

What Europe Wants

American reliability within the transatlantic alliance

by Nicholas Dungan

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There is a widespread perception outside the United States that the ‘idea that is America’ represents almost a state religion, that the US is ‘a country where traditionally it is adherence to creed ... that qualifies you for membership’. To many non-US observers, what passes for patriotism in the US looks a lot like nefarious nationalism anywhere else. This was true before the arrival of the current president and has only been reinforced by ‘America First’.

The notion that the United States is ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave’, that America is ‘one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all’, that the US is a force for good in the world, that American exceptionalism is due to a quasi-biblical benediction of the country—‘We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.’—served to anchor this sense of creed. To question that creed was heresy, until recently.

Breaking the chains of political piety

During the 2016 presidential campaign, the taboo against Americans taking a critical view of their country began to crumble. ‘Make America Great Again’ suggested that America had lost its greatness, even the sources of its greatness. The word ‘corruption’, never before widespread in American political discourse, became common currency, notably in describing the extent to which elected officials were beholden to private interests in ways that, in most other advanced democracies, would point to prison terms.

Since 2016 Americans have increasingly recognised and debated their country’s poor rankings against other industrialised nations in healthcare, public education and infrastructure. Racism and racial injustice have been shown to be acute problems across US society. Divisiveness and bitter partisanship are acknowledged as gnawing national weaknesses. Hatred has poisoned politics.

Under the Trump administration none of these issues has been resolved, many have gone unaddressed and most have worsened.

The implications of this decline for the United States’ role in the world have become increasingly plain. Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote a book entitled *Foreign Policy Begins at Home*. In January 2020, former Vice President Joseph Biden published an article,

¹ This issue brief was first published on 22 October 2020 on the blog of *International Affairs*, a journal of The Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House. The writer is a member of the International Advisory Board of *International Affairs*.

‘Why America Must Lead Again’, much of which was devoted to an analysis of the reforms required inside the United States in order to re-establish credible American leadership outside.

The former US Secretary of Defence, Robert M. Gates, has called for an end to the ‘overmilitarization’ of American foreign policy. Ganesh Sitaraman has urged ‘A Grand Strategy of Resilience’, examining ‘American power in the age of fragility’ in which he identifies a host of necessary changes to the American system, albeit he does not go far enough on education or corruption, or how these needed changes might actually occur in practice, which would require an end to partisanship and divisiveness.

‘Stronger with allies’

At the same time as they focus on the United States, nearly all these experts place great emphasis on the need for US leadership to be ‘restored’ while the country stands alongside America’s allies. In January 2019 the Executive Vice-President of the Atlantic Council² told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States should ‘put our alliances at the core, not the periphery, of our strategy’.

Many of those allies are in Europe, and NATO is the oldest and strongest of the US alliance structures. For many Americans NATO is the first ‘Europe’ they think of. Increasingly, the European Union has also become ‘Europe’ for Americans, especially as the Eurozone debt crisis and the Covid19 pandemic have highlighted the strengths (and incompleteness) of the EU. Lastly, Americans tend to think of ‘Europe’ as individual nation-states, almost all of which, however, belong to either NATO or the EU or both.

What Europe wants

It is clear that Europe—defined as any one of those three forms of Europe—would welcome a set of American policies different from those of the current administration. Angela Merkel’s Germany has rejected Trump and all he stands for outright; in France Emmanuel Macron initially attempted to tame Trump before giving up. Meanwhile the United Kingdom under Boris Johnson contends with a drawn out foreign policy identity crisis, caught as it is between the end of its membership of the European Union and the dwindling of the ‘special relationship’ with Washington. These and many other European leaders would welcome an America restored to its previous pivotal place in international affairs.

But let American foreign policy planners beware. They must not underestimate how far their country has fallen and must not overestimate how much its leadership would be welcome. As US citizens themselves have lamented the frailties and failings which they have, to their chagrin, discovered as the scales of state religion have fallen from their eyes, the world has been watching, too.

In 2005, fully fifteen years ago, Robert Zoellick urged China to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in international affairs. For Europeans today, a United States committed to being such a responsible stakeholder would be a welcome change and a sufficient role, while the United States addresses, and repairs, its domestic ills.

² The writer is a senior fellow of the Atlantic Council.