

# Two Possible Futures

## An outlook on EU-US relations

**T**hings will not go back to the way they were before 2016. Regardless of how one thinks Donald Trump handled the relationship with Europe and with Germany in particular, he was right that something was fundamentally off.

The fundamental reason for this is not personality but power, economic growth, and structure. China's rise – and especially its behaviour in recent years – has buried the notion that geopolitics was a thing of the past. In the United States, this realization dawned a few years ago and has now increasingly come to be accepted – belatedly, for sure, but definitively. This is leading to a re-examination of every facet of US foreign and domestic policy.

This must include US relations with Europe. US policy toward the continent will need to be shaped by the overall demands of dealing with China. Asia is the world's largest market, and China its most plausible aspiring regional hegemon. Accordingly, preventing China from dominating Asia will be the top priority for Washington. US policy towards Europe will necessarily have to follow from how Europe fits into that framework.

This means that the United States will have to economize its efforts and exposure in Europe. Politically, Washington will need to husband its capital for Asia rather than spend it on addressing European concerns or controversies that might have



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**ELBRIDGE COLBY**  
Principal, The Marathon Initiative; fmr. Director, Defence Program, Center for a New American Security, Washington, D.C.

engaged it more fully in the 1990s or 2000s. It will also need to ensure its economic vitality, and thus that its companies and workers operate on as fair a basis as possible. The United States can no longer afford to look magnanimously beyond inequitable economic relationships, as it might have when it was by far the world's largest economy. And in the military realm, while it should certainly maintain its commitment to NATO, it will need to reduce the military requirements of doing so. Indeed, a major part of the long-term attraction of NATO for Washington is precisely its ability to maintain security in Europe with a reduced US effort.

This means the United States will have to press Europe to do more. This applies to Germany more than anyone, given the country's size, strength, and economic health.

Beyond these constants there are, it seems, basically two broad futures for US-Europe relations. Because the United States will need to focus on China, especially in Asia, this means that its orientation is likely to be relatively fixed. Everything else will be adjusted in light of how it relates to that primary challenge. This is as true of Europe policy as of any other issue.

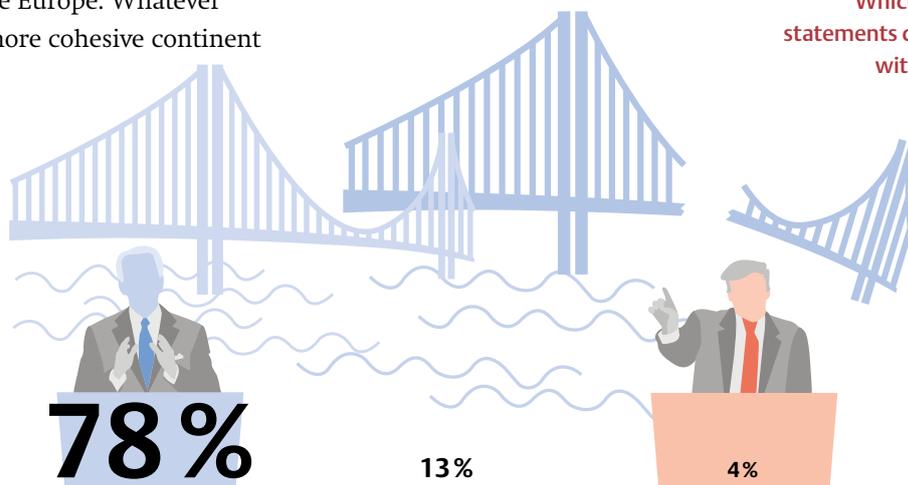
In one future, Europe, concerned by the threat an increasingly domineering China poses to its own security and prosperity, takes a firmer line vis-à-vis Beijing. This does not require poking China in the eye. But it will mean things like reducing Europe's exposure to China's coercive leverage, for instance with matters like 5G, and working with the United States to develop equitable trade agreements to create transatlantic and indeed global markets to match the scale of China's. It will also mean supporting vulnerable Asian states and Taiwan that seek to resist Chinese domination, helping developing countries to avoid Chinese debt traps, and assuming more security responsibility for defence of the European area as well as the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Levant. In this future, Washington will have very potent incentives to support a stronger and more cohesive Europe. Whatever scepticism it has about a more cohesive continent

will pale before the primary need of ensuring it has strong allies to help balance China.

The other future is a more difficult one. In this, Europe seeks to avoid friction with China or even tries to chart a neutral or 'third pole' path between the United States (and its partners like Japan, Australia, and India) and China. Europe shies away from increasing its resilience to Chinese coercion. It avoids doing things that, by helping the United States, its partners and other states resist Chinese pressure, 'offend' Beijing. In this future, Washington's incentives toward Europe will be considerably different. Why would it want to encourage the strengthening of a cohesive Europe that is so profoundly misaligned with it on the central issue of the time? In this context, the United States will be better off working with individual European states that are more in sympathy with this goal and prepared to do something about it. Of course, China will do the same, turning Europe into an arena of competition rather than an active shaper of that competition.

It will be Europe's decisions about how it relates to China's growing power and influence that will drive US policy toward Europe. For its interests, and for the health of the transatlantic bond, Europe should seek to bring about the first future. ✖

Which of the following statements corresponds most with your own view?



**78%**  
The transatlantic partnership worsened under President Trump and will normalize again under President Biden.

**13%**  
The transatlantic partnership worsened under President Trump and will remain the same under President Biden.

**4%**  
The transatlantic partnership did not worsen under President Trump.

November 2020:  
don't know 3%,  
no answer 2%