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Elastic Relations: Looking to both Sides of the Atlantic in the 2020 US Presidential Election Year

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Introduction

Regardless of how we define the so-called liberal order, its global reach and actor-composition (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann, 2020), most if not all pundits and scholars alike agree that the transatlantic relationship lies at the heart of this order (Ikenberry, 2000). At the core of the transatlantic relationship is a security commitment tying the US to the European continent and *vice versa*. This commitment is not only encapsulated in an international treaty, the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, but also in a formal intergovernmental organization (IGO), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Some even argue that the liberal order has never extended much beyond the transatlantic relationship, as US alliance-building in Europe has greatly differed from alliance-building in the Middle East and East Asia (Staniland, 2018).

Although the US, Canada, and European countries have formalized their security relationships and opened up communication channels – not only across capitals, but also through regular (daily) meetings in NATO – crises and cooperation are both common to the relationship (Hofmann and Yeo, 2015). Strong disagreements over military interventions, such as in Vietnam or Iraq, or whether and where to station nuclear missiles, were stress tests. The Trump administration's policy towards NATO was the most recent reminder that political cohesion is not a given among allies. In President Trump, many saw a challenge or even danger to the transatlantic relationship (Barnes and Cooper, 2019).

In the run-up to the 2020 presidential elections in the US, the transatlantic relationship was under enormous pressure. The Trump administration flexed its political muscles to demonstrate its 'America First' approach towards Europe. Many in Europe feared that a second Trump administration could mean the end of NATO. How do formalized interstate relations accommodate grave political tensions? In other words, what holds the core of the liberal order together despite many crises?

By introducing a concept recently used in sociology, namely institutional elasticity, I argue that the transatlantic relationship is able to withstand many crises because it is elastic. Its elasticity does not absorb political shocks, but helps restore the relationship after major crises. I argue that in international institutions, two properties, which can mutually reinforce or weaken each other, are essential to understanding elasticity: generalized trust and diffuse reciprocity. The Trump administration's threat to withdraw from NATO (reduced trust) and its transactional approach (no diffuse reciprocity) severely stretched and deformed the transatlantic relationship. Especially the run-up to

the 2020 US presidential elections provided Trump with a platform to accentuate his 'America First' agenda. However, the relationship has not been overstretched to the breaking point. Instead, other trust-inducing actors (for example the US Congress) pulled in the other direction by insisting on shared values and experiences (diffuse reciprocity). Trump's electoral loss has reduced the pressure on the transatlantic relationship as not only the US Congress but also President Biden have reemphasized trust and diffuse reciprocity. However, the transatlantic relationship is not perfectly elastic; that is, it does not return to its original state intact but remains marked by the deformations caused by prior experiences (Fioretos, 2017). The Trump presidency made its mark on the transatlantic relationship by making European allies aware that the elastic can break.

This argument focuses on factors endogenous to institutions to better grasp the social fabric that sustains them (Henke, 2019). This is not to say that exogenous factors such as geopolitical changes and tensions (for example the rise of China and Russia's assertiveness) do not also impact an institution's elasticity. Rather, the argument here suggests that exogenous and endogenous pressures on an institutional relationship both test the trust and diffuse reciprocity relationships that sustain institutions.

Introducing elasticity to the study of transatlantic relations and institutionalized interstate relations more generally provides us with a better understanding that institutional change is not always unidirectional or enduring. Through the lens of elasticity, we can theoretically and conceptually grasp under what conditions certain changes may revert back to a state resembling the previous status quo, while other changes are here to stay.

I. Institutional Elasticity and Political Relationships

Nothing about interstate relations is inevitable or immutable. Relations between states can exist and change in form, frequency, and size (for example formal, informal, regular, occasional, equal, asymmetric). A focus on formalized intergovernmental relations reveals that many are stable for an extended period of time, but IGOs can also die (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020) or resemble zombies (Gray, 2018). They can go through extended periods of crisis (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019; Haftel *et al*., 2020) or become more robust over time (Gocaj and Meunier, 2013). In addition, individual governments can change their appreciation for interstate relations over time (Hofmann, 2013). This has implications for where countries invest their time, expertise, and resources. In the following section, I will briefly explore what a focus on elasticity helps us understand about institutional relationships by discussing some key theoretical questions: What enables IGOs to stay together in crises and major shocks? What brings elasticity about and how can it be sustained? What makes elastic relations break apart slowly? What makes them break apart abruptly?

What enables IGOs to hold together while experiencing crises and major shocks? I introduce the concept of institutional elasticity to better understand this phenomenon. While elasticity has been employed (anecdotally by some) in management, sociology, and economics (Watanabe *et al*., 2004; Hijzen and Swaim, 2010; Awasthi *et al*., 2020; Knoblach and Stöckl, 2020), few have applied it to institutionalized interstate relations (Hofmann and Mérand, 2012). Elasticity is commonly understood as 'the

tendency of a body to return to its original shape after stretching, stress, or compression' (Hofmann and Mérand, 2012). Through the lens of elasticity, a researcher can draw attention to changes that occur in the properties of relationships, as well as to whether some of these changes are not durable but can instead bounce back. Hofmann and Mérand (2012) have looked at strong versus weak institutional elasticity to determine what kind of changes are possible in intergovernmental settings. However, they did not pay much attention to elasticity over time. When looking across time, Awasthi *et al*. (2020) assume that institutional relations revert back to their initial state. This malleability is just one side of the coin, however. No rubber band continues to exist forever; it can become brittle and, with each small stretch, the danger of it breaking increases. Or it can overextend under too much pressure and rip.

What brings elasticity about and how can it be sustained? Elastic interstate relations have at least two properties: they are based on generalized trust (Rathbun, 2011) and on at least some degree of diffuse reciprocity (Keohane, 1986). Both of these properties stress social aspects of institutionalized relationships, a glue that can keep counterparts in conversation with one another even in times of major shocks and crises. 'Generalized trust must be moralistic, based not on an assessment of others' interests but on their character and honesty … It helps sustain cooperation when the exchange of benefits is not consistent or frequent over time' (Rathbun, 2011, p. 3). Generalized trust enables reliance on others and political concessions – as does diffuse reciprocity. Diffuse reciprocity means 'to contribute one's share, or behave well toward others, not because of ensuing rewards from specific actors, but in the interests of continuing satisfactory overall results for the group of which one is a part' (Keohane, 1986, p. 20). These properties set the parameters for political contestation and non-detrimental disagreements regardless of individual state characteristics and preferences (Hofmann and Yeo, 2015). Diplomatic embeddedness (Henke, 2019) facilitates mutual trust and diffuse reciprocity. The more diplomatic ties actors have with one another, the more likely it is that at least some counterparts can communicate trust and diffuse reciprocity to one another. However, the communication between political leaders remains essential. Security communities, for example, are elastic, while alliances are not necessarily so. This is not to say that institutionalized relationships are perfectly elastic – that is, that they automatically return to their original shape after the pressure is removed. Instead, shared experiences and memories can have lasting effects (Hofmann and Mérand, 2020); hence, some changes or at least fears are likely to stay.

What makes elastic relations break apart slowly or abruptly? If actors start questioning generalized trust and/or diffuse reciprocity, they stress the institutionalized relationship and test its elasticity. Every stretch leaves its mark and, over time, the rubber band can become brittle and break. In relationships of any kind, strong disagreements can be overcome but not necessarily forgotten. They can leave partners in a state of worry and fear that the stretch, stress or compression could occur again. And during the stretch, stress or compression period, some policy decisions might have been decided that are not easy to revert (Fioretos, 2017). As such, repeated crises and political shocks can lead to the hollowing out of international relations, with IGOs becoming zombies (Gray, 2018) or dying altogether. And if we overextend a rubber band, it can rip. When looking at interstate relations, unreasonable demands paired with too much pressure on the relationship can break it apart. These demands depart from the confines of broad political consensus

and instead move into the realm of overt antagonism. One example of this could be Brexit (see Usherwood, 2021, in this issue).

II. Elastic Transatlanticism

NATO was stretched to its limits in 2020. Political tensions and frustrations on both sides of the Atlantic abounded. Trump was frustrated with European reluctance to invest more in their own security despite their increased pledges at the NATO Wales Summit during the Obama administration, as well as with certain countries' (like Germany) relations with Russia. European governments understood Trump's political style and policies as threatening the principle of diffuse reciprocity; unilateral US policy decisions further diminished trust among political elites. In the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election, the Trump administration introduced a series of unilateral policy decisions that challenged and threatened European allies with withdrawal of support under the banner of 'America First'. European allies reacted to some of Trump's challenges with a reinvigorated discourse on 'strategic autonomy' or new European Union (EU) military capacity initiatives but, overall, they waited for the result of the US elections.

Overstretch? Trump's 'America First' Approach

Throughout Trump's presidency, NATO was sidelined in his 'America First' foreign and security policy approach. Like previous administrations before him, Trump was frustrated with European reliance on the US security umbrella. However, he translated this frustration into a political approach that differed from his predecessors. Interactions with NATO and NATO allies became primarily transactional, elevating the decade-old burden-sharing debate to the most pressing issue at hand (Becker, 2019). Prioritizing the transactional approach meant ignoring the principle of diffuse reciprocity and generalized trust between allies.

The signals coming out of the White House were arguably more mixed in Trump's first years in office. The Trump administration might have been oscillating between two positions. Some emphasized that 'President Donald Trump shook the foundations of NATO more than any of his predecessors' (Pothier and Vershbow, 2017, p. 1). Trump's 'America First' led many to question whether the US president would be willing to defend allies if they called for help (Borger, 2019), which hurt the credibility of NATO's Art. V mutual defense clause and reduced trust in the US commitment to NATO. Others argued that 'Trump has kept much of American foreign policy within familiar boundaries' (Sperling and Webber, 2019, p. 513) and 'personnel choices have signaled a lack of intent to overhaul foreign policy' (Sperling and Webber, 2019, p. 514).

In his last year in office and in the run-up to the November elections, Trump's 'America First' approach became more aggressive towards NATO and individual NATO allies, as well as towards the confidence-building treaties that surround the transatlantic relationship. Trump not only stretched the transatlantic relationship but also started overextending it. One *New York Times* headline from 3 September 2020 reads 'Allies and Former U.S. Officials Fear Trump Could Seek NATO Exit in a Second Term'; in the article, its author recounts 'Recent accounts by former senior national security

officials in the Trump administration have … len[t] credence to a scenario in which Mr. Trump, emboldened by re-election and potentially surrounded by an inexperienced second-term national security team, could finally move to undermine – or even end – the United States' NATO membership' (Crowley, 2020). Some of these accounts stemmed from Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton. Not only did Trump feel emboldened; in the many reconfigurations of his national foreign, security and defense policy staff, he also reconfigured his cabinet and advisors so that in 2020 most advisors and cabinet members were no longer 'seasoned officials with a strong loyalty to the alliance and the trans-Atlantic relationship … Their successors are not thought to be acting as strong checks on Mr. Trump's instincts' (Crowley, 2020). This intentional diplomatic dis-embedding was yet another signal to European counterparts that a transactional approach was guiding this US administration.

Trump's unilateral policy decisions, taken with no prior consultation with allies, decreased European trust in the Trump administration (Wheeler, 2020, p. 637). It was in 2020 that the Trump administration announced a few policy changes that also began overextending the transatlantic security relationship. In May 2020, he announced that he wanted to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg responded by stating how important this agreement is for NATO and that all other allies remain committed to it (NATO, 2020).

> As for Open Skies, many have pointed out that European NATO states' capacity to track Russian military movements in the region would be diminished. The four multinational NATO battalion groups deployed to the Baltics and Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence would also suffer should they not be able to mobilize quickly in case of a Russian military incursion. This erosion of information-sharing and confidence-building exposes the vulnerabilities in NATO and, in turn, benefits Russia's strategic interests (McGee, 2020).

Regardless, the US government provided formal notification of withdrawal to the other treaty parties on 22 May and withdrew from the treaty on 22 November 2020.

In July 2020, Trump announced his decision to remove around 10,000 US soldiers from Germany, a decision at least partly motivated as a punishment for Germany not paying enough for its own security and defense (Williams, 2020). Nearly half of these troops were ordered back to the US, while the rest were redistributed to Italy and Belgium, "a move that sent shockwaves through NATO" (McGee, 2020). To many NATO analysts, US military bases in Germany are vital to the Alliance (Williams, 2020). For example, they host US Africa Command and its European Command, support US drone communications, and include a net of US military hospitals.[1]

One of his last unilateral decisions – which occurred during the period when Trump refused to concede the elections to Joe Biden – was further military withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq. While the Afghanistan withdrawal is in line with an agreement reached between the US and the Taliban in Qatar in February 2020, under which the US pledged to withdraw its forces by May 1, 2021, Trump accelerated the planned

[1]This is not to say that all European allies were suspicious of Trump's policies. Instead, 'There are some allies such as Poland's President Andrzej Duda who are embracing the Trump administration to advance their own short-term domestic interests, while undermining the long-term cohesion of NATO' (McGee, 2020).

withdrawal. Neither the initial agreement with the Taliban, nor the later decision to accelerate the withdrawal, occurred with prior consultation or coordination with NATO allies – some of which also have troops stationed in Afghanistan Instead, they happened against warnings from NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg 'in a rare rebuke of U.S. policy' (Taylor and Birnbaum, 2020), as well as against the warning of Trump's own Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper, who consequently got fired (Schmitt *et al*., 2020).

Resisting Overstretch and Bouncing Back: The US Congress and the Biden Administration

While Trump's announcements and decisions began overextending the transatlantic relationship, other parts of the US government tried to induce trust in their European allies and to move away from a transactional approach. The US legislature worked on the elasticity of the relationship by softening the disagreement on both sides of the Atlantic. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate repeatedly sent signals across the Atlantic to show that the US legislative branch still broadly supported NATO. 2019 ended with a bill in which the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously voted 'to stop Donald Trump from withdrawing the US from Nato … amid uncertainty over the president's intentions towards the alliance' (Borger, 2019). This bill obliges the US president to get the consent of the US Senate should he want to withdraw from NATO.[2] In 2020, in reaction to Trump's announcement to reduce the US military presence in Germany, Republicans in the US House of Representatives' Armed Services Committee issued a letter urging Trump to reconsider. They declared:

> We believe that such steps would significantly damage U.S. national security as well as strengthen the position of Russia to our detriment … In Europe, the threats posed by Russia have not lessened, and we believe that signs of a weakened U.S. commitment to NATO will encourage further Russian aggression and opportunism. In addition, the overall limit on troops would prevent us from conducting the exercises that are necessary for the training and readiness of our forces and those of our allies. The troop limit would also significantly reduce the number of U.S. forces that can flow through Germany for deployment to bases around the world, causing serious logistical challenges (House of Representatives, 2020).

After Trump's electoral loss, the change in government heralded a reduction of pressure on the transatlantic relationship. If one wanted to summarize the Trump administration's approach to NATO with a song, The Clash's 'Should I stay or should I go' comes to mind, while the incoming Biden administration instead resonates with Al Green's 'Let's stay together'. 'The U.S. election results were greeted with relief inside NATO's glassy new headquarters in Brussels' (Taylor and Birnbaum, 2020). Biden is a known Atlanticist since his time as a US Senator. He immediately signaled towards allies that he wants to change the tone towards NATO, re-establish trust, and move away from a purely transactional approach. However, to say that the relationship has bounced back to its pre-Trump

[2]By the time the Trump administration left office, the bill had not been picked up by the full Senate. Sen. Tim Kaine and Sen. Marco Rubio therefore reintroduced it in April 2021.

form would also exaggerate the Biden approach, which likely will insist on European allies taking on more of their security and defense expenditures in a volatile international/global security environment.

Carefully Testing Bounce Capacity: European Strategic Autonomy

Trump might have stretched the transatlantic security relationship as no other US president before him, but he was not the first US president to push European allies to invest more in their own security, and he will not be the last. So far, US presidents have favored increased European military spending (and purchases of American military hardware) over greater EU institution-building to coordinate policy-making and develop, or even consolidate, the European defense industry. In short, many US presidents like the idea of a strong Europe, but not an autonomous one.

Trump's particular stance toward NATO nurtured a lack of trust across the Atlantic and questioned the diffuse reciprocity principle underlying the Alliance. In the eyes of many European politicians, it made the US a less reliable ally: if Trump won the 2020 election, then the US might leave NATO and if Trump lost, then nothing would prevent 'another Trump' from winning in the future.[3] This realization gave political traction to a two-decade-old, half-hearted European debate that the French introduced to the EU political discourse with the catchphrase 'European strategic autonomy' (Borrell, 2020), and that European Council President Charles Michel called 'the aim for our generation' (Michel, 2020).

Trump was not the only factor enabling the sincerity with which this tired debate is now taking place across the EU; other factors include a changing security environment and Brexit, which was finalized at the end of 2020. Shortly after the Brexit vote, the EU revitalized the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and created the European Defence Fund (EDF),[4] which help plan for and invest in EU defense capabilities, thereby addressing some capability gaps and increasing joint deployment capability/abilities. Previously, British governments had hindered the development of a more autonomous European security and defense policy because they feared fragmenting NATO. Brexit and Trump formed the momentum to potentially bring about greater strategic coherence within the EU, create new institutions such as a headquarters, bolster the European defence industry, and improve overall capabilities.

European strategic autonomy could redefine the transatlantic relationship. However, while the debate was thriving in 2020 and some decisions were taken towards more autonomy, it also has since become apparent that neither a US president with isolationist tendencies nor a changing security environment will entice EU politicians to act more decisively or make big investment decisions in a chain reaction. They were waiting for the US presidential election to see where and how to further invest in security. As the

[3]After the May 2017 NATO summit, when Trump refused to endorse NATO's Article V collective defense commitment, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reacted with 'the time in which we could rely fully on other – they are somewhat over' and Europe 'really take our fate in our own hands' (Merkel quoted in Smale and Erlanger, 2017) and in 2018 'Angela Merkel has said EU leaders should one day consider "a real, true European army" shortly after Donald Trump ramped up a Twitter attack on Emmanuel Macron over the same idea' (Rankin, 2018).

[4]While NATO facilitates European purchases of US military equipment, the EDF creates incentives to coordinate European industrial efforts.

2020 PESCO strategic review reveals, only 23 out of 47 projects will be delivered by 2025 (Council of the European Union, 2020) and the Coordinate Annual Review on Defence (CARD) showed that not all members meet the EU's High Impact Capability Goals (European Defence Agency, 2020). EU countries reacted to some of Trump's threats and challenges but otherwise moved slowly.

This stands in stark contrast to how 2020 started rhetorically. Just before the new year, French President Emmanuel Macron called NATO 'brain dead' after President Trump had decided to pull out US troops of north-eastern Syria without consulting with allies, which enabled Turkey to launch a military operation against Kurdish forces there. 'You have no coordination whatsoever of strategic decision-making between the United States and its Nato allies.' He went on, pointing out that 'Things that were unthinkable five years ago – to be wearing ourselves out over Brexit, to have Europe finding it so difficult to move forward, to have an American ally turning its back on us so quickly on strategic issues – nobody would have believed this possible' (Macron cited in The Economist, 2019). While many leaders in the EU, foremost among them Angela Merkel, did not appreciate the style and tone of the message, it led to an internal NATO reflection process and revived debate about European strategic autonomy.

One possible step towards greater strategic autonomy happened in June 2020 as the EU launched the Strategic Compass under the German EU Council presidency. The Strategic Compass is a tool for joint threat analysis across EU member states, as well as a tool for identification of common actions and means. It could serve as the appropriate tool to systematically define the EU's common level of ambition, instead of pursuing rhetoric that is not matched by political action, by enabling policymaking to deal with cross-cutting challenges while also addressing national defense planning processes. However, the Strategic Compass tool is only scheduled to become operational in 2022, well into Biden's presidency.

COVID-19 will most likely further contribute to a piecemeal European strategic autonomy. Due to the pandemic, the EU expects a drop in gross domestic product (GDP) across its member states and pandemic recovery initiatives will most likely take away from defense budgets. Hence, while some steps towards a more cohesive Europe have been taken, they do not make Europe more autonomous in the foreseeable future and enable the continuation of the transatlantic relationship, if current and future US governments are so inclined.

The jury is still out on how exactly the EU's strategic autonomy will look and how it will relate to the transatlantic relationship. But 2020 ended with a particular vision of how European strategic autonomy could relate to transatlantic burden-sharing, emphasizing generalized trust and diffuse reciprocity. In anticipation of a revitalized transatlantic relationship, the European Commission and the High Representative put forward a proposal for a new transatlantic agenda on 2 December. 'Unprecedentedly, European Union (EU) member states have not squabbled to get Washington's attention, nor have they waited for the new U.S. leadership to set the agenda to reinvigorate the transatlantic relationship. Rather, the Europeans have capitalized on the optimism of change to propose initiatives for collaboration and renew diplomatic efforts' (Balfour, 2021). In this new agenda, the EU warns that 'We should also not fall into the trap of false debates that seek to oppose a stronger Europe and a stronger transatlantic partnership. A united, capable and

self-reliant EU is good for Europe, good for the transatlantic partnership and good for the multilateral system' and recognizes that 'Over the last years, the EU has made unprecedented progress in security and defence cooperation, with landmark initiatives tackling capability shortfalls while incentivising defence spending and burden-sharing.' It therefore proposes that 'The EU and the US should reaffirm our joint commitment to transatlantic and international security. A stronger EU role in defence, including through supporting investment in capability development, will benefit NATO and transatlantic cooperation' and promises that 'The EU is ready to fulfil its responsibilities, enhance its strategic autonomy and ensure better burden-sharing. The EU and NATO's capability priorities should be largely aligned. To frame our cooperation, a structured EU-US Security and Defence Dialogue should be established, taking a comprehensive approach to security and based on a shared strategic vision' (European Commission and High Representative, 2020).

III. Looking Ahead

While the year 2020 will go down in history as the year in which COVID-19 spread across the globe, it also is the year that saw President Donald Trump voted out of office and the conclusion of Brexit. All these developments impacted the transatlantic relationship and its elasticity. However, the transatlantic security relationship neither ended in 2020 nor did it create an autonomous EU. Instead, the transatlantic relationship almost got overstretched before bouncing back into a more tenable long-term position in which political disagreements, not only across the Atlantic but also within the US and the EU, will persist within the confines of established trust and political concessions that resemble diffuse reciprocity.

Right after taking office, President Biden reversed or changed the conduct of many of Trump's foreign policy decisions. While he continued with the decision to withdraw troops in Afghanistan, he does so in coordination with allies. He decided to prolong the departure beyond the May 1 deadline negotiated by the Trump administration, which leaves Germany, the country with the second largest contingent in Afghanistan after the US, time to coordinate an orderly departure (Ryan and DeYoung, 2021). Biden also halted the withdrawal of US troops from Germany and ordered a review of US force deployment. These examples show that transatlantic elasticity is not only about continued US involvement in Europe, but about a transatlantic coordinated approach that rests on trust and diffuse reciprocity.

Some things are harder to reverse than others. Fear of a future US administration resembling Trump's will remain with a generation of European political leaders. And subsequent US administrations will most likely continue to fear European evasion of further burden-sharing and therefore keep insisting that European governments pay more for their own security. Whether considering internal NATO reflection processes or the EU's strategic autonomy debate, these abstract discussions in both organizations leave open many possibilities for concrete developments.

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