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Europe and Biden

Towards a New
Transatlantic Pact?

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Summary

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The transatlantic relationship has been subjected to a significant stress test under the presidency of Donald Trump. Across Europe, the initial reaction to the election of Joe Biden was almost universally positive. Yet analysts tend to agree that there can be no return to the *status quo ante*. The world as we knew it under the Obama administration has changed in very fundamental ways, notably with the rise of an assertive China. Moreover, the Trump presidency has exacerbated the sharp polarisation of political preferences within the US. Bipartisan foreign policy is a feature of the past. Europe cannot assume there will be policy continuity after the next presidential election in 2024. It is time to take stock of transatlantic values and interests—which are not always in harmony—and to attempt to forge a new type of partnership across the Atlantic, one more geared to the realities of an emerging multipolar world. Europe should not abandon its attempts to develop a greater measure of autonomy from—or non-dependence on—the US. And the US should not see such yearnings as threatening. There will be many issues on which Europe and a Biden administration will work in harmony. But there will also be policy areas where friction could well arise, most notably over trade, China, Russia and the future of NATO. It would be in the interests of neither the US nor the EU for the latter to revert to the type of followership that has characterised its relations with the US since the Cold War. Only by recognising the distinctiveness of US and European values and interests will it be possible for the two sides to move towards a more balanced partnership that will confer true strength on their relationship.

Keywords US – EU – Transatlantic relations – European autonomy – Biden administration – Foreign and security policy



Introduction

When Joe Biden was elected as the forty-sixth president of the US, an audible sigh of relief could be heard from almost every European chancery. After the relative chaos of the Trump years, there was a broadly shared desire to return to something approaching normality in the transatlantic relationship. Many commentators have suggested that relations will be much easier with a president who has many close friends in Europe and who has consistently expressed his belief in the transatlantic alliance. Biden's advisors are, for the most part, friends of Europe and committed multilateralists.¹

However, an equal number of commentators have stressed that there can be no return to square one, no falling back on the *status quo ante*.² Since 2016 the world has changed dramatically. Under Trump the US has lost a great deal of international prestige and diplomatic capital, and President Biden will have his work cut out to recover the previous level of US influence. China has emerged as a serious challenger to the US-led international order. The signing, on 15 November 2020, of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between the ASEAN countries, China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia was a striking demonstration of the extent to which the US, under Trump, has succeeded in squandering its attractiveness as an economic and commercial model in the Asia-Pacific region—to the decided advantage of China.³

The Middle East chessboard has been upended under Trump, and it is far from clear how the players will reconfigure themselves over the coming decade, in particular with respect to Iran.⁴ The much-vaunted 'liberal international order' has taken a huge battering as regional 'strong men' around the world, emboldened by Trump, have chipped away at established rules and norms. The Covid-19

¹ L. Jakes et al., 'Biden Chooses Antony Blinken, Defender of Global Alliances, as Secretary of State', *New York Times*, 23 November 2020; J. Traub, 'Biden Has the Team Obama Always Wanted', *Foreign Policy*, 24 November 2020.

² J. Ganesh, 'Biden Will Not Revive the Atlantic Alliance', *Financial Times*, 17 June 2020; S. Erlanger, 'Europe Lauds Biden but Wonders: What Will He Want? How Long Will He Stay?', *New York Times*, 8 November 2020.

³ R. Harding and J. Reed, 'Asia-Pacific Countries Sign One of the Largest Free Trade Deals in History', *Financial Times*, 15 November 2020.

⁴ L. Scazzieri, *A Troubled Partnership: The US and Europe in the Middle East*, Centre for European Reform (London, July 2019).



pandemic succeeded in bringing home to the former apostles of globalisation the vulnerability of international supply chains—and even of national frontiers.⁵

Perhaps above all, and certainly so in the context of this study, US allies around the world have been forced to reconsider the wisdom of their own dependency on the American protector. From Tokyo to Berlin and from Canberra to Paris, from Seoul to Brussels and from Ottawa to London, long-standing certainties about the nature of security relations with Washington have been shaken.⁶ Stirrings of autonomy have captured the headlines. This global trend took on a particularly acute form in Europe as Trump called into question not just the funding basis of NATO but even its core purpose (collective defence based on Article 5 of the Washington Treaty). The quest for ‘strategic autonomy’ has given rise to an outpouring of analyses and policy prescriptions that have dominated the European security agenda for the past four years. A fundamental question which arises is not so much that of knowing how easily and to what extent Biden can turn back the autonomist tide as that of deciding whether and to what extent a new balance can or should be established between independence and partnership.

This policy brief argues that the US and the EU both have a strong interest in forging a new, more balanced partnership, one that reflects the evolving reality of their distinct roles in an emerging multipolar world. The first section assesses the historical record of their changing relationship over two and a half centuries. Although they share many values and interests, it is important to recognise that these are not always identical. The US and the EU are allies, but they are not joined at the hip. Only through an understanding of their distinct social, political and cultural value systems as well as of their quite different geostrategic profiles can we begin to chart a possible course towards a balanced partnership.

The second section examines the EU’s recent, relatively limited attempts to assert a degree of independence, particularly in the security field. It also assesses the extent to which Europe no longer plays a central role in US geostrategic thinking. Finally, it raises the issue of the new threats that have arisen with the Covid-19 pandemic. The third section assesses the potential impact on the transatlantic relationship of Biden’s administration. It argues that, while Europe warmly welcomes a new, friendlier face in the White House, it should avoid any temptation to revert to the relationship that existed prior to the election of Trump. The fourth section examines three major areas where Europe and the US are likely to encounter difficulties in their relationship: trade, China and NATO/Russia.

⁵ J. S. Nye, ‘Post-Pandemic Geopolitics’, *Project Syndicate*, 6 November 2020.

⁶ R. Haas, ‘Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade US Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs*, October 2020.



The paper concludes with a plea for both sides to recognise the desirability of forging a new type of partnership. This could be Biden's greatest contribution to the transatlantic alliance.

Transatlantic relations in historical context

Since its founding in the late eighteenth century, the US has passed through several historical stages in its interactions with Europe.⁷ From 1776 until around 1905, the relationship was based on balance of power principles and starkly divergent interests. This period saw the US in military conflict with several leading European powers. From around 1905 to 1945, the relationship was based on balance of threat logic. The US came to believe that certain European powers posed a greater threat to it than others; consequently, on two occasions it joined with the less threatening powers to wage total war against those felt to be more threatening. Even during this period, the US made it clear that the worldview held by those less-threatening powers with which it had forged military agreements (imperial powers such as France, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium) was antithetical to core American values such as open and free trade, and national self-determination.

From 1949 until 1989, the Cold War saw the US and the states of *Western* Europe forge an alliance against the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. This period was marked by a narrative of convergent interests, common values and a shared identity ('the West') which was both historically contingent and, to a degree, intellectually artificial.⁸ Since the end of the Cold War, the US and the EU have tentatively sought to achieve a new, more balanced partnership that reflects the newly emerging multipolar world order. However, that new, unprecedented, relationship has thus far proven very elusive.

The EU and the US formally flag their joint commitment to certain core values of 'the West': democracy, individual freedoms, the rule of law, open markets and human rights. These values allow for different political, social and cultural

⁷ C. Kupchan, 'The Atlantic Order in Transition: The Nature of Change in US-European Relations', in J. Anderson et al. (eds.), *The End of the West? Crisis and Change in the Atlantic Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁸ K. W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1957).



constructions on the two sides of the Atlantic.⁹ There are significant differences at the best of times between the ways in which such a basic term as ‘freedom’ is interpreted in the two entities. There are stark divergences in attitudes towards such fundamentals as the role of the state, socialised medicine, gun control, women’s reproductive rights, the public role of religion, incarceration, the death penalty and many more issues.

Under President Trump, the assertion that Europeans and Americans promote common values became even more difficult to credit. Opinion polls in 2020 revealed that America is no longer considered by majorities of Europeans to be a positive reference.¹⁰ A poll of 11,000 respondents across 9 European countries showed that there was an overwhelmingly negative perception of the US.¹¹ The presidential election in November 2020 did little to change that view. Most Europeans were positively impressed by the exceptionally high overall turnout and by the exemplary fashion in which the voting was conducted under the extreme circumstances imposed by Covid-19. Most Europeans were delighted that Biden won. But they were even more struck—this time negatively—not only by the fact that some 47% of voters (74 million) found themselves able to cast a ballot for Trump, but especially by the fact that the losing candidate refused to accept the result and concede defeat. The image of the US as the beacon of democracy received a hammer blow under Trump’s baseless attempts to use the courts to disqualify vast numbers of legally cast ballots. The astonishing size of Trump’s support base raises fears that, whatever President Biden may or may not do to improve them, transatlantic relations could easily be reversed in 2024 by a new ‘Trumpist’ president—or even by a second dose of the genuine article. Europeans can no longer assume seamless bipartisan continuity in US foreign policy.

Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, Europe has figured far less centrally on the US radar screen. The intensity of US–European relations during the Cold War should not be misunderstood. It was a brief historical moment during which the US–Soviet bipolar stand-off dominated global history. In that potentially

⁹ R. Kuisel, *The French Way: How France Embraced and Rejected American Values and Power* (Princeton University Press, 2011); D. Lacorne, J. Rupnik and M. F. Toinet, *The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism: A Century of French Perceptions* (New York: St Martin’s, 1990); A. S. Markovits, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America* (Princeton University Press, 2007); R. Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); P. Roger, *The American Enemy: A History of French Anti-Americanism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Europe’s View of China and the US–China Conflict* (January 2020); R. Wike, J. Fetterolf and M. Mordecai, ‘US Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly’, *Pew Research Center*, 15 September 2020.

¹¹ S. Dennison and P. Zerka, *Together in Trauma: Europeans and the World After Covid-19*, European Council on Foreign Relations (London, June 2020).



existential struggle, Europe was both the arena and a player. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, US interests were overwhelmingly focused on the Asia-Pacific region and on Latin America. Since the end of the Cold War, US interests have reverted to the Pacific and to what has been called the 'greater Middle East'.¹² Throughout a series of crises from the 1990s to the 2010s, in which US and European military forces were both involved (the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Arab Spring, Libya, Syria and the campaign against the Islamic State), it became clear that the interests of the two parties were far from 'common'.

All that being said, it remains true—at least, on balance, to this author—that Europeans and Americans¹³ share more with each other politically, socially, legally and culturally than either does with any other major global power. But those shared features, which have deep historical roots, do not imply that the mere assertion of 'shared values' involves an automatic or structured alignment around interests or geostrategic realities.¹⁴ This is the key challenge facing the two entities as they attempt to recalibrate their partnership in the twenty-first century world of multipolarity and emerging regional powers.

Europe's quest for strategic autonomy

Europeans' pursuit of a lesser degree of dependence on Washington did not begin with the end of the Cold War. It was France, under General de Gaulle, which first asserted the need for more freedom of manoeuvre.¹⁵ But all European countries understood, during the tense debates over flexible response in the 1960s, and above all during the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) ('Euromissiles') crisis of the 1980s, that being an American protectorate involves

¹² A. J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2017).

¹³ I use these terms recognising full well that there are huge cultural differences between and among Americans and between and among Europeans. Hence my qualification 'on balance'.

¹⁴ The second US president, John Adams, underscoring his predecessor George Washington's rejection of entangling foreign alliances, said: 'no attachment between nations arising merely from a similarity of laws and government is ever very strong or sufficient to bind nations together who have opposite or even different interests'. Cited in C. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself From the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 77.

¹⁵ De Gaulle made a distinction between *independence*, which he considered to be a status, and *non-dependence*, which he saw as a relational dynamic.



not only guarantees but also risks. In 1981 Ronald Reagan evoked the possibility of a nuclear war between the US and the USSR that would devastate Europe but spare US territory.¹⁶ Six years later, in Reykjavik, he proposed to Mikhael Gorbachev the elimination of all nuclear weapons (on the very existence of which NATO discourse had, for 30 years, based Europe's security). In both cases, there was absolutely no discussion with the Europeans. Their fate hinged on the mood of the changing occupant of the White House. With Trump in the White House, that dependency became a strategic liability.

In his magisterial history of US isolationism, Charles Kupchan argues that in 2020 Americans find themselves seriously torn between the twin dangers of isolationism and interventionism. They are seeking 'the right balance between doing too much and doing too little in the world.'¹⁷ More generally, US politics has entered a period of tension and confusion that sees four quite different schools of thought contending for pre-eminence: libertarians, mainstream Republicans, progressives and old-guard Democrats.¹⁸

Where does Europe fit into that equation? In October 2020 David Ignatius, the dean of Washington columnists, offered a bird's-eye view of what the rest of the world was expecting from the presidential election. He did not even mention Europe.¹⁹ Similarly, in its major survey *Four Scenarios for Geopolitical Order in 2025–2030*, the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies fails to include Europe as a player in any of the scenarios.²⁰

The Financial Times US correspondent Janan Ganesh noted poignantly that to live in Washington 'is to sense Europe at times all but slide off the Earth. It is invoked often enough, but less on its own terms than as a swing vote in the US–China showdown'.²¹ In the challenges facing the Biden administration, Europeans must accept that they will be upstaged by China and the Asia-Pacific region. Ganesh, reflecting on the decline of American interest in Europe, noted that the 'grandiose language of geopolitics' allows only for 'rivals and allies', 'competitors and partners', and concluded ruefully that 'it will have to learn how to describe two parties who have little to do with each other.' While such a stark conclusion

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, 'Reagan Remark Stirs European Furor', 21 October 1981.

¹⁷ Kupchan, *Isolationism*.

¹⁸ S. Walt, 'The Election Is Over. The Ideological Fight Is About to Start', *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2020.

¹⁹ D. Ignatius, 'The World is Watching This Election. Here's What Other Countries Have to Gain and Lose', *Washington Post*, 29 October 2020.

²⁰ S. Brannen, *Four Scenarios for Geopolitical Order in 2025–2030: What Will Great Power Competition Look Like?*, CSIS (Washington, DC, September 2020).

²¹ J. Ganesh, 'Why America No Longer Looks to Europe', *Financial Times*, 8 October 2020.



is overblown, Ganesh's warnings against the temptation to fall back on what he calls the 'mawkish threnodies to "the West"'—to dust off the Atlanticist hymnbook and hope for the best—should be given serious consideration.

In truth, that 'new' geostrategic situation has been visible since shortly after the end of the Cold War. The EU's Common (formerly European) Security and Defence Policy (ESDP/CSDP), inchoate throughout the 1990s and embryonic at the turn of the century, was always predicated on the perceived need for Europeans to acquire the wherewithal to take responsibility for their own (above all regional) security if the Americans saw no interest in engagement.²² CSDP is now more than 20 years old. Brussels officials can make a coherent case that it is still destined for a robust and increasingly autonomous future.²³ Yet, by all objective measures, it remains very far from the ambition set out in Saint Malo as long ago as December 1998: 'the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.'²⁴ It is arguably even further from the objective set out in the 2016 *Global Strategy* document: strategic autonomy.²⁵

The CSDP must be judged by what it does. What it does is engage in overseas civilian and military crisis-management missions and operations. To date it has embarked on some 40 of these, beginning in 2003. By around 2010 it was already clear that the vast majority of them were *civilian* in nature: policing, border control, security sector reform, rule of law and general assistance. There is nothing wrong with such missions, but they do not help the EU achieve strategic autonomy. Currently, the EU is engaged in six military missions.²⁶ Of these, three are relatively small attempts to train African soldiers. Again, such attempts are necessary and useful. But they do little to advance the cause of EU autonomy. It is true that the two significant EU military missions—the naval operations in the Mediterranean and off the Horn of Africa—can be considered 'strategic'. But when set against the genuine geostrategic challenges facing the EU around its entire periphery (from the Arctic to the Black Sea and from the Bosphorus to the Atlantic), they amount to relatively little.

²² J. Howorth, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

²³ T. Breton, speech given at the 'Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe : quelle ambition pour la défense européenne ? – Les entretiens de la défense' on 4 November 2020, European Commission.

²⁴ Franco-British St. Malo Declaration (4 December 1998), in M. Rutten (ed.), *From Saint Malo to Nice. European Defence: Core Documents*, EUISS, Chaillot Paper 47 (Paris, May 2001), 8–9.

²⁵ EU, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (June 2016).

²⁶ EEAS, *Military and Civilian Missions and Operations* (5 March 2019).



At the same time, a new threat to EU security has emerged in the form of Covid-19. The growing number of studies that link the Covid-19 challenge to that of European security all chronicle a series of new threats: vulnerability of supply chains, commercial dependencies and the need for far greater intra-European cooperation in the fields of medicine and hygiene.²⁷ At a more global level, the pandemic has posed yet another challenge to the multilateral system, as *national* responses have tended to predominate. It has exacerbated an unstable geopolitical environment in which an autocratic country like China seems to hold better cards than ‘the West’—if only in its ability to sow division. What will be the long-term impact of Covid-19 in the Middle East and Africa—Europe’s strategic neighbourhood? New concepts have emerged, such as ‘Total Defence’.²⁸ And new efforts have been made to redefine another key concept from the 2016 *Global Strategy* document: ‘resilience’.²⁹ All this will make tentative EU moves towards strategic autonomy even more difficult. These moves are nevertheless historically necessary.

The impact of Biden’s election to the US presidency

Biden has an impeccable record as a supporter of the Atlantic Alliance. At the February 2019 Munich Security Conference, he assured his audience that, after the Trump diversion, ‘we will be back’.³⁰ Nevertheless, during his election campaign, foreign and security policy barely figured as key issues. There is no question that the tone and register of transatlantic relations will return to their traditional civility. Biden will almost certainly deliver on his key promises: to return to the Paris climate agreement and to the World Health Organization, to attempt to revive the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), to keep alive the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and possibly other arms control agreements, and to engage in constant multilateral dialogue with allies.

²⁷ N. Nováky, *The EU’s Security and Defence Policy: The Impact of the Coronavirus*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, In Focus (Brussels, April 2020); A. Marrone, ‘The Covid-19 Pandemic and European Security: Between Damages and Crises’, Istituto Affari Internazionali (Rome, April 2020).

²⁸ A. Missiroli and M. Rühle, *The Pandemic and the Military: Towards Total Defence?*, NATO Defense College, NDC Policy Brief no. 21 (Rome, November 2020).

²⁹ N. Tocci, ‘Resilience and the Role of the European Union in the World’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41/2 (2020).

³⁰ G. Witte and M. Birnbaum, ‘Democrats Offer European Allies the Promise of a Post-Trump Future. But Can They Deliver?’, *New York Times*, 7 February 2019.



However, his election was greeted in most European capitals with a measure of caution.³¹ In Germany, which has been the main target of Trump's malevolence, some felt there would be more continuity than change in US international policy. Peter Wittig, former German ambassador to the US, noted that 'Germans have started to realize—maybe too slowly—that the world order of yesterday is history and that there will be no return to the status quo ante. There might be a chance to restore the transatlantic relationship, but only on the basis of a stronger, more resilient European Union'.³² From Paris came the same message. 'France used the few days of uncertainty over the result of the election to send a message to its European counterparts: whoever sits in the White House for the next four years, the transatlantic relationship will never be the same again; and France is ready to defend European sovereignty when building its relationship with the new US president'.³³ Similar refrains were heard from Rome and Madrid.

While Europeans are relatively confident that they will be able to work constructively with Biden on issues such as climate change and arms control, and while they may find alleviation from the threat of US sanctions on companies doing business with Iran, on other matters, the picture seems less clear.³⁴ One key issue, to which I shall return, is the degree of dependency on US military power. One senior German politician recently insisted that 'without the nuclear and conventional capabilities of the US, Germany and Europe cannot protect themselves'. President Emmanuel Macron fired back, saying that he 'profoundly disagreed' and suggesting that this view stemmed from a failure to understand the march of history.³⁵ Although Berlin and Paris agree that there can be no return to the past, they remain divided over the extent to which Europe can and should seek greater autonomy.

On Iran, while Biden's insistence that he wishes to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action has been music to European ears, it is far from clear that he will be able to deliver a new version of the nuclear deal, even if Tehran is willing to renegotiate. And it is even less clear that he would be able to sell such a deal to Congress.³⁶ On the Middle East more generally—from Turkey to Iraq, from Syria to Israel and from Lebanon to the Gulf states—it is not at all

³¹ P. Buras et al., 'Views From the Capitals: What Biden's Victory Means for Europe', European Council on Foreign Relations (London, 10 November 2020).

³² P. Wittig, 'Hope for the Future of American Leadership Dies Hard', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 October 2020; see also J. Puglierin, 'Berlin: No Return to Normal', in P. Buras et al., 'Views From the Capitals'.

³³ M. Ciulla, 'Paris – Defending European Sovereignty', in P. Buras et al., 'Views From the Capitals'.

³⁴ M. Karnitschnig, 'What Biden Means for Europe', *Politico*, 8 November 2020.

³⁵ H. von der Burchard, 'German Defence Minister to Macron: EU Depends on US Security Guarantee', *Politico*, 17 November 2020.

³⁶ S. Erlanger, 'Biden Wants to Rejoin Iran Nuclear Deal, But It Won't Be Easy', *New York Times*, 17 November 2020.



clear how Biden intends to reverse the course set by Trump or whether any such reversal would necessarily meet with European approval. While the EU, led by France and supported by the US, was struggling with Islamism in the Sahel, the Trump administration was preparing to pull out most US military assets from Africa.³⁷ It seems unlikely that Biden, who has a strong track record of scepticism over US military interventions, will beef up those assets, even though his Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, seems more open to a strong US role in Africa.

It is already a truism that Biden's main policy priorities, at least in his first two years, will essentially be domestic rather than foreign.³⁸ There are nevertheless three major areas of international policy where relations with Europe are likely to prove problematic, particularly since these areas interconnect deeply: trade, China and NATO.

Trade, China and NATO: key challenges for the transatlantic partners

Jake Sullivan, one of Biden's closest advisors and his nominee for National Security Advisor, recently co-authored a radical redefinition of US grand strategy, focusing overwhelmingly on trade and economics rather than on military resources.³⁹ Sullivan sees power in the twenty-first century as deriving from the success of economic models rather than from success on the battlefield. This is not as revolutionary a concept as it might appear. On two previous occasions the US has used economics in the cause of grand strategy. In its century-long struggle against European imperialisms, the US promoted free trade as the antidote to mercantilism. And during the Cold War, the US embraced Keynesian instruments to generate a type of growth that the Soviet Union simply could not match. In the competition with China, economic and investment policy will be critical. The new economic priorities being developed by the Biden team include a growing role for the state, national industrial policy, infrastructure investments, information technology and artificial intelligence, the Green New Deal and a radically revised

³⁷ *Oxford Analytica*, 'France Will Struggle to Refocus Its Sahel Strategy', 10 November 2020.

³⁸ R. Zoellick, 'Biden's Domestic Priorities Should Guide His Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 September 2020.

³⁹ J. Harris and J. Sullivan, 'America Needs a New Economic Philosophy. Foreign Policy Experts Can Help', *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2020.



fiscal code.⁴⁰ These preferences must, Sullivan argues, be backed up by an appropriate foreign and security policy.

The quasi-existential struggle between two competing economic models will dictate the international agenda in the coming decades. The difference with the Cold War is that China's economic model, unlike the Soviet one, needs to be taken extremely seriously (if there were ever any doubts about that, the emergence of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership will have laid them to rest). 'The emerging great power competition between the United States and China', argues Sullivan, 'will ultimately turn on how effectively each country stewards its national economy and shapes the global economy.'⁴¹ This is likely to become Biden's absolute priority, and many forecasters believe he will not deviate far from Trump's tough approach to China.⁴² Europeans will be strongly urged to step in line with American preferences.

Europeans will be forced to take their own adaptation to this Manichean competition seriously. As Rosa Balfour noted in a major analysis, Europe is already 'simultaneously an arena for U.S.–China rivalry and a player in the game, a status that complicates the calculus between domestic choices and foreign priorities'.⁴³ It is unlikely that the EU will meekly endorse whatever policy preferences a Biden team chooses to adopt.⁴⁴ In the emerging multipolar world, the EU has the option of partnering with various powers wishing to situate themselves outside the binary logic of the Sino-American confrontation. Balfour's conclusion is that '[a] more autonomous and geo-strategically engaged EU . . . could assert itself outside great power rivalry and work with partners to lay the foundations for better governance and a more resilient, sustainable economy.'

The EU's choice in this matter could prove critical for its future security. At the very least, every move Europeans make will be scrutinised in Washington with a view to determining its significance in the context of the US–China stand-off. At least one key analyst in the US has even suggested that the price of America's continuing support for NATO will be European alignment on US–China policy.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Economist*, 'Bidenomics', 3 October 2020.

⁴¹ Harris and Sullivan, 'America Needs a New Economic Philosophy'.

⁴² A. Swanson, 'Biden's China Policy: A Balancing Act for a Toxic Relationship', *New York Times*, 16 November 2020; *Economist*, 'Joe Biden's China Policy Will Be a Mix of Trump's and Obama's', 19 November 2020.

⁴³ R. Balfour, 'Europe's Global Test', Carnegie Endowment (Brussels, September 2020).

⁴⁴ N. Barkin, 'The US and Europe Are Speaking a Different Language on China', *Foreign Policy*, 16 February 2020.

⁴⁵ S. Walt, 'Europe's Future Is as China's Enemy', *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2019. On this see also J. J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order', *International Security*, 43/4 (Spring 2019).



But even if we were to suppose that the EU wished to follow that course, such an alignment would be all the more difficult to engineer since, despite the publication in March 2019 of the European Commission document in which China is named a ‘systemic rival’,⁴⁶ the Union still does not have a robust, unified policy towards China.⁴⁷ In particular, the Central and Eastern European states appear to be adopting their own separate approach to China via the ‘16 plus 1’ format.⁴⁸

The above-mentioned linkage between China and NATO raises the question of how the Biden presidency will approach the future of the Alliance. At first glance, Biden and all of his senior foreign and security appointees are on record as wishing to restore the Atlantic alliance to its pre-Trump sense of stability and dialogue. But this may prove more challenging than anticipated. When Emmanuel Macron argued that NATO is ‘brain dead’, he was drawing attention to the absence of any clearly agreed strategy on the part of the Alliance’s member states—particularly with regard to the situation in the Middle East, where one NATO ally, Turkey, was forging a separatist path at odds with the preferences of most European member states.⁴⁹ Indeed, by late 2020, Turkey was posing challenges to the cohesion of the Alliance in a vast range of areas.⁵⁰ However, as NATO approached its seventieth birthday in 2019, even its most fervent supporters recognised that the Alliance was in a state of crisis. One major study from that time detected no fewer than 10 serious challenges facing the organisation.⁵¹ In March 2020 the Secretary General convened a reflection group to advise on the political future of the Alliance. Their report was published on 25 November 2020.⁵² While it discreetly skirts around the specific issue of Turkey, the report makes it clear that the extent and scope of relations between the EU and NATO are far from satisfactory. It concludes that the two sides ‘should seek to reinvigorate trust and understanding at the highest

⁴⁶ European Commission, *EU–China: A Strategic Outlook* (12 March 2019).

⁴⁷ P. Le Corre and E. Brattberg, ‘The EU and China in 2020: More Competition Ahead’, Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (19 February 2020); M. Leonard and J. Oertel, ‘It’s Complicated: Europe–China Relations in a World of Superpower Competition’, ECFR (London, 17 July 2020).

⁴⁸ J. Hillman and M. McCalpin, ‘Will China’s “16+1” Format Divide Europe?’, CSIS (Washington, DC, 11 April 2019). It should be noted that this format became ‘17+1’ in May 2019, with the entry of Greece into the discussions.

⁴⁹ *Economist*, ‘Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO is Becoming Brain-Dead’, Interview with Emmanuel Macron, 7 November 2019.

⁵⁰ These include the purchase of Russian S400 missiles; intervention in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh; and oil and gas exploration in Greek territorial waters in the Mediterranean. A. Got, ‘Turkey’s Crisis with the West: How a New Low in Relations Risks Paralyzing NATO’, *War on the Rocks*, 19 November 2020.

⁵¹ N. Burns and D. Lute, *NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis*, Belfer Center for Science and International Relations (Cambridge, MA, February 2019). The 10 challenges are as follows. *Internal*: US leadership, European military capacity, threats to democratic values and decision-making; *external*: Russian threat, Afghan war, partnerships and enlargement; *on the horizon*: digital and China.

⁵² NATO Reflection Group, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* (25 November 2020).



levels.⁵³ How NATO should deal with the challenge of China is a major conundrum raised by the report.⁵⁴

President Biden's campaign was supported by two quite different constituencies within the US international relations community. The first, whose members one might call 'old-guard Atlanticists', sees the transatlantic link as the most important political, economic, diplomatic, strategic and cultural US asset on the global stage. For these people the most crucial challenge is Russia, and the 'solution' remains further NATO expansion (into Georgia and Ukraine and perhaps beyond).⁵⁵ The second constituency behind Biden, made up of what have been dubbed 'deep engagers' or 'liberal hegemonists', considers the Russian challenge to be a minor issue on the global chessboard. US interests lie overwhelmingly in the Asia-Pacific theatre and particularly in rising to the challenge posed by China.⁵⁶ It is conceivable that this latter constituency will seek to triangulate between Washington, Moscow and Beijing by attempting, as far as possible, to co-opt Russia as an asset in America's tussle with China—in much the same way as Richard Nixon's breakthrough to China in 1972 was designed to isolate Russia.⁵⁷ The implications of such an approach for Europeans would be significant and uncomfortable, forcing them to make difficult choices in their relations with both Moscow and Beijing, choices driven primarily by US preferences.

Similarly, Europeans will have to make difficult choices in responding to one of President Biden's most high-profile initiatives: the convening, within the first year of his presidency, of a world summit designed to create a 'Coalition of Democracies'.⁵⁸ Its objectives would be 'fighting corruption; defending against authoritarianism, including election security; advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad'. In particular, there is a call for technology companies to make 'concrete pledges for how they can ensure their algorithms and platforms are not empowering the surveillance state, facilitating repression in China and elsewhere, spreading hate, spurring people to violence, and remaining susceptible to misuse'. These objectives are entirely praiseworthy and will resonate significantly across Europe, particularly as it tries to put its own Hungarian and Polish houses in order.

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27–8.

⁵⁵ This constituency is best exemplified by the work and publications of the Atlantic Council.

⁵⁶ G. J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ K. Hille et al., 'US Urged to Exploit Cracks in Russia–China Relationship', *Financial Times*, 27 July 2020.

⁵⁸ Biden/Harris website (2020).



The initiative itself is a remake of a project promoted in 2008 by then presidential candidate John McCain: the ‘League of Democracies’, which owed its emergence to a group of thinkers linked to the ‘deep engagement’ school of international relations. But it is clear that any such initiative implies increased confrontation between democracies and autocracies. The question of who is invited—and who is not, and why—remains complex. Moreover, the project risks undermining the role and purpose of the UN and has complex implications for NATO. It was for this reason that the McCain initiative found little support in Europe.⁵⁹ The Biden summit opens up the issue of how NATO might recalibrate its partnerships with countries such as Australia, India, South Korea, Japan and Israel. For Europeans this prospect is problematic. At its Prague summit in 2002, NATO conferred upon itself a global remit—and European forces promptly found themselves drawn into the US-led war in Afghanistan. This is not an experience they are keen to repeat.

However, the idea behind the Coalition of Democracies has received considerable backing from a variety of recent transatlantic policy papers. NATO’s reflection group report argues that member states should ‘draw a clear political and moral distinction between democracy and the autocratic forms of government that characterise NATO’s systemic rivals’.⁶⁰ In December 2020 the European Commission published a Joint Communication together with the European Council and the European Parliament endorsing Biden’s initiative and declaring that ‘the EU is ready to play its full part in the Summit for Democracy [by] working with the US and international partners to make further commitments on fighting corruption, authoritarianism and human rights abuses around the world’.⁶¹ In October 2020 the US State Department and the European External Action Service launched the US–EU Dialogue on China in an attempt to prepare the ground for closer cooperation between the two entities.⁶² In December 2020 Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the German Council on Foreign Relations issued a major report on revitalising transatlantic relations. The report deals at length with both the challenges posed by China and the need to strengthen democracy around the world, though without explicitly referring to the Biden initiative. It argues that ‘the Biden administration and its transatlantic partners should recommit to the defense

⁵⁹ M. H. Halperin and T. Piccone, ‘A League of Democracies: Doomed to Fail?’, Brookings (Washington, DC, 5 June 2008).

⁶⁰ NATO Reflection Group, *NATO 2030*, 51.

⁶¹ European Commission, *A New EU–US Agenda for Global Change*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, JOIN(2020) 22 final (2 December 2020), 8. It should be noted that, on the same page, the Communication states that ‘the EU and the US agree on the strategic challenge presented by China’s growing international assertiveness, *even if we do not always agree on the best way to address this*’ (emphasis added).

⁶² US Department of State, ‘Launch of the U.S.–EU Dialogue on China’, Media note (23 October 2020).



of liberal democracy as a foundational value of the transatlantic alliance: within our domestic orders, in NATO, and abroad.’⁶³ Relations with China will undoubtedly become a major agenda item for transatlantic dialogue in the coming decade.

Conclusion: be careful what you wish for

Biden’s penchant for revitalising allies and alliances could prove to be almost as much of a challenge for Europeans as Trump’s efforts to undermine them. The temptation of what Rosa Balfour has dubbed ‘lazy Atlanticism’⁶⁴—to fall back on past policies of European followership behind a revitalised US leadership—would likely have two main effects. It would suck Europeans into a range of US policy options across the globe—particularly in the Asia-Pacific region—for which they might have neither the material wherewithal nor the political incentive to engage. And it would constitute a death blow for any aspirations that might still remain in Europe to move towards strategic autonomy.

Even if Europeans continued or even strengthened their ongoing efforts to boost Europe’s strategic autonomy, the situation within NATO would likely revert to the unsatisfactory dynamics of the past. Those European states most vulnerable to Russian pressure might be reassured that Biden, unlike his predecessor, would respect the responsibilities implied in Article 5. Inertia would be reinstated. The US would resume its leadership role, and the Europeans would once again resort to followership. In the context of the financial consequences of Covid-19 and the Europeans’ commitment to colossal expenditure under the Recovery Plan, traditional calls in Washington for greater burden sharing by Europe may well be met by the same resigned shrug as in the past. If both sides accept, as some have argued, that Europe has no alternative but to rely for its security on the US, and particularly the US nuclear ‘umbrella’, then the same old arguments that have gone round in circles since the foundation of NATO will continue their circular trajectory. The CSDP would be relegated to the secondary role that it has, in truth, never moved beyond. And Europe’s quarter-century experiment with assuming greater responsibility for the stability of its immediate neighbourhood would be put back in the icebox.

⁶³ C. Stelzenmüller, ‘Democracy’, in N. Burns and D. Schwarzer (eds.), *Stronger Together: A Strategy to Revitalize Transatlantic Power* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 61.

⁶⁴ R. Balfour, ‘Europe’s High Expectations for a US President Joe Biden’, Carnegie Europe, Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe (10 November 2020).



There is an alternative. It involves Europeans and Americans recognising that both history and geography call on them to engineer a new kind of relationship, one that is more balanced and respects the distinct sovereign interests each cherishes, and whose parties will strive to cooperate wherever possible in a complex and turbulent new world. At the military level, challenges are beginning to emerge to the notion that Europe is almost existentially dependent on US military might.⁶⁵ In an interconnected world where economic and commercial clout and cutting-edge technology constitute a currency more potent than tanks and artillery, the EU has a leading role to play. A partnership more genuinely based on equality is a more promising arrangement for a multipolar world than an alliance based on leadership and followership. A stronger Europe can be a better partner for the US than a weak, incompetent or even supine one. It is in the interests of the US to recognise this and to accept that Europe should be moving towards greater autonomy.⁶⁶ That would be the greatest contribution a Biden administration could make towards forging a lasting and more solid transatlantic partnership.

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⁶⁵ B. R. Posen, 'Europe Can Defend Itself', *Survival* 62/6 (December 2020–January 2021); T. G. Carpenter, 'Why Can't Europe Defend Itself?', *The National Interest*, 1 December 2020; J. Ringsmose and M. Webber, 'Hedging Their Bets? The Case for a European Pillar in NATO', *Defence Studies* 20/4 (2020). For responses to B. R. Posen by D. Barrie et al., F. Heisbourg, and S. G. Brooks and H. Meijer, see *Survival* 63/1 (2021 forthcoming).

⁶⁶ J. Howorth, *Strategic Autonomy: Why It Is Not About Europe Going It Alone*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2019).



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