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EUROPEAN UNION'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND BIDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract

Over the last decade the EU has faced challenges on numerous fronts: economic crisis and slow recovery, refugee crisis, terrorism, Brexit, lack of effectiveness of its foreign and security policy. In recent years, the EU has put new effort to define its purpose and standing in international relations, and it seeks to become strategically autonomous actor. That means an actor with the ability to set priorities and make decisions. As the role of the United States is still pre-eminent in the security of Europe, the EU-US relations have a special bearing on that EU's ambition. In this paper we provide an overview of the relations between these two actors with the focus on the first year of Joseph Biden presidency, and we argue that through a complex interaction the EU will seek to define its policies independently of the United States, wishing to expand its space for maneuver and action.

Keywords: *European Union, United States, strategic autonomy, foreign policy, Joseph Biden, Donald Trump*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years the standing of the EU as a global actor has been put under considerable strain. Geographically, it has been surrounded by the arc of instability: from the war turned frozen conflict in Ukraine and in a wider sense a conflictual nature of the relations with Russia; across Turkey, a NATO partner but increasingly a difficult and opportunistic neighbor; Syria, where the 10-year civil war is still ongoing and whose territory has served as a platform for the rise of Islamic State terrorist network; Libya,

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whose prolonged fragmentation bread the Mediterranean human trafficking for a decade; deeper south, countries of the Sahel region are both struck by poverty (and thus of mass emigration) and are under frequent attacks from the Islamic fundamentalist factions.

Ideologically, the EU has suffered from Brexit, that has shown that the union is not an eternal and unchallenged centripetal force in Europe. The long-term effects of the economic crisis early in the last decade have diversified the party politics in the EU and have, if nothing else, made any considerable reform more difficult. Even the Commission, a traditional driver of unification of authority and policymaking had to make way for different scenarios of institutional reform (European Commission 2017), some of which include devolution of Brussels competencies. The fact that the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe is happening during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 is not particularly helpful for having broad and meaningful internal discussion.

The US role as a security underwriter for most of Europe, generally through NATO, has been put under question during the Donald J. Trump presidency (2017-2021) in particular. He was the first and only president of the USA that has repeatedly questioned the very logic of that alliance, calling it the "relic of the Cold War", or "obsolete" (DW 2018). He also put a stronger emphasis on the existing American dissatisfaction with the lower level of defence spending among majority of European NATO members (the usual mark is 2% of GDP), and on sectoral trade imbalances such as in automotive industry imports. He has expanded that criticism to the core of the political economy of the alliance. His words that European allies must "pay their fair share" has found its way into the 2017 National Security Strategy (The White House 2017, 48), and public chastising of some European countries, notably Germany, for not spending enough on defence and freeriding on American expense had become a signature of his presidency.

Still, the US has strengthened its commitments towards the Eastern European countries that find themselves on the NATO's eastern flank. Warsaw government did not let itself slip into ideological and public confrontation with Trump presidency, seeking instead to improve the bilateral ties. President Andrzej Duda officially proposed the setting up of a permanent US military base in Poland under the name "Fort Trump" (The White House 2018). Such ambition proved to be publicly too controversial

because of the naming issue, and eventually two sides did not agree on the financing of the project. Warsaw and Washington have signed the Enhanced Defence Co-operation Agreement in August 2020 that provides for the increase of American troops in Poland (up to around 5000) and the redeployment of an unmanned aerial vehicle squadron (BBC 2020).

Trump has withdrawn the USA from the 2015 international agreement on Iran's nuclear capability agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) in May 2018 and has reintroduced the sanctions against Teheran. The EU views this deal as historic (EEAS 2015) since its diplomacy (in concert with three member states - UK, France, Germany) has played a key role in facilitating the direct US – Iran negotiations. Thus, the US move has undermined the EU's international credibility. Brussels had put its efforts into keeping the other signatories still engaged and in compliance with the agreement, and steered clear of the reintroduction of sanctions against Teheran.

On 1 December 2019 the current European Commission, led by German Christian-Democrat Ursula von der Leyen, took office. One of the self-definitions of the current Commission is that it is a "geopolitical Commission" (von der Leyen 2019). The moniker is used as a show of intent that the European Union takes its international position seriously, that it wants to project not only norms but power as well and furthermore, that while it prefers to build up its alliances, it still wants to be able to stand on its own in foreign and security policies. As High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell said, "Europeans must deal with the world as it is, not as they wish it to be. And that means relearning the language of power and combining the European Union's resources in a way that maximises their geopolitical impact" (Borrell 2020). European Council's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 states that "In a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future." (European Council 2019). Council's president, Charles Michel, stated the three goals of the EU's strategic autonomy: stability, disseminating EU's standards, and promoting EU values, and claimed that the "effective strategic autonomy is the credo that brings us together to define our destiny and to have a positive impact on the world" (Michel 2020). But, giving a meaning to such an autonomy,

especially in a time of pandemic, has shown how the foreign - domestic policy nexus works. For example, in March 2021, the Netherlands and Spain drafted a non-paper on strategic autonomy that stressed the importance of open economies, and Germany, Finland, Estonia and Denmark sent a joint letter to European Commission President with ideas on fostering the EU's digital sovereignty, with implications for its foreign relations as well as economy (Fiott 2021, 8). And in a practical term, the EU showed its capacity and willingness to act when it concluded the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China in December 2020, disregarding the pleas by the officials from the incoming Joseph Biden's administration officials (Alcaro and Tocci 2021, 2). In a challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategic autonomy is spilled over many other social sectors (Ryon 2020); it has become central for political discussions and not merely a think-tankers' preserve (Pothier 2021, 95). And an unescapable issue for any concept of the EU's strategic autonomy is its relationship with the United States.

EUROPEAN UNION'S INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND THE ELUSIVE STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Over the last decades, the EU stakeholders were frequently faced with issues of whether the EU was a "global actor", a "European pillar within NATO", or maybe a "normative power" or "risk-sharing community", or any of the other various buzzwords that tried to define the elusive nature, purpose and standing of the EU in international relations. Several waves of serious discussions and institutional arrangements can be observed throughout recent EU history. The short-lived push to create the European Security and Defence Identity within NATO in the mid-1990s was superseded by the European Security and Defence Identity and the newly established role of EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (June 1999). The 2002 Berlin Plus Agreement made specific arrangements between the EU and NATO in security and defence and came against the backdrop of the war against FR Yugoslavia (1999) and Washington's response to 9/11 and the early stages of the Global War on Terror, with full backing from the UK while dividing the newly enlarged EU (2004) into "old" (France and Germany) and "new" (Poland, Romania, Czechia, Lithuania, Estonia) over their (un)willingness to follow the US foreign policy. That big bang enlargement, coupled with

strong economic growth over previous years and the focus on terrorist threats by Al Qaeda network that, while deadly, was not a systemic challenge, could lead the EU to proclaim that "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free" (Council of the European Union 2003, 3). The big bang enlargement was supposed to be followed by the new EU constitution, but the integrationist Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was voted down in referenda in France and the Netherlands in spring of 2005. After that, the less ambitious approach was found in amending the Rome (1957) and Maastricht (1992) treaties, which resulted in the Lisbon treaty (2008) that is still governing the EU.

The Treaty has created a stronger role for the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. It has established the European External Action Service, enabled the process of Permanent Structured Cooperation in defence matters and streamlined the roles of the European Defence Agency and the EU Military Staff. Yet, these changes did not amount to the effectiveness of the EU as a global actor, or as a problem solver in its own neighborhood. EU's problems in this field still lie in the old Brussels vs the Member-state and NATO vs the EU dichotomies, the need for consensual decisions on vast majority of foreign policy actions which has been especially hard over the past few years (Maurer and Wright 2021, 386), and the diverging security interests of Member-states. EU's expeditionary forces remain only a written word and not a reality, reliant upon few larger national armies and the political will to use them, and the EU Battlegroups[1], while functional, have never been called into action.

A short recap of the last decade can start with the effects of the Great Recession (2008-2009) that has caused economic contraction, hastily creation of new financial instruments (European Stability Mechanism), bitter political standoff regarding the very political economy of the Eurozone (Greek crisis of 2015) and has given rise to right wing politics to which many of the member states have not been accustomed to. During the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, a military intervention in Libya was put together mostly by the two EU Member states (UK and France, with Italy and Spain in the background but with Germany staying out of it), and while being sanctioned by the UN (UN Security Council Resolution 1973), it has failed to create sustainable

1) It should be noted that Serbia participates EU Battlegroups since 2016, and that the Balkan Battlegroup, led by Greece and with army units from Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, Ukraine, and Serbia has been on rotation in the first half of 2020.

peace settlement, but it fueled the creation of long-lasting risk multipliers in Libya and the surge of human trafficking across the Mediterranean.

EU's Eastern Partnership policy was tested in 2013 when the Ukrainian government was in negotiation about the association agreement, on which the official Kiev reneged after strong pressure from Moscow. The protests in Kiev that started in November 2013 in support of the pro-EU policy drew strong response from the government and the support of array of politicians from the EU. Over next several months it all morphed into a conflagration that had toppled the government and the president, the establishment of a new cabinet and a rebellion in Donbass and Crimea with direct Russian support. That support included disguised military units that fought off the attempts of the Ukrainian army to establish the control over the rebel territory. In mid-March 2014 Russia has officially annexed Crimea while the EU and the USA have introduced new sanctions regime against Moscow. While the efforts of the Normandy format (four-way meetings between Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and Kiev) have resulted in armistice in early 2015, the front line has divided parts of Donbass from the rest of Ukraine, and low-level combat is still ongoing six years later and firm political settlement is absent. This crisis has directly hit the security interests of number of EU member states in Eastern Europe, and the military buildup to their aid came through NATO. Over the next three years new NATO multinational forces at a brigade level have been created in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (NATO Enhanced Forward Presence), that provide a trip-wire form of support, ensuring that any attack by Russia would necessarily be directly engaged by many other members of NATO and not just by local countries. Air force, naval, radar and air-defence capabilities have been ramped up in the Baltic and Black Sea by both sides, and in many ways that geographical line now seems to divide Europe. That division line has become a *raison d'être* of the new regional format - Three Seas Initiative – that since 2016 gathers 12 EU member states from the Baltic – Adriatic - Black Sea triangle, all of which except Austria are also NATO member states. Most of these countries are at the same time members of the China-led China-CEE (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries) that was established in 2012 to promote China's links with these countries and to build on its strong export potential around the One Belt, One Road Initiative.

While still reeling from the adverse effects of the Great Recession, the 2015-2016 period brought several new issues to the EU. Over 1 million refugees from Africa and the Middle East came to Europe in 2015, overburdening the border control and asylum system. Mediterranean and Balkan routes that were primarily used by the refugees made additional political strains within the EU, marking the difference between border countries (Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary) and target countries such as Germany or Sweden. It also highlighted the difference between right-wing and broad center party politics within the EU. The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria on the rump territories of these two states has boosted new Islamic fundamentalist terrorist network that was able to conduct several spectacular attacks on the European soil, such as in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016.

But the hardest hit came in June 2016 when the majority of UK voters voted to leave the European Union at the Brexit referendum. As the only such move in EU history it was the direct repudiation of the old "ever closer union" principle. EU's new Global Strategy, unveiled the day after the Brexit referendum (24 June), stated at the very beginning that "we live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned" (EEAS 2016, 7). Three arduous years of negotiations (2017-2019) about the terms of the UK's exit from the EU have fueled sporadic crisis in relations (over the Irish border, fisheries) and have led to further drifting apart between the two parties. The relations have reached such a point that Charles Michel has publicly included the UK in the list of actors that comprise the arc of instability around the EU, along with Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Libya (Reuters 2020).

In the background of these events, some progress has been made in promoting internal cohesion in military affairs. Permanent Structured Cooperaton in defence has been fully set up in 2018 and by the end of 2020 47 joint projects on armaments development and procurement, training and tactical development have been in place (Fiot and Theodosopoulos 2020, 232-235). Together with the European Defence Fund, it drew criticism from American politicians along several lines: that it is pulling away the funding that could be used within NATO, that it is duplicating capabilities which NATO either already has in place or for which it would be a more suitable framework, or that it is too protectionist and

not inclusive for the US defence contractors (Novaky 2018). As a combined direct effect of Brexit and a long-term necessity, Military Planning and Conduct Capability – on operational headquarters of joint EU military assets – has been established in Brussels in 2017-2020. UK's facilities at Northwood Headquarters have often been used as a pragmatic solution for operational control for various EU and multilateral mission and the EU needed its own permanent military HQ instead, for Common Security and Defence Policy missions and ad hoc coalition missions. CSDP serves as an umbrella for six current military and 10 civilian missions, with around 5000 persons, roughly a single brigade (if we should count civilian advisors as soldiers) engagement with its wider neighborhood from Ukraine to Somalia and Mali. (Fiot and Theodosopoulos 2020, 218-229).

In several locations, such as Mali and Niger, EU Member states have more significant military presence than the EU itself. Since 2013, France has been running the Operation Barkhane in five Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso), with the primary focus of combat against a number of local Islamic military factions and protecting its security and energy interest (uranium ore in Niger). Several EU countries and the UK have provided smaller military contribution, while the EU has expanded its development aid to the region. But France's most important partner in the area has been the United States, with special forces (up to 1000 men), intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance force (from UAVs stationed in French bases or in Greece) and air-to-air refueling and strategic airlift capacity (Delaporte 2020). The US have put in place military assets that are still lacking in meaningful quantity in Europe.

THE TRUMP-BIDEN TRANSITION

President Joseph Biden started his term in January 2021 by declaring that "America is back" (The White House 2021a), signaling the return of the United States to multilateralism and close cooperation with its allies in the broad range of issues, in a seeming difference to Trump's "America First" unilateralist approach. As Biden wrote in his opinion piece in *Foreign Affairs* in spring 2020 (Biden 2020, 71-73), that return means "at the head of the table" in order to "do more than just restore our historic partnerships; I will lead the effort to reimagine them for the world we face today". The role of the European Union in

such an arrangement is to become an important partner in putting long-term pressure on China in terms of economic regulation and human rights and democracy issues, while maintaining the established stance against Russia (Foreign Policy 2021).

In the early months of the presidency, Biden was sending a message that two allies share many of the common concerns. At the G7 meeting in United Kingdom in June 2021, he reaffirmed the US role in fighting climate change (BBC 2021), a topic that was discarded by the Trump administration. Early talks regarding the tariffs on some European goods imposed by Trump have resulted in removal of many of them by October (Bown and Russ 2021). Biden's proposal of the global 15% corporate tax has received wide support at G7 and G20 meetings and has yet to be discussed at the OECD level (Alcaro and Tocci 2021, 3). But, "Buy America Act" as amended by Biden might be an early sign of difficult times ahead for transatlantic trade relations (Pothier 2021, 97).

The new administration does speak to its European allies with a softer language than the previous one. Instead of "paying their fair share", as was stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, its 2021 revision says that "we will work with allies to share responsibilities equitably, while encouraging them to invest in their own comparative advantages against shared current and future threats". (The White House 2021b, 10). The pressure towards the Europeans to spend more on defence will still be there.

Washington was quick to make a tactical move with Germany regarding the Nord Stream 2 gas line project and the long-standing opposition to it in the USA. In June 2017 the US Senate adopted a bill on the establishment of sanctions on companies engaged with the Nord Stream 2 project. The rationale was to pressure Germany and several EU energy companies (Austrian OMV, German Uniper and Wintershall and French Engie) to stop the project and their cooperation with Russia and Gazprom. In the wider context of sour relations with Russia, it was expected of Germany to put aside its specific benefits of the project for the sake of more united front against Russia. In December 2019 Donald Trump approved the sanctions recommended by the Senate on any firm that participates in the gas line project (Ryon 2020, 241-243). German chancellor Merkel has remained steadfast in defending the project against the US pressure. The Biden administration sought a rapprochement with Germany over

this issue, as it has its focus on Russia and China. While the 2019 sanctions over the gas line remain in place, the administration has a room to maneuver with its application. Thus, the Biden administration has avoided targeting the major EU companies and has applied the sanctions against the Cyprus-based but Russia-linked shipping company *Transadria* (RFE/RL 2021). The agreement between two countries reached in July 2021 has relaxed the US position over Nord Stream 2, in exchange for stronger German commitments towards Ukraine's economic stability and against Russia "using energy as a weapon" actions (US Department of State 2021).

But, over the summer and early autumn, Biden made two moves that have caused considerable uproar in many quarters in Europe – he made a quick withdrawal of US military and security presence in Afghanistan, and made trilateral arrangement with the United Kingdom and Australia on Australia's future nuclear submarine fleet that has effectively ended the French submarine export deal with Australia. Biden did not hide his view that the military presence in Afghanistan was a burden to America's foreign policy, and before the elections he made a pledge that he will "bring the vast majority of our troops from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State" (Biden 2020, 72). So, the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan in early August was not a surprise; the surprise was the swift collapse of the Kabul government's positions to the Taliban, who overrun them within days including the takeover of Kabul. Instead of the orderly withdrawal, the US decision pressed their European allies to act hastily and under duress. It was a time for strong-worded reactions from Europe. Norbert Röttgen, chairman of the German parliament's foreign relations committee, said that "the early withdrawal was a serious and far-reaching miscalculation by the current administration" and "does fundamental damage to the political and moral credibility of the West". Tom Tugendhat, Conservative chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the UK House of Commons (who had served in Afghanistan) called it "the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez"[2] (Karnitschnig 2021). The EU had no military capability, even if it had any will, to be an armed pillar to a tethered Afghan government. These are the underlying problems of that deployment. The more immediate

2) He refered to the Suez crisis in 1956 when the UK, France and Israel attacked Egypt after secretive preparations, and were met with strong American opposition to that move.

problem was that the involved governments were blindsided by the erroneous US intelligence and reassurances of the orderly withdrawal, and were left with a humiliating defeat.

Less than a month later, France was blindsided with the announcement of the trilateral US-UK-Australia deal (AUKUS) that is supposed to provide Australia with nuclear submarines sometime late in the next decade, as a part of arrangements of containing China north and east of the Malacca strait and Indonesian archipelago. The part of the deal is that Australia will abandon the 2016 submarine deal with France which included production and transfer of technology for 12 Barracuda class submarines (diesel-electric, converted from originally nuclear-powered submarines) from the French Naval Group, and was worth 56 billion Euros. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves le Drian called this move a "duplicity" and a "major breach of trust", and France withdrew its ambassadors to the United States and Australia, which was an unprecedented move (Bouemar 2021). European Commission head von der Leyen reacted in response by calling for the creation of the European Defence Union and for the review of common defence policies and capabilities to be finished by spring 2022, in the period when the France will have the rotational chair of the EU and just before the French presidential elections (April 2022).

There are several salient points being made by this US-UK-Australia decision. It once again showed that the US prioritizes Pacific over Atlantic; that the UK is still ready to follow the US steps, even if it means going behind the back of France with which it already has established deep bilateral military ties (through Lancaster House agreements in 2010); while France has parts of its national soil in the Indo-Pacific, the US does not take it seriously; and the corollary it does not particularly value possible European military outreach into Indo-Pacific. To make matters worse for the EU, a day after the AUKUS announcement the EU made public its strategy for the cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, that is centered around economic, ecological, and human rights topics, but also includes rising ambitions of naval presence in the region (European Commission 2021). By shunning France, the AUKUS partners have also shunned the EU as the reduction of France's role in the region will surely translate into the reduction of EU's role. Small consolation for Paris and Brussels came a week later, after the discussion between Biden and Emmanuel Macron in which Biden recognized the need for previous and open

discussion about the issue. He also recognized "the importance of a stronger and more capable European defense" but one that should be "complementary to NATO" (Momtaz and Forgey 2021), which is an old US trope on the matter of EU-NATO relations.

In responding to these two events, Borrell argued at the European Council meeting in early October there were two attitudes possible for the EU: one was to bury a head in the sand and downplay the significance of these events or pretend that they are issues of only some of the Member states, or to be proactive, understand the ongoing changes and act "if we do not want to live in a world order that we cannot help shape" (Borrell 2021). He expects that the process of putting down on paper the modalities of strategic autonomy through the process of Strategic Compass (by March 2022) will "give a sense of direction" (Borrell 2021).

CONCLUSION

The United States under Trump regarded the European ambition towards the strategic autonomy in the realm of security with a mix of skepticism and rejection. The principle of "America First" and Trump's personal unpredictability and impulsiveness have pushed EU to make practical steps in strengthening its security potentials within the limited internal possibilities and with the long-term focus. The maxim of strategic risk hedging against the unpredictable ally has been partially confirmed by Biden's messy withdrawal from Afghanistan and pushing aside France in the AUKUS deal, even if most of the EU countries have not been directly hit by that move. Understanding that the locus of economic power has moved towards East Asia, Europeans have started to look towards a future in which America is less central to their strategic calculations, towards a post-transatlantic moment. The change of US administration has not really changed that, and it is yet a question whether Biden' multilateralism is essentially unilateralism by another name (Grare 2021).

Under Biden, the United States have no clear and fixed view on the EU's ambition for strategic autonomy and might remain open to the idea of greater European self-sufficiency in the area of security and defence. That view is a function of the premiere challenge – the relationship with China which is continuity between two rival administrations in Washington. While the European allies can offer just a symbolic military presence in the Pacific, they might be crucial in the attempts to shape future

commerce, ecology, and digital rules, which will take time longer than a single electoral cycle. The hard power of Europe is more important in its own neighborhood, where the issues of burden sharing and clear commitments still reign supreme.

The EU is not and never will be a superpower nation-state. It will not be able to harness in a coherent way the total military capabilities of its member states and bits and pieces of its own, and match them with its considerable economic and diplomatic capacity. Even with France, as a nuclear power, within its ranks, the EU lacks the ability to provide nuclear extended deterrence on its own continent, given the preeminence of Russia and the USA in that particular domain (Heisbourg 2021, 28-29). It will remain only one of the colors in a Rubik's cube of security interests of its member states, who will occasionally turn to NATO or pragmatic coalition building outside the EU to further their own goals. The first year of the Biden administration's foreign policy has pushed the EU deeper into soul-searching of its global role and the modes of strategic autonomy that it wants to define and pursue.

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ПОТРАГА ЕВРОПСКЕ УНИЈЕ ЗА СТРАТЕГИЈСКОМ АУТОНОМИЈОМ И БАЈДЕНОВА СПОЉНА ПОЛИТИКА

Резиме

Током претходне деценије ЕУ се сусрела са изазовима на више фронтова: економска криза и спори опоравак, избегличка криза, тероризам, Брегзит, одсуство ефикасности своје спољне и безбедносне политике. Последњих година, ЕУ је уложила нови напор да дефинише своју сврху и положај у међународним односима, желећи да стратешку аутономију. То практично значи да постане чинилац са способношћу да поставља своје приоритете и доноси одлуке. Како је улога Сједињених Држава у безбедности Европе још увек преовлађујућа, односи ЕУ-САД имају посебан значај на ту амбицију ЕУ. У овом тексту пружамо преглед односа између ова два чиниоца са фокусом на првој години председничког мандата Џозефа Бајдена, и дајемо аргументе да кроз сложену интеракцију ЕУ тежи да дефинише своје политике независно од Сједињених Држава, желећи да прошири простор за маневар и акцију.

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