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## 10 A strained partnership? A typology of tensions in the EU-US transatlantic relationship

**Abstract:** This chapter considers recent developments in the transatlantic relationship between the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) as an example of how multiple kinds of simultaneous crises can affect an area of EU activity at once. In so doing it disentangles the effects of certain short-term and prominent inflection points, such as the election of Donald Trump as US president, or Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from more long-term and background elements of strain affecting the overall trajectory of the transatlantic relationship. This focus on different types of crises also allows for the chapter to consider both tensions arising from within the transatlantic relationship, as well as those which are technically exogenous to it, yet which have spillover effects into the state of transatlantic ties. Overall, the chapter concludes that while prominent and sudden developments have a significant impact on the state of transatlantic relations in the short term, it is the more long-term and less prominent gradual divergence of the underlying preferences of both actors which is likely going to have a more lasting and drastic impact overall.

**Keywords:** Transatlantic relations, United States, NATO, trade war, overlapping crises

### Introduction

When then US president Donald Trump announced on 14 July 2020 at a press conference held in the White House Rose Garden that “[t]he European Union was formed in order to take advantage of the United States” (Trump 2020) transatlantic relations, defined here as the bilateral relationship between the United States and the European Union, had reached an absolute low. While the state of the transatlantic relationship has trended much closer to its historical, relatively cordial state since the election of Joe Biden as Trump's successor, the Trump era has still demonstrated how easily it can be strained and receive long-term damage. This is particularly problematic given the diverse composition of both partners in terms of their relative size, their democratic foundations, as well as their joint long-term interests concerning issues such as free trade, a rules-based international system, or

the promotion of democracy (with none of the two partners being a perfect proponent of either of these issues, however). Symbolically the importance of this partnership has been emphasized on numerous occasions, with the European Union considering the United States as one of its ten long-term so-called strategic partners with which it wants to maintain particularly close ties.<sup>1</sup>

While the developments of the Trump era have already shown that long-standing European assumptions about the United States as a key promoter of European integration since the EU's humble beginnings (Rappaport 1981) cannot be seen as natural constants, this episode nonetheless raises further questions as to the state and trajectory of the transatlantic relationship. In particular, it is unclear whether the Trump presidency serves as a temporary exception during which the interests of both parties were merely politically out of sync, or whether those developments foreshadowed genuinely diverging interests between both parties, thus hurting the overall relationship in a more structural sense. This chapter attempts to answer this question by considering different types of strain that have and continue to affect the transatlantic relationship, as well as how their effects vary by type. This allows for distinguishing between the kind of negative short-term impact that the Trump presidency has mainly represented, as well as wider and often less prominent long-term trends which stand to affect the transatlantic relationship on a more permanent basis. Overall, the chapter argues that while different types of short-term crises can serve to illustrate both the fragilities and strengths of the transatlantic relationship, it is more profound shifts in interests, underlying conditions, and positions on both sides of the Atlantic which represent the bigger long-term risk for bilateral ties.

By disentangling different kinds of strain, the chapter illustrates how their respective impact differs, as well as how the overall state of the transatlantic relationship is the result of multiple elements of strain occurring in parallel. Discussing distinct types of crises also allows us to distinguish between strain arising from within the transatlantic relationship itself, and that which is technically exogenous in nature yet affects the overall state of the transatlantic relationship regardless. In the latter case, it is important to note that such crises can ultimately have a positive, rather than overall negative impact on the state of the transatlantic ties.

This introduction is followed by a brief discussion of existing research on the state and recent evolution of the transatlantic relationship. Based on these perspectives, the remainder of the chapter then focuses on individual crises which have shap-

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<sup>1</sup> The other original “strategic partners” are Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and South Africa. However, China has since also been considered as both a “competitor” and “systemic rival” (European Commission 2019, 1), with Russia's status also in doubt not least since the country's reinvasion of Ukraine since the spring of 2022.

ed transatlantic relations in recent years. While these are considered in separate sections, most of these are necessarily interrelated, with the chapter pointing to such linkages whenever necessary. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the chapter does not attempt to capture all elements of strain affecting the transatlantic relationship, but instead highlights particular crises as an illustration of how strain can affect the relationship. The examples chosen are not only the most prominently discussed ones but also represent a cross-section of the kinds of strain affecting transatlantic ties. In the order that they are discussed, these are 1.) the dominant yet relatively short-term crisis in transatlantic relations induced by the Trump presidency; 2.) domestic issues affecting both partners alike, and which have contributed to both parties' introspection; 3.) fundamental long-term shifts affecting the foundations of the transatlantic relationship; and 4.) Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an example of an external crisis having had a positive effect on transatlantic ties.

## The state of the transatlantic relationship in context

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the transatlantic relationship in its larger dimension, bringing together the United States on the one side, the EU and its 27 member states on the other, and even further countries when including additional institutional contexts such as NATO membership. This has led scholars to argue that said relationship lies at the heart of the global liberal order (Hofmann 2021: 150). Furthermore, “[i]n terms of values and interests, economic interactions and human bonds, the United States and the European Union are closer to one another than either is to any other major international actor.” (Hamilton 2014: 25).

While the said relationship is thus central to both parties involved in it, it is also very complex given the different nature of both actors. The United States is arguably the most powerful sovereign state in the world, while the European Union's status as an ultimately confederal entity with only some of the powers of sovereign states, and the continued parallel existence of its 27 member states, make this a particularly complex relationship defined by its multi-layered nature (Hamilton 2014: 25). It is this underlying asymmetry in the relationship (Polyakova & Haddad 2019: 109) which has, on the one hand, enabled the United States to play a role supportive of European integration underlying the EU project, while enabling the EU to develop on its own regardless of Europe's geopolitical position. On the other hand, it has enabled the United States to shape global order by leading a coalition of largely like-minded countries throughout the Cold War and beyond.

Identifying the strength and evolution of this relationship is thus relevant far beyond the confines of transatlantic ties itself, as it has the potential to affect geopolitics. Recent analyses have both raised concerns and given hope to the status of this relationship going forward. While, during the Trump presidency, Riddervold and Newsome argued that “the transatlantic relationship is under more pressure today than in any other period since its establishment after the Second World War” (2018: 518), only a few years later they then made the case that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine meant that “relations between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) seem more robust than ever” (2022: 128). According to these analyses, the state of the relationship is thus subject to relatively short-term swings dependent on developments internal and external to it.

When taking a more long-term perspective, such back-and-forth developments are not entirely unexpected, as the “relations are beset by competitive impulses, underlying questions of trust, and mutual doubts about relative commitment and capacity” (Hamilton 2014: 25). At the same time, the duration of the partnership, and said swings within it, are often also seen as evidence for its robustness, with the relationship being able to bounce back (Hofmann 2021), and the swings in public rhetoric hiding underlying structural issues attesting the transatlantic relationship’s strength (Olsen 2022).

## **The Trump-era transatlantic breakdown: A template of things to come?**

The Trump presidency and its all-encompassing political claim of putting ‘America first’ were perhaps the most visible recent instance of significant short-term strain being introduced in the transatlantic relationship. The prominence of this particular episode in the partnership can ultimately be attributed to the underlying symbolism of some of President Trump’s actions, such as his public statements opposing the EU, or a decision to downgrade the status of the EU’s representation in Washington, D.C. in 2019 (Borger 2019a).

What turned the Trump presidency into a more significant actual strain on the transatlantic relationship, however, were some underlying political decisions that also affected its foundations. For most of these issues, responsibility lies directly and unequivocally with the Trump administration. However, some instances of transatlantic tension illustrate how the EU’s and its member states’ sometimes naïve approach toward global and transatlantic issues has facilitated the negative fallout of the Trump administration’s choices.

Given the centrality of economic issues for the European Union, it was some of the protectionist measures introduced by the Trump administration which have added the most significant strain to the transatlantic relationship. Here, it was Trump's view of the EU as an economic competitor and rival (much like China), and Germany, in particular (Larres 2020: 106), which informed several economic policy measures alienating the European Union.

The most significant of these measures was the 2018 introduction of tariffs on US imports of steel and aluminium products. While these tariffs were chiefly aimed at China, with the United States initially granting certain exemptions to EU imports, they ultimately hurt EU-US trade and led the EU to retaliate by imposing tariffs of its own (Larres 2020: 121). Trump's anger over an ongoing trade deficit between the US and the EU, and the US and Germany, in particular, also led his administration to threaten additional tariffs on the importation of automobiles by European car-makers. While such an escalation was avoided by a trip of the then European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker for negotiations with Trump in Washington (Larres 2020: 122–23), the damage in trust between the EU and its member states on the one side, and the Trump administration, on the other, was hard to reverse. Tensions were not eased by the fact that while Trump eventually buried the hatchet in an escalation of trade tensions, he continued to be an outspoken supporter of Brexit, the principal issue affecting the EU internally at the time.

These tensions were made worse by certain decisions of the Trump administration affecting global order including, but also going beyond, the realm of trade. Here, the Trump administration's assault on the global trading system was rendered worse by also attacking the WTO and essentially rendering its dispute settlement mechanism ineffective (Hopewell 2021). To make matters worse, it is this body that is tasked with mediating trade conflicts of the sort initiated by the Trump administration. Beyond the realm of trade, the United States' decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) (Rogers & Mandavilli 2020) also critically weakened an institution which at the time played a central role in managing the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Beyond this, the Trump administration also threatened the EU's role in global governance more directly. One such example was the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, and the introduction of economic sanctions against the country. JCPOA was initially reached through the central mediating role played by the EU, thus illustrating its novel importance in foreign policy since the institutional changes introduced with the Lisbon Treaty. The departure of the United States from the agreement led the EU to actively counter this development by attempting to uphold JCPOA's terms on its own. Given the central role played by the United States and its currency for international finance, it even led the EU to develop a mechanism

that would allow Iran to participate in international commerce despite the economic sanctions of the United States (Immenkamp 2020: 9–10).

Another field in which the Trump administration not only snubbed the international community, but the EU in particular, was by withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement (Pavone 2018) given the EU's (perceived) leadership on this issue not just within the transatlantic relationship (Cross 2018). Ultimately, the sum total of such decisions by the Trump administration not only hurt the transatlantic partnership internally but also had external consequences, with the EU having to partly rebalance its international outlook in the affected issues away from the United States and often towards cooperating more closely with China. In the realm of international trade, this led both the EU and China to collectively challenge Trump's protectionist policies at the WTO (Larres 2020: 121–22), while both also collaborated more closely on tackling climate change (Boffey & Neslen 2017), thus further antagonizing the Trump administration amidst its critical stance towards China.

Another core area in which the Trump administration's actions significantly worsened the transatlantic relationship is in the realm of security. While transatlantic security cooperation continues to be the principal remit of NATO, rather than the EU, the overlap in membership between both organisations, as well as the EU's modest integration steps in the realm of security and defence meant that the transatlantic relationship would also be affected in its US-EU dimension. Here, it was the Trump administration's threat for the United States to leave NATO which represented the most significant risk to transatlantic ties.

However, short of implementing this extreme decision, the relationship was nonetheless strained anyway by the United States' decision to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, which had previously allowed unarmed surveillance activities to ease East-West tensions, as well as the announcement of a withdrawal of US troops from Germany (Hofmann 2021: 154). While it was yet again the decisions of the Trump administration which ultimately sparked this dimension of the crisis in transatlantic relations, this was enabled by decades of underinvestment in defence capabilities by many EU countries. As explored below, it was this long-term imbalance in the transatlantic security relationship which led to the Trump administration taking and threatening the decisions outlined above. Lastly, and affecting security cooperation outside of NATO's own territory, the Trump administration also weakened transatlantic ties by increasingly taking unilateral decisions such as withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan without consulting major allies.

While the Trump administration principally contributed to a crisis within the transatlantic relationship itself, it also increased strain within the EU as some EU countries advocated for different kinds of reactions to certain decisions taken by the United States. Overall, this did not lead to EU unity over central issues in the

transatlantic relationship or topics such as Brexit being threatened but instead became visible in the margins of other areas of EU activity. For instance, Donald Trump's decision to relocate the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in 2018 led to a weakening of a previously held EU position over the status of the city. Here, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania blocked EU statements condemning the embassy's move, with representatives of the three countries as well as Austria also attending the embassy's opening ceremony (Aggestam & Bicchi 2019: 526).

While the immediate crisis in transatlantic relations caused by the Trump presidency was resolved due to Joe Biden's election as US president, as well as the Biden administration's underlying measures to repair the damage that had been done, this episode has nonetheless had a lasting effect on transatlantic ties. While, on the one hand, the rhetoric and many actions by the Biden administration helped to assuage the EU and its member states (Olsen 2022: 157), a complete policy reversal to a status quo before the Trump administration did not happen. Here, some damage simply could not be undone in the short term, such as the weakening of the WTO. The Biden administration also took relatively long – in part deliberately – to reverse certain other Trump-era policies, and did not alter some at all, as illustrated by the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan during the summer of 2021 (Olsen 2022: 154).

Lastly, while the Trump years illustrate the fragility of the transatlantic relationship to short-term internal shocks, there is also some evidence for its built-in resilience. This can be seen when considering Donald Trump's support for Brexit and the UK government's attempts at weakening certain parts of their agreement with the EU when it came to the status of Northern Ireland. Here, the Trump administration promised the quick conclusion of a UK-US trade agreement as a near-term benefit of Brexit. This would have directly contravened the EU's efforts to hold the UK to the promises made in its EU withdrawal agreement, and particularly to preserve the precarious status quo in Northern Ireland. These promises were contravened, however, by checks and balances built into the US system of government, with key members of the United States Congress threatening to block any potential trade agreement should the UK's approach to relations with the EU affect the status quo in Northern Ireland (Borger 2019b).

## **Domestic political strain on both sides of the Atlantic: United in crisis?**

While the election of Donald Trump as US president marked an immediate crisis in transatlantic relations, the political dynamics that led to his success are not unique



to the United States. Instead, the success of political figures like Trump is illustrative of a wider trend of the rise of populist and far-right political movements on both sides of the Atlantic. While this trend affects both partners alike, ironically it is this similarity that has contributed to a weakening of their ties (Aggestam & Hyde-Price 2019: 118). The drastic change in foreign policy positions of the Trump administration aside, this is mainly due to these domestic challenges to the established political order that have led both the United States and the EU in becoming more self-centred and inward-looking to deal with said challenges.

In the EU this is best illustrated by the political developments which contributed to the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. Brexit itself has been the foremost factor leading to the EU's introspection in the aftermath of the UK's referendum on the matter (see the chapter by Usherwood) and has reduced the EU's overall international clout (see the chapter by Smith). With Brexit negotiations underway not only were large parts of the EU's bureaucracy preoccupied with managing the actual dissolution process and its fallout, but this also contributed to the EU deliberately focusing on discussing potential domestic reforms (e.g. European Commission 2017). Central political figures such as French president Emmanuel Macron have also used Brexit and associated issues to argue that the EU would need to look inward before focusing again on key foreign policies such as enlargement (Chrisafis & Rankin 2019).

Political developments similar to those which led to Brexit have also introduced additional strain on the EU's internal coherence by empowering far-right political parties and empowering some Trump-like political figures within the EU. The latter dynamic has, so far, principally remained limited to certain domestic contexts such as Janez Janša's premiership in Slovenia between 2020 and 2022, or former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (whose government supported the Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem). However, far-right and often Eurosceptic parties have also seen a general rise across much of the EU (Rump 2022) independent of Trumpian rhetoric, thereby threatening overall European unity. In certain country contexts, such as Hungary, a similar trend has also come to the fore, albeit not through the rise of novel political movements, but the gradual transformation of the existing Fidesz party under prime minister Viktor Orbán into a populist and largely anti-European political outfit (Fabry 2019).

Given the set-up of the EU's political system, the impact of the rise of such political movements has so far been relatively limited at large. Even though far-right anti-EU political parties have managed to increase their number of seats in the European Parliament over several electoral cycles, they have so far remained marginalized at the EU level. However, the impact of increasing fragmentation of the EU can instead be seen in areas of EU activity where unanimity voting requirements apply, thus giving individual countries large leeway in blocking EU decision-making

and requiring extensive negotiations over underlying trade-offs. Such issues of EU unity are likely going to be tested even further with additional far-right parties entering EU member state governments.

While the EU's capacity to fruitfully engage in a renewed transatlantic relationship has thus been limited both by Brexit and the impact of the rise of far-right and populist political movements, the fallout beyond the Trump administration has been somewhat similar in the US. Here, the fundamental weakening of the country's political system amidst the questioning of the electoral process by Trump and his allies has contributed to the country's inward focus even into the Biden administration. As some developments ahead of the November 2022 mid-term elections have shown, this tendency has continued well into the term of the Biden presidency (Pilkington 2022).

What's more, with Trump having been supported by many traditionally Democratic voting parts of the electorate, such as blue-collar workers, efforts to block the success of Trump or similar political figures in the future will necessarily contribute to the country continuing to focus on domestic economic and social policies, which, as the next section illustrates, may run counter to common interests such as free trade in the wider transatlantic dimension. Such developments then ultimately create the foundations for a transatlantic alliance that has been eroded by its constituent parts being weakened domestically.

## The gradual erosion of the transatlantic alliance's foundations

While the presidency of Donald Trump, based on underlying political dynamics playing out on both sides of the Atlantic, has demonstrated the potential for immediate disruption in the transatlantic relationship, the excesses of the Trump presidency are ultimately but a symptom of wider geopolitical trends which lead to a gradual erosion of the long-term common basis of transatlantic ties. These developments occur irrespective of this recent episode, as “[a]lthough it is tempting to attribute the deterioration in transatlantic relations to one specific factor [...] the problems besetting transatlantic relations are deeper and more multifaceted than that” (Aggestam & Hyde-Price 2019: 114). Indeed, an increasing overall divergence between both partners has already been noted for quite some time (Ridder-vold & Newsome 2018).

On the one hand, this increasing divergence reflects structural shifts in the wider international system, which contribute to the weakening of the transatlantic partnership over time. This, in turn, is a product of the rise in relevance of certain

international actors such as China but also results from the kind of domestic trends (Smith 2022) which were outlined above. With both parties changing preferences and having to reorientate their positions in response to these developments it is ultimately possible to observe a weakening commitment to collective values shared by both, which in turn negatively affects the strength of the overall bilateral relationship (Smith 2018: 550–51).

While the prior alignment of values and goals also served to hide any underlying structural deficiencies in the partnership beforehand, the diverging positions now highlight problems related to how the transatlantic relationship operates. Here, it is important to remember that the interaction between both sides cannot be regarded as one of equals. The EU's limited capacity to engage in international relations has led to interactions between the EU and the US to remain relatively technocratic in nature, to focus on processes rather than outcomes, as well as approaching many issues in an ad hoc rather than strategic manner (Hamilton 2014: 25).

Such technical constraints on the EU's side are made worse by an underlying power asymmetry in the broader transatlantic alliance which also includes NATO and the individual positions of EU member states. Here, the divergence on security issues between the United States and European parties is at the heart of one of the developing rifts (Polyakova & Haddad 2019: 109).

While president Trump merely highlighted such asymmetries in the context of NATO, European countries' reluctance to invest in their own security amidst the security umbrella provided by the United States has contributed to more long-term strain affecting the relationship. The long-term importance of this issue can be illustrated by the fact that Trump was not the first US president to prominently criticize Europe's under-investment in its own defence. Instead, the Obama administration issued similar warnings against European free-riding on security issues (Szabo 2018: 541). What made matters worse was that a significant shortfall in defence capabilities could even be observed for the EU's (then) largest defence spenders, France and the UK, who faced significant difficulties amidst the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 (Aggestam & Hyde-Price 2019: 116).

While these ongoing warnings by two US presidents have had a small positive impact on European defence spending, the underlying asymmetry has remained even as the United States entered the Biden era. As a result, many European countries delayed further significant defence investment, which could have moderated the positions of the Trump administration, and instead hedged on a win by Biden in the 2020 presidential election and an eventual return to normal in the transatlantic security relationship (Hofmann 2021: 156–57). This has only changed more recently amidst Russia's war against Ukraine.

Difficulties due to the existing power asymmetry of both actors aside, there is also potential for further long-term strain in the relationship when considering a gradual divergence of both parties' positions when it comes to their geopolitical outlook. Here, it is particularly the observation of an ongoing geographic shift in the United States' political attention, often described as a 'pivot to Asia', and the EU's increasing focus to develop what has been described as 'strategic autonomy' which can serve to illustrate the ongoing erosion of a common basis for the transatlantic relationship.

With NATO and EU enlargement in the 2000s radically altering the political set-up of the European continent in the aftermath of the Cold War, the attention of the United States increasingly began to move elsewhere. This could first be observed under the Obama administration which initiated the United States' first significant pivot towards Asia (Szabo 2018: 541). With the increasing relevance of the latter continent amidst the world's growth patterns, as well as the potential for conflict due to the rise of China, this pivot has only continued since then (Aggestam & Hyde-Price 2019: 117) and is likely to continue progressing going forward.

Aside from reinforcing the need for the EU to become a more autonomous actor on its own continent (see below), this development also serves to underline the potentially distinct perspectives of both the EU and the US on the wider Asian sphere. Here, the increasingly hostile position of the United States towards China, which began to become apparent during the Trump presidency and has since continued into Joe Biden's term in office (Olsen 2022: 154), has the potential for additional policy divergence between both partners. This came to the fore, in particular, amidst the announcement of a military alliance between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (AUKUS), which would include providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. This was seen as an affront in France and the EU, as it coincided with Australia reneging on an advanced military procurement contract that would have provided the country with submarines of a French design (Olsen 2022: 158).

This attempt to strengthen the United States' ties to a key partner in the Pacific region thus ultimately had the indirect effect of alienating (parts of) the EU, thus further weakening the potential for transatlantic collaboration in the Asia-Pacific region. This is unfortunate as the EU and an increasing number of its member states have similarly started to become worried about the rise of China and its policies. However, this is a much more gradual development in the European case as many EU countries are more highly intertwined with China than the US, and central EU members such as Germany particularly so (Bergsen et al. 2022: 5–6). Here, the United States more rapid turn towards Asia and the lack of coordination with its European allies may have thus fundamentally damaged the potential for developing a collective view of the region within the transatlantic partnership.

Key European countries such as France have seen this as an element to justify a European approach that would explicitly be distinct from that of the United States – a view that was already reinforced by key policy choices of the Trump administration (Larres 2020: 119–24). This is ultimately related to increasing calls to develop greater European ‘strategic autonomy’ (Szewczyk 2022) amidst the US withdrawal from Europe and emerging divergence of positions, where “discussions in Europe on attaining strategic autonomy are often held not so much with China in mind, but the US” (Bergsen et al. 2022: 19). Underlying such initiatives is the realization that “Europe will never be as central to the United States as it once was and will have to focus on ensuring the survival of its own model before claiming global ambitions.” (Polyakova & Haddad 2019: 119). At the same time, prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was also assumed that “Europe is now no longer as reliant on US security guarantees as it was during the East-West conflict” (Aggestam & Hyde-Price 2019: 117), thus allowing (if not forcing) it to develop a more independent perspective on pressing international issues.

The United States’ ongoing pivot to Asia is thus a parallel yet interrelated development to calls for the EU and its member states to become more independent in their geopolitical outlook. After all, while the desire by the US for its European partners to invest more heavily in their own security necessarily contributes to an increasing European foreign and security policy autonomy, so can the EU’s desire to become more independent only be realized when emerging from the security umbrella provided by the United States (Polyakova & Haddad 2019: 110). The contrary developments of the United States pivot to Asia, as well as increasing calls for a more autonomous EU position thus have the potential for further eroding the basis of transatlantic ties going forward, irrespective of the short-term political developments observed above.

The economic dimension of the transatlantic partnership would seem to offer a more positive outlook on its foundations at first sight. Here, both partners had attempted to negotiate the world’s largest bilateral trade agreement, the so-called Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) prior to the Trump presidency. Despite underlying difficulties at the time, the mere existence of said negotiations is thus a testament to both parties’ desire to strengthen this element of their relationship. However, here again, it was a decision by the Trump administration preceding the protectionist measures outlined above which brought the project to a halt.

While one could once again conclude that this represents a mere short-term disruption, developments since the end of the Trump presidency have also hinted at a more long-term shift affecting trade and economic ties as a foundational aspect of the transatlantic relationship. Here, the Biden administration has been quite reluctant to return the economic dimension of transatlantic relations to

the status quo prior to Trump entering office. While the lack of a resumption of trade talks between both parties is one of the clearest indicators of this, it can also be seen in how the Biden administration has undone some of the more extreme trade policy measures introduced by Trump.

While a certain *détente* in transatlantic trade relations was already reached by June of 2021, six months into Biden's term in office, by ending a long-lasting dispute over subsidies for Boeing and Airbus respectively (Brundsen et al. 2021), it took until October of 2021 to end the escalating trade war over punitive tariffs. Here, ahead of the EU taking further retaliatory measures against US tariffs the Biden administration announced in the margins of a G20 meeting in Rome that most of the Trump-era tariffs on European steel and aluminium goods would be rolled back (Swanson & Rogers 2021). This did not amount to a full-scale removal of said tariffs, with some protections remaining in place given constraints fuelled by the domestic political developments in the United States outlined in the previous section.

Rather than further reducing trade tensions over the ensuing period, these have only escalated again amidst US plans to overhaul and expand subsidies for the onshoring of production in critical sectors necessary for the energy transition and future technologies, which would put the European economy at a disadvantage (von der Burchard & Leali 2022). While one could thus have expected that EU-US trade ties would return to normal after the end of the Trump presidency, the developments since then point to a similar erosion of the common basis which had enabled both parties relatively cordial economic relationship in the past.

## **The impact of external shocks: Temporary transatlantic unity amidst Russia's war against Ukraine**

The above sections have principally considered strain emanating from within the transatlantic relationship, including parallel challenges at the domestic level. To complete this picture through yet another perspective, this section considers Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine since 24 February 2022 as a crisis external to the transatlantic relationship which has, however, had a largely positive impact on it – at least in the security domain. While many of the crises outlined above have served to underscore the immediate and long-term negative effects on the existing transatlantic relationship, the transatlantic response to Russia's war against Ukraine instead serves to illustrate that transatlantic ties continue to have a significant potential, which can re-emerge when existing difficulties within the transatlantic relationship are dwarfed

by larger geopolitical developments. This renewed unity was expressed, on the one hand, through the extensive need for transatlantic coordination to make measures such as economic sanctions as effective as possible, and secondly, the renewed relevance of the transatlantic security community to ensure the safety of the wider European area (and beyond) against military threats.

Here, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ultimately served as an external shock which, while affecting the EU in a much more immediate manner, has focused minds on both sides of the Atlantic given its geopolitical repercussions. With both the United States and the European Union ultimately defending similar interests when it comes to this conflict, analysts have considered that "[t]he war in Ukraine has reinvigorated transatlantic unity" (Wright & Cooley 2022). Others have compared the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war to a vaccination, representing a positive "shot in the arm to the transatlantic relationship" (Bouchet 2022). This conflict has thus served to make the existing transatlantic tensions fade into the background of this much more immediate and threatening largely external crisis, while also bringing common transatlantic values, such as a commitment to a rules-based international order or the support of democracy back to the fore.

What has led to this external crisis having a direct effect on the transatlantic relationship is ultimately its intensity. While Russia had already violated Ukraine's territorial integrity through its annexation of Crimea and by waging war against Ukraine in a more restrained manner since 2014, the underlying conflict and its potential repercussions were never perceived as relevant enough to have a lasting impact on the wider dynamics of transatlantic ties. There were also some differences in how the parties on both sides of the Atlantic perceived the sequence of events following 2014 (Stahl et al. 2016). Regardless, the rather weak cornerstones of the failed attempts to contain Russia's expansionism were transatlantic in nature. Here, the Obama administration coordinated its policy response closely with EU partners, and Germany, in particular (Szabo 2018: 543–44), all while never turning into a central aspect of the transatlantic partnership at the time.

It was the failure of this policy, as well as the larger geopolitical implications of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine which then made this crisis the centre of transatlantic relations since 24 February 2022. Unlike before, however, there was also a shift of leadership within the EU. Here, central European countries such as the Baltic countries, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland have been proven right in their long-standing hostile attitude towards Russia. In turn, these countries have been at the forefront of EU aid towards Ukraine (Antezza et al. 2022), their own military reorganization (Karnitschnig & Kość 2022), as well as calls for tough EU sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

The reinvigoration of the transatlantic relationship occurred in many areas. One of these central issues has been the need for coordinating the United States'

and the EU's non-military response to the conflict. With sanctions policy being at the heart of Western efforts to impose costs on Russia amidst its war against Ukraine, extensive coordination had to be undertaken between the partners to ensure the largest possible effectiveness of the overall Western sanctions regime. Consequently, certain trade sanctions imposed by only, say, the United States, but not the EU would ultimately allow Russia to simply shift the origin and destination of its trade in sanctioned goods elsewhere. This is also one of the most central areas of direct cooperation between the EU and the United States since EU sanctions policy is an exclusive competence of the European Union with member states no longer being able to maintain sanctions of their own.

Throughout all of 2022, the gradual increase of sanctions against Russia has been coordinated amongst Western partners, with the US and the EU at the heart of such efforts. What's more, such coordination – despite not reaching absolute synchronicity in the overall sanctions package – has been at the centre of communication efforts to demonstrate transatlantic and Western unity (e.g. The White House 2022). Such coordination only became more extensive as the conflict intensified and further sanctions measures increased in complexity. Although a ban on the transport, insurance, and facilitation of trade in Russian oil sold above a certain price threshold, it was the EU that ultimately set the suggested price cap for itself and all G7 countries alike (Kijewski & Cooper 2022). This represents an instance in which the G7 partners of the EU, including the United States, were willing to concede some of their own scope of action in light of the higher European exposure to the negative side effects of such sanction efforts.

The consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are also likely going to reduce another long-standing element of strain in the transatlantic relationship, namely the mismatch in membership between the EU and NATO on the European side, which has previously rendered cooperation between both organizations difficult. Prior to the developments of 2022, there were six EU members not simultaneously part of NATO. Two of these, Finland and Sweden, have since also applied for NATO membership (Reuters 2022), with only Austria, Ireland, Malta, and Cyprus currently committed to remaining outside of the security alliance.

Lastly, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also served to bury one long-standing issue in transatlantic relations in the form of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline between Russia and Germany. While the project had long faced criticism from other EU member states and the United States alike, Germany had nonetheless continued to support the pipeline project which was completed but not yet operational by the end of 2021. The transatlantic conflict (or more precisely principally a conflict between the United States and Germany) over the construction of the pipeline had been long-lasting but ultimately peaked during the Trump administration (Olsen 2022, 159–60) which even introduced economic sanctions against



the project (de Jong 2022). The conflict surrounding this pipeline was ultimately resolved when the German government announced its suspension already immediately before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Marsh & Chambers 2022) when an escalation on the part of Russia had already become all but certain. This decision then also eliminated the need for the EU to continue to discuss retaliatory measures against the US which were also highly controversial internally (de Jong 2022: 227).

While the effects of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the transatlantic relationship have thus so far been positive overall, this ongoing crisis nonetheless has the potential to introduce renewed strain into the relationship going forward. As a result, the outward political unity of both partners cannot hide the continued underlying imbalance of contributions to the solution of this security crisis. Much like the earlier debate about Europe's contributions to NATO's collective defence, EU (countries) security support for Ukraine has fallen short of that provided by the United States (Shapiro 2022). This has even extended to a security-adjacent domain with the United States playing a bigger role in ensuring the continued liquidity of the Ukrainian state than the EU.

While some predict that this will bring the transatlantic security burden-sharing debate back to the fore in the short term (Shapiro 2022), others believe that this will only occur after the war has ended (Engelbrekt 2022), thus once more revealing the underlying transatlantic structural tensions. In short, while Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine has shown the strength and potential of transatlantic relations amidst a major crisis, it is not a given that this will have a fundamental structural effect going forward.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the state of transatlantic relations has been affected by multiple prominent tensions in recent years. Whereas an all-time low in the bilateral relationship had been reached during the Trump presidency, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has since led the relationship to a novel high. The swing in both directions has demonstrated the fragility and resilience of the transatlantic relationship in response to both an internal crisis and one external to the relationship. However, these swings are likely not the best indicator to assess long-term strain present within the transatlantic relationship, or its likely trajectory going forward.

Instead, a better indicator of the overall tensions affecting the relationship can be found when assessing the less prominent foundations of transatlantic ties. Here, both parties have been negatively affected by similar kinds of domestic

strain which have led each to turn inwards. Similarly, while the long-term goals and values of both the US and the EU had largely aligned in the past on issues such as a rules-based international trading system, there is growing evidence that both are increasingly diverging from one another.

Overall, the transatlantic relationship is subject to various kinds of tensions that intersect in multiple ways, and which have contributed to this relationship, thus adding to the different elements of crisis with which the EU has to deal with amidst its polycrisis. The insights presented in this chapter ultimately caution that an analysis of crises in the EU needs to consider not just short-term effects but distinct perspectives in longer-term horizons so as to gain a better overview of political strain, its evolution, consequences, and underlying determinants.

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