

## BERLIN-MADRID-PARIS-ROME Quadrilateral Dialogue Europe in the post-US elections scenario

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### Report of the conference (written on March 2024)

The coming US election risks being a storm for the EU political scene and transatlantic cooperation. While there is a common sense of danger associated with a Trump victory, different views still persist in EU capitals, revealing gaps that can be exploited by a Trump return to the White House. Nothing is as illustrative of this as Ukraine: different member states keep knocking on the American door with little coordination. The lack of a common position between Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland is evident and sends a signal of internal dysfunctionality. The same goes for broader debates on security and defence, or the future of EU integration and enlargement.

Parallel to this lack of unity, a clear lack of leadership is emerging: German Chancellor Scholz struggles to keep his coalition together, and French President Macron has increasingly posed himself as a leader on Ukraine- but his country lags behind Germany in arms supplies. British Prime Minister Sunak will suffer a catastrophic election defeat, and US President Biden is equally concerned about the Ukraine-Gaza polls. While geopolitics is heavy on Europe, leaders are missing from the stage, calling for more unity and less public disagreements.

In such a situation, current inclusive discussion frameworks are showing their limits, requiring experimentation with different, smaller formats: this Quadrilateral offers a coordination opportunity, and the revitalized Weimar triangle could also bring progress – better if expanded to include Italy and Spain. Creativity is required to break the 27-states deadlock and to reach out to London on defence, yet this has to be careful to avoid resentments from excluded actors.

Franco-German division over EU defence capabilities and investment plans are evident, yet they are more complementary than it appears: Berlin's emergency mode is focused on filling the short term gap, buying off the shelf with little concern for domestic origin; France looks more at the long term posture and the development of EU equipment. Those two can be the sides of the same coin: Europe should look at producing European when possible and buying American when necessary, without preconditions. However, looking only at the transatlantic side of the issue fails to grasp internal problems in interoperability and capacity building.

The war in Ukraine and the US election are both existential threats to the current EU, but the continent has to realise that many crisis scenarios are not vital to Washington, requiring the EU to be at the forefront. There is ample room for Europeans leading or co-leading: support to Ukraine has raised significantly without waiting for the US. Yet, as Europe cannot effectively compensate for the lack of American contribution, a sense of panic about the November vote is sweeping in. Trends in US policy putting America and China first would hardly change and the US are already asking for alignment on Beijing, creating tension ahead of the July NATO Summit.

Nonetheless, Europe has to adapt to a Trump presidency, understanding what it would imply in Ukraine: a quick peace deal forcing Kyiv to give up lands, followed by no real pace, but more likely a bloody insurgency scenario. This would open also an opportunity for Moscow to test NATO guarantees in the Baltics. Such an outcome should be avoided, requiring a stepping up of the support and a fine-tuning of the communication: the current NATO framework allows for European-led effort to freeze current frontlines. Parallel to this, industrial investments should increase armaments production for future operations. In the end, the EU economy as a whole vastly surpasses Russia's GDP and Moscow is more constrained than Brussels on resources for the war effort. However, raising resources in Europe has proven notoriously difficult, requiring new methods outside the Stability and Growth Pact to reduce the gap with US NATO expenditures. An EU Commissioner for Defence would help in that regard, with a portfolio covering defence industries and not actual security policies. The EU defence pillar should be reactivated, profiting from Putin's actions to push for European unity: this should be accompanied by a communication strategy directed at the public opinion. The return to Cold War defence logics is unfortunately inevitable.

All the discourses about Trump-proofing Europe hold little value if Europe does not Europe-proof itself, as Europeans are hurting themselves with disunity and the inability to effectively coordinate. The objective should be to make the war unsustainable for Moscow, signalling that Europe can act quickly, especially on forward defence deployments and deterrence capabilities. The lack of unity would likely be exploited by a new Trump presidency, with a heavy risk of bilateralization of transatlantic economic and security links. Transactionality in NATO would hurt common defence needs and should be resisted by Europeans. This would thus require greater alignment and greater internal trust – currently low on security – preventing domestic divides from becoming EU divisions. At the same time, unity should not mean settling for the lowest common denominator, Europe needs ambition and the capability to deal with the most thorny issues instead of shelving them.

EU enlargement is arguably equally divisive as Ukraine, at least in terms of the methods to implement it. Germany is a traditional enlargement enthusiast, believing in a manifest destiny of going East, France remains much more skeptical, preferring cohesion instead. Spain and Italy are both supportive, Madrid with a lower profile and Italy more pragmatic on Western Balkans. Yet, the last years have seen a fast convergence in support for enlargement framed in a geopolitical lens.

Consensus is also emerging on the necessity to avoid shortcuts for Ukraine accession and the impossibility of widening the EU without a parallel deepening. When it comes to internal reforms, however, disagreements rise again, from qualified majority voting to differentiated integration. Reaching 33 members would inevitably require flexibility, leaving the room to proceed for those willing to integrate more. The length of the process and the ongoing war pose the question of how to use European leverage in the negotiations, still the most powerful external tool in the hands of the EU. The outcomes on the battlefield make Ukraine integration risky, and this enlargement would make the EU a geopolitical player in the region, pitting it permanently against Russia. The ability to play such a role is at the heart of the enlargement question: for the first time ever this might not be underwritten by US security support. Keeping the pace without American support would be difficult, but the worst-case scenario has to be planned on time. This applies to fiscal, agricultural, and

industrial policies too, understanding that Ukraine would end its status as a buffer and become a fully European security issue.

The coming EU Parliament election further complicates the debate on enlargement, as the tactical dimension tends to prevail in the campaign over the long term strategy. Growing public dissatisfaction and defeatism about the war in different countries add a consensus problem on top of the fiscal one. Notwithstanding the limited space for further support, there is space to do better and to improve the narrative, also explaining that Europe has been able to weather the energy storm quite well. On enlargement, the EU credibility is at stake: doors opened for negotiations and never closed have created distrust and resentment in candidate countries, this should not be repeated with Ukraine. Pragmatism on enlargement requires a bigger political push from the Council to create ownership by the capitals and build alliances. At the same time, the fake opposition between geopolitical imperative and merit-based approach should be overcome, all accession are merit-based in the chapters. However, credibility requires a change in the paradigm: candidates should be partially brought in and experience the benefits during the association phase. This serves two purposes: making clear to Moscow that it does not hold a veto on the EU future of Ukraine, and sustaining support in candidate countries.

Between the four capitals, there is a wide convergence on four major points: 1) Europe faces existential threats and needs to go forward; 2) the current leadership crisis is also a crisis of trust; 3) restricted formats could be the adequate tools – however, it is necessary to make sure they do not create fragmentation; 4) timing is of the essence, requiring fast responses. Indeed, on all those points the gap between the short term logics and the long term strategies is smaller than it appears, leaving room for better coordination even in the face of bilateralization risks that could not be fully removed. Resisting Trump is not the only reason to reshape the transatlantic alliance: even a Biden win would not alter US longstanding foreign policy trend and the relationship should not be taken as a given. A smaller NATO footprint on the continent looks inevitable, regardless of the November elections winner. Europe can and should play a more proactive role and think about how to complement it on the security side rather than plan to substitute NATO or US security guarantees. Complementary engagements should look at the UK and the wider European Political Community to include third countries, focusing on the strategic goals that can be achieved by working together.

Notwithstanding the need to expand cooperation, it is now up to the big four of the EU to send the right message about Ukraine and enlargement, focusing the latter on the contribution candidate countries can make to Europe instead of exclusively talking about what can be offered to them. The process is a two-way street, and previous enlargement rounds yielded great economic benefits to the bloc as a whole, not just to the new members. In implementing those strategies, Policy Planning Units offer a unique added value, as they are able to go beyond the segmentation and classic topics division of Commission DGs. This makes them key actors in the intra-EU dialogue among the capitals: reinforcing those formats for discussion, alignment, and coordination would be crucial.