Why America Won't Turn to Isolationism

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Why America Won't Turn to Isolationism

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With Russia continuing its aggression against Ukraine, Europe has good reason to be anxious about the US midterm elections in November. European leaders fear a massive Democratic defeat which could pave the way for another Trump victory in 2024 and a return of America First policies. At the same time, neither the American political elite nor the wider public lean toward isolationism. But Europe does need to prepare for Washington shifting its focus to China.

The experience of the Trump years badly damaged Europe's belief in America's reliability as a military ally and economic partner. Under President Joe Biden, transatlantic relations improved significantly. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Washington has also re-asserted its role as Europe's security guarantor, supplying billions worth of arms to Ukraine and putting its considerable weight behind NATO. But Europeans are rightly concerned about the possibility of a second Trump presidency. A massive Republican victory in the midterm elections in November may increase the chances of Trump contesting and winning the presidential election in 2024.

Given how erratic Donald Trump's foreign policy was during his first stint in the White House, Europeans are right to worry about a possible second term, particularly concerning US policy toward Russia and NATO. But even leaving out the idiosyncratic Trump risk, European leaders are concerned that the rise of political populism could herald a more fundamental shift in American foreign policy toward isolationism and protectionism. Yet such fears appear misplaced: First, because the American public is much keener for the United States to stay internationally engaged than is often assumed, and second, because the country's political elite remains strongly committed to maintaining America's international power and defending its strategic interests in world affairs.

PUBLIC OPINION IS NOT ISOLATIONIST

Let's first look at public opinion data. The annual survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that more than two thirds of Americans support the United States playing an active role in international affairs. Respectively, 68 percent and 59 percent of Americans say alliances with Europe and East Asia benefit both the United States and its respective allies. 73 percent support maintaining or increasing American commitments to NATO. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of those surveyed support increasing or maintaining America's military presence in the various regions of the world. (Note that this poll was conducted before the war in Ukraine.)

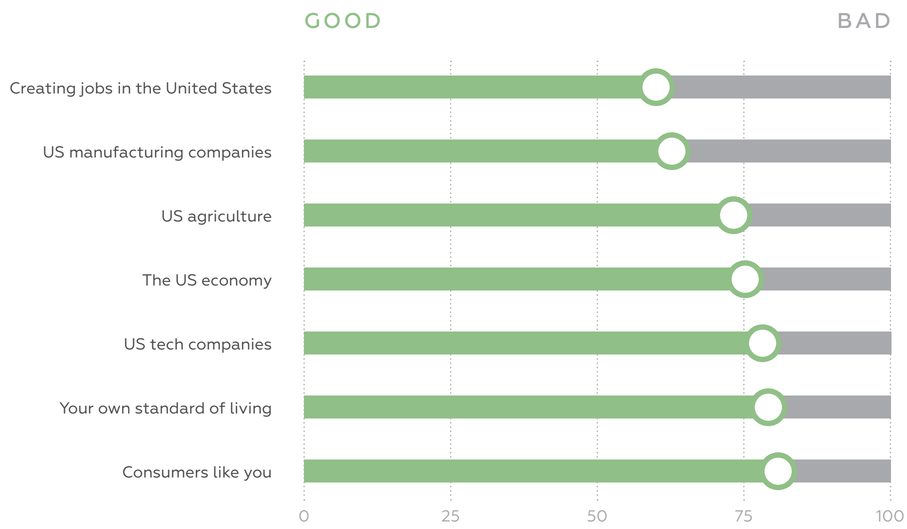
As far as foreign economic policy is concerned, 68 percent of Americans believe that globalization mostly benefits the United States, and a majority believes that international trade benefits America and Americans. This suggests that some commentators make rather too much of the link between political populism and protectionism, let alone a 'new isolationism.' Public opinion data suggest that there is broad support for international engagement as well as cooperation with allies.

BUT PARTISAN DIFFERENCES DO EXIST

The aggregate data inevitably conceal partisan differences. But while more detailed polls suggest that there are partisan differences regarding the priority given to foreign policy issues, neither Republicans nor Democrats are outright isolationist. Nor are they obviously protectionist.

A Pew Research poll shows that "improving relationships with allies" was seen as a priority issue by 63 percent of Democrats and a still respectable 44 percent of Republicans. While 57 percent of Republicans named as a top priority "getting other countries to assume more of the costs of maintaining world order," only 30 percent of Democrats concurred. And maintaining the United States' military advantage over "all other countries" was a foreign policy priority in the eyes of 68 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning

1 – PUBLIC OPINION & FREE TRADE
OVERALL, DO YOU THINK INTERNATIONAL TRADE IS GOOD OR BAD FOR ...?



Source: Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, Chicago Council Survey (2021)

2 – PARTISAN DIFFERENCES & FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES
% WHO SAY ISSUE SHOULD BE GIVEN TOP PRIORITY AS A LONG-RANGE FOREIGN POLICY GOAL

Importance (ranking)		Democrat/ Lean Dem	Republican/ Lean Rep	TOTAL
1	Protecting the jobs of American worker	67	85	75
2	Taking measures to protect the US from terrorist attacks	60	81	71
5	Improving relationships with our allies	63	44	55
6	Limiting the power and influence of China	36	63	48
7	Dealing with global climate change	70	14	44
8	Getting other countries to assume more of the costs of maintaining world order	30	57	42
9	Limiting the power and influence of Russia	50	30	42
13	Reducing illegal immigration into the US	16	64	38
17	Reducing US military commitments overseas	29	29	29
19	Reducing legal immigration into the US	11	35	20

Source: Pew Research (Survey of US adults conducted Feb 1-7, 2021) voters, compared to only 30 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning voters. As for "limiting the power and influence of China," the split was 63 percent of Republicans versus 36 percent of Democrats. Republicans, rather than being isolationist, are more supportive of hard power, more hawkish vis-à-vis China, and keener for allies to share the burden of international leadership.

So neither Republican nor Democratic voters are isolationist – but are they protectionist? 85 percent of Republicans consider "protecting American jobs" the top foreign policy priority as compared to 67 percent of Democrats. Leaving aside whether protectionist trade policies are seen as "protecting jobs," the data may (or may not) be interpreted as voters harboring concerns about free trade. Incidentally, partisan differences become much sharper when the focus is on 'foreign policies' that are primarily seen as an extension of domestic policies – for example, international cooperation on climate change or immigration.

BIPARTISAN SUPPORT IN CONGRESS FOR COUNTERING CHINA AND RUSSIA

If public opinion is not a potential source of isolationist sentiment, what about Congress, which in recent decades has become so partisan? One would expect bipartisan polarization to extend to foreign policy – but it does not, at least not as far as countering China and Russia is concerned. Hawkish policies toward Beijing and Moscow are just about the only issue that garners high levels of bipartisan congressional support. Meanwhile, congressional support for free trade policies is, at best, weak, with both parties harboring skepticism. But support for protectionism is weak, too.

True, Republicans were often reluctant to oppose many of the more controversial foreign policy decisions of the Trump administration. But Republican lawmakers did object to Trump's more egregious policies, such as the reduction of the American troop presence in Germany or the watering down of American Russia sanctions. It is also telling that since Trump left office, there has not been much criticism among Republicans of the Biden administration's support for international alliances.

Meanwhile, Biden's Ukraine aid package has benefitted from broad bipartisan consensus. Admittedly, a higher percentage of House members than Senators opposed it. This may well be indicative of a certain degree of popular opposition as well as of the way the Senate with its six-year electoral cycle is more cushioned from public opinion than the House with its two-year cycle. Nevertheless, the foreign policy consensus in Congress in favor of confronting Russia and maintaining traditional security alliances such as NATO remains strong. Policies countering China similarly enjoy strong bipartisan support.

AMERICA IS NOT GOING TO TURN ISOLATIONIST

Contrary to European fears, neither public nor elite opinion in the United States are isolationist. A second Trump administration aside, Washington is highly unlikely to turn inward. Driven by strategic imperatives, US foreign policy toward China and Russia has been remarkably constant. Yet the United States does not dispose of unlimited resources. Countering China's ambitions and defending the status quo in Asia will ultimately take priority over maintaining a very high level of support to its European allies.

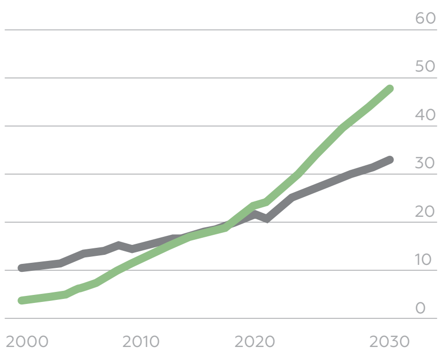
If geo-strategic competition forces the United States to direct a greater share of its resources to Asia and demand more allied support, this will over time become a source of transatlantic tensions, regardless of who is in power in Washington. And Germany will become a particular focus of American attention due to its low levels of defense spending, large economic resource base, and its extensive economic relationship with China.

A possible Trump victory would have extremely negative implications for transatlantic relations in general and Germany in particular. But long-term, the risk to the transatlantic relationship will arise from Washington's strategic shift to Asia, not isolationism. The view according to which populism and domestic polarization are pushing the United States to international disengagement and isolationism is mistaken: It misreads the historical record (great powers don't throw in the towel), underestimates the logic inherent in international politics (hegemonic powers defend the status quo; very rarely do they retrench), misinterprets domestic political dynamics (or at least US public and elite opinion), and it disregards the powerful role cognitive biases play in decision-making (sunk cost effect, status quo bias etc.). Finally, it fails to recognize that 'politics stops at the water's edge' in the words of Senator Arthur Vandenberg: In America's foreign policy, national interests override partisan politics.

3 – CHINA HAS OVERTAKEN AMERICA ECONOMICALLY

(GDP, PPP, TRILLION DOLLARS)

CHINA UNITED STATES



Source: IMF

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