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Article

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The Trump Effect Is Forcing Europeans Out of Their Comfort Zone

The stage is set for a rematch. On 12 March, voters from the US states of Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi and Washington headed to the polls in their primary elections and, unsurprisingly, handed current President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump the overwhelming majority of their support. The results propelled both candidates past the required 1,215 delegates necessary to clinch their respective party's nominations, officially solidifying a repeat of 2020. But while the players are the same, the game has changed over the past three years.

On 6 January 2021, an angry mob of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol at his urging, in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the legitimate election results of 2020. In Biden's first year in office, the country struggled to get back on its feet following the COVID-19 pandemic, suffered rising inflation rates the likes of which have not occurred in decades, and witnessed the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* – a Supreme Court decision that had codified the right to abortion into law. Meanwhile, the world has been caught off-guard by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the ensuing global energy crisis and devastating violence and brutality in Israel and Gaza.

While the US presidential election is still months away, Trump has remained slightly ahead of Biden in most of the voter polls that have been conducted in the past few months. Biden struggles to convince voters that he is physically and mentally fit for the job. Meanwhile, over 100,000 voters in Michigan, a must-win swing state, chose “un-committed” rather than Biden, as a protest against US support for the Israeli government in the ongoing war in Gaza. And despite the declining inflation rate, low unemployment and rising wages, Americans feel as though their dollars do not go as far as they did four years ago.

Trump also undoubtedly has many obstacles in his path. The first former president to be indicted, Trump has been charged with 91 criminal offenses in four criminal cases that range from fraudulent business dealings and concealing classified documents to election interference and subversion. But time is of the essence, and Trump is practiced in the art of running down the clock.

There are still numerous variables that could play out in multiple scenarios that may alter the course of the campaign. But Europe must reckon with the fact that one of these possible scenarios is Trump 2.0 – who, though familiar, will do things differently the second time around.

Since his departure from the White House, Trump has vetted and openly supported candidates for state and national office who have been supportive of “the big lie”. In early March, he forced the head of the Republican National Committee to resign, installing loyalists including his daughter-in-law and purging 60 staff members – who will be replaced by his supporters. He also commands a number of Representatives and Senators who bend to his will, for example, when he threatened lawmakers who considered voting for the bipartisan immigration legislation that would have helped alleviate the crisis at the southern border – a bill that was tied to additional military aid for Ukraine.

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Trump has continued to embrace autocratic figures like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whom he recently invited for a visit, and praise their illiberal restrictions on immigration, freedom of the press and the LGBTQ community. And while he already threatened to abandon NATO during his presidency, Trump took it one step further at a recent campaign event when he told a cheering crowd that he would encourage Putin to do “whatever the hell he wants” if NATO members do not pay their share. The US under Trump 2.0 is not an ally that Europe can count on.

Whether Donald Trump or Joe Biden wins the US election, future US administrations will likely be less Atlanticist, not more. It is generally fairly risky for the EU to count on the US, leaving European security every four years up to American voters. However, as Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has passed its second anniversary with no end in sight, the prospect of going it alone is forcing Europeans to reconsider their own defence with a sense of urgency.

Wandel durch Handel (transformation through trade), the German maxim based on the assumption that trade and dialogue induce political and social change, proved to be a wrong guiding principle when dealing with a dictator. Rather than achieving the sought-after effect of making Russia more liberal and democratic, this policy led to Germany, and Europe, becoming more dependent on Russian energy. Interdependence goes both ways, and its flipside is vulnerability.

Yet interdependence is at the very heart of what the Union is. The European project, which started with the European Coal and Steel Community after World War II, was based on the idea that closer economic integration between countries could transform former enemies into allies. Russia’s war in Ukraine thus called into question the EU’s basic principles and posed tremendous challenges to its core values. Peace and solidarity, the two cornerstones of the European project, are under increasing pressure, across the world and at home. Rather than adhering to the words of Groucho Marx, “Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them...well, I have others”, the EU needs to strengthen its unity around its common values and act according to its principles as they make up what the Union really is.

“World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it”, begins the proposal presented by Robert Schuman for what has become the EU. Today, 74 years later, the Union should make creative efforts to develop a new vision for its foreign, security and defence policies, one that is based on its values of multilateralism, European integration and a rules-based international order.

The obvious starting point is to protect the integrity of EU common values in its member states. The systemic rivalry between authoritarianism and democracy, and the pressure on democratic principles are not only an external issue. Within the member states, discontent is becoming increasingly evident: the surge in inflation and energy prices as well as rising interest rates put pressure on European consumers already weary from the economic crises of the past two decades and the COVID-19 pandemic. This provides fertile ground for propaganda and misinformation seeking to destabilise and delegitimise democracies.

Europe needed a wake-up call, and it got it. It is woefully unprepared for the potential danger posed by the Trump 2.0 presidency with its “America First” ideology that undermines democracy and the transatlantic relationship. Perhaps the only bright spot is that the premonition of doom and gloom could mobilise European voters and support politicians advocating for European sovereignty.

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