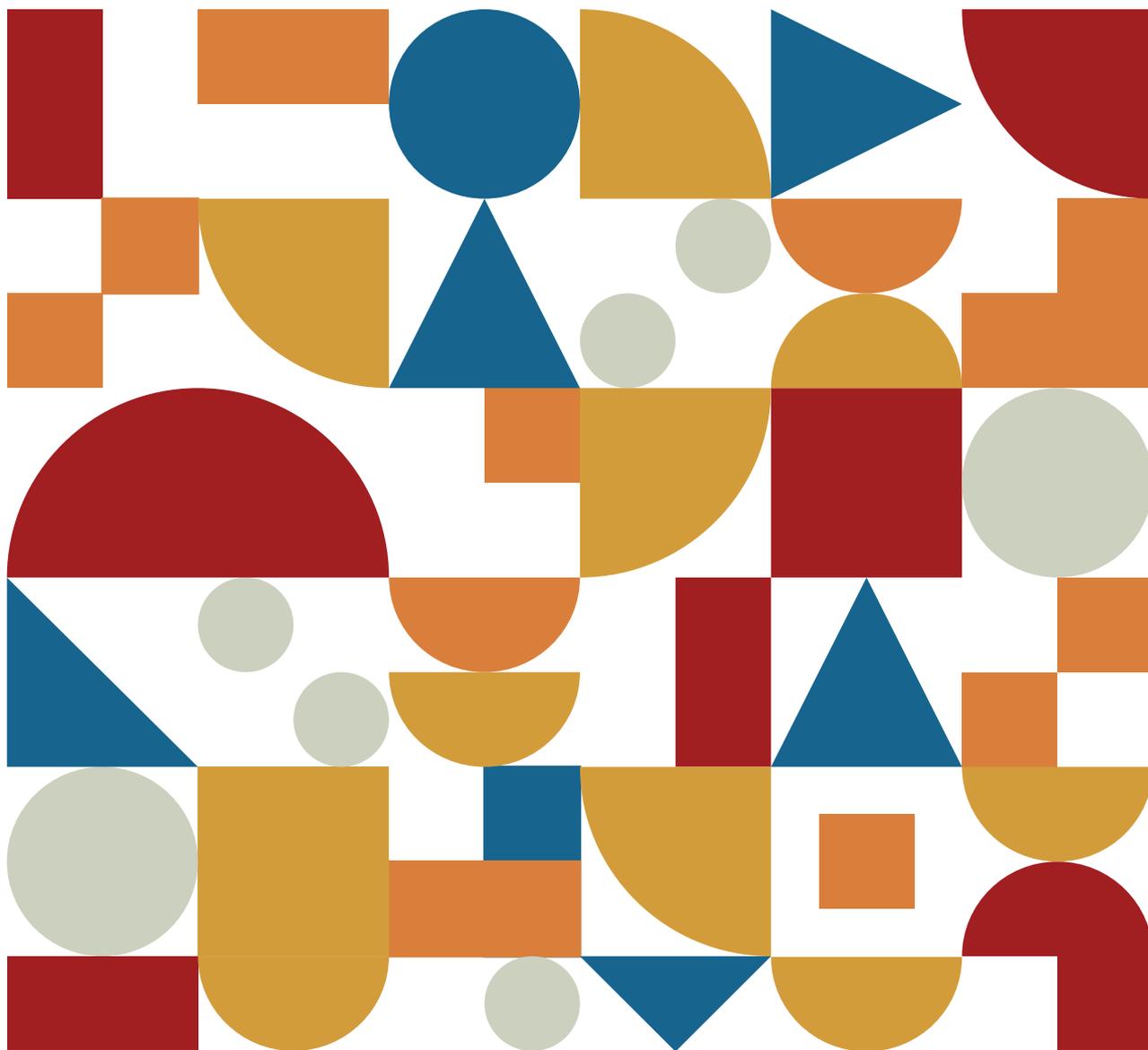


After Kabul, a Tipping Point for Europeans?

SURVEY - OCTOBER 2021



After Kabul, a Tipping Point for Europeans?

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AFTER KABUL, A TIPPING POINT FOR EUROPEANS?, GROUPE
D'ÉTUDES GÉOPOLITIQUES, SURVEY, OCTOBER 2021.

Concept

The Fall of Kaboul has triggered a large amount of reactions and comments with regards to its implication for international politics. From Charles Michel's comments on the lack of consultations with European partners in his interview with Le Grand Continent to Anthony Blinken's testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the withdrawal from Afghanistan has been a major test to the transatlantic relations. The AUKUS alliance between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom was also an important moment for Europeans to reflect on the practical meaning of strategic autonomy and the extent to which there exists a shared view on this matter. Both elements can be understood as part of a sequence in which the United States formalise and reorient their strategy towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Groupe d'études géopolitiques conducted a survey gathering contributions from 13 international experts from the four corners of Europe and beyond, with varying viewpoints and backgrounds, on the state of transatlantic relations following the withdrawal of Afghanistan and the AUKUS alliance. This new survey follows two previous editions on European Strategic Autonomy in 2020 and with regards to the Biden Presidency.

In order to assess the state of transatlantic relations from a multidimensional perspective, we asked contributors to position themselves on a scale from 0 to 5 by answering two questions:

Question 1 (Q1) Will the events of August and September 2021 have a transformative effect on transatlantic relations in the long-term? 0 (None whatsoever) to 5 (Radical shift)

Question 2 (Q2) Is this a relevant question? 0 (No, it is not the right way to look at it) to 5 (Yes, it is a crucial question)

Contributors' marks are represented in a graph. In order to allow them to elaborate on their choices, we also asked each author to support their views with a short text.

(Q1) 2.5/5
(Q2) 5/5

SVEN BISCOP • DIRECTOR OF
THE EUROPE IN THE WORLD
PROGRAMME AT THE EGMONT
ROYAL INSTITUTE FOR
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Transatlantic relations have been transformed since Obama announced the “pivot” to Asia in 2012 - but many still refuse to see it. Some want to reassure themselves in the face of Russian assertiveness that, whatever happens, the US cavalry will always be there to protect them. Others need excuses for their own lacklustre defence efforts. If you convince yourself that the US will take care of things anyway, then nothing is urgent. Because so many want to believe that nothing will ever change, neither the evacuation from Kabul nor the AUKUS deal will fundamentally change their assessment. Both events confirm the trend, though: for the US, it is now “China first”. If not all members of the EU and NATO are yet willing to face this reality, those who are should perhaps act outside either framework. Nothing stops them from creating a core group that forges ahead with the integration of defence efforts, and that leads the way towards a more resolute European foreign policy.

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(Q1) 3/5
(Q2) 4/5

MAJA BUCAR • PROFESSOR OF
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AT THE
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
LJUBLJANA

The discussion on European Strategic Autonomy will strengthen and move from more of an academic topic to a policy field. EU reliance on NATO and the USA is being called into question, not only in the security field, but in a number of others. While the cooperation will still be there, the EU needs to build up its own resources and design a strategy where gradually a more autonomous stance will be possible. How successful the EU will be in this depends on the acceptance of such a policy by all of the member states, and here it is already possible to sense some differences, with some being more in favour of close alliance with the USA and others warning of the need to further build on self-reliance.

It may not be the most crucial question for the EU's future, but it certainly is an important one which, with the behaviour of the main partners (USA, UK), is gaining in importance. It also opens a question of the unity among member states and their common external policy.

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(Q1) 4/5
(Q2) 5/5

**FLORENCE GAUB • DEPUTY
 DIRECTOR OF THE EUROPEAN
 UNION INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY
 STUDIES (EUISS)**

SURVEY - OCTOBER 2021

We have been debating the broadening of our circles of friends beyond NATO for a while; proposed formats were for instance originally the Community of Democracies or similar formats, which could include all of EU, NATO, AUKUS, some of ASEAN, and all those like-minded states not in any of those (e.g. Japan, most Latin-American states, some African ones etc.). I think we will move in this direction, which means that the term ‘transatlantic’ will lose saliency - but not because the relationship is weakened, but because it is no longer the only game in town.

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After Kabul, a tipping point for Europeans?

Survey conducted by Groupe d'études géopolitiques in October 2021.

Q1: 0 (None whatsoever) to 5 (Radical shift)

Q2: 0 (No, it is not the right way to look at it) to 5 (Yes, it is a crucial question)



Chart: Groupe d'études géopolitiques, octobre 2021 • Source: Groupe d'études géopolitiques

(Q1) 3/5
(Q2) 4/5

SHADA ISLAM • COMMENTATOR ON
EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Despite the romanticized one-dimensional view of transatlantic relations as special, solid and all-weather – a narrative often peddled by politicians, think tankers and media on both sides of the Atlantic – the truth is that while the US and the EU can work together when their interests align, they are also permanent competitors and rivals with very different priorities and concerns.

This is most obvious in business and trade – both on the bilateral and multi-lateral level – but is also true when it comes to geopolitics. Much before the current focus on the Indo-Pacific, it was America’s overwhelming presence and influence in Asia (including in China) that encouraged the EU to craft its own relationship with the region. In Africa, the US and Europe also compete for influence and markets. Same is true in Latin America. Donald Trump may have described the EU as an “enemy” but the truth is that all recent US presidents have viewed the EU as a junior partner that you turn to when you need help – for instance to present a “joint front” to China or Russia – but that you can safely ignore and overlook when times are good. Joe Biden is doing just that.

Transatlantic scars left by the lack of consultation and transparency on the trilateral “Anglosphere” AUKUS alliance and the secretive US-Australia nuclear submarine deal will not be easy to heal. But more than AUKUS, more than the 2008 financial crisis, the war in Syria, the mess in Libya or the cringe-inducing Trump years, it is the Afghan debacle that has put an end to any magical belief in the US being able to provide benign global leadership or in the strength of the transatlantic alliance. Transatlantic trust will be difficult to rebuild.

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(Q1) 3/5
(Q2) 4/5

**JUHA JOKELA • DIRECTOR OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION RESEARCH
PROGRAM AT THE FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS**

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the AUKUS defence deal – forged behind the back of France and the EU – have certainly raised concerns in many European capitals. While they have been warned about the implications of the shift in US strategic interests, the Biden administration was expected to rebuild key alliances, including the transatlantic one. Europeans' lack of sway over the ending of joint operations in Afghanistan and global geostrategic matters have made them ponder their position in an era of intensifying strategic competition.

Accordingly, Europeans are likely to continue their efforts to build military capabilities to take more responsibility in security and defence. While they still see the US as an indispensable ally, and NATO as a cornerstone of European security, they increasingly recognise that a more capable Europe is needed to retain relevance in Washington. This would, however, require them to work towards political will to act regionally and globally, a daunting task for Europeans due to their diverse strategic cultures and security interests.

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(Q1) 4/5
(Q2) 4/5

**BEN JUDAH • NONRESIDENT
SENIOR FELLOW AT THE ATLANTIC
COUNCIL**

Historians will look back and see this as the moment Western geopolitics clarified through the pandemic fog. When the virus arrived, the strategic discourse had been haunted since Trump's election by four questions, seemingly, unable to take concrete form.

What was the Western response to China? What, given Macron's "brain dead" comments, was the future of NATO? What, following on from that, was the Western response to an increasingly belligerent Turkey? And post-Brexit, was there a strategic future for Britain?

The sudden announcement of the AUSUK agreement, between Australia, the US and the UK, whilst humiliating France, was more significant for brusquely answering both the China and the Britain question. A new sub-alliance of Anglo-countries would now attempt to contain China and "Global Britain" would be an integral part of this.

But in Europe, the defence agreement that swiftly followed, between France and Greece was no less significant. Paris had given its answer to both the NATO and the Turkey question: a new pact with Athens, to check Ankara. The new age of sub-alliances were here. There would be no collective Western response to China or Turkey. Instead, a more volatile world of coalitions was here.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 4/5

**NICOLE KOENIG • RESEARCHER AT
THE JACQUES DELORS INSTITUTE
- BERLIN ON POLITICAL
INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES**

They certainly have a sobering effect on Europeans, eager to relaunch transatlantic relations after the difficult Trump years. This effect is not transformative, however.

Afghanistan and AUKUS are symptoms of longer-term trends that already started under the Obama administration. First, the US public is less and less willing to pay the price for out-of-area operations which are not in the country's primary interest, and their presidents act accordingly. We have already seen this when Obama decided to 'lead from behind' in the Libyan crisis in 2011 and later refrained from intervening in Syria despite crossed 'red lines'. Second, AUKUS shows that the US pivot to the Pacific is real, and that Washington is not willing to wait for EU partners when flexing its muscles in the region.

Europeans will get over Afghanistan and AUKUS sooner or later, but they represent another wake-up call: it is time to develop our autonomous capacity to act, as the US will not always stand by our side. It is relevant as it leads to the even more interesting question: Will Europeans actually wake up and develop joint responses to these longer-term trends? The answer will shape the upcoming EU and NATO strategic documents and thus set the tone for the next decade of Euro-Atlantic security cooperation.

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(Q1) 2.5/5
(Q2) 5/5

ELENA LAZAROU • HEAD OF THE
EXTERNAL POLICIES UNIT OF
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY
RESEARCH SERVICE (EPRS)

There is no doubt about the relevance of this question: a recalibration of transatlantic relations has been taking place in the last decade – to a large extent due to the rise of Asia and the US pivot to that region – with implications for the future of security and defence cooperation. The withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as the announcement of the AUKUS defence pact laid bare the need to step up the work to bolster the transatlantic alliance in terms of coordination and sharing of intelligence.

These events also re-opened a critical conversation about the priorities of EU and US defence respectively. Despite being brought about by discord, if built upon constructively, this conversation could bring about new modalities of cooperation in critical regions such as the Indo-pacific and the Sahel. Moreover, these events functioned as catalysts for the debate about the EU's future defence identity to return to the forefront of the EU agenda following a time when the pandemic had replaced other priorities. The EU's capacity to act when needed in pursuit of its own goals and operational ambitions and the plan to bolster its capabilities will be a big part of deliberations going into 2022, and Afghanistan and AUKUS will be referenced often in that context.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 3/5

ALESSANDRO MARRONE • HEAD
OF THE ISTITUTO AFFARI
INTERNAZIONALI DEFENCE
PROGRAMME

The US-led NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan generated some frustration in Europe because of the Afghan state's collapse, but European allies were aware of this risk, and most Europeans were and are glad to leave Afghanistan in any case. Currently, and in the near future, Western nations will have little political appetite for crisis management and/or stability operations. Transatlantic relations will adjust to deal more with the Indo-Pacific and less with Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. NATO will focus more on collective defence and great power competition with Russia and China. It is an evolutionary rather than transformative trend, already initiated in the 2010s.

The negative effects of the Australia submarine deal with the US and UK only concerns France: it does not impact other EU members nor the EU or NATO as such. It is likely to increase the French push for European strategic autonomy, but other major European countries will maintain more or less the same position on the balance between NATO and EU defence (particularly Italy). It is worthwhile to reflect on transatlantic relations after the end of a 20-year long war in Afghanistan which involved up to 40,000 troops from European countries, and which ended in a very negative way.

On AUKUS, much ado about little. It is normal for the US to strike diplomatic, military, and industrial deals with partners in East Asia in order to contain China, and that the UK tries to follow. There have been quite excessive polemics in Paris in the aftermath of the loss for the French shipyard industry.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 3/5

GARIMA MOHAN • FELLOW IN THE ASIA PROGRAM OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE UNITED STATES

The surprise announcement of the AUKUS deal and the Biden administration's sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan caused shockwaves around the world, but especially in Europe. While in the short term these announcements have led to some tensions in transatlantic ties, they should not have long term consequences. Both decisions, in a way, were not surprising since they are in line with the policy priorities announced early on by the Biden administration - which is keen to shift focus and resources to the Indo-Pacific theatre. It is also clear that when it comes to threat assessment and approaches to China, the US has more in common with its Quad partners (Australia, India and Japan) than it does with Europe.

There are many pillars upon which the transatlantic relationship is built. As Europe tries to formulate its approach to dealing with China and pivots to the Indo-Pacific, it should have a lot more to talk about with the US, not less. The Trade and Technology Council is one such avenue. The US has also made clear it wants to repair its relationship with France, which is an important actor in the Indo-Pacific. Hopefully this will also extend to more US-Europe coordination in the Indo-Pacific.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 4/5

JOSEPH NYE • UNIVERSITY
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE
PROFESSOR, EMERITUS AND
FORMER DEAN OF THE HARVARD'S
KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

For an administration that said it wanted to repair and reinforce the alliances that Trump had weakened, the Biden administration was surprisingly and unnecessarily clumsy in consulting its allies regarding the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the announcement of the AUKUS submarine agreement. There is bound to be some residual cost to trust and to soft power. In the longer term, however, these effects will be overshadowed by the structural importance of managing the rise of Chinese power. European allies complained about the lack of consultation over Afghan withdrawal, but Asian allies did not because they welcomed the implications for implementing the pivot that Obama had announced. France objected to the AUKUS deal not just for economic reasons, but because of the implications for its image as a resident power in the Pacific, but the objective effects of the deal on balancing and deterring China will be clear in the longer term. The current question is whether more adroit diplomacy can repair some of the short run damage.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 3/5

PATRYCJA SASNAL • HEAD OF
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
PROJECT AT PISM – THE POLISH
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Two events shook transatlantic relations in September: the U.S. and allied withdrawal from Afghanistan and the AUKUS defense deal. Both should be seen as results of larger trends, not causes thereof. The withdrawal revealed how little attention the U.S. pays its European allies: there was little coordination between the Americans and the Europeans, and the U.S. apparently ignored Europeans' request to extend the deadline.

If this may be understood - all things considered the Biden administration made the right decision - the AUKUS deal between the U.S., UK and Australia, sealed at the expense of French interests, is a harder pill to swallow.

It confirmed not only Biden's preoccupation with China, bordering on fixation - that much we knew in Europe already - but also his readiness to strain the transatlantic bond to this end. That, in turn, reveals that in the long run, the U.S. does not see its Europeans as prime partners in countering China. If, behind the niceties of an Atlanticist Biden lies a conviction that the U.S. can go it alone, or with the Quad, rather than with the Europeans, it is a worrisome new development both for the U.S. and Europe. There have been worse times in transatlantic relations but if ultimately both sides begin to see less value in cooperation and embark on separate security and economic policies regardless of each other, China and Russia win.

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(Q1) 2/5
(Q2) 3/5

**LUIS SIMON • RESEARCH
PROFESSOR AT THE INSTITUTE
FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES AND
DIRECTOR OF THE BRUSSELS
OFFICE OF THE ELCANO ROYAL
INSTITUTE**

The Afghanistan withdrawal and AUKUS episodes have led to a spike in calls for European strategic autonomy. Both episodes are certainly consistent with America's decision to prioritize China above all else. This will surely compel Europeans to step up their contribution to security in and around Europe, and incentivize them to look for more effective ways to add strategic value in Asia. However, recent calls for European strategic autonomy should be put in perspective. Too many security crises over the last thirty years have been perceived as a catalyst for greater European strategic autonomy. Prominent examples include the Balkan crises, Obama's decision to rebalance to Asia and 'lead from behind' in Libya and, most eminently, the 2003 Iraq War, seen by EU-autonomy diehards as the mother of all catalyzers. All these events supposedly left no option to Europeans but to take security matters into their own hands. And notwithstanding some progress in the defense-industrial realm, the advances experienced in the last thirty years in EU defense policy have remained modest.

The fact that France and Germany boast such radically different views on the role of force is certainly a structural obstacle. Moreover, many countries in Central and Eastern Europe see the US-NATO connection as the only reliable insurance against the Russian threat, and would rather continue to structure European security around the transatlantic relationship.

Changing US priorities will compel Europeans to take greater security responsibilities. However, gaps in strategic culture and threat perception continue to set limits to EU defense autonomy. Thus, a greater European effort in the context of the transatlantic relationship, and a rebalancing of the EU-NATO relationship, is probably the most realistic way forward.

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(Q1) 1/5
(Q2) 1/5

ANDRIS STRAZDS • ECFR
COUNCIL MEMBER AND VISITING
FACULTY AT STOCKHOLM SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS

The transatlantic relations had already changed long before this August. The events of August and September have not been a U-turn. At most they have perhaps shattered largely unreasonable hopes of traveling back in time to 2016. It's the sobering realization by some politicians in Europe that Biden administration is not some kind of « Obama administration version 2.0 » that they had hoped it would be, which is causing so much headache in Europe right now. However, in strategy the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result. « And there's a critical thing to understand: the world is changing », to quote directly from President Biden's remarks delivered on 31 August. It's high time for Europe to pull itself together and invest in reestablishing its sovereignty, from strengthening its defense capabilities to developing its own technological solutions.

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