

# COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: If the US and Europe Find the Will, Multilateralism Is the Way

by Susan Corke

## ABSTRACT

The COVID pandemic has presented the transatlantic alliance and multilateralism with an existential challenge: can they tackle a global emergency and demonstrate the necessity of values-based alliances? With a transition to new leadership in the US, this is the moment to rebuild trust, sharpen resolve, and catalyse collective mobilisation. The major test is whether we can agree on a shared set of priorities; top of such a list must be the hybrid threat posed by Russia and China. Our shared liberal democratic values are the source of our strength and unity; thus, we must hold regimes who flout those principles to account. Better integrating NATO's role will be critical to addressing hybrid risks – security, economic, political, cyber, and democracy itself. With cyber as an increasingly contested space, where democracy is confronted by authoritarianism, the US and Europe must build an integrated, democratic framework together.

*Coronavirus | US foreign policy | European Union | Transatlantic relations  
| NATO | Multilateralism*

**keywords**

## COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: If the US and Europe Find the Will, Multilateralism Is the Way

by Susan Corke\*

### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is a pivotal moment for the transatlantic alliance and multilateralism – a brutal, devastating test about collective responsibility and shared values. So far, the United States and Europe, as the architects of the multilateral system, are failing to deliver solutions to the challenge of our time. A global public-health crisis should have been the time for a values-based security alliance to show its worth by responding better than the nationalistic, autocratic form of government that has been infecting the transatlantic narrative for the past decade.

In the last four years, US President Donald Trump has eroded the pillars of America's leadership in the world and its commitment to values-based alliances. This proved fatal when the pandemic hit. Trust is perilously low. The pandemic revealed that Europe could not count on the current US leadership. The United States failed not only to lead the world in organising a pandemic response, but also has had one of the worst pandemic records. That is a compound failure.

The European Union also did not show much early leadership on its own continent and was slow to provide support to the hardest-hit members. It squandered its opportunity to shine; if the Union had been able to marshal unity and leadership among its members, and lead a global response, it could have been an opportunity to reposition itself as a geopolitical force.

We do not need to sound the death knell yet. Multilateralism and the democratic alliance that undergirds it still have the greatest potential for addressing the complex, hybrid transnational challenges that we face today. The current global challenge – this time against a common viral enemy, not each other – is presenting

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stark evidence about the need for alliances and the benefits of transparent, responsive governance for earning the trust needed for a collective solution.

Devastating as it is, the pandemic provides a chance for transatlantic leaders to re-establish trust in democracy and transnational institutions by tackling the crisis and its aftermath in a responsible way. In recovering from a complex crisis such as this one, which will require public trust and a whole-of-society response, democracies have a deeper arsenal than the autocratic governments that were able to quickly institute heavy-handed steps to fight the pandemic in the short term. This is a moment of reckoning. The choices the United States and Europe make in the coming months could be determinative of the multilateral system. Success is not assured.

America and Europe's primary geopolitical adversaries, Russia and China, ramped up propaganda to create and exploit existing transatlantic and intra-EU divisions. Early in the pandemic they sought to portray themselves and their systems as the generous and competent leaders in managing the pandemic. A silver lining to their disinformation campaigns in the pandemic was that reality punctured their narratives – the aid they provided was neither in working order nor free – and exposed the scope of their deception.

While the advantages if not the necessity of tackling hybrid, transnational and global emergencies within a multilateral structure of cooperation would seem to be self-evident, political will, accountability, trust and leadership were lacking. To be sure, the failures in addressing the pandemic also revealed flaws within the multilateral organisations themselves, including a paucity of resources relative to the need, outdated processes, a lack of coordination, and a creaky bureaucracy. Some of those problems are mostly technical and can be fixed with more money, better coordination and knowhow.

But the real test is harder. Multilateralism itself is “facing a ‘Darwinian moment’ in which adaptation becomes a prerequisite of evolution: multilateralism needs to be fit for purpose, in order to survive”.<sup>1</sup> The United States and Europe need to agree together on the priorities and threats that the multilateral system must tackle and then adapt the system to meet the moment.

Beyond the current health crisis, interrelated areas that the United States and Europe need to work on together if the multilateral system is to be effective include: (1) China and Russia – as adversarial regimes vested in undermining the transatlantic alliance; (2) cybersecurity and disinformation; and (3) threats to democracy.

<sup>1</sup> Elena Lazarou, “The Future of Multilateralism and Strategic Partnerships”, in *EPRS Briefings*, September 2020, p. 1, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)652071](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)652071).

How have several parts of the multilateral system – the United States, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in particular – been addressing these priorities?

## 1. The current landscape

Many European experts, according to a recent study, seem to agree that the inadequate multilateral response to the pandemic is in part a result of the current dynamics between United States and China. The accusation is damning: “Already engulfed in a growing geopolitical and ideological rivalry and a heated trade war, China and the US instrumentalised the health crisis to create allegiances and to engage in power games that delayed [...] initiatives for a coordinated global response.”<sup>2</sup> Actually, this critical analysis gives the US administration too much credit for executing a geopolitical strategy that could advance its interests. The United States has been caught up in a bruising election, and the Trump administration has proven so incompetent in responding to the pandemic that it has completely overwhelmed America’s capacity to exert leadership on the world stage.

### 1.1 The United States

Under President Trump the US commitment to the multilateral order has been adversarial at best and isolationist at worst. Trump has violated the bedrock beliefs of American foreign policy that democratic alliances protect America and help advance shared interests. The United States has abdicated the global leadership it has built over decades – Trump has withdrawn the United States from the Iran nuclear deal, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Paris climate agreement and has coddled dictators such as North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and Russia’s Vladimir Putin. He has attacked the European Union and NATO, “the very foundations [...] that allowed war-torn Europe to become whole, democratic and free”.<sup>3</sup> The credibility, trust and legitimacy that Trump has squandered in America’s name may not be so swiftly reinstated, as he resists conceding the election and providing a smooth transition for President-elect Joe Biden. Trump is pouring salt in the wounds before he departs.

On 3 November, voters faced a stark choice between two very different visions for the United States’ role in the world. If Trump had been re-elected, he would have dragged the United States further down the road toward isolationism and unilateralism. Alliances that have kept the American people safe for decades would have continued to deteriorate, and global institutions that benefited American

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Cohen, “How Trump Lowered America’s Standing in the World”, in *The New York Times*, 29 October 2020, <https://nyti.ms/3mfwfSN>.

interests would be neglected. This was a bellwether moment, but the result was more a defeat of Trump than a clarion call for change. Biden will need to heal a divided country or at least find a way to govern it.

The United States' lack of support for international efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic – the biggest absence of US leadership since it emerged as a superpower in World War II (WWII) – reflects more than simply failure. Trump has actively sabotaged the response to the pandemic at home and heaped scorn on the WHO and others trying to coordinate measures abroad, enabling Russia and China to score easy propaganda victories by trumpeting their aid to stricken Western countries such as Italy. Key US allies such as France and Germany accused the Trump administration of unscrupulousness for seeking to appropriate critical medical supplies in a zero-sum fashion.<sup>4</sup> The travel restrictions Trump imposed without consultation with European partners created chaos and consternation, and even helped spread the virus by creating a surge of travel.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 The European Union

Global leadership in the early stages of the pandemic was unfortunately also lacking from the European Union. The inward-looking, me-first mentality was the first impulse of national governments when COVID-19 hit Europe. Moreover, the European Union restricted the export of medical gear beyond the EU countries, effectively hoarding supplies rather than contributing to the mobilisation of a collective response.

Brussels is limited in how much it can impose on member states for a healthcare response; nevertheless, it got off to a slow start in preparedness, coordination and crisis mitigation. For example, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – established after the SARS epidemic in 2003 – was supposed to act as a mechanism to help the Union manage health crises, but its 60-million-euro budget is vastly insufficient to meet the challenge.<sup>6</sup> At a minimum, the amount should be considerably increased to allow a basic “whole of Europe” response for providing testing, medical equipment and information sharing.<sup>7</sup>

The European Union has also proved politically ineffectual so far in confronting a member state – Hungary – whose authoritarian prime minister brazenly exploited the pandemic to tighten his grip on power and erode democracy.<sup>8</sup> The Trump

<sup>4</sup> Susan Corke and Greg Feifer, “The Coronavirus Stress Test Is Just Beginning for the Transatlantic Alliance”, in *Transatlantic Take*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/14693>.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Miller, Josh Dawsey and Aaron C. Davis, “One Final Viral Infusion: Trump’s Move to Block Travel from Europe Triggered Chaos and a Surge of Passengers from the Outbreaks’ Centers”, in *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2020, <https://wapo.st/2AQkqrf>.

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Laurent, “The EU’s Big Pandemic Failure Isn’t About Money”, in *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2020, <https://wapo.st/3a7znRZ>.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Corke and Greg Feifer, “The Coronavirus Stress Test...”, cit.

<sup>8</sup> Selam Gebrekidan, “For Autocrats, and Others, Coronavirus Is a Chance to Grab Even More Power”,



administration did not help; it provided cover for the authoritarian impulses of Viktor Orbán. Yet, the pandemic has also taken the wind out of the sails of far-right parties. This is somewhat ironic as their influence wanes as their wish of closed borders is realised with the pandemic. Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with her background in science and steady leadership, increased the popularity of her Christian Democratic Union party; according to a poll by German broadcaster ZDF, more than 80 per cent approved of Merkel's handling of the crisis.<sup>9</sup>

As the pandemic progressed, public health coordination between EU member countries was lacking and national leaders fell short in their responses. As winter approaches, Europe is now contending with a rapidly rising second wave.<sup>10</sup> European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen essentially said that the European Union had moved in the right direction but when nation states did not follow, she lacked enforcement power. "If you look back, you can see that a lot of things were done in the right direction in the first wave," von der Leyen said, "but obviously the exit strategies were partly too fast, and measures were relaxed too soon".<sup>11</sup> But it was the potential for an economic fallout from the health crisis that was, in the words of Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, "the biggest test since the Second World War".<sup>12</sup> After some early handwringing, it seems that the European Central Bank has been able to exceed expectations and calm the markets with a show of pandemic resolve. A silver lining to the crisis is that the pandemic forced the European Union to take long overdue action to create integrated financial solutions to shared problems. After tortuous deliberations early in the pandemic, the EU eventually agreed to a 750-billion-euro rescue package, partly funded by an expanded power of the European Commission to borrow money on the market. Led by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Emmanuel Macron of France, these "steps reflected a difficult consensus among members: that the scale of the crisis facing them required groundbreaking measures to ensure the bloc's legitimacy, stability and prosperity".<sup>13</sup> In what could be a sign of deepening European unity, the European Union issued debt in the bond markets for the first

in *The New York Times*, 30 March 2020, <https://nyti.ms/39qLqJt>.

<sup>9</sup> Jenipher Camino Gonzalez, "20 Years since Merkel Took Helm of Germany's Christian Democrats", in *Deutsche Welle*, 10 April 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3akVA>. See also Shannon Schumacher and Moira Fagan, "Confidence in Merkel Is at All-Time High in Several Countries During Her Last Full Year in Office", in *Fact Tank*, 2 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=376920>.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, *On Additional COVID-19 Responses* (COM/2020/687), 28 October 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0687>.

<sup>11</sup> David M. Herszenhorn, "Von der Leyen: EU Countries Must Step Up Against Coronavirus", in *Politico*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/von-der-leyen-nations-must-step-up-against-virus>. See also European Commission, *Statement by President von der Leyen at the Joint Press Conference with Peter Piot, Special Advisor to the President, on Additional Measures for the EU's Response to Coronavirus*, 28 October 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_20\\_1997](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_1997).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Lowen, "Coronavirus: EU Could Fail Over Outbreak, Warns Italy's Giuseppe Conte", in *BBC News*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52224838>.

<sup>13</sup> Matina Stevis-Gridneff, "E.U. Adopts Groundbreaking Stimulus to Fight Coronavirus Recession", in *The New York Times*, 20 July 2020 (updated 23 September 2020), <https://nyti.ms/3jz9vnY>.

time. The European Commission issued “a €17 billion inaugural [pandemic relief] social bond under the EU SURE instrument to help protect jobs and keep people in work”.<sup>14</sup> This is progress; hopefully these economic measures achieved during the pandemic represent a more lasting momentum towards deeper European unity.

The funds may take a while to reach European citizens because of Hungary’s and Poland’s violations of their EU rule of law obligations. The European Parliament has been taking strides to implement rule of law conditionality for EU funds. Some may press that there is no time to waste. But those with a longer-term view counter that unity on adhering to rule of law across the European Union is vital because the actions of one norm-breaking state, like Hungary or Poland, can make all members more vulnerable.

The pandemic has provided opportunities for exploitation by malign actors. Cybercrime has spiked over the past year due primarily to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to an organised cybercrime threat assessment by Europol, the European Union’s law enforcement agency. Criminals contrived both “new modi operandi and adapted existing ones to exploit the situation, new attack vectors and new groups of victims”.<sup>15</sup> Healthcare organisations faced increased cyber-threats during the pandemic, particularly through the use of ransomware.<sup>16</sup> Criminals exploited the societal vulnerabilities created by the crisis – more people online, at home, looking for info were more vulnerable. “Criminal opportunism” was an amplification of existing problems. The remedy to the situation is simple yet unattainable to date; there needs to be better sharing of information, coordination and cooperation.

### 1.3 NATO

Viewed conventionally, a pandemic is a health crisis, not a security one as defined in Article 5 of NATO’s founding treaty. Viewed in terms of destructiveness, COVID-19 is a deadly enemy which is attacking all NATO members at once, and it is the only multinational organisation with “the clout and command-and-control to take on this mission”, as Elisabeth Braw of the Royal United Services Institute puts it.<sup>17</sup>

As the United States and Europe failed to work well together to provide global leadership and even intensified transatlantic tensions, it is a significant outcome that NATO was able to step up as a positive example of how multilateral, transatlantic institutions can still play a vital role in a crisis, even when nationalistic impulses

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, *European Commission Issues First Emission of EU SURE Social Bonds*, 21 October 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1954](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1954).

<sup>15</sup> Europol, *Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2020*, October 2020, p. 4, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2020>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Braw, “The Coronavirus Pandemic Should Be NATO’s Moment”, in *Defense One*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-natos-moment/164239>.

are predominant at the country level. NATO's support role was not that widely known; it helped facilitate assistance between member states and prevent a health emergency from catalysing into a global security crisis. NATO established a dedicated COVID-19 task force. Leveraging its experience in crisis management and disaster relief along with its massive logistical apparatus, the alliance filled a vital global role in transporting medical aid, medical experts and equipment.<sup>18</sup> It was a demonstration of the essential value of transatlantic multilateralism – when and how it can act in a functioning, capable, and coordinated way to address emergencies. And if NATO's erstwhile leader had played a constructive role, it likely could have accomplished more. Brookings scholar Giovanna De Maio, in a report assessing NATO's response to COVID-19, said that what NATO was able to accomplish is an "important testimony to the reactive capability of the alliance and of solidarity between member states".<sup>19</sup> From NATO's own assessment, they concluded that their operations to date have been largely successful: "NATO has demonstrated that it can sustain its operations, missions and activities, and maintain readiness despite the pandemic."<sup>20</sup>

NATO by most accounts demonstrated its potential to be a complementary partner in responding to complex global health emergencies. NATO was able to support member state mitigation measures, as well as ensure the readiness of Alliance forces and defend against the opportunism of adversaries. While primary responsibility for health and national militaries resides with national governments, NATO's coordination infrastructure was instrumental. In countries that were overwhelmed in dealing with the pandemic, NATO mobilised the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which operates as a "clearing-house mechanism for the coordination of requests and offers of international assistance amongst NATO Allies and partners".<sup>21</sup> A total of seventy countries are now included in the mandate. NATO's EADRCC helped to coordinate assistance between donor and recipient member and it used excess airlift capacity to transport essential supplies, protection equipment and disinfectants across borders.<sup>22</sup>

NATO's primary role of maintaining readiness of its security forces continued throughout the pandemic. Although a number of readiness exercises were not able to be conducted, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg assured the world that NATO's "forces remain ready, and our crucial work goes on".<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Giovanna De Maio, "NATO's Response to COVID-19", in *Brookings Foreign Policy Briefs*, October 2020, <https://brook.gs/3jCGKpd>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> NATO, *NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation: A Focus on COVID-19*, last updated 17 July 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> NATO, *NATO and Civil Emergency Response: Marking 20 Years since the Creation of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre*, 3 June 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_155087.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_155087.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Peel and Mehreen Khan, "Turkish Pandemic Airlift Reveals New NATO Mission", in *Financial Times*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/37d98391-c188-4ddf-862f-ee51b7253348>.

<sup>23</sup> NATO, *Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the Meeting of NATO*



### 1.4 Disinformation and interference

Over the past years, as Russia and more recently China have increased the scale and sophistication of their weaponised disinformation campaigns to destabilise multilateral organisations and pit individual countries against one another, the transatlantic alliance has tried to keep up with what seems like a Sisyphean struggle in the information space battle. The pandemic provided a uniquely fertile ground for Russia and China's propagandist war. Since Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea in Ukraine in 2014, both the EU and NATO have intensified their efforts to build capacity to counter the threat disinformation poses to security and unity in the Alliance.

The EU has created new bodies such as the East StratCom Task Force under the External Action Service to expose disinformation narratives related to the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> The EU's Rapid Alert System, which was stood up ahead of European elections in 2019 is designed to better enable EU member states to coordinate against disinformation – yet it is not perceived by policymakers as yet being fully up to the task. While it is promising that the EU is installing new bodies to deal with disinformation, the assessment of a comprehensive research project conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is that there is room for improvement. In particular, the Carnegie's scholars advocate the development of a framework that would “clearly delineate institutional responsibilities based on each body's comparative strengths and formulate countermeasures that more fully leverage those advantages”.<sup>25</sup>

NATO has also been necessarily expanding its own capacity in countering disinformation. In 2019, in the NATO London Declaration, Allied Heads of State and Government declared that NATO is “strengthening [its] ability to prepare for, deter, and defend against hybrid tactics that seek to undermine our security and societies”.<sup>26</sup> NATO was able to contribute to monitoring, reporting and engaging in strategically debunking disinformation, particularly as it related to false and destructive narratives about NATO activities in the pandemic. China was engaged more overtly in propagandist efforts than it had been in the past, but it was mostly focused on trying to burnish its image as a magnanimous leader in the world and distract from COVID's Chinese origins. Russia planted deliberate and weaponised misinformation against NATO. The Alliance tracked and debunked these Russian

*Ministers of Foreign Affairs*, 2 April 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_174772.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_174772.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Naja Bentzen, “COVID-19 Foreign Influence Campaigns. Europe and the Global Battle of Narratives”, in *EPRS Briefings*, April 2020, p. 6, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)649367](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)649367).

<sup>25</sup> James Pamment, “The EU's Role in Fighting Disinformation: Crafting A Disinformation Framework”, in *Carnegie Papers*, 20 September 2020, p. 1, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/82720>.

<sup>26</sup> NATO, *London Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019*, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm).

disinformation narratives, which ranged from simple declarations of NATO's incompetence, to kooky conspiracy theories that COVID was a weapon created in a secret NATO lab.<sup>27</sup>

NATO's contributions were only a modest part of the broader European efforts, by EU bodies and individual countries. Because disinformation campaigns are designed to be difficult to identify, it is hard to know how effective NATO's efforts ultimately were in countering the full range false narratives about the alliance. But, NATO's focus in addressing pandemic disinformation appears to be mostly reactive based on the reported cases studies.<sup>28</sup>

More investment is clearly necessary in a race that the West has been losing to Russia and China - if the alliance aims to not just react to disinformation but prevent it, deter it, and counter it. This will not be an easy task. Russia and China have shown that they are not constrained by ethics, norms, or laws. And they can achieve outsize impact with relatively modest investments.

## 2. US horizon: Complicated but restorative

Joe Biden will inherit a changed landscape and weary partners after a tumultuous Trump presidency. Unlike Trump, Biden prefers working through alliances and global institutions to American unilateralism. He also believes that America must address shortcomings in democracy at home and must stand for human rights and democracy in the world. This is not new rhetoric from Biden. He has consistently stood by these priorities. However, the Obama administration, in which he served as vice-president, had a mixed record on human rights and democracy issues. Even if it was possible, a return to a pre-Trump status-quo would not be a sound strategy given the changed landscape of threats and opportunities. Trumpism has revealed some underlying grievances, many of them legitimate but others uglier in nature. It has also destroyed faith in multilateral institutions as part of a misinformation campaign to prove America's dominance.

Biden will need to find or sequence a delicate balance. In the first days of a Biden presidency, the whole point will be "establishing normalcy, reestablishing our alliances, showing that we care about democracy and human rights again, sort of reassuring the world".<sup>29</sup> Normalcy does not mean a regression to a past time. It means using the dynamism intrinsic to a democratic system and the commitment to shared values to show leadership and innovation in tackling tough, hybrid, global challenges.

<sup>27</sup> NATO, "Russia's Top Five Myths About NATO & COVID-19", in *NATO Factsheets*, April 2020, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19_en.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> NATO, *NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation: A Focus on COVID-19*, cit.

<sup>29</sup> David M. Herszenhorn, "Joe Biden vs. the American Foreign Policy Establishment", in *Politico*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/joe-bidens-us-foreign-policy>.

In 2021 we can expect that the US government will seek to reengage in a multilateral system and repair American leadership. Biden has pledged to immediately re-join the Paris Climate Accord, the WHO, the Human Rights Council, and revitalise transatlantic ties. He has stated in his campaign briefs that he will host a Global Summit for Democracy in his first-year galvanising significant new country commitments to counter authoritarianism and protect our democracies and advance human rights at home and abroad. The concept calls for greater collaboration between governments, civil society and the private sector.<sup>30</sup> This will be symbolically important to send a global signal to authoritarian rivals and foes that America as a values-based global power is back.

### 3. European outlook: Less trusting but hopeful

With the prospect of four more years of Trump, Europe had to prepare itself for the continued absence of the United States as a positive force in the multilateral system and focus on developing greater strategic autonomy. In planning for this outcome, the Europeans have created strategic momentum and a constituency for building autonomous military capacity. Time will tell, but this preparedness planning could be a positive outcome rather than one that threatens cohesion in the alliance. A healthier alliance one will be one that is more balanced.

Most in Europe presumably will welcome the American return to values and alliances which would accompany a Biden presidency. But the anxiety and distrust that accumulated during the Trump years will not be so easily repaired. Europe will likely pursue a dual strategy to hedge its bets. It will embrace a return to a more normal and respectful partnership. But those who have been pressing for greater European strategic autonomy will likely continue to do so. The painful lesson for Europe is that a Trump presidency was possible in the first place. And that it could happen again if the underlying factors that paved the way for him are not ameliorated.

Despite an uneven grade on public health performance across the Union in addressing the pandemic, in part due to differing levels of compliance in member states, economically and politically the European Union has made some promising steps forward. The shared EU debt in the bond market to raise adequate funds to recover from the pandemic was a difficult but historic step, one that had long been resisted by the financially healthiest members of the Union. Where there was a lack of coordination, communication and sharing in individual member states, and tension with the US, it was mitigated somewhat by the ability of NATO to provide a connective layer of infrastructural support. NATO's continued collaboration will be vital as the transatlantic allies moves to implement better COVID testing, contain the pandemic through the winter, counter adversarial moves by Russia and China, and hopefully have a vaccine for wide distribution as soon as possible.

<sup>30</sup> See Biden-Harris campaign website: <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership>.

#### 4. A common agenda and commitment to fight urgent problems

In order to have meaningful commitment, the United States and Europe first have to answer these fundamental questions to their own citizens: how does the multilateral system keep me safe, free, and financially secure? How can the multilateral system address and succeed in confronting the challenges we face? For the United States, policymakers must persuade ordinary Americans that international engagement and alliances are worth the cost. For Europe the challenge is similar.

The multilateral system has been underperforming. As discussed, this is in part due to tensions between the United States and Europe, and in part due to the United States abdicating its moral and practical leadership. For the multilateral system to be effective, it needs to reform or invest in building the necessary structures, expertise, and processes to meet the threats posed by a global landscape where the transatlantic alliance competes against aggressive non-democratic adversaries, Russia and China.

A starting point has to be investing in resilience and preparedness. A shocking aspect of the pandemic was that the world knew something like this was coming. Jim Townsend and Anca Agachi made a powerful argument in an Atlantic Council paper for how a multilateral organisation such as NATO could perform better in future complex emergencies simply by being better prepared. They proposed that “NATO should conceptualize resilience as a peacetime effort, which empowers people and societies within member states to work together continuously to address sources of vulnerability, especially those areas below the threshold of the use of force.”<sup>31</sup> In 2010, NATO identified “health risks” as a future area of concern for NATO’s operations. A significant regret in hindsight is that the organisation did not follow up with sufficient measures to strengthen its crisis management apparatus. Instead, it cut the staff of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), the alliance’s main mechanism for civil emergency response.<sup>32</sup> This is the very body that has played a critical role in providing assistance to ally countries during the pandemic. That same pattern of hijacking our own preparedness occurred throughout the transatlantic alliance. President Trump dismantled pandemic preparedness initiatives in the White House that had been established under Barack Obama.

Over the past seven decades, the multilateral system has been able to evolve to meet daunting challenges – such as the Cold War – and emerge stronger. It is certainly possible that the multilateral system can emerge from this crisis with greater strength, determination and willingness to collaborate. A commitment to reform and investment is only one piece of the puzzle. The more important question is whether there is the political will to make the alliance not just competent, but

<sup>31</sup> Jim Townsend and Anca Agachi, “Build Resilience for an Era of Shocks”, in *Atlantic Council Reports*, October 2020, p. 63, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=307250>.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanna De Maio, “NATO’s Response to COVID-19”, cit.



forward-looking, capable of shaping the global narrative and regaining confidence.

The major test of the multilateral, transatlantic alliance is whether they can agree on a shared set of priorities to face the hybrid threat posed by Russia and China. They are adversarial regimes vested in no less than the destruction of the multilateral system based in democratic principles. Russia and China have been investing heavily in information warfare. Russia attacked and interfered in the American 2016 elections.<sup>33</sup> Within the current political environment, the United States and Europe have not kept pace with their technological ruthlessness and ubiquity. That means that they will need to jointly exert leverage and enact real consequences for Russia's and China's violations of international law, treaties and norms.

When the United States and Europe coordinate in imposing targeted sanctions, it sends a powerful message and hits back directly at the corrupt elite, for instance in Russia. In 2018, the US administration provided for sanctions against individuals and entities involved in operations to interfere in the US elections. This included individuals and companies that were part of the so-called "troll farm" in St. Petersburg that produced and distributed disinformation during the 2016 presidential elections. The United States should work in coordination with democratic allies to expose disinformation operations by foreign governments and sanction the entities involved in such operations.<sup>34</sup>

Europe and the United States need to have a shared understanding of the risk that Russia and China pose to the multilateral system. Formulating a coherent, collective and nuanced response requires assessing Chinese and Russian influence operations against core US and European interests as well as political and economic vulnerabilities. We are only beginning to understand how vulnerable the multilateral system is to cyber threats. The European Union and United States, with NATO, need to be prepared to work together on a blueprint for how the system needs to change and become better integrated.

To meet this challenge would require a transformation of the multilateral system. Experts such as Marietje Schaake, a leading voice on technology policy issues in Brussels, have argued that we do not currently have the right digital "infrastructure to guarantee the free exchange of ideas, interoperability, fair voting and other key conditions for democracy".<sup>35</sup> She and others have proposed the need for a Transatlantic Digital Alliance which could set the democratic framework for internet governance. This would be a necessary step to repair and restore public

<sup>33</sup> US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measure Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure with Additional Views*, July 2019, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=830205>.

<sup>34</sup> Alina Polyakova and Dan Fried, "Democratic Defense against Disinformation 2.0", in *Atlantic Council Reports*, June 2019, p. 18, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=130959>.

<sup>35</sup> Marietje Schaake and Tomica Tilleman, "Digital Transatlantic Alliance" (podcast), in *The Cable Podcast*, 7 August 2020, <https://wp.me/p9kr06-2ZO>.

confidence in our multilateral institutions.<sup>36</sup>

A Transatlantic Digital Alliance would require a highly integrated, interactive network of different agencies, organisations and actors, including the US government, the big tech companies, EU agencies, the G7, the United Nations, NATO and civil society. It would need to have the power to create better communication, coordination and capacity.

Europe also will need to show that it can hold member states accountable on issues of rule of law. If the European Union (and the United States too) cannot hold member states accountable to democratic principles, it undermines trust in democracy and multilateral organisations. The Trump administration does not care about performance on rule of law issues and has even encouraged authoritarian leaders in their illiberal behaviour. Biden, however, will likely buttress the European Parliament's efforts to rein in the poor performers.

This will be tricky for the European Union as it weighs a push to release pandemic recovery funds quickly against the need to put a stop to abuse of EU rules by nations such as Hungary and Poland. These member states are large recipients of EU funds, yet at the same time they betray their commitments to adhere to a shared set of rule-of-law standards. This is not just a question of keeping promises, it is a matter of maintaining the security and functionality of multilateral alliances. Hungary's authoritarian leader, for example, has relied on misinformation, undermining of independent institutions and maintaining a corrupt inner circle. Countries in the European Union and NATO that are some of the worst performers on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>37</sup> – including Hungary and Romania – have underfunded hospitals and political leaders who have enabled the kind of systemic corruption that will hamper informed, effective long-term security measures.

After the initial failures, the next phases of mitigating the pandemic's effects and recovering from crisis will determine the future of European and American leadership of a multilateral system. To pass the test, both sides of the Atlantic must unite over common liberal democratic values by sharing responsibilities.

There are many valid criticisms about where the rules-based multilateral order has failed to live up to expectations. Nonetheless, it is the only path that we know can lead to peace and security; and the complex challenges on the horizon can only be solved through cooperation.

*Updated 24 November 2020*

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019*, January 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/corruption-perceptions-index-2019>.

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