

Commentary



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More challenges than opportunities for Canada's transatlantic relationships

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The transatlantic policy community breathed a sigh of relief when, after days of vote-counting, major US networks at last projected that Joseph Biden would win the White House in the 2020 Presidential election. After all, Donald Trump's time in office had been a turbulent one. Even on the campaign trail back in 2016, Trump derided the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as "obsolete" and pointedly called out long-standing treaty allies like Germany as conniving free riders who took enormous advantage of the United States.

As President, Trump at times refused to endorse Article Five of the Washington Treaty – which provides that an attack on one NATO member is an attack against all of NATO – and has withdrawn his country from such cooperative arrangements like the Iran nuclear deal or the Paris Agreement, both of which his predecessor Barack Obama had negotiated in partnership with European allies. In the middle of Trump's campaign for re-election, his administration announced its intention to withdraw 12,000 US military personnel from Germany. If Trump were indeed to have been re-elected, then

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he might have been emboldened to take more disruptive steps that would further harm the transatlantic relationship. With its deep European ties and membership within NATO, the stakes for Canada were high.

Biden's election has headed off the worst-case scenario, but how does Canada and its transatlantic partners move forward in the years ahead? There are at least two issues at play here. The first involves repairing and strengthening the political ties that have frayed over the course of the Trump administration's mandate. That Biden has similar views on such shared problems as climate change and Iran should pave the way for further cooperation in the years to come. Moreover, notwithstanding the announced withdrawal of US forces from Germany, the Trump administration has bequeathed upon its successor a strong foundation for bolstering local defence and deterrence initiatives in Europe.

This ironic legacy rebounds to Canada's own interests in light of its participation in the enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic littoral region. Nevertheless, matters of deep contention like trade will persist in transatlantic relations during the Biden presidency. The second issue is that, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been steadily prioritizing the Indo-Pacific over Europe. The Trump administration has only sought to deepen that commitment and the trend will likely continue during Biden's presidency. Because Canadian decision-makers are most comfortable in the North Atlantic policy space, even as Canada's population is becoming less European, this transition may pose certain difficulties for them.

These issues are explored in depth below. First, this paper relates the positive side of the ledger when accounting for the transatlantic relationship as the Trump administration draws to a close. Much of the positivity centres on the military-to-military contacts that were otherwise allowed to flourish during Trump's presidency. Canada has benefited since it was able to go about its successful but quiet deployment in Latvia unimpeded. Then, it highlights the problems that will continue to dog transatlantic relations into the Biden years and how those controversies could affect Canada. The next section discusses what prospects Canada has in partnering with key countries in Europe to further mutual interests. As this paper concludes, the future ahead for Canada is rocky given the uncertainties and risks involved. No great initiative may be worthwhile, and so Canada will muddle through.

The good news about post-Trump transatlantic relations

The Biden administration already promises to be much more cooperative and consultative than the Trump administration. In his 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article, Biden (2020, 65) declared that, if elected President, he would "take immediate steps to renew US democracy and alliances, protect the United

States' economic future, and once more have America lead the world." He has affirmed his commitment to NATO, tackling climate change, and engaging Iran again if it returns to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Over the course of the presidential campaign, he has also emphasized his desire to strengthen allies, to confront illiberalism, and to rejoin the United States in the Paris climate accord.

Such statements have resonated well with Ottawa and many European capitals. Many of them favour some degree of climate change action and, more generally, a renewed emphasis on diplomacy (see, for example, Juneau 2019, 44). More crucially, Biden is a known and arguably predictable quality, not least because of his time as vice president to Obama. This is in stark contrast to Trump, who had never held public office before the White House and who seemed to thrill on keeping off-balance his political partners and opponents alike.

The legacy of the Trump administration is not entirely negative, however. In fact, one ironic achievement on its part has been to bolster deterrence and defence in Europe throughout the controversial president's mandate. Of course, the Obama administration had already agreed to deploy US military forces to Poland as part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). Involving four battalion-sized multinational battlegroups deployed on a rotational basis in Poland and the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the eFP is a military posture intended to reassure those members of NATO while putting enough military forces in place to signal resolve and capacity to resist vis-à-vis Russia.

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It may be more accurate to say that Trump built on Obama's legacy. Nevertheless, since Trump took office in January 2017, the US-funded European Deterrence Initiative benefited from major increases in its budget. This was done in order to assist in the repositioning of military equipment and material, to cover the costs of an Armored Brigade Combat Team that rotates through Central and Eastern Europe, to improve military infrastructure and facilities in Europe, and to build partnership capacity as well as to finance allied exercises and training (Congressional Research Service 2020).

Trump's demands that US allies contribute more to the collective defence burden have been one factor in the rise of military spending across Europe – a process that arguably has had much more to do with concerns about Russia (Deni 2020, 4). Despite rebuffing Polish enticements to station US military

forces permanently in Poland, the United States concluded an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement that envisions, among other things, the creation of a forward division command in Poland as well as improvements in military infrastructure to allow for quick and major increases in US troop numbers in that country should an emergency arise (US Department of Defence 2020). The United States also stepped up its activities in the Black Sea to work with allies and partners that are located in its littoral and worry about Russian intentions (Faram 2019).

These actions apparently contradict Trump's stated preference to work with Russia. Still, this deepening of military ties has been possible in part because the White House has granted extensive operational autonomy to US military commanders and because the US Congress still supports a tough line against Russia (Brooks 2020, 30; Stravers 2018). To be sure, the Trump administration declared its intent to withdraw from Germany in a move that many observers criticized for weakening European security. Yet the Biden administration will at the very least put these proposed adjustments to US force posture in Europe on hold (see Vandiver 2020).

This ironic legacy on the part of the Trump administration in turn has validated Ottawa's own investments in European security. Since 2014, in addition to deploying six fighter jets to assist in air protection, Canada has contributed a frigate to NATO regional maritime security operations and assurance measures in the Mediterranean and Black Seas as part of Operation Reassurance (Department of National Defence 2020).



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Canada's largest military deployment.*

Partly because of Obama's overtures to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada also agreed to assume the role of the Framework Nation that would lead the multinational eFP battlegroup in Latvia. This military and political commitment has been significant even though its visibility within Canadian society has generally been low. The Latvia mission constitutes at present Canada's largest military deployment and the diplomatic presence that it has engendered within that Baltic country has become Canada's most significant within Europe outside of the United Kingdom. It has also built up much good will within the Baltic region and, by extension, NATO.

This leadership task has not been easy. Indeed, the Latvia battlegroup is possibly the hardest one to lead because of its unusually diverse character with nine contributing countries. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, many NATO countries had considered Latvia to be the least secure of the four eFP Host Nations, given its ethnic politics and relative unease in seeing Russia as a big enough

security challenge to require major defence investments.

Although the eFP mission involves over two-thirds of NATO's membership so as to promote burden-sharing and to spread risk, US participation in it has always been *sine qua non*. If the Trump administration decided not to support the eFP mission, as many had initially feared, other allies like Canada would have had to face uncomfortable decisions about whether to continue their participation. That, of course, never happened, and the eFP mission can now proceed without having to fear as much the unilateral defection of the Alliance's most important member.

The bad news about post-Trump transatlantic relations

Many observers, however, would be mistaken to assume that the Biden presidency would be free of tensions and controversies within the transatlantic relationship. Trade will be one area of friction. Although Canada ratified a free trade agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2017, the treaty is yet to come into force amid concerns among some EU Member States about its investor-state dispute settlement mechanism as well as its impact on consumer rights and environmental protections (Leonelli 2020).

For its part, the Trump administration had an antagonistic relationship with the EU, having imposed tariffs on its various goods in a trade war that has resulted in dubious economic gains for the United States (see Drezner 2019). The Biden administration will very likely dial down the economic rhetoric, but it may be as or even more protectionist as its predecessor (Campanella 2020). Since Canada relies so much on US trade and sees extra-regional free trade agreements as a way to soften that dependency, the possibility of continued discord is bad news, especially as COVID-19 has led to soaring debts and ever tighter fiscal constraints.

Biden's electoral triumph can be interpreted as a victory over populism. But some observers worry that the populism characteristic of the Trump years will continue to be a force in US politics. Biden's presidency may only provide temporary relief in transatlantic relations, especially if Trump were to run for re-election in 2024, and so US allies need to prepare for the worst.

However, this pessimism may be unwarranted. For one, Trump's populism is a spent force, having eked out one electoral college win and lost the popular vote twice. For another, his brand of populism has become too closely tied to his own person. Trump may be kingmaker for the Republican Party in the 2022 midterm elections, but his ability to recapture the Republican nomination for the presidency is hardly a given considering his age, to say nothing of the legal challenges he will likely face. The Republican Party has incentives to make itself more appealing to suburban and Latino/a voters, and it is not

clear how it can do so by continuing to embrace Trump.

Trump's revival cannot be entirely discounted, but the odds are against him. Nevertheless, Europe remains divided in part because nationalism and illiberalism remain present. Take, for example, the 2016 decision by British voters to withdraw from the EU. Partly because of his own Irish heritage, and partly because the Democratic Party is generally pro-EU, Biden will probably not countenance any development that will jeopardize the Good Friday Agreement. He may be reluctant to offer much support to a post-Brexit UK. Any politicization of Anglo-American economic relations could spill over into Canadian domestic politics in light of the Conservative Party of Canada's endorsement of Brexit (Hurrelman et al. 2019, 457-458; see also Bell and Vucetic 2019, 372).



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Even militarily, the challenges facing Canada in Europe should not be understated. Russia's deployment of nuclear-capable military forces raises the specter of decoupling – that is, the concern that Russia could threaten specific European countries in such a way as to isolate them from other NATO countries. Partly in response to such worries, the Trump administration has withdrawn from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. It has also pulled out of the Open Skies Treaty, while running down the clock on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

As much as some European allies supported the US position on the INF Treaty in view of Russian violations of it, the Trump administration could arguably have done more to shore up deterrence gaps that Russian military investments have created. Deterrence ultimately hinges on an adversary believing that the costs of revising the status quo are unacceptably high relative to the benefits. Given the far-flung nature of the Baltic states, decoupling could create new stresses on North American efforts to help secure them from subversion or attack (Simón and Lanoszka 2020). Compounding matters is that NATO itself is internally divided as to whether to focus on Russia or on transnational threats relating to terrorism and instability in Europe's neighbourhood. COVID-19 may also mean lower defence budgets. Because Canada has the largest government deficit since the Second World War, there may be pressure to cut military commitments down the road, especially those that seem too hard to defend (BBC 2020).

Adding further pressure on the transatlantic relationship is that Europe has been steadily receding in significance for the United States since the Cold War ended. That is not to say that Europe will end up being unimportant. At

minimum, a key aim for Washington has been the preservation of the balance of power in Europe in order to prevent a single power that can challenge the United States to emerge. This grand strategic goal will certainly remain true, but the post-Cold War peace dividend in Europe and the rise of China have combined to push the United States to turn its attention increasingly to the Indo-Pacific.

However, because East Asia is primarily a maritime environment and Europe a land theater, no direct trade-off between these regions exists as regards to how the United States goes about its force posture. Still, legislators and policy analysts have called for a rebalancing of US force posture that would entail a reduced presence in the Middle East and Europe while beefing up allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Notwithstanding how the annexation of Crimea prompted the United States to make new investments in European security, such has been the broader trendline. Given how bipartisan consensus now exists over how China's international behaviour poses a major security challenge to the United States, US prioritization of East Asia will be enduring (see Zakaria 2020).



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Of course, the rise of China has significance for Canadian interests beyond its impact on how the United States prioritizes certain regions. First, China has consistently engaged in industrial espionage and unfair trade practices that come at the expense of Canada and many of its Western trading partners (Friedberg 2017). Second, China has engaged in a major military modernization effort that has enhanced its own capabilities vis-à-vis its neighbours. The country most at risk is Taiwan since China harbors revisionist aims against it (Hunzeker and Lanoszka 2018). If China were to attack Taiwan, an economically successful liberal democracy, then the consequences would be dire not only for the island country's citizens but also for the regional military balance and the liberal international order. Third, China may be exporting its digital authoritarianism. Security concerns abound with how Chinese security service could use vulnerabilities in Huawei products, especially those that use fifth-generation (5G) telecommunications technology, to monitor citizens. And indeed, surveys reveal that Canadians increasingly view China as a threat (Macdonald-Laurier Institute 2020, 44-46).

Although geopolitical considerations are pushing the United States to focus more on the Indo-Pacific, and although Canada faces negative repercussions that attend the rise of China, Canada remains solidly anchored in the transatlantic world. Indeed, with the exception of its signature of the Compre-

hensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, Canada's engagement with issues important to East Asia remains limited. This is true even of matters involving China. Most of its dealings with China or with the broader Indo-Pacific have been with respect to trade and investment (Nossal and Larson 2014; Dewitt et al. 2018, 26).

Unlike the United States, which has had a long-standing military and political presence in East Asia dating back to the Second World War and the Korean War (see Robb and Gill 2019), Canadian defence and security capabilities are mostly tied up in North America or the North Atlantic policy space (Dewitt et al 2018, 8). Canadian policy towards China has largely remained unchanged even after China detained Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in retaliation for Canada's arrest of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou on a US extradition warrant (see Inkster 2019). Kim Richard Nossal's (2018, 365) observation that "Ottawa has in fact demonstrated a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the Asia Pacific" still holds up.

Leadership opportunities moving forward

The news, as ever, is mixed with respect to the state of transatlantic relations. On the one hand, the military basis is sturdy even though challenges remain as a result of Russia's arms control violations and revisionist intentions. On the other hand, a combination of political differences and economic friction will remain a source of frustration for both sides. That the United States may, over the medium- to long-term, align its posture more with its prioritization of East Asia remains a distinct possibility.

As Ottawa's geopolitical instincts are largely oriented eastwards, an abrupt shift to the Indo-Pacific is unlikely even though Canadian society is becoming increasingly detached from Europe. After all, political scientist David Welch (2005) argues that foreign policy-making tends towards inertia, and so, if he is correct, what might spur a foreign policy change is a shock that makes Ottawa feel like it is losing out profoundly by not engaging more in the Pacific. Absent such a shock, Ottawa will remain tied primarily to the transatlantic relationship.

But how might Canada position itself in that relationship in the years to come? It is not a European power. If its objectives are to maintain free trade, to protect the territorial integrity of NATO, and to defend liberalism, to which partners might Canada gravitate? The answer in brief is that Canada will face a number of conflicting challenges such that it will likely muddle through in transatlantic relations while taking shelter from some of the deeper political controversies that might roil Europe in the coming years. To see why, consider how Canada will relate to key European actors.

The United Kingdom is Canada's most important European partner. Its signif-

icance to Ottawa is more than just its colonial ties, Commonwealth heritage, and cultural affiliation. The United Kingdom represents Canada's biggest source of trade within Europe. Thus, ahead of the December 31, 2020 Brexit deadline, the two countries concluded a free trade agreement that resembles the one Canada negotiated with the European Union. Yet whether Canada will align itself fully with the United Kingdom in the years to come remains open to question.

The 2016 decision by British voters to withdraw from the EU complicates matters for Canada in two ways. First, partly because of his own Irish heritage, and partly because the Democratic Party is generally pro-EU, President Biden will likely not countenance any development that will jeopardize the Good Friday Agreement. He may be reluctant to offer much support to a post-Brexit United Kingdom. Any politicization of Anglo-American economic relations could spill over into Canadian domestic politics in light of the Conservative Party of Canada's endorsement of Brexit (Hurrelman et al. 2019, 457-458; see also Bell and Vucetic 2019, 372). Second, although London will remain a key participant within NATO and has recently pledged to increase defence spending as such, the decision to withdraw from the EU comes at a time when the United Kingdom aspires to be a greater presence in the Indo-Pacific. Canada may find itself being the only major predominantly English-speaking country in the North Atlantic not to be pivoting away from Europe.

Canada also has major ties with France. To begin with, Quebec has a number of agreements with France in areas that fall under its provincial jurisdiction like education, scientific research, and culture (*Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères*, 2020). Both Quebec and Canada are, separately, members of *La Francophonie* – France's counterpart to the British-led Commonwealth. These linkages should not obscure key risks that France could pose to Canada's transatlantic commitments, however.

First, although French President Emmanuel Macron has positioned himself as someone who can resist populism, one wonders how long he can persevere in that struggle given the domestic problems currently wracking France. From the *gilets jaunes* protests to persistent concerns about immigration to COVID-19 wrecking the French economy, it is possible that the far-right leader of *Rassemblement National*, Marine Le Pen, can finally close the gap and even defeat Macron in the 2022 Presidential election. She has been critical of free trade, France's participation in the Eurozone and the European Union, as well as NATO's policy towards Russia (Le Pen 2016). Her possible election would arguably deal a bigger blow to transatlanticism and the values that Canada embraces than Brexit.

Second, Macron himself has pushed for Europe to move towards strategic autonomy, partly because of concerns about the reliability of the United States as a guarantor for European security. The risk of EU defence structures supplanting those of NATO is admittedly low, not least because countries located in northeastern Europe remain keen on US security guarantees (Järvenpää

et al. 2019, 1-2). Nevertheless, European strategic autonomy in theory leaves little space for Canada to make a contribution. Working outside NATO structures, as notions of European strategic autonomy sometimes suggest, may undermine the investments that Canada has made in the Alliance.

The last of the so-called European Big Three – Germany – thus seems to be the best that Canada can have for an enduring partner in the transatlantic space. Throughout the Trump years, many observers often linked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with German Chancellor Angela Merkel as being the “last defenders of the liberal international order” (Ayed 2017). Both are involved in eFP operations as Framework Nations in the Baltic region. Both have an expressed interest in free trade. Both prefer working through multilateral organizations to pursue cooperative diplomacy in view of addressing problems of global consequence.

Given these aligned interests, a partnership between Germany and Canada seems almost natural. However, any assessment of their co-leadership potential needs to be realistic. For one, both countries spend as much (or as little) on their militaries in terms of gross domestic product. Claims that these countries are able to “defend” the international order may just be overstated if these countries are hamstrung in their operational readiness and ability to undertake military missions. Indeed, Germany’s commitment to NATO and acceptance of US security guarantees may be increasingly elite-driven. Surveys reveal that a small majority of Germans in fact approved of Trump’s planned military drawdown while leading politicians in the Bundestag denounced it (Pladson 2020).

For another, and more to the point, both countries have been reluctant to challenge China directly in a way that can spell continued trouble with the United States even under a Biden administration. Germany has been split, for example, on whether to permit Huawei’s 5G products despite US pressure not to accept them (Düben 2020). Given these similarities, Canada and Germany can still of course be partners, but whether that translates into a durable transatlantic leadership role is open to question. The United States will still be looking for partners to spend more on European defence and to counter China, if not in the Indo-Pacific then in Europe or in North America. Either action may require the sorts of hard choices that both countries might prefer to avoid.

Conclusion

Where does that all leave Canada going forward? Canada will continue to play a role, as ever, in transatlantic relations but it will avoid any grand plans or initiatives too closely aligned with any one major European partner. Fortunately, the military basis to NATO is stronger in 2020 than what many might have predicted in 2016. That investment has generated good-will and fostered

important partnerships within NATO so as to demonstrate its transatlantic credentials.

Still, the Biden years will not be free from controversy as regards to the transatlantic relationship. Of course, the tone will be much more agreeable than that which characterized how the Trump White House dealt with allies, but trade friction and other political disagreements will continue. Canada will not be simply a bystander to those disputes. Its own interests in NATO and free trade will be implicated. At least among the three biggest European states, no bilateral relationship is free of risks for Canada.

Canadian policy-makers must ask themselves several questions:

1. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the government deficit, will Canada be willing and able to retain its military commitments to Europe?
2. When it comes to furthering the transatlantic relationship, should Canada align with any key European state in light of those risks, or should it be a junior partner of sorts to a Biden-led United States?
3. To what extent will Canada endorse a strong anti-Chinese coalition that might involve the United States and the United Kingdom but not, for example, Germany? Will Canada's professed commitment to transatlanticism resonate less with partners if they sense that Ottawa could be doing much more against authoritarian China?
4. Can Canada find a way to reconcile France's aspirations for Europe to achieve strategic autonomy with its support for NATO?

None of these questions are easy; the answers partly depend on what Canadian policy-makers want to achieve. But thinking through them at least would be a good step to get as much as a handle on the transatlantic relationship in the years to come.

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