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IN BRIEF

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Implications of the 2020 US Presidential Election for the EU

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The US presidential election on 3 November is likely to be consequential for America's future and leadership on the world stage. However, it will also have implications for the EU as the two main candidates, President Donald Trump and former Vice-President Joe Biden, have different visions for the future of transatlantic relations and EU-US cooperation.

Introduction

On 3 November, Americans will again choose who they want to lead their country as President of the United States. In this election, the choice is between the incumbent Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump, and former Vice-President Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate. Trump and Biden are two very different candidates with different visions for America's future and leadership on the world stage.

This *In Brief* discusses what Trump's re-election, or Biden's victory, would mean for the EU. A Biden victory would be broadly welcomed in Europe because he is viewed as a vehicle for restoring and revitalising the transatlantic relationship, which has experienced tough times under Trump. However, this does not mean that EU-US relations would be dispute-free under Biden: among other areas, the US and the EU would continue to have differences over international trade, China, and security and defence cooperation. Nevertheless, a Biden victory would make it easier for Europe to shoulder more of the burden and coordinate with the US more closely

on all those issues.

If Trump is Re-Elected

By now, the EU and its member states have learned to live with, if not become used to, a President Trump in the White House. His re-election on 3 November would therefore not serve as a shock to them, as it did when he was first elected in 2016. The EU and the US would continue to have disagreements on multiple issues on the transatlantic agenda, but there would also be room for cooperation, as there has been during Trump's first term. However, there would be a risk of Trump doubling down on some foreign policy elements, especially international trade, that he feels are expected by his voter base, such as punitive tariffs.

At a systemic level, the Trump administration has been more explicitly hostile towards various multilateral structures than any previous US administration, due to its unilateralist [America First](#) policy. Trump has withdrawn or is intending to withdraw, inter alia, from the [Paris Climate Agreement](#), the [Iran Nuclear Deal](#), the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#) with Russia, the [Treaty on Open Skies](#), and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO). He has also been critical of the [World Trade Organization](#) (WTO), and de facto disabled it by refusing to nominate new judges to its [appellate body](#).

The EU, by contrast, continues to defend these structures and the broader treaty-based international order, although it shares some of Washington's concerns, namely with regard to the WTO and the

WHO. This is because the Union itself is a multilateral structure, and has treaty-based cooperation in its DNA. If Trump is re-elected, America First will continue to clash with the EU's international priorities, outlined in its [2019-2024 strategic agenda](#) and in documents such as the 2016 [Global Strategy](#). Yet, these clashes could be mitigated if the EU worked with the US in areas such as WTO reform, although there is no guarantee.

Climate change would continue to be a particular point of tension. The Trump administration gave formal notice on 4 November 2019 of its intention to withdraw the US from the [Paris Climate Agreement](#). Due to the 12 month notification period, formal withdrawal of the US can take place on 4 November 2020 the earliest - a day after the election. The EU, however, continues to be part of the Paris Agreement and has launched an ambitious [European Green Deal](#) to cut greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050 and decouple its future economic growth from resource use.

China would continue to cause friction in the transatlantic relationship. Current US-China tensions may de-escalate after the election, as the Trump administration's hawkish rhetoric on Beijing and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have been at least partly driven by [domestic electoral concerns](#). However, even after, the US and China will continue to be at odds over issues such as [intellectual property theft](#), [trade](#), and [Beijing's growing influence in Europe](#). A second Trump presidency would likely put more pressure on the EU to choose a side in the US-China rivalry, something that the Union has sought to avoid so far.

The EU's China policy has hardened in recent years, both rhetorically and in practice, in areas such as 5G. The European Commission and the Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, described China in 2019 as a '[systemic rival](#)', promoting alternative models of governance. European Council President [Charles Michel](#) also said during the 2020 UN General Assembly that, in the US-China rivalry, the EU is 'deeply connected' with the US due to shared 'ideals, values and a mutual affection'. There will therefore be areas suitable for cooperation between the US and the EU with regard to China during a second Trump presidency, although the Union will continue to resist picking a side more explicitly.

In the area of security and defence, Trump would continue to pressure America's NATO allies to meet the Alliance's 2% of GDP [defence spending target](#).

Their failure to make further progress towards it could lead to reductions in the US' military presence in Europe, or to the redeployment of US forces and assets to the territories of those allies that meet NATO's defence spending target. The US will also continue to be critical towards EU defence cooperation initiatives, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), which focus on joint capability development, because it views them as [protectionist industrial policies](#).

A second Trump term would also pose challenges to the internal coherence of the EU. Trump would continue his policy, already visible after 2016, of trying to play EU member states against each other, especially using security-related topics such as the positioning of US forces in Europe.

If Biden Wins

The EU and most of its member states would welcome Biden's victory because his administration, which is likely to include many [foreign policy officials](#) that Europeans are already familiar with from the Obama administration, would seek to [restore](#) transatlantic relations and American leadership more broadly. The rhetoric coming from Washington would normalise and the number of issues on which the US would agree with the EU would increase. That being said, even under a president Biden, there would continue to be disagreements between the EU and the US.

From election day onward, a project of a Transatlantic Renewal would take shape. This would not only entail a more cooperative approach from Washington, but also firmer commitments by Europeans to finally get serious about shouldering more of the security burden, and actively seeking better coordination on security issues, ranging from Russia to China. Whether this remains on the declaratory level would only become visible after the inauguration.

There is a temptation now to [point](#) to European free-riding under Obama, and increased European defence spending under Trump, thus relativising the Trump/Biden difference. But this does not take into account the shock effect that Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 had for Europe: Putin's Russia may have been a more effective driver of Europe's [increased defence spending](#) than Trump's view of NATO as a protection racket. In Germany, a Biden victory would enhance the willingness of polit-

ical leaders to advocate higher defence spending, a more robust energy approach to Russia, and closer coordination with the US on China, precisely because it would be both necessary and not look like caving in to Trump.

The other new project of US foreign policy would be a global '[Alliance of Democracies](#)', encompassing not only NATO and like-minded countries such as Australia and New Zealand, but also Japan, India, South Korea, and others. This reflects the recognition by Biden and many of his advisors that the conflict between liberal democracy and authoritarianism will be the overriding global fault line for the foreseeable future. Its purpose would be to better coordinate global strategies to preserve and strengthen the rule of law. This would also entail better coordination of strategies vis-à-vis China, which is now becoming the leading authoritarian power.

A Biden administration would align itself more closely with the EU's position on climate change. He has [promised](#) to recommit the US to the Paris Climate Agreement on the first day of his administration, and his climate plan includes, inter alia, the goal of ensuring the US achieves a 100% clean energy economy and net-zero emissions no later than 2050. Biden's climate goals would receive strong backing from the EU and most of its member states.

Biden would also take tougher steps to address Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns and hybrid operations, including within the EU itself. He [wants](#) to expand NATO's capacity to tackle threats such as weaponised corruption, disinformation, and cyber-theft. In addition, Biden wants to 'impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society', including those who have stood up against the regime of President Vladimir Putin. The EU would welcome this, having [sanctioned](#) in October 2020 senior Russian figures over the poisoning of prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

The US would also distance itself from prominent UK Brexiteers and other populist leaders in Europe, who seek to undermine the EU and the values on which the Union is founded. The Trump administration has supported Brexit, described the EU as a '[foe](#)', and endorsed [anti-EU politicians](#). Biden, on the other hand, is a Brexit-sceptic who has the backing of America's influential Irish community. The Irish caucus in the US Congress has also promised to block a trade deal with the UK if Brexit un-

dermines the 1998 [Good Friday Agreement](#), something that Biden [supports](#).

The US tone on European security would normalise under Biden, but not change completely. When it comes to NATO, Biden has [said](#) that the next president needs to 'salvage our reputation, rebuild confidence in our leadership, and mobilise our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges'. He reportedly [plans](#) to review Trump's announced US troop [withdrawal from Germany](#) if elected. However, Biden would continue to push America's European allies to do more for their own security, as US presidents traditionally have since the Cold War. A Biden administration will likely follow the Trump administration's critical tone towards EU defence cooperation initiatives like PESCO and the EDF, due to US defence industrial interests. The tendency developed under Trump, where the US actively enhances intra-EU splits on defence and energy security, especially between Germany/France on the one hand, and Poland on the other, is likely to end.

China is likely to be an issue on which US policies will not change fundamentally. Biden has [emphasised](#) the necessity of cooperating with Beijing on issues like North Korea, but has equally stressed that the US needs 'to get tough with China', inter alia to prevent it from 'robbing' the US and American companies of 'their technology and intellectual property'. The US-China rivalry is systemic and rooted in the international balance of power, and there is a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington over the need to contain Beijing's growing influence. For the EU, this means that, even with a president Biden, the US is likely to continue to push for the Union to choose sides. But siding with the US, at least in some crucial areas, would be easier for the EU with a President Biden because it would become a multilateral effort instead of a bilateral and potentially very lopsided relationship.

Regarding international trade, Biden would almost certainly follow a more predictable policy and be less tariff-prone than Trump. However, it is unclear what he would do with the tariffs that Trump has already imposed. Furthermore, Biden claims that 'economic security is national security', and his '[Made in America](#)' plan suggests that he shares at least some of Trump's protectionist agenda. It is also unclear whether a Biden administration would follow a significantly different policy to WTO reform. This, combined with the EU's own policy of [open strategic autonomy](#) in the area of international trade,

suggests that transatlantic trade disputes will not be over if Trump leaves office.

Conclusion

While a Trump victory in the 2020 election would be less of a shock than his 2016 victory, it would put considerable strain on the transatlantic relationship and the multilateral treaty-based world order. Brexiteers in the UK would feel emboldened to believe in the 'special relationship', possibly at the cost of a more constructive partnership with the EU. It would also reinforce centrifugal tendencies within the EU, with governments in Central and Eastern Europe looking even more to bilateral relationships with Washington, instead of consensus with their West European EU partners.

A Biden victory would support centripetal tendencies in the EU, itself and make for a more constructive post-Brexit relationship between the UK and the EU. In many policy areas, from climate change to the Middle East, EU-US cooperation would be enhanced. The most important effect on transatlantic cooperation, in general, would be a spirit of renewal which may, for the first time in history, lead to a more balanced partnership that could then form the nucleus of a global Alliance of Democracies. There would, of course, be no guarantee for a sustainable Transatlantic Renewal. But the chances for such a development would be better than any time since the beginning of the 21st century.

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