



## **A New European-American Agenda for Global Change with President Biden**

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### **Abstract**

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The prospect of better transatlantic relations and of America's return to multilateralism under President Biden is warmly greeted by Europeans. Crisis management at home will be his first priority; and not Europe or Russia, but China will dominate US foreign policy in the years to come. Economic relations will remain tense, so it is wise that the EU stepped forward with proposing a new transatlantic agenda for global cooperation.

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### **About the Author of this Issue**

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## Analysis

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In Europe – especially in Germany – the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States of America and Kamala Harris as his Vice President has been greeted with great relief. With Joe Biden, America returns to a predictable course, his foreign policy style will be fundamentally different from that of his predecessor; never before has someone with so much foreign policy experience been elected to the White House. Biden was a member and long-time chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for over 30 years. He was also involved in all of Barack Obama's major foreign policy decisions for eight years as Vice President. He is a convinced transatlanticist who was decisively shaped by the Cold War and for whom NATO is therefore "the most important alliance in US history". These are good preconditions for a new start in transatlantic relations, which have steadily reached new lows in the four years under the frequently errant President Trump and in which Germany has frequently been the target of "presidential" attacks.

However, the world has changed significantly since Donald Trump's election – with or without the involvement of the US and its president. Probably the most consequential change is the return of great power rivalry as a defining element of international relations; brought about by the rise of China and its increasingly offensive challenge to the US. A domestic and foreign policy challenge is overcoming the Corona pandemic and the economic crisis it triggered.

### **Crisis management at home takes priority**

President Biden, who has been campaigning against Donald Trump's "America First" policy, will have no choice but to put all his efforts into fighting Covid-19 and reviving the American economy first. The Corona virus has already claimed a quarter of a million lives in the USA alone. Consequently, Biden's first decision as president-elect was to set up a task force to fight the pandemic.

In addition, Biden has announced that, as president of all Americans, he will be concerned with reconciliation between the political camps, combating open and latent racism and the growing inequality between rich and poor.

Biden will also have to bear in mind that he was supported by a broad coalition ranging from avowed socialists and progressives like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren on the one hand to centrists and independents on the other, who pursue very different political goals.

Nor did it come to the blue wave that the Democrats had hoped for: They suffered losses in the House of Representatives and captured the Senate only in early January when they won narrowly both senatorial seats in Georgia.

Biden must also bear in mind that Donald Trump was able to significantly expand his voter base and, at 74 million, won considerably more votes than in 2016.

In addition, President Trump has shown no willingness to ease the start of his successor through an amicable transition. He is (still) supported by the Republican majority in the Senate.

President Biden will have to take all this into account when putting together his administration. It should be helpful that as a long-standing senator he has good contacts in Congress.



### **Return to multilateralism under American leadership**

In the March/April issue of Foreign Affairs, candidate Biden outlined his foreign policy under the title: "Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump". He cites restoring relations with allies and other democratic partners, especially in Europe and Asia, and advocating for democracy worldwide as the top priorities of his foreign policy. In his first year in office, he said, he would host a "Summit for Democracy" to fight authoritarianism and corruption together with democratic partners, and to work together again to stand up more strongly for human rights at home and abroad. He wants to see the USA "back at the head of the table": "to work with its allies and partners to mobilise collective action on global threats".

It can be assumed that he will – as announced – decree the return of the US to the Paris Framework Agreement on Climate Change on the first day of his term, which should be very welcome in Europe. Whether he can push through his ambitious "green" agenda internally remains to be seen. The summit of the largest CO2 emitters that he has announced in order to commit them to more ambitious reduction targets and thus pave the way for a successful COP meeting in Glasgow in autumn 2021 should certainly also meet with great approval in Europe. It should not be forgotten here that it was President Obama's personal commitment that persuaded China and India to attend the Paris climate conference. In the last four years, the fight against climate change has clearly lost momentum – mainly due to the lack of American leadership, which could not be replaced by the Europeans.

Whether the US will also return to the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) with Iran remains to be seen. According to statements from Biden's circle of security policy advisors, Iran is not likely to be a high priority on the foreign policy agenda, especially since the agreement is also viewed critically in democratic circles; not least because of Iranian involvement in the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

If only with a view to overcoming the pandemic, which requires global cooperation, Biden will certainly also reverse the US withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared by Trump.

Perhaps the US under President Biden will also join the "Alliance for Multilateralism" initiated by Germany in cooperation with France and Canada – in any case, candidate Biden has expressed himself accordingly during the election campaign.

### **Rivalry with China will dominate US foreign policy**

If there is still a bipartisan consensus in the US, it is that rivalry with China poses the greatest challenge to the US and its (especially Asian) allies. "Great power competition – not terrorism – is now the primary focus of U.S. national security", Trump's first Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis had already declared in January 2018. Biden has a long personal experience with China. In 1979, the then 36-year-old senator travelled to China for the first time, where he proposed to Deng Xiaoping, the strongman of the CCP and initiator of economic reforms, that American listening posts be set up on Chinese soil on the border with the Soviet Union. Due to the overthrow of the Shah of Persia by Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution, the Americans had lost their radar installations in Iran shortly before. During his vice-presidency, he met Xi Jinping, the current strongman of China. At that time, Biden was one of the architects of both the attempt to make China a responsible partner (stakeholder, Zoellick) in the international system and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Initiative, a free trade agreement with East and Southeast Asian partners that was at least implicitly directed against China. In the Biden camp, the realisation has matured in the meantime that the integration of China has not succeeded and that the People's Republic is increasingly aggressively asserting its interests in Asia, in international organisations, in the Middle East, Africa and even in



Europe. The US is determined to oppose China. The Biden administration can also be expected to focus more on the human rights situation in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong. At the same time, President Biden is likely to seek cooperation with China in the areas of pandemic control, climate protection and nuclear non-proliferation.

As Europe's view of China has also changed in recent years and the EU increasingly sees the country as a systemic rival (EU-HR Borrell, Indo-Pacific Guidelines of France and Germany), productive cooperation could emerge in this area. Common issues abound: unfair economic and trade practices, human rights, forced technology transfer, data and maritime security. However, economic relations with China are more important to many European countries, not least Germany, than to the US. Thus, there is more at stake for Europe. There is also no unified position in Europe regarding the approval of Huawei in the construction of the 5G networks.

### **No new reset in US-Russian relations**

When Barack Obama moved into the White House, his administration, with Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, tried to restart relations with Russia. This had long since failed when Putin finally ushered in a new ice age in relations with the US (and Europe) with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. President-elect Biden called during his election campaign for the establishment of a commission of enquiry (analogous to the "9/11 commission") into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. He has repeatedly spoken out strongly against Russian interference in the internal affairs of other countries. His advocacy of strengthening NATO fits into this picture. Here, too, it can be expected that the Biden administration will work closely with its European partners to counter Putin. However, this cooperation will primarily take place within the alliance and also involve the EU; in contrast to the bilateral policy that Trump has favoured, especially with Poland and Romania. At the same time, in the area of arms control, there is an urgent need to negotiate with Russia on the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which expires at the beginning of February 2021.

### **Trade relations remain tense**

Joe Biden is known as a free-trader and proponent of free trade agreements. During his time as Vice President, Biden was a driving force in the negotiations for a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP). President Trump broke off the negotiations in 2017, which is seen by many as a strategic mistake with regard to China. During the election campaign, Biden advocated not joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which was subsequently reached without the US, in its existing form, i.e. without labour and environmental protection clauses. Biden was also a supporter of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership agreement (TTIP), whose negotiations were also not continued by Donald Trump, but which was also highly controversial in Europe. Therefore, negotiations on a far-reaching agreement that also includes norms and standards are unlikely. In Washington, Biden will be under pressure from the progressive wing of the Democrats, who position themselves against new free trade agreements or the expansion of existing ones. To secure their support, he spoke out against Trump's "America First" but in favour of a "Buy American" and "Make it in America" policy. The hope, however, is that the tariffs on steel and aluminium introduced by Trump will be lifted and that the threat of tariffs on car imports will finally be off the table. An agreement would also be conceivable in the Airbus/Boeing subsidy dispute, in which both sides have imposed punitive tariffs following corresponding rulings by the WTO. Perhaps smaller trade agreements between the EU and the US are possible. A free trade agreement with the US is even more important for the UK than for the EU. In London,



Brexiters regret the departure of Brexit supporter Trump, who had held out the prospect of a beneficial free trade agreement for the British.

Under Biden, the US is likely to abandon its blockade of the WTO, which had already begun under the Obama administration and intensified under Trump. As the centrepiece of the WTO, the independent, two-tier dispute settlement system should be restored as a matter of priority. Since the Europeans are also in favour of modernising the WTO rulebook, fruitful transatlantic cooperation could also emerge here.

### **A new transatlantic agenda**

It should be clear to all Europeans that there will be no return to the relations of the Obama or even Clinton era. Even during the eight years of the Obama presidency, transatlantic relations were not all sunshine. Besides trade conflicts, which have been part of transatlantic reality for decades, Obama's "pivot to Asia", among other things, was met with suspicion in Europe. Moreover, the world has continued to turn and presents both sides with new, major challenges, which, however, can only – or at least better – be tackled together and with greater prospect of success on the basis of transatlantic partnership.

President Biden seems determined to do so. However, Europe will not be the top priority, because his gaze will also be primarily directed inwards and towards Asia.

Of course, transatlantic relations are not shaped by only one side. Europe should use the opportunity to approach the new administration with proposals while it is still in the process of being formed and its positions are not yet firmly established.

It is therefore very welcome that the EU Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen, together with the High Representative for External Relations Josep Borrell, approached the new administration in early December with a proposal for a "New EU-US Agenda for Global Change". They propose close cooperation with the American side in four specific areas: First and foremost is cooperation to urgently combat the Corona pandemic: securing funding for the development and global distribution of vaccines, tests and therapies through a substantial US contribution to the EU's ACT-A and COVAX initiatives. This also includes facilitating trade in essential medical goods by joining the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Trade and Health Initiative and strengthening and reforming the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In second place, the EU Commission proposes close cooperation to protect our planet and our prosperity through joint efforts to combat climate change and biodiversity loss. In view of the UN Climate Summit COP26 in Glasgow and the UN Biodiversity Summit COP15 in Kunming, the EU proposes a coordination of positions and joint efforts to reach ambitious global agreements – starting with a joint commitment on net zero emissions by 2050. To this end, the EU proposes a new green trade agenda including a trade and climate initiative in the WTO and measures to avoid carbon leakage. A green technology alliance will accelerate the development of clean and circular technologies. Together, the destruction of forests and the pollution of the oceans should be combated worldwide, and a global regulatory framework for sustainable financing of investments should be created.

The EU Commission defines the technology, trade and standards sector as the third area for more intensive transatlantic cooperation. Brussels counts joint efforts to reform the WTO and the search for negotiated solutions to bilateral trade disputes among these. The EU also proposes the establishment of a new European-American Trade and Technology Council to develop common standards for the transatlantic area, promote



innovation and facilitate trade exchange. In a transatlantic dialogue on the responsibility of online platforms and "big tech", global solutions for a fair taxation of the digital economy and the prevention of market disruptions are to be sought. In addition, a joint approach to the protection of critical technologies is to be developed, among other things in the discussion on 5-G technology. In the area of artificial intelligence, joint work on a global agreement is proposed to enable free data flow with trust.

The EU Commission has entitled its fourth proposal for a joint forward-looking transatlantic agenda "working together towards a safer, more prosperous and more democratic world". On the basis of a common interest in strengthening democracy and the international legal order worldwide, in supporting sustainable development and advocating for human rights worldwide, Brussels sees a global responsibility for the EU and the US to support democratic values and to advocate for regional stability, prosperity, crisis management and conflict resolution. The EU declares its readiness to play its full part in the Democracy Summit proposed by President-elect Biden and to work with the US to counter the rise of authoritarianism, human rights abuses and corruption. To strengthen this joint commitment to transatlantic and international security, the EU proposes the establishment of a new transatlantic security and defence dialogue between the EU and the US, as well as joint efforts to strengthen multilateralism.

The EU Commission, together with the High Representative for External Relations, has invited the European Council to embrace the new transatlantic agenda, which could then be adopted at a forthcoming EU-US summit in the first half of 2021.

The new European-American agenda for global change could have a similar impact as the Atlantic Charter, signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill on a British warship off Newfoundland on 14 August 1941, for the development of the post-war period in Europe and the lasting commitment of the USA on the old continent.

To this end, the Europeans would also have to continue the course they have embarked on towards "European sovereignty" ("strategic autonomy"), and expand their international (also military) engagement. As president, Biden, too, will undoubtedly stick to NATO's 2 percent target.

Joe Biden will be the last great transatlanticist in the White House. Europe should use his presidency, which may only last four years, as an opportunity to weatherproof transatlantic relations for the time after, when Europe's weight in international relations will continue to decline due to the shift of power towards Asia. The US will play a central role in Europe's security for the foreseeable future.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.