



THE CAPITOL AND THE REICHSTAG



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (11 January 2021)
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When a sitting president refuses to accept the outcome of elections and incites his supporters to storm the parliament that is about to confirm his successor, that is a coup d'état. That is indeed how many American commentators label the events of 6 January 2021 in Washington.

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After the facts, every failed coup appears to have been bound to fail. And there is always a whiff of the ridiculous about failure. A coup in a buffalo horn cap seems as silly as a putsch in lederhosen. But many who laughed at Hitler's failure in Munich in 1923 paid with their lives when 10 years later the Nazis did take power.

Less than a month after becoming chancellor, Hitler abused the burning down of the Reichstag to install dictatorship. Similarly, the mob might well have taken the Capitol last week, at which point Trump may have hoped to declare a state of emergency and stall the transition of power. That is to say: this coup could have worked.

It did not, and so a sigh of relief is allowed. But the very fact that it was attempted, must be a call to action. If the parallel with 1923 can teach us anything, it is that now is not the time for leniency. Hitler got off lightly, which he simply took as an encouragement. Trump's shameless and childish disavowal (*I didn't do it!*) comes as no surprise. Nor do the protestations that the demonstrators meant well, were only simple, god-fearing folks led by patriotism, and misled by infiltrators. *Quatsch!*

Severe legal action must be taken against the leaders of the coup, starting with Trump himself, in order to fully and finally discredit them. What cannot be allowed to happen is that Trump and his troupe walk away, and found their own party. They may split the Republican party, to the benefit of the Democrats, but it would be a severe mistake to let Trumpism install itself as a permanent and poisonous fixture of US politics. These are not democrats, and they will try again.

The Republican leadership lost its honour a long time ago, when they nominated Trump and then supported him throughout his presidency. They could at least start to make amends by taking firm legal action in the few days that they have left in power. They owe Joe Biden and all democrats (with small "d") that much.

The parallel with the Nazi power grab is not far-fetched: these are the same fascist methods. And fascism cannot be pardoned; it must be eradicated. For history shows that nothing is inevitable. The US was not preordained to become a democracy, and it is not inevitable that it will remain one. The same holds true for any EU Member State.

Let this also spur on the EU therefore to finally take radical action against the would-be authoritarians in its own ranks, and to use the new instruments that it doted itself with for exactly that purpose. Not half heartedly, but until authoritarianism is broken, not some time in the future, but now. So far, the EU has actually been subsidising anti-democratic regimes in Hungary and Poland, that must stop. Instead, EU membership ought to be a failsafe guarantee

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against democratic back-sliding.

Until they fix this, the US and the EU both will remain severely hampered in their foreign policy. The loss of credibility is enormous. Just now the EU was berated for allegedly betraying its values in daring to conclude an investment agreement with China (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/eu-china-drop-the-masks-back-to-real-diplomacy/>). How do these critics think the storming of the Capitol will play out? It is a direct confirmation of the message of the CCP to Chinese citizens: “you may not have the same liberties, but we bring you stability and prosperity – and just look at the alternative”.

The whole point of foreign policy, of Grand Strategy, is to protect your own way of life. That means, first, that the purpose is *not* to convert others to it. International politics is not a confrontation between democrats and dictators, but a meeting between states pursuing their interests; states that cooperate and compete at the same time. The US and the EU may criticise, but must not try to force domestic change upon China and others – states and societies can only change themselves. Washington and Brussels can act, though, to force China to respect the rules in its relations with other states.

Second, however, a state without a strong internal consensus about what its own way of life is, cannot stand up for its interests. The Chinese regime knows which domestic model it wants to maintain. The US and the EU better make sure, therefore, that they know what democracy means – for themselves.

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