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THE TROUBLING IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic is challenging international cooperation. This is notably the case of the already damaged relationship between the EU and the United States, since Donald Trump halted travels from Europe to US on March 11. Is the coronavirus crisis going to durably dash an already overstretched transatlantic link? Read senior analyst Erik Brattberg's insights.

Having already deteriorated significantly since President Donald Trump assumed office in 2017, the transatlantic relationship is now at risk of being further weakened during the coronavirus. Rather than serving as an impetus to restore the battered relationship between Washington and European capitals, the presence of the global pandemic is accelerating already existing negative transatlantic trends. If Trump is reelected in November, he will likely continue to double down on his "America First" foreign policy, skepticism of multilateralism, and trade protectionism, giving rise to further European disaffection with his administration's leadership.

MISSING IN ACTION SO FAR: A TRANSATLANTIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19

To date, the coronavirus has not been well-handled at the transatlantic level. Although many European governments rushed to shut down their own borders in a haphazard manner during the initial phase of the out-

break, President Trump's decision to impose a travel ban against Europe on March 11th stands out. Not only was Trump's Oval Office address announcing the ban undiplomatic in tone, it also came without any prior consultation with European diplomats. This prompted an unusually sharp rebuke from EU leaders the following day. Although coordination has since improved somewhat, the rhetorical mismatch between the White House and other parts of the U.S. administration remains an impediment.

On top of this, there are signs of a "beggar thy neighbor" attitude as allies are scrambling to respond to the virus. In recent weeks, stories have circulated about American efforts to acquire a German vaccine manufacturer in order to gain exclusive rights to the vaccine and attempts to seize medical shipments heading for Germany and France. Although details are spotty and the allegations have been denied by U.S. officials, such stories nevertheless serve to illustrate how deep transatlantic distrust is at the moment.

Diplomatic etiquette aside, the most troubling aspect of the Trump administration's response to the coronavirus is the clear lack of interest in multilateral solutions. Despite holding the chairmanship for the G7 this year, Trump only reluctantly agreed on a leaders call on March 16th after being nudged to do so by president Emmanuel Macron. A separate call between the foreign ministers of the G7 countries on March 25th failed to agree on

a joint communiqué because of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's insistence on using the term "Wuhan virus".

Trump's recent decision to halt U.S. funding to the World Health Organization also stands in sharp contrast to the European approach. Although Trump's criticism of the WHO is not without certain merit, European diplomats have slammed the move. For example, EU High Representative Josep Borrell called it "weak" and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas likened it to "throwing the pilot out the plane". Several European countries have already pledged to step up their support to the WHO, but U.S. disengagement risks increasing China's grip over the organization and undermining its effectiveness.

COVID-19: A NEW INFLECTION POINT IN TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS?

The coronavirus pandemic is turning policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic more inward-looking as they are preoccupied with managing its immediate public health and socio-economic consequences. As a result, the United States and Europe will be less focused on each other over the next months. What is more, transatlantic disagreements over defense and trade could also grow as an indirect effect of the crisis.

For example, transatlantic security cooperation could be one indirect victim as the economic fallout from the crisis takes a toll on NATO defense budgets. Washington will face pressures on its own defense budget as the national debt climbs up and spending demands on health care and social security increases. Meanwhile, as IMF is currently predicting a 7.5% drop in GDP in the eurozone, a scenario similar to the financial crisis in 2008 when European defense spending fell by €24 billion over the next six years is not unimaginable. If so, transatlantic tensions over burden-sharing will likely worsen. Attention to other, less pressing foreign policy issues, such

as addressing security threats in the Middle East and North Africa, could also fall by the wayside.

Moreover, as U.S.-China competition intensifies in the wake of the pandemic, anti-China hawks in the White House are seizing on the opportunity to pursue hard decoupling from China and "onshore" manufacturing back to the United States. The EU is also contemplating ways of reducing dependence on China on key supplies. For example, president Macron has issued calls for more European "sovereignty" over medical supplies and equipment. However, the EU's approach differs from the Trump administration's in that "self-sufficiency" is not seen as a desirable objective. There is accordingly a considerable risk transatlantic trade ties could worsen if the Trump administration seeks to impose

an "either with us or against us" type of logic when it comes to China.

A FRESH START FOR TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION IN 2021?

Although it is still too early to assess the impact of the coronavirus on the U.S. presidential campaign, a second Trump term would likely see current negative trends continue and possibly even accelerate over the next four years. If so, there is a considerable risk that more and more European leaders will reach the conclusion that Washington is a fundamentally unreliable partner and that the EU should instead seek to carve out more equidistance between the United States and China as part of a multipolar world order.

At the same time, the possibility of a Joe Biden presidency would

present new opportunities to repair the transatlantic relationship—though this will no easy task. A Biden administration would be more likely to return to traditional U.S. support for the European project, seek to work with the EU on addressing joint challenges like climate change, would prioritize multilateral solutions over unilateral ones, and would ease transatlantic trade tensions. Even so, U.S.-China competition is likely to remain tense and an all-out American return to multilateralism is unlikely in the absence of fundamental reform of institutions like the UN and WHO.

One thing is sure: although there can be no going back to normal again in transatlantic relations, the coronavirus pandemic illustrates the necessity of likeminded democratic societies joining hands in shoring up the multilateral system. ●

