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Echoes of unity

The transatlantic relationship determines European security and global role. A second term for Biden could build on the initial progress made

The primaries have kicked off in the US. By 5 March, at the latest, it should be clear who the US Republicans are sending into the race for the White House. Donald Trump's chances are looking exceptionally good. His good start in Iowa and New Hampshire came as no surprise, Ron DeSantis has already dropped out of the race, and Nikki Haley will have to visibly catch up with Trump in the next rounds in South Carolina to maintain her chances. The outcome of this contest will have consequences for Europeans, too. If Trump were to return to the White House, the EU would need to be prepared to be ignored, or worse, sabotaged. So, it's time to take stock.

The Russian attack on Ukraine has made it clear that European security depends on the US. As underlined by the EU's Strategic Compass, NATO is the organisation for territorial defence in Europe. To close the known deficits and come closer to the goal of a more effective European pillar in the transatlantic alliance, important integration steps have been taken towards a common defence policy at EU level. In 2017, the first step was the agreement on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Capability Development Plan (CDP) followed, intended to support the member states in better coordinating and cooperating with each other.

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On the financing side, the EU provided the Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility. The former to promote joint projects, the latter to finance military support for third countries, the pot with which the member states were able to compensate their rapid assistance to Ukraine. To plug the holes that European defence still faces, the Commission is now focusing on the European defence industry, which will be supported by the European Defence Industry

Reinforcement, the Common Procurement Act and the European Defence Investment Strategy (expected by the end of February).

Community policy options are being used to harmonise Member States and strengthen the European defence sector. The Commission's role has increased in an area that is otherwise the responsibility of the individual states. In this way, integration steps are being prepared without fundamental treaty changes. This means that tasks are now being taken on that were already agreed upon by the European Council in 2012. Initially, however, other challenges were at the centre of the integration efforts. The necessary political will and external pressure only materialised with the annexation of Crimea and, ultimately, with the collapse of the European security structure.

A general good mood amongst partners

As is usual for the EU, this is a lengthy process that is moving at the speed of a glacier. Too slow, given the situation in Ukraine, which is dependent on military support. The one million artillery shells promised by March are a long time coming. The three tracks (utilisation of existing stock, joint procurement, increase in production capacity) with which the EU wanted to achieve this ambition are not sufficient. This was already recognised in November.

At the same time, support for Ukraine in the US has fallen victim to the election campaign. President Joe Biden has to wrestle with the Republicans for a new aid package. For this, he needs the willingness to compromise from the camp that supports Trump, which does not want to give Kyiv another cent.

Irrespective of the war, the EU has established itself as a relevant partner for the US over the last four years and, not just because of Biden, a staunch transatlanticist. The two EU-US summits, the first ever, held in 2021 and 2023 are evidence of this. Also, because we have already seen how badly things can go, both sides are not getting tired of stressing how good the atmosphere is. The range of topics covered at the summits emphasises the broad basis of common interests. In addition to foreign and security policy aspects, the economy, digitalisation, technology and sustainability were also discussed.

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In addition, the US was invited to participate in the PESCO project on military mobility. This is a sign that the pursuit of strategic autonomy on the European side no longer needs to be seen as

common interests, values and goals.

a contradiction to a close transatlantic partnership. Both partners have also agreed on a cooperation agreement between the European Defence Agency and the US Department of Defence.

However, the good spirit is not a given. This became especially clear when the EU was caught off guard by the Congress' typical American decisiveness in passing the Inflation Reduction Act — with negative consequences for the European economy. And after all, the results of the second summit fell short of expectations. Negotiators on both sides have not managed to agree on a Global Agreement on Sustainable Steel and Aluminum (GSA) before the end of last year and left it with extending the quota system. It is questionable whether a compromise could be found with a possible second Trump administration.

It is therefore all the more important to remain in continuous exchange about common interests, values and goals. Evidently, the EU should be clearer on how it may play a constructive role in the transatlantic partnership, both for Europeans and also its US partners. In addition to its contribution to security in Europe, there is also its potential to set standards, for example with the General Data Protection Regulation or the Digital Services Act/Digital Market Act. Both partners also have an interest in functioning multilateralism. The EU can contribute to this through diplomatic ties with global partners.

Potential risks

In reaction to the smooth coordination between the EU and the US in the response to the *Zeitenwende*, Biden exclaimed that 'the West is back!' This assessment is probably not that helpful in view of the functioning multilateralism and international cooperation that both sides invoke in the 2023 summit joint statement. Last but not least, the Europeans are seeking international partners in a global diplomatic initiative as a result of the Russian attack on Ukraine. However, the interpretation of the collapse of the European security order with an international dimension was met with incomprehension in other regions. The EU's divided reaction to the war in Gaza in retaliation for the Hamas attacks undermined its international credibility even more.

In a world with multipolar tendencies, the EU should try to find a position in which it is seen as independent of the US. Multilateralism and international partnerships should be based on common interests, which could be shared in flexible partnerships. For this, however, the EU needs the ability and the will to formulate its own goals and the means to

achieve them. But as it stands now, this wouldn't work detached from the partnership with the US.

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The transatlantic relationship determines European security and the EU's global role. A second term in office for Biden could build on the initial good progress made. Should Trump take over the administration again, we have to assume that unresolved disagreements will intensify. But would the increased pressure on the EU lead to further steps towards integration, partly in order to better formulate and pursue self-determined goals and interests? Or will the disputes and rifts within the EU open up and will the Europeans allow themselves to be played off against each other?

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is already playing his cards skilfully in his own interest. Ultimately, the elections to the European Parliament will show whether nationalist and anti-European centrifugal forces will pull apart the EU as a foreign and security policy actor. In a worst-case scenario, we end up with populists on both sides of the Atlantic who stand in the way of cooperative transatlantic and European security.



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