



US President Joe Biden (L) waits to speak at the Biden campaign headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, on February 3, 2024, with first lady Jill Biden by his side.
ALEX BRANDON/AP

Trump steps up, helping Biden just when President needs him

By Peter Baker
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OPINION

If anyone gets a thank-you note from President Biden for helping get him out of a jam in recent days, it should probably be former president Donald J. Trump. Just when Mr. Biden was swamped by unwelcome questions about his age, his predecessor and challenger stepped in, rescuing him with an ill-timed diatribe vowing to “encourage” Russia to attack NATO allies that do not spend enough on their militaries.

The stunner from Mr. Trump over the weekend not only drew attention away from the president’s memory problems, as detailed in a special counsel report, but also provided a convenient way for Mr. Biden’s defenders to reframe the issue: Yes, they could now say, the incumbent may be an old man who sometimes forgets things, but his challenger is both aging and dangerously reckless.

It was not the first time, nor likely will it be the last, that Mr. Trump has stepped up when an adversary was in trouble to provide an escape route with an ill-considered howler of his own. Mr. Trump’s lifelong appetite for attention has often collided with his evident best interest. For Mr. Biden, that may be the key to this year’s campaign, banking on his opponent’s inability to stay silent at critical moments and hoping that he keeps reminding voters why they rejected him in 2020.

“There’s a saying that the enemy of your enemy is your friend,” said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist who worked on the 2016 presidential campaign of Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who lost the party nomination that year to Mr. Trump. “Since Trump is his own worst enemy, he’s arguably Biden’s best friend.”

That does not mean that age is no longer a political liability for Mr. Biden, who at 81 is already the oldest president in American history and would be 86 at the end of a second term. While Mr. Trump is close behind him at 77, the special counsel’s characterization of the president as a “well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory” proved searing and damaging.

A new poll by ABC News and Ipsos released on Sunday found that 86 percent of Americans think Mr. Biden is too old to serve another term as president, while 62 percent consider Mr. Trump too old. But in Washington, the traditional political strategy when under fire is to change the sub-

ject as quickly as possible. Mr. Biden’s team set out to make the real issue not his own capacity but the conduct of the special counsel, Robert K. Hur, just as past presidents like Mr. Trump and Bill Clinton have sought to redirect attention from allegations against them to the prosecutors who investigated them.

White House surrogates and friends flooded the airwaves in the days afterward to assail Mr. Hur for citing the president’s inability to remember key dates, including the year of the death of his son Beau. In a fund-raising appeal, Jill Biden, the first lady, denounced Mr. Hur’s “inaccurate and personal political attacks about Joe,” and then asked supporters for money. The pushback might not persuade voters already opposed to Mr. Biden, but it gave Democrats something else to talk about.

Mr. Trump played right into the Biden camp’s strategy during a rally in South Carolina on Saturday by castigating “delinquent” NATO members and saying that not only would he not come to their defense if attacked by the Russians, but he would also encourage the Russians “to do whatever the hell they want” against such allies.

“Donald Trump can’t help himself,” said Rodell Mollineau, a Democratic strategist and Partner at ROKK Solutions. “He will always try to turn the focus to him, even when it’s not in his advantage to do so. I expect many more hold-my-beer moments from Trump before this election is over.”

Nikki Haley, the former UN ambassador and South Carolina

governor, who is still trying to wrest the Republican nomination away from the front-running Mr. Trump, seized on that penchant to bolster her case that the party should not trust him to lead it to victory this fall. “That’s what you’re going to get, is unhinged chaos,” Ms. Haley said on Fox News. “And that only makes Joe Biden,” she added, “sound sane. When you get Donald Trump making Joe Biden sound sane, it’s more of the reason why Donald Trump can’t defeat Joe Biden. They’re taking everything he’s saying and they’re going to use it against him.”

Mr. Biden’s camp certainly sought to do just that. The White House released a statement saying that “encouraging invasions of our closest allies by murderous regimes is appalling and unhinged”. In a separate statement released by his campaign, Mr. Biden said Mr. Trump’s comments were “predictable coming from a man who is promising to rule as a dictator.”

Robert Gibbs, a former White House press secretary to President Barack Obama, said the latest episode proved that Mr. Trump was incapable of heeding an old political adage: “If your opponent is having a bad day, simply get out of the way and let it happen.”

For Mr. Biden, he said, such out-of-the-blue opportunities may prove decisive. “The dexterity of the president and his team to drive those moments is going to be maybe one of the big determining factors as to who wins this race.”

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Trump’s potential re-election, Europe’s looming crisis

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OPINION

Europe is on the brink of uncertainty again. Former United States president Donald Trump’s likely return to the American presidency could unsettle the continent as never before. The European landscape today starkly differs from its history of robust leadership, now mirroring a disjointed chorus grappling with challenges that jeopardize the continent’s cohesion. The departure of influential leaders, exemplified by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s exit from the political stage just three months prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, highlights a growing concern over the absence of decisive leadership within Europe itself. Many European Union (EU) strategic partners, which could provide leadership, such as the United Kingdom, Norway, and Türkiye, are NATO members but remain outside the union. Moreover, the EU’s strength relies on its capacity to collaborate effectively. This internal configuration entails swiftly reaching a consensus on every issue. However, the EU’s current state does not inspire much confidence. European leaders, who have struggled to build consensus on critical matters like supporting Ukraine, addressing immigration, and responding to Israel’s War on Gaza, will face even tougher tests if Trump is elected.

EU’s burden: Russia-Ukraine war

Amid the vigorous debates surrounding NATO’s effectiveness in the post-Cold War era, the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent support extended by NATO member countries breathed new life into the alliance, with US President Joe Biden’s full commitment to the transatlantic alliance extracting it from the catacombs of uncertainty. At that juncture, NATO countries demonstrated unity and transatlantic cooperation. Even historically neutral nations like Finland and Sweden expressed interest in joining NATO.

Ukraine’s territorial integrity. While Europe may still attempt to aid Ukraine, such efforts would likely be superfluous and provoke a clash with Trump. While some European governments could still advocate for ongoing support for Ukraine, others may refrain from contradicting Trump’s position. The three major European donors to Ukraine — Germany, the UK, and Norway — are all NATO members, with only Germany being a member of the EU. While Germany is an economic giant, it is a military midget, and, thus, it cannot compensate for the void left by the US. If Ukraine

“Europeans must seize their destiny”

By supporting the EU after Brexit, the Biden administration delayed the progress of far-right parties in Germany and Italy. However, Trump’s potential re-election would likely have the contrary effect.

As Merkel aptly stated, Europeans must seize their destiny. The Ukraine conflict, fundamentally a European matter, demands proactive measures, not passivity. Among the swift actions needed is to address potential security gaps arising from a diminished US defense umbrella under



NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg (front center left) speaks with then-US president Donald Trump (front center right) after a group photo at a NATO leaders meeting in Watford, England, on December 4, 2019.
FRANCISCO SECO/AP

If Trump wins, this means the US would focus on the Asia-Pacific rather than Europe. Trump would not withdraw from NATO but would refrain from implementing Article 5, raising concerns about NATO’s cohesion and togetherness. This possibility stems from Trump’s criticisms of the EU for not adequately supporting NATO’s financial burdens despite the alliance’s resurgence since February 2022.

For the EU, which has leaned for its defense on NATO for the past 79 years, waning American support would be a disaster. Even more concerning is Trump’s pledge to resolve the bloody war between Ukraine and Russia in a single day, which entails an agreement likely to result in Ukraine ceding territory. This scenario would be humiliating for the EU, which staunchly defended

is forced to accept the loss of territory, the EU would still have a few years to adapt to this new reality.

Russia would require several years to rebuild its worn-out army and economy, during which it would pose less of a direct threat to the EU, giving the EU time to bolster its defenses. Unlike Russia, which has long relied on a war economy system, the EU faces a different economic landscape. This situation is what led Trump to declare that he would not support European defense in the first place. For Europe, this new environment would imply shifting funds from social welfare toward the defense industry. It would also signal a potential increase in far-right extremism, which has already been on the rise in Europe in recent years, gaining even more traction in the upcoming European elections in June.

Trump.

While American voters might grow weary of Ukraine, Europeans cannot afford such a luxury. This reality is another wake-up call for Europe that the old continent cannot afford to entrust its collective security to the whims of American voters. Developing an independent defense policy must be a priority before the November elections. Europe cannot afford to be caught unprepared again, like with Brexit and Trump’s previous presidency. By taking charge and implementing rapid, strategic policies, Europe can navigate the uncertainties ahead and ensure its security and stability. However, this can only be achieved with strong European leaders, a condition that is inexistent today.

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