

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

ELECTION '24: WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR US-EUROPEAN RELATIONS?

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2024

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PANEL DISCUSSION:

LIANA FIX: Fellow for Europe, Council on Foreign Relations

MATTHIAS MATTHIJS: Senior Fellow for Europe, Council on Foreign Relations

CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER: Director, Center on the United States and Europe, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center on the United States and Europe, Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Trans-Atlantic Relations, Brookings

TARA VARMA: Visiting Fellow - Foreign Policy, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

MODERATOR:

Michael Birnbaum: National Security Reporter, The Washington Post

BIRNBAUM: Hi there. Thanks for joining us. We're going to have a conversation today about the elections of 2024. Obviously, they're not over yet, and the most consequential one we're still very uncertain about the outcome. But I am looking forward to talking today with our distinguished panel—and forgive the slight bug in my throat. Looking forward to talking today about how things have been going so far this year and what we can expect in the coming years after the November election here in Washington.

Joined today by Liana Fix, who's a fellow for Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations. She also teaches at Georgetown and is a historian and political scientist who focuses on German and European foreign security policy.

Matthias Matthijs, who's a senior fellow for Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations, who also teaches at SAIS. He's an expert on European political economy and regional integration.

Constanze Stelzenmüller, who is the director of the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, and is an expert—scarcely needs introduction, but she's an expert on German, European, and transatlantic foreign security policy and strategy.

And Tara Varma, who is a visiting fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings who focuses on French security issues, European geostrategy, and European sovereignty.

I am Michael Birnbaum. I cover foreign affairs at the Washington Post. I was based in Europe a long time and now cover foreign security affairs from here in Washington. Excited to moderate this panel today.

I'll keep it short. I want to get to the discussion as quickly as we can. I have been asked to read this promotional material. This event is a part of a series of election initiatives that both CFR and Brookings are organizing to bring public attention to consequential policy issues confronting voters and policymakers in the runup to the 2024 election. This webinar today is the first of three that Brookings and CFR are jointly organizing.

In addition, CFR and Brookings want to thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which has made this event possible. The activities supported by their donors reflect a shared commitment to independence. And the views we're all about to express at this event are solely those of ourselves, not of those various other donors and organizations and other people who we would get in trouble if we didn't include that disclaimer.

I'm sure all of you want to, you know, have—bring some ideas to this discussion. Why don't we talk—I'll give you a chance to talk briefly and then we can really sort of interchange with each other.

But in your opening remarks I just wanted to say maybe two things that we could think about. One, let's say Trump wins on November 5th or a victory becomes apparent in the days after. I'm curious your sense of what you think would need to happen in the months between then and January 20th, what kinds of things Europe would be interested in concluding with an outgoing Biden administration knowing that a Trump-Vance administration was about to take office.

And then if Harris wins, I'm interested in your sense of what, you know, more broadly Europe's expecting from a Democratic, a Harris presidency, and to what extent the transatlantic divides are permanent, to what extent you think that there is a sort of positive trajectory that comes out from that.

Why don't we start? We'll just do alphabetical order, so by family name. Liana, why don't you go first? And why don't we try to be pretty quick, and then we can quickly move into discussion?

FIX: Thanks so much, Michael. Thanks so much for the invite to take part in this discussion.

I'll start with a provocative thought: Relating to the title of our event, which I think is one of the big problems in the transatlantic relationship, that we are thinking from elections to elections, and in particular from U.S. elections to U.S. elections, which basically define the transatlantic relationship. No one would speak about the era of Scholz or Chirac in transatlantic relationship; we always speak about the Obama era, the Trump era.

So it shows two things. First, the overdependence of Europe from Europe's side on the United States. And second, that Europeans are looking at the United States in—from event to event instead of thinking about the long-term structural changes that we see in U.S. foreign policy.

And what I mean by that—and I'll link this to your question, Michael—Europeans, after the election of Joe Biden, basically dropped all the thoughts that they had on their own—on their own role as a security actor. They leaned in the United States' leadership role during the Ukraine war; and they thought that business is back as usual with President Biden, who said America is back.

My concern is if we have a Kamala Harris administration that all the discussions that we had among Europeans so far, how can they take on more responsibility—and I don't like this word because it's too soft; it's actually about how do they produce more tanks, more ammunitions, more missiles—(laughs)—that all these—all these considerations will be dropped immediately and Europeans will hope that we come back to the cozy transatlantic relationship of Cold War times with a Kamala Harris administration.

And the other way around, if you look at the possibility of a Donald Trump administration, Europeans right now hope for the best, but they don't prepare for the worst, and that's what they should be doing after the November elections. Europeans should come forward with a proactive plan for the Trump administration that includes both European security and Europe's relationship with China. What can Europe offer on European security, Ukraine support, taking on more responsibility for its own defense? How do they take on China's support for Russia's war? How do they take on China's overcapacity challenge in electric vehicles?

I have proposed together with our colleague Sophia Besch from Carnegie that Europe needs a E-7 format of the most important member states, the Commission, and the European NATO representative to react quickly and in an agile way to any negotiation proposal that might come out from Washington under a Trump administration and ideally present their own plan. And I'm sure we will discuss throughout this hour what are the obstacles to all of that. (Laughs.) I'm looking forward to hearing on that from my colleagues.

BIRNBAUM: Great. Thanks so much for that compact—and I agree, you've anticipated a few of my questions there, Liana, some of the things that I'm curious about talking with all of you about.

Matthias, why don't—why don't you have your turn?

MATTHIJS: Yes. I mean, I think Liana said it very well, so I don't know if I have much to add. So let me—let me focus a little bit on how Europe has changed in the last five years, which maybe Americans don't always understand. But I tend to agree with Liana that that Europe lives every four years, from administration to administration, and doesn't seem to, you know, kind of think of its own interests, and how—and even what they could offer to the United States, for that matter, if they are so reliant still, at least in the short term, for their security.

So I think that the most important change in in the last ten years is where the center of gravity used to be the member states of the European Union, especially when the U.K. was still a member as well. But you know, if you asked me ten years ago who's the leader of Europe, I think nine out of ten people would say it's Angela Merkel, right? Is the chancellor of Germany that seemed to either, you know, decide the main things or slow down decision on other things. I think now the answer is Ursula von der Leyen. Not because she's also a German woman—I think that's a coincidence—but the shift in gravity in Europe has moved towards the Commission.

And you see this—I mean, this is striking for somebody like me who studied the euro crisis very early on when it was happening, where the Commission was seen as a bunch of bureaucrats who were implementing the decisions that were made in Berlin, right? I mean, that's become very different. You see von der Leyen is a frequent visitor in the White House. She's close with Joe Biden. That's one thing. But it's also because the Commission can act on things where member states are much slower to act. So whether this is on sanctions with Ukraine, whether this is on trade, whether this is on a kind of joint action vis-à-vis China, much of Europe's power is now with the Commission. I mean, we can break this down further and talk about the role of the U.K. since Brexit, and how Starmer fits into all this. But that's—so that's a fact.

That said, that “gloeonomic revolution” that I called it a year ago with Sophie Meunier in Foreign Affairs is not complete, right? I mean, it started. It started in '17 with Juncker. It accelerated during COVID, when Europe was, as anywhere in the world, aware of their vulnerability. But a lot of these things still need to be implemented, rolled out, need a lot more money. I mean, all of us on this call at least have followed the

release of the Draghi report, and you know, for many people that's nothing new. What is new is that there's a growing consensus that this is that serious, right?

So, what worries me a bit, that—Liana is absolutely right. If Kamala Harris gets elected, the Europeans and another collective sigh of relief, and they'll be, like, we'll just continue businesses as usual, and slowly move towards talking more about joint collective defense on the European scale. And what worries me even more is that if Trump, heaven forbid, wins the election on November 5 and it's not even that close, that every EU member state will make their bilateral deals with the Trump administration—whether it's naming fortresses after Trump's kids; whether it's, you know, new deals with Boeing and Lockheed Martin; or things like that—and that very little in this agenda of European strategic autonomy will come to fruition.

And so I'll end with this. I mean, I think from—what still hasn't really quite dawned on the European side is that there is a shift both on economics and on security in the—both sides of the aisle here, right, whether it's Republicans or Democrats. I think Democrats are a lot nicer and diplomatic about it. And biggest important difference is that Democratic administrations value allies a lot more than I think a Trump administration 2.0 would. But, yeah, they're waiting in Europe; they're not actually moving forward. And it's also because of its own electoral agenda, the calendar, that the Commission is still very much in formation, and that its two most important member states—Germany and France—have incredibly weak governments, if not no government or a government in formation, I'll say, in the case of France.

Let me stop right there.

BIRNBAUM: Thanks. Some interesting things to pick up later.

Constanze.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yeah. I agree, of course, with Liana and Matthias. I'll put some sort of trailings on this.

It is true that the Commission has become more powerful. And it is true that that is the case because central states are either absent, like the Brits—so powerful, large states are absent or weak, like the Germans and the French. But the governance of Europe has also become more complicated in that we

have always had a sort of coequal governance between the European Commission and the Council, which is the heads of—the heads of state or government. And in the Council, again, the most powerful states would have the most powerful vote.

In that collegium, to the extent that both Paris and Berlin have become more absent—and I would say that Berlin especially currently seems to me to be pursuing what almost feels like an anti-European policy, or rather a renationalization of policy even by the mainstream democratic parties of the traffic-light government—that means that there is a power shift in the European intergovernmental arrangement towards, I think, in this case at least on security issues and many foreign policy issues that are current towards the Nordics and towards the Eastern—and the Eastern Europeans.

There are also some quite significant tensions there that are masked by the fact that other governments, such as the Spanish or the Portuguese, are less vocal in this domain. That doesn't mean they agree with the Poles or with—or with the Norwegians—sorry, the Norwegians aren't members—the Swedes, for example, or the Finns. So, there is—sort of there is divergence masked by silence. There is an absence of Paris and Berlin. And then, finally, there's a European Parliament which has been given more powers of co-governance in the Lisbon Treaty, and at the same time has seen a distinct rightward shift.

And we haven't seen yet what that rightward shift—because the parties of the right are both stronger and more fragmented—what that will mean for the European parties' ability to interfere with the Commission. And why haven't we seen that yet? Because this Commission is taking unusually long to constitute itself, not least because Ursula von der Leyen has asked member states to propose at least 50 percent women as commissioners and most member states aren't complying—which, I have to say, I find very hard to swallow as a person of the female persuasion.

And so, the result of all of which, I just want to say, is that we, I think from the outside, very—it would be very understandable if even our friends and allies were at this point somewhat confused. Trying to understand what we want, where we are headed, whether we ourselves have a sense of direction I think is, at this point, quite difficult. And, yes, Liana's completely right when she says we think from election to election. And that is both an analytical and a political weakness, right, because the issues that we're dealing with are structural rather than conjunctural, and also require us to cooperate. But right now,

we're not presenting the picture that we are able to do that. And I'm afraid that's particularly true currently of my own country. And if you think that I am annoyed at this, you would be right.

Also, finally, I want to apologize for having an espresso during this conversation, but I did feel that, A, it would be conducive to clarity; and, secondly, I need to keep up with the cliches.

BIRNBAUM: Thanks so much, Constanze.

Tara.

VARMA: Thanks a lot.

I agree with a lot of what has already been said, so I'll be very brief. I want to pick up on two ideas. My co-panelists will not be surprised I want to talk about European strategic autonomy briefly and the idea of a European offer.

On European strategic autonomy, I think it needs to be said that it used to be portrayed, for a long time, basically against the idea of the transatlantic relationship and the solidity of the transatlantic bond. I don't think that's the case anymore. I think it has become clear that Europeans doing more for themselves, investing more in tanks and weapons, building economic protection instruments, is part of basically building European power, and it is needed. And if Europe is stronger, the transatlantic bond is stronger and the U.S. is stronger.

And so I think there was an acceleration under the first Donald Trump administration of a sense of urgency that Europeans needed to do more for themselves. And we saw it really done on economic security, I would say, anti-coercion instruments, et cetera. I'm guessing if Donald Trump were to be reelected we would see another acceleration of that process, but it would not be done probably in the best of ways because we're—you know, we need months and years of building up budgets, buying manufacturing plants, training people. This is a very long process that the EU would not be able to conduct in the span of the two months that we have left, or month and a half basically, and until Election Day and even until January Europeans would not be able to get there on their own.

And this is where I get at the European offer. I think I really, really like Liana and Sophia's piece. I really recommend everyone reading it. I think it's super helpful. I just think that a European offer works only with a Kamala Harris administration.

I'm not sure that Europeans would think that, you know, it would be business as usual with Kamala Harris. I think it's evident that she wants to carry a lot of the legacy of Joe Biden, but he really was—he is the last transatlanticist president, I think. He has a vision of Europe as an ally, and that—Matthias alluded to that. I think that's really important to her. She said it again in the debate a few days ago against Donald Trump. But she also has a vision of the U.S.'s role in the world and the idea of what the U.S. is supposed to do that is quite all-encompassing, and Europe is one part of that. And so I think she would—I assume that she would be very interested in an idea of a European offer being brought to her—what Europeans and Americans could do on trade, on climate, on NATO, and European defense, amongst other things; and would add international order and a proper transatlantic offer to the Global South as well.

I don't think Donald Trump would be conducive to that at all. And I don't have to assume this. You know, I'm just thinking about a number of declaration(s) that he made earlier this year, that he would tell Vladimir Putin to do whatever he wanted with countries not reaching 2 percent of defense spending in their GDP. He came out with this very publicly, and in a rally. He didn't say it in a panel discussing it, you know, as—(laughs)—as a think tanker; he said it as the candidate for the nomination of his own party. So I think he's quite clear about this. He's not lied to the public, whether American or European, about this. I don't think he would be interested in the idea of a European offer.

His view of transactionalism is really any deal that is in favor of the U.S. It would not be about an egalitarian deal, you know, a balanced deal; it would be what works for the U.S. only. And really, the Europeans here, I think in his mindset, not only are free riders but they're also inconsequential; they don't matter at all. You know, he has, really, a profound dislike of the European Union as an international organization. He has a profound dislike of a number of European leaders, personal dislike. And that was true eight years ago; I think that is still true. And I think—I also absolutely agree that he would actively try to divide Europeans and that he might actually reach his goal in doing so, looking at the state of European politics right now.

Let me stop here.

BIRNBAUM: Great. Well, thanks so much.

I have a couple questions based on what you've just said. I forgot to mention in about twenty-five minutes we'll open it up to some audience questions, which you can submit online. They'll be passed to us. And you all should feel free to jump in. Ignore the moderator if you have something to say to each other.

But just to start, you've made some very interesting points about, you know, what is it that Europe—European countries, EU members, however you want to sort of tally it—might need to do if Trump is elected in November. Liana, you mentioned a proactive plan for Ukraine and China. Matthias, you've said you weren't convinced that European countries are capable of working together enough versus just making bilateral deals with the Trump administration.

And so I was curious—maybe I could just direct this to you, Constanze, first, but if others want to jump in please do—to what extent is it possible to come up—I mean, Constanze, you've just been talking about the weakness of individual governments and then, to a certain extent, the collective weakness of Europe at the moment. To what extent is it possible to come up with some sort of coherent plan, whether you call it a plan or an offer? But let's say Trump's elected. Are European countries going to be able to coordinate with each other? Do they see the problems sufficiently similarly that they can come up with a collective strategy? Or do you agree more with Matthias that it will be a kind of every-country-for-itself scramble to Washington to do golf packages with Trump?

STELZENMÜLLER: So hard to say. Honestly, I think in the case of a—of a new Trump administration I do see the likelihood of a renationalization of European transatlantic policies, right? That strikes me as incontrovertible. Tara has already said that as well.

I do think that we are about to see another sort of real downturn in European security because the impact of the winter on Ukraine, combined with ongoing Russian bombardments, will greatly exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, right, and the pressures on civil society there—never mind, of course, also on fighting troops in the east. And it's quite possible that we will see more major refugee movements towards Europe

at a time when, among others, the German government—German government today has again instituted border controls on all its land borders, right, which I personally find profoundly distressing and shameful.

I am—I think it's worth reminding ourselves what we were capable of in the fall and winter of 2022. The Germans decoupled from Russian energy imports with a speed unimaginable to them and to most of their friends. And we stood up weapons support for Ukraine at a degree and in a quantity that also was unimaginable in the first weeks of the war.

The problem is that we always fall back. And the problem is that we always, when things become even slightly more comfortable, then think we can dial back the clock to some form of imaginary pre-conflict status quo in the—in the hopes of regaining some sort of a stable security equilibrium in Europe, which I believe at this point given more than two years' experience with Putin's Russia is unattainable for us for the foreseeable future. And the real—the drama of European lack of strategic autonomy is not our ability to respond to crises; it is our inability to plan ahead strategically, right, as—in the—in the knowledge that that is at least as necessary as the crisis response, right?

It is possible that a new Trump administration and a—and a hostile White House will impress that need upon us again and that we might shift. But I find it deeply distressing that it, you know, would require that for us to be able to move on these issues.

And what I'm particularly concerned by is the sort of disappearance of European solidarity from our public debates, and including in my country, right? That strikes me as a key European virtue. And if we can't achieve that, then we are going to find it very hard to reach for the kind of institutional structural fixes that probably all of us think are necessary.

So, yeah, I do see a renationalization of transatlantic relations. And I think that that will be exploited in very much the same way as it was exploited the last time around, where we saw Macron, Johnson—or, Theresa May, I think—and Angela Merkel trying different methods of working with the American president and failing in their own way, right? From embrace to ironic eyerolls to, you know, shades of in between, none of that, as we know now, really worked.

BIRNBAUM: So I'd like to circle—I mean, Constanze, you just mentioned Ukraine, which is, obviously, a pretty key issue in all of this. I want to circle to Ukraine in one moment.

But just to keep on sort of European solidarity and European strategic autonomy for a second, I mean, if there is this concern that if Trump were elected, you know, there would be this kind of nationalization of approaches to Washington—Tara, I think you mentioned, and this is certainly a question that I've also had, if Harris were elected, what would happen to efforts to—for Europe to stand more autonomous, or stand—do the investments that it's been talking about doing? And would there be a lessening of pressure if there were a Democratic administration?

So I'm curious, you know if, on the—yeah, to what extent European strategic autonomy and all these efforts have a future if there's a kind of breakdown under Trump, and a lessening of pressure to actually do something, and make deeper investments under Harris? I mean, how does that add up? And maybe—Liana, maybe you could address that just a little bit.

FIX: Yeah, absolutely. And I want to make sure that we don't become a Europe-bashing panel here, because obviously there's a lot of criticism—(laughs)—that one can bring forward when it comes to the situation Europe is in.

There's always this claim that without the United States it will be incredibly difficult for Europe to be united, and I'm actually not sure if I fully agree with that. And it goes back to what Constanze said about the renationalization. Think the danger is not a united or disunited Europe. Europe has always been very successful in being disunited—(laughs)—even if there was a strong United States. The danger here is that rivalries among European countries have not fully disappeared.

Of course, the umbrella of NATO and the umbrella of the European Union has bureaucratized rivalries. It's very difficult to be rivaling when you are in the halls of Brussels and it's all about committees where you are negotiating. But in the end, we do see still a situation in Europe where, especially between Germany and France, there is a rival relationship about a leadership role in Europe, and France's ideas about European strategic autonomy obviously go into that. France has not been excited—and Tara knows

more, can comment more about this than I do—about Germany's attempt to become a military leader in Europe, and we see how the relationship is still not where it should be.

And at the same time, if you think about what Europeans could achieve if they are united, they actually have a lot to offer. And what they have to offer is not only support for Ukraine—and we can dig into that even further. We also—not only financial support, but we also see that Europeans are now are also increasing the production lines for ammunition. So, increasingly, the military side of the support, Europeans will become better at providing that. What Europeans can also offer is a defense industry, opportunities for the United States in cooperating between the defense industries.

And what Europeans have is an incredible leverage towards China as a market. Europeans are not using that because their first concern when they think about China is retaliation. They are—by every move that they do, they are concerned about Chinese retaliation and what it will mean for their respective economies. But there are precedents how one can deal with retaliation fears. For example, in the runup to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission has prepared sheets for every European country which European country will suffer most from Russian retaliation, and has tried to share the burden among European countries. Those are examples that can be—that can be repeated in the future when it comes to the China thing.

And I think, apart from European security, the China part is the part where the United States wants to see most from Europeans. And it's not about sending a frigate, as the Germans are heroically doing now, through the Taiwan Strait. It's more about using the economic and the trade leverage that Europeans have towards China to address Chinese overcapacity, for example; to address China's support for Russia's war, which has crossed the line from dual use support to direct support, as U.S. officials only recently have claimed, and by which China has become a direct security threat to Europe itself.

I think that would have to be part of the package. Of course, again, it's only possible if Europeans unite instead of renationalize in a response to a Trump administration. But for that, we need—we need leadership figures, and I think that's perhaps the biggest lack that we have right now. I see Constanze throwing her hands in the air.

STELZENMÜLLER: May I do a two-finger?

FIX: Please.

STELZENMÜLLER: Michael, you know, we're—I think none of us would say Europe doesn't have power assets, right? Our single market and our—and our regulatory power makes us a peer power, at least in that context, to the United States, right—but only to the degree, as you say, that we develop political leadership, right? And right now, people are undercutting the new—the incoming president of the Commission, right, and preparing to do battle with her in the EP. And the intergovernmental sort of side of the—of the European decision-making is currently, you know, developing—you know, is shifting, right, but is not—I would say the powers to whom that is shifting in Europe haven't really found a voice yet, right?

FIX: And I would add one sentence. I would even go as far—and this might be unpopular—to blame—put a little bit of blame on the—even on the United States, because I think they have—with Biden's "America is back" rhetoric they have entered into leadership paradox, where they are so successful in leading throughout the Ukraine war that they are too successful for their own good, because they incentivize Europeans to lean back and not to engage in a leadership role, as they've done in 2008 with Georgia, 2014 with Crimea and eastern Ukraine. One can criticize how well that went. But one could also imagine a new U.S. administration which is more forceful towards demanding from Europeans to take on more leadership themselves.

BIRNBAUM: Tara, you know, from the French perspective on these efforts for Europe to stand on its own, strategic autonomy, I mean, what do you think in terms of either what Liana just said—a sort of more demanding United States asking Europe to take more of the burden—or, you know, I don't quite know how to characterize, you know, let's say a Democratic administration that is a little less demanding, friendlier in terms of rhetoric, but also maybe less interested in general in European security, and certainly with attention diverted in many different directions? I mean, what does—how does that leave, you know, all these European efforts, do you think?

VARMA: So, yeah, I wouldn't expect a Harris administration to be less interested in European security. I would expect it to expect more from Europeans and not to assume that the U.S. would always be here.

And I fully agree with what Liana said. You know, the sentence that we heard, “America is back,” I think Europeans heard it for themselves. The world heard it for itself, too. You know, Donald Trump withdrew from so many multilateral institutions. I think there was a sense that “America is back” means also multilateralism is back, international cooperation is back; it’s actually good. We’re going to be there for our allies.

But I think Europeans heard it a bit too literally. Also, because I think it came from Joe Biden—again, the last transatlanticist president. And so we were kind of happy as Europeans to take for granted that the U.S. would always be there. And we understood “America is back” in in kind of only one way, through one angle. And we were wrong to do so because, you know, in the months ahead of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. was quite clear that they didn’t want to go into Ukraine. They were providing Europeans with quite clear information that this was in their neighborhood, that it would be for Europeans to take a lot more care of their own security.

In the end, the U.S. did a lot. And it was through U.S. military and political leadership, I think, that also the EU proved itself in an unprecedented way. The European Union right now is sending lethal aid, lethal assistance to Ukraine. It’s not just financial and material and humanitarian aid that the EU is providing to a country not a member of the EU yet, not a member of NATO, but something unprecedented is happening from the European side. It’s just that I think we heard too literally “America is back.”

I don’t think it would be the same with Harris. I don’t think she has—she carries the same sense of U.S. responsibility to European security. I think it would be quite clear for her that Europeans need to do more. But this is why I was saying I think the idea of a European offer works with her because, actually, I think with her there could be a conversation, Europeans saying: We can bring this, this, and this to the table. It’s going to take a long time for us to relaunch our production lines, to ramp up defense industrial production, but we want to do it. And to actually have a proper NATO-EU discussion on how to do this—NATO being the obvious convening platform for countries to discuss, but the EU actually having financial tools and industrial tools that NATO doesn’t have.

So let’s have these conversations. I think that’s possible with a Harris administration. I don’t think that’s possible with a Trump administration; I don’t think he would be interested in that. But I do think there’s a

way for a Harris administration to be more demanding of Europeans without undermining European security. And that, fundamentally, is what we're looking for.

BIRNBAUM: I'd love to shift the conversation maybe more squarely on this Ukraine question. And, Matthias, maybe you could be first in addressing this. But you know, what happens if Trump wins? He's been sort of clear about what he wants. J.D. Vance last week gave a pretty clear vision that squares pretty well with some reporting that I did in the springtime about what Trump's specific plan for Ukrainian peace would be. And of course, Trump repeats over and over again he would institute peace, he'd end the war even before he were in office on January 20. And so last week Vance said that, you know, Trump would sit down, tells the Russians, Europeans, Ukrainians to sit down, find out what a peaceful settlement looks like. It would basically fix the lines of fighting where they are. Russians agree not to invade again. It's a heavily fortified line. Russia gets neutrality from Ukraine. Ukraine promises not to join NATO and doesn't join some of these allied institutions. And by the way, Germans and other countries have to fund some Ukrainian reconstruction.

So let's say the—you know, the election goes the Republicans' way. What does Europe do? I presume that the Trump-Vance camp would indeed come up with some kind of effort like this. What happens on the European side?

MATTHIJS: Yeah. It actually ties nicely with what we discussed before, right? I mean, there's no—there's no iron law written that if Trump becomes president again that Europe will fall apart and bilateralize its security relationships, right? I mean, there is a leadership vacuum right now, especially in Paris and Berlin; that's clear. But there's also no law being written that the Franco-German engine has to move everything forward, right? I mean, I think the vacuum is one where the Commission can jump into, and gather everybody, and I think Europe could move quite quick.

I mean, don't forget the last time Trump showed any—zero desire in helping Europe was in March 2020. There were no American planes landing. I mean, there was—COVID wasn't quite happening yet. It happened earlier in Europe than in the U.S. There were Chinese planes that were landing. And I mean, to be fair, Europe came together, you know, with a few hiccups at first, but within a few months, fairly quickly. Next Generation EU, with new—all kinds of rubicons, all kinds of taboos were broken, right? I mean, that

could well happen again. The frustrating thing—and this is to Constanze's point—is that it always has to happen with some sort of crisis, right, that they can't just be a bit more forward looking and anticipating this stuff.

So to your main point, I just don't see this Trump-Vance plan as acceptable to Ukraine, or Europe—or Russia for that matter, right? I mean, Russia doesn't want to stop fighting right now. I mean, they don't want to put the line around Kursk, where now the Ukrainians are. They want at least that back. They probably want to—they always think they're winning, right? So what you could imagine is Trump completely stopping any efforts to fund the further war effort. And then I could actually see Europe come up with money, because what they need and they don't seem to have right now—because I think there is desire in many European capitals for Zelensky to sue for peace somewhere and kind of end this because it's become too expensive, and it drags on, and they don't see a victory—but I could see, actually, Europe get its act together when it comes to Ukraine, because, I mean, very quickly the Baltics, Eastern Europeans, the Scandinavians will make the argument, I mean, this is the moment. This is Europe's moment. We need to actually hang together here. And I can imagine even French leadership under those conditions, too.

And I mean, that's, I think, the contradiction, right? I mean, Macron has had this sort of almost U-turn on finally listening to Eastern Europeans and Baltics during his Slovakia speech—Bratislava speech a year ago. But the paradox is still that Eastern Europe and the Baltics still hang onto American presence on everything until, of course, if the USA were done, then I think they're going to have to put some faith in German, French, U.K., I mean, European leadership, in no matter what form that takes. It's just hard to predict that coming together in a sort of neat, organized fashion.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

So, Constanze, I mean, I think that, you know, if we give Matthias the point that it's unlikely that just because Trump wants the war to end that it actually would end, you know, it is in his power, more or less, to stop military aid for Ukraine. So, you know, in that context, Constanze, you mentioned earlier this increase of volume, you know, or an increase of strength of the voice of the Nordics and Eastern Europe in discussion around Ukraine and also more broadly European foreign policy. I've always kind of

wondered, you know, certainly their voices are more prominent, but you mentioned the silent countries, whether they are actually more powerful, the Easterners and the Nordics, or whether they're just sort of louder at this point. But do you think that Europe would manage to make up the gap that the end of U.S. military aid would create in Ukraine? How would that look? And what kind of success do you give that—the prospects of success?

STELZENMÜLLER: I think that we could probably make up the gap for military support of Ukraine. I think we would do that at the price of completely hollowing out our defense and deterrence. And that is, in itself, an anti-deterrent signal. That would be the tradeoff, right? It would be the short term against the medium term, and it would be read in Moscow. And I think—in other words, what I'm trying to do here is to say that, like America, we, too, have finite resources and difficult tradeoffs. And that's not even mentioning the butter-versus-guns tradeoffs that are currently being made in our domestic politics, right? There is also guns-versus-guns tradeoffs.

And, again, I feel that if there is a second Trumpian administration, I mean, I've read—I've read the pieces that suggest it all wouldn't be so bad. There have been some recently. I have to say, I beg to differ, right, based on the experiences that we had, based on the sort of foreign policy pronouncements that we have seen in magazines—in foreign policy magazines in Washington and in speeches. I think we can—we can assume, right, that European strength and solidarity would be tested to the utmost by a second Trumpian administration. But—and I think that it is quite possible that we—that both Moscow and Beijing would decide that that would be a great moment to test us, right? And I don't think it's impossible, right, or unthinkable to assume that we would rise to the challenge, right? But that would be really a quite extraordinary moment of crisis, and one of a nature that I think would surpass what we've seen in the past two years.

The other—the other point that I want to make here, why it seems to me to be so dangerous that we—that we sort of remain in this reactive election-to-election and crisis-to-crisis moment is two things, if I may.

Which is that the behavior of the Russians, both the military and the security services, is increasingly reckless—or, to quote the head of MI6 in a—in a recent debate, slightly feral. The recklessness is real, and it's extraordinary.

And that produces a second risk, which is—which is a different kind of escalation risk, different than the one that we keep talking about in European capitals, which is we give them—we give the Ukrainians more weapons and then things escalate. And the escalation—the other escalation risk we don't like talking about is that there is a miscalculation, either in Moscow or among its allies, or a misinterpretation of Russian recklessness that leads to escalation. That risk right now strikes me as very high. And if that comes to pass, if that sort of produces a sort of chain reaction, then, again, we will—we will be in a—in a moment where we are forced to react and where we—where I assume we're going to rise to the crisis, because I cannot see us not doing it.

But, again, I would much prefer us to be prepared for that. And I think all of us who are in conversation with our national security establishments know that the people who do this professionally are thinking very hard about this, right, and are—and are churning through plans. But what they really need is political support. What they really need is to know that the—that the political masters—that the government in power—will be capable, willing, and able of making decisions when it matters, right? It's not that we can't imagine these contingencies and that the people who are trained to do this aren't planning for them; they are.

BIRNBAUM: Thanks, Constanze.

I'd like to—you know, we're starting to run out of time here. I want to turn this over so we have a chance for one or two audience questions, and I see one of them.

Liana, you had mentioned, you know, concerns about Chinese retaliation earlier and China policy. One of these from our audience is: How do you assess the way that Europe's strategic calculus of engagement with China may be impacted by a Trump victory this November? What do you think about that? And if others would like to jump in, please, please do. But maybe Liana first.

FIX: Yeah. So there are two choices that Europeans can make.

The first choice is to hedge out of concern that Trump will have another trade war with Europe; to say: Well, why should we risk two of our most important economic relationships with the United States and with China at the same time? We will stay calm on China. We will not impose additional sanctions for China's support of Russia's war and for Russia's military. We will not overdo the tariffs on Chinese electronic vehicles. So we will try to play it nice with China for as long as we are not sure where U.S. trade policy will be heading under Trump. That's a little bit of a similar strategy that Europeans already have adopted in the first Trump term, but the world has changed. The threat that China now poses to European security but also to Europe's economy is much greater than it has been during Trump's second term.

So the second choice, that I would advocate from a European perspective, is to, ahead—and even ahead of the elections, actually, right now, when the United States has confirmed that China's support for Russia has crossed the dual-use line—to impose harsher sanctions on China for its support of Russia's war and to—in addition to the tariffs on Chinese electronic vehicles—and Heidi Crebo-Rediker and I have written about this in Foreign Affairs—to think about additional means how to constrain the dying of—(laughs)—Europeans' car industry in Europe, how to put forward conditions for Chinese investments in Europe's automotive industry. And if Europeans do that already ahead of the elections, they have something they can offer to a potential Trump administration once he gets elected demonstrating: Well, look, we've become tough on China. Because for a Trump presidency it will be impossible to explain why on the one hand Trump should support Ukraine and European security when, on the other hand, sort of from the other side—(laughs)—China is undermining all that support. So just logically I can imagine Trump thinking about it: Well, why should we do that—(laughs)—if that gets neutralized—our support gets neutralized by China's support and Europeans are not doing anything about it? And I think that's a fair—it's a fair—it's a fair question to ask, and I think that risk Europeans should avoid.

And if Trump moves forward on a scenario where he wants to negotiate about Ukraine, I think it would be—I would not advise Europeans to just throw their hands in the air and say: Oh my God, how terrible; we don't support that at all. They might also get pressure from Trump to support it. But if that happens, Europeans need to act behind the scenes tactically and try to prevent the worst. I mean, of course, there's

a bad, worse, and worst choice, but even among these choices it was still better to have the bad choice than the worst choice. And so Europeans cannot just stay out of that if that's the plan that Trump is going to pursue; they have tried to mitigate—they have to try to mitigate the damage.

BIRNBAUM: Does anyone else want to take that one on, or? OK.

A question that we had that was sent in earlier, ahead of the discussion, was about Iran. I was with Blinken last week in Europe when he made this announcement that Iran has been sending short-range ballistic missiles to Russia. There's a clear coalescence, gathering together between Russia-Iran, Russia and China. And so I'm curious—Matthias, maybe you could speak to this—how will these global elections affect coalition building and policy on Iran and its proxies? I suppose the big question, as always, is if Trump wins. But more broadly in terms of a coordinated approach to Iran, where do you see the developments there?

MATTHIJS: Yeah. I mean, this is tricky because, back to your very first question, Michael, of some of the things that the Europeans may want an outgoing Biden administration to do in the case Trump is elected, it's probably to do with the Middle East, right? It's to at least use all its power it has over Israel to put an end to the war in Gaza, even though it's hard to imagine Netanyahu saying: Sure, why don't we do that? I mean, he's just going to drag this out until Trump is president, then, right?

So, like, what is interesting in the case of a Trump administration—I was thinking about this when Liana was answering your previous question—is that, of course, if Trump puts as much pressure as he promises on China, China has the—faces a similar situation as Europe, right? Suddenly, its two most important economic partners are turning hostile. And so, I don't know, maybe it's thinkable that the Chinese rethink their relationship with Europe and maybe even their support for the war in Ukraine. I mean, I find that hard to imagine, but Xi is under tremendous domestic pressure as well, right? I mean, if you get a double squeeze from your main export markets—and Europe has become more important for China because of the Trump tariffs in 2016 to 2020; and conversely, I mean, China has become a more important market for certain—I won't mention which countries, but certain countries in Europe.

And so there is clearly—it's complicated because in the case of Iran, clearly, the Europeans have a very different approach, wanted the Biden administration to kind of bring back the JCPOA, and I just don't see this being an option in the last few months of a dying Biden administration. And it is a major worry, but it's also one of those issues where Europe has much less influence than the Americans would.

BIRNBAUM: We're being reminded that we have just three minutes left. It's so much fun to talk with all of you that I fear I'm sort of happy to bust through, but I think that Brookings is being very rigorous about the timing.

So, you know, Tara, maybe you are the person to carry us out here just in terms of, you know, wrapping us up, any final thoughts. But I am curious, you know, if you do think that there are any sort of immediate, very short-term priorities between the election and whatever new U.S. president comes into office, if there are things from the—from the waning months of the Biden administration that Europeans would like to see or make deals about.

VARMA: Sure. I think if there could be tariffs on steel and aluminum lifted, the Europeans would be quite happy. That has been something that we inherited from the last Trump administration, but it's proven to be an inextricable problem between Europeans and Americans to today. So I think that would be—if somehow we managed to solve this, I think it would put us in a good situation. And I think it would show that there is a true transatlantic consideration for a common issue that we have, which is the erosion of our industrial bases. And our reflex might be to, again, be inward-looking, be preoccupied with only our national or continental concerns. I think there's a lot that we can do in a transatlantic setting there about creating jobs, basically, providing people with opportunities, and that's something that we can do.

And the last point that I want to finish on, something that I was struck also about during our discussion, is that I think we need to think about leadership differently. We still want to have that one person in Europe who would embody European solidarity and integration. I don't think that works anymore. I think we expected the Franco-German engine to be that. Right now, that's not going to be possible. But I also don't think one person should carry this burden—(laughs)—on their shoulders. I think it needs to be the leaders of Central and Eastern European countries. It needs to be the U.K., as well, and the president of the European Commission. It needs to be a coalition of people working together, and that's hard. We know it.

But it can't be—we can't expect one person to solve all our problems. I think that's why we end up always being very disappointed in our decision-makers and leaders. I think what we need right now, and that would be a true demonstration of solidarity, is the capacity of our leaders to work together in a European and transatlantic setting to answer the challenges of today.

(Pause.)

BIRNBAUM: Sorry. Thanks, Tara.

Does anybody else want to say one last thing before we usher ourselves off the stage, or are we—are we OK?

Well, Liana, Matthias, Constanze, Tara, thank you all so much. And thanks to CFR and Brookings for hosting this discussion. It's been a lot of fun to talk to you, and I'll look forward to watching the next two conversations coming up in the coming months. There's, obviously, a lot to talk about. It's an odd and exciting moment in transatlantic relations, and I look forward to keeping in touch with all of you about it as we—as we ride the storm. Thanks a lot.

FIX: Thank you, Michael.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank all of you. And thank you, Michael, for moderating. You were great.

(END)