

All is not well in the transatlantic relationship

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January 20 marks the end of the first year of Joe Biden's presidency, an administration that promised to respect and rebuild the transatlantic alliance after years of neglect and disdain, that declared, "America is back." But subsequent experience has not reassured all Europeans.

To get a better understanding of the expectations and hesitations regarding the Biden administration's second year, I conducted interviews with over 50 European and American experts. And it appears that all is still not well in the transatlantic relationship.

Overall, significant achievements were indeed made in 2021 — resolving bilateral trade disputes, launching technological cooperation, coordinating relations with China. "This went about as positively as I hoped it would on the day of his inauguration," said a former German ambassador to the United States.

"There were lofty expectations, especially among [American] Europhiles, that Europe would be more of a priority in overall Biden foreign policy," remembered a foreign policy analyst at a Washington think tank. "There was this sense we would see a new day in the partnership."

But 2021 was also a year marred by friction: Afghanistan, the AUKUS defense pact, the challenges posed by Russia and China, as well as political developments in the U.S. have all "fed a conclusion in Europe that the relationship with the U.S. will never go back to 2016," said a former U.S. ambassador to NATO — whether former President Donald Trump returns or not. And now the challenge facing the Biden administration is to prove such concerns wrong.

"You have to know that you have no other friends than Europe," warned a Polish foreign policy expert. "If you screw up talking with us, that undermines the U.S."

system of alliances and that is not useful for the U.S.” And when it comes to the looming confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, Europeans worry the U.S. has not yet learned this lesson, and there is fear, especially among Poles, that a deal affecting their futures will be made over their heads.

Moreover, as observed by a former U.S. ambassador to the EU, AUKUS openly said to Europeans that “the China folks in the White House are driving the bus. And they don’t have an appreciation of the EU as a useful partner on things that matter to the U.S.”

As a result, quipped a Berlin-based analyst: “Anxiety, skepticism and bad juju around the pivot to Asia is prevalent everywhere in Europe. The fear is that it will lead to transatlantic decoupling.” And as Washington’s attention progressively shifts to Asia, more incidents sparking Europeans’ sense of abandonment or betrayal may be inevitable.

The first test of this could be Taiwan, which has opened a representative office in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. Beijing has imposed economic sanctions on the Baltic nation and threatened to deny multinational firms exporting from Lithuania access to China’s market in retaliation. If Washington stands idly by while Beijing coerces individual EU member countries and corporations in this manner, much-vaunted transatlantic cooperation on China could prove to be a paper tiger.

More broadly, 2022 may prove a test of transatlantic solidarity over economic sanctions on both Russia and China. A Russian invasion of Ukraine would almost certainly precipitate American and European sanctions, including a shuttering of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, and there is growing support on both sides for sanctions against China for its human rights abuses as well. But with the European economy struggling to recover from the COVID-19 downturn, and the EU’s relatively greater dependence on both the Chinese and Russian markets, Brussels and Washington may find it difficult to act together.

Despite all that, the most corrosive development in transatlantic relations in the coming year may yet prove to be the deterioration of American democracy itself and what that says about the reliability of the U.S. as an ally.

The Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has judged the U.S. a “backsliding democracy,” and, according to a Pew Research Center survey, a median of only 18 percent of the publics in nine

European nations believes that American democracy is a good example for other countries to follow.

“No longer in Europe are they talking about who is the sick man in Europe,” noted a worried New York-based foreign policy expert, “it’s America that is the sick man.”

“America still acts as if it is the leader,” concluded a disdainful Social Democratic member of the European Parliament. “But the preconditions for transatlantic leadership have changed fundamentally. America is not as sovereign as it used to be. America needs its allies as much as the allies need the U.S.”

The upcoming 2022 U.S. Congressional election and Biden’s fading poll numbers also have Europeans worried. “There is panic [over] what will happen in the U.S.,” said a Washington-based veteran of transatlantic relations. “Europeans hear that the Republicans may win the House and Senate in 2022, and the White House in 2024.”

“The Biden administration is working in a very narrow window of opportunity,” noted a U.S. expert at a British think tank. “We may only have 10-11 months,” added the Social Democratic member of the European Parliament worriedly, “because after the midterm election, things may be different.”

Then the real question will be, observed a former high-ranking European Union official, “will Biden have any political capital to expend on things that are important for Europe?”

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