners was back on track (DeYoung, 2021). The Afghanistan situation nevertheless emphasized that American presidents make decisions based on their own perceptions as well as, to some degree, based on American public opinion (Graham, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). The Afghanistan case also illustrates that the international systemic stimuli were not highly important in this context unless the withdrawal was seen as a way of releasing US resources to counter China.

## 7. Conclusion

This article was inspired by the prevalent argument in the literature that the transatlantic relationship had

been under pressure for quite some time and that it could be described as weakening. The article proposes a counter-argument that there is no clear weakening of transatlantic cooperation if the focus is narrowed down to security. The article's overall conclusion is that it is not possible to show that the transatlantic relationship has weakened or is weakening. Rather, in some of the policy fields analyzed here, one can argue that the relationship between the US and Europe/the EU/NATO has strengthened.

Transatlantic cooperation on security has always been strong within NATO, and it is even possible to argue that it strengthened in recent years, including during the presidency of Donald Trump, due to the simple fact that all European NATO members increased their defense spending. By doing so, they sent a strong signal about their commitment to the security cooperation with the Americans. The first year of Joe Biden's presidency strengthened the relationship even more, as shown by this article. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 made it clear that the transatlantic cooperation is surprisingly strong in the wake of this obvious breach of international law.

The rise of China and the assertive Chinese policies in Asia and the South China Sea brought the transatlantic partners closer to each other. They now agree to characterize China as a "strategic challenge." Within the framework of NATO, the partners signaled increasing willingness to cooperate on security issues related to the rise of China, though the European states still disagree on how to implement cooperation.

The pattern of transatlantic cooperation did not repeat itself in the case of Russia and its assertive foreign policies towards Ukraine. In the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the transatlantic partners showed that they were able to maintain the tough sanctions despite strong disagreement among the European governments. However, when Russia deployed more than 100,000 troops on the border to Ukraine, the US basically returned to its traditional hegemonic position, at least within the Western alliance, by taking upon itself the responsibility to negotiate directly with the Russian authorities. The tangible, coordinated, and common reactions towards Russia following its invasion of Ukraine point to a strong bond between the transatlantic partners as of 2022.

In conclusion, the transatlantic relationship has not weakened; rather, to the contrary, it has strengthened in recent years, and in particular as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was demonstrated that the US still plays a remarkably prominent role within the Western alliance. The US may be weakened globally and under increasing pressure from China, but the transatlantic alliance has not weakened. In the process, the EU member states clearly demonstrated that they were unable to agree on common foreign policy initiatives despite the international systemic changes that had pushed the US to react unilaterally. The Russian invasion

of Ukraine in 2022 indicated that the EU member countries might be ready to take new steps toward a more coordinated security policy. Despite the strong polarization of American society, the US reacted to the international systemic stimuli, and Washington did so with political and popular support for its tangible foreign policy responses.

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