

BRIEF

AMERICA'S TRANSATLANTIC
AGENDA

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Joe Biden's message to America's allies at the annual Munich Security Conference in 2019 was a simple one: "We will be back." Dignitaries from both sides of the Atlantic, who had been alarmed by the downward spiral of the transatlantic relationship under Donald Trump, nodded in approval and hope.

Trump's 'America First' foreign policy had disdained multilateralism, was ideologically hostile towards the EU, soft on human rights violations, and quick to embrace the world's authoritarian rulers. In rapid succession, the US abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Agreement on climate change, and imposed trade tariffs on some of America's closest partners. Trump's transactional approach to diplomacy clashed with the long-standing, broad commitments that had traditionally underpinned relations between the US and its allies. He demanded a manyfold increase in compensation for US military presence in Japan and South Korea, and threatened to withdraw from NATO. Unsurprisingly, Biden's victory was met with sighs of relief in many allied capitals.

America's allies in Europe are now counting on a quick return to business as usual. Their optimism is based on Biden's record in politics, his foreign policy manifesto tellingly entitled "Why America Must Lead Again," and his nomination of Obama-era transatlanticists to key posts in the new Administration. Biden has vowed to pursue a tougher line on Russia, to reverse Trump's policies on climate change, to end trade wars with democratic countries, and to reinvigorate US alliances around the world. He has also

reaffirmed unconditional US commitment to NATO: "the most effective political-military alliance in modern history."¹ From a European perspective, the contrast with the previous Administration could hardly be greater: thus, on the day of his inauguration, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg heralded, "the start of a new chapter" for the Alliance.²

REALITY CHECK

Biden's reaffirmation of America's steadfast commitment to Euro-Atlantic security has sent positive ripples through the Alliance. His decision to suspend Trump's order reducing US troop numbers in Germany was a highly important step towards restoring normality in the transatlantic relationship. But Europe's expectations should be kept in check. These early achievements were low-hanging fruit and are notable only against the low bar set by the previous administration. The reality is that adapting NATO for a new age of great power competition will entail a hard policy slog with few easy wins.

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NATO faces three sets of complex, interrelated challenges. First, it is weakened by the diverging security policy priorities of key Allies. Second, the rise of China and accelerating Sino-US rivalry require an urgent re-think of its role and responsibilities. Third, worries about America's future direction are now a factor in the Euroatlantic security debate: as one observer has put it, "the world cannot unsee the Trump presidency."³

A. FAMILY QUARRELS, OLD AND NEW

NATO has lived through several acute crises in its 70-year history. The Suez war of 1956, the Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus in the 1970s, and the rift over the US-led Iraq invasion in 2003 were critical tests of its resilience.

Today, Allied cohesion is undermined by a multitude of intractable squabbles, rather than a single crisis event. Perhaps the most prominent and long-standing irritant in the transatlantic partnership concerns defence spending and equitable burden sharing. In 2014, at US insistence, the Allies committed to raising their defence expenditure to at least 2% of GDP. President Trump turned this issue into a *cause célèbre*, publicly lambasting the European Allies, Germany in particular, as free riders and threatening to withdraw from NATO. Despite some progress, the defence budgets of many European Allies remain well below the agreed target, and the question of burden sharing will continue to cause acrimony within the Alliance.

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The hurdles for NATO's critically important cooperation with the EU also remain as high as ever. Tensions between Turkey and its EU neighbours have escalated lately over a range of issues, including migration, maritime rights, and Libya's civil war. Both the EU and (for different reasons) the US have considered imposing sanctions on Ankara, which would further undermine these vital relationships.

Furthermore, many Allies find the German government's insistence on completing the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline disgraceful in the light of Moscow's naked hostility, its use of chemical weapons against opponents of the regime, and the new wave of political repression in Russia. The Brexit saga has also left a bitter aftertaste that may yet spill over into security and defence matters, while President Macron, having declared NATO's "brain death," is determined to advance the EU's 'strategic autonomy,' which implies a degree of political and military decoupling from the US.⁴ None of these disputes are fatal alone, but together they generate bad blood that risks crippling the Alliance.

B. NATO'S CHINA CHALLENGE

China's rise is the most significant geopolitical shift since the end of the Cold War. It threatens US primacy and the international liberal order, which America's economic and military power has underpinned. It is likely that Sino-US rivalry will become the defining feature of international relations, with third countries increasingly forced to pick sides. In this context, America's allies will feel particularly exposed.

In Washington, the hard-line approach to China enjoys rare bipartisan consensus. The new US State Secretary Antony Blinken has stated that "President Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China," indicating that America's hawkish policies would continue.⁵ The Biden Administration has kept all the tariffs imposed on Beijing by Trump and reiterated America's commitment to provide Taiwan with the necessary means for self-defence. Its most significant change to US China policy has been a promise to abandon Trump's unilateralism.

Crafting a broad transatlantic strategy will require NATO to find enough common ground to translate its trivial statements about Beijing's growing power into coherent policies. US and European attitudes have begun to converge lately on the back of Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests and the revelations of the scale of human rights violations in Xinjiang. Moreover, China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy has turned out to be both clumsy and counterproductive, hardening anti-Beijing sentiments in the West. But turning shared resentment into a common strategy remains a far-fetched aspiration. Europe seems politically too fragmented, militarily ill-prepared, and economically too dependent on the Chinese market to embrace America's more confrontational approach.

Early indications suggest that pragmatic interests will continue to prevail when it comes to China. The EU controversially finalised a major investment agreement with Beijing only days before Biden's inauguration, while none of the Allies rushed to endorse a US declaration that China had committed genocide against the Uighur population. At the same time, Biden's signature of the protectionist 'Buy American' act

in his first days in office sent an unmistakably Trumpian signal to America's trading partners. While both sides downplay the significance of these early discrepancies, they highlight fundamental differences that NATO will have to overcome. It would be ironic if the new Administration's attempts to align policies on China were to result in greater transatlantic tensions than Trump's 'go-it-alone' approach.

C. WILL AMERICA'S RETURN LAST?

Biden's central message to the world since his inauguration has been, 'America is back'. True to its word, the new Administration was quick to re-join multilateral institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization. It also promised to re-engage on regional security matters such as the Iran nuclear programme, and global challenges like climate change.

However, doubts will persist about America's future direction. The past four years have exposed deep-seated problems in American society. Washington's incorrigible partisan politics, the racial divide, the bungled response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the conspiracy theories threatening US democratic institutions have shocked America's friends and delighted its enemies. Moreover, the 2020 US Presidential election has demonstrated that the nationalist and isolationist sentiment that brought Donald Trump to power, remains strong.

The new Administration will also find America's international standing as the leading advocate of democracy and human rights diminished. Autocratic states from Russia to Venezuela, used to Washington's lecturing on democratic governance, gloated at the frenzied scenes from American cities. Many contrasted the chaos in the world's greatest democracy with their own authoritarian stability. Beijing's propaganda was quick to draw parallels between the mob vandalising the Capitol and Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests.

Even more significantly, opinion polling indicates that European attitudes towards the US have changed massively. Most Europeans now believe that something is profoundly wrong with the US,

and that its political system is broken. Almost two-thirds doubt American security guarantees.⁶

These are alarming numbers for NATO, an organisation fundamentally based on the transatlantic bond and heavily reliant on US leadership. Any lingering uncertainty about America's future commitment will not only weigh on the Alliance's strategic planning, but also provide opportunities for adversaries to exploit and exacerbate intra-alliance divisions. The new US administration will thus need to pay constant attention to shoring up America's democratic bona fides and restoring America's international credibility.

RESETTING THE ATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP

The two decades of America's global 'war on terror' were a major distraction for US foreign policy and a drain on its military resources. Biden's Administration will be the first since 9/11 to not be burdened by major operational commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. It should

Most Europeans now believe America's political system is broken

use this opportunity to align US global force posture with its foreign and security policy priorities and to bolster its alliances.

The multiple hurdles that stand in the way of reinvigorating NATO, should not overshadow the reality that the US and Europe need each other more than at any time since the end of the Cold War. China and Russia pose long-term challenges to international security, the liberal order, and the interests of Western democracies. In this context, the US-led global network of security partnerships, which neither China nor Russia will ever be able to match, is the West's biggest advantage. NATO, with thirty members and robust security policy coordination mechanisms, is a particularly valuable asset.

A credible US military presence in Europe will be crucial for deterring the Kremlin's revisionist ambitions and the harassment of its West-leaning neighbours. Even though Russia's economy has stagnated since 2014 and its

relative power has steadily declined, Moscow remains both willing and capable to militarily challenge the Atlantic Alliance in its vicinity and beyond. China's rise presents a wider and much more complex threat. Beijing's economic heft and technological advances have eroded America's primacy and emboldened its foreign policy. While China's near-term focus is on pushing the US out of the Indo-Pacific and establishing regional hegemony, Beijing's power will be increasingly felt in the North Atlantic region and in the locations of NATO's operations.

This dual challenge makes the parameters for a new grand transatlantic bargain look straightforward: America needs Europe's help in managing China's rise, while Europe needs US help in managing Russia's decline. This simple formula captures NATO's primary mission in the current security environment and provides a

clear framework for its strategic planning. In practical terms, it calls for a credible long-term US military presence in Europe to deter Russia's bullying, and for a greater alignment of European and US policies to contain China's malign influence.

Importantly, the multifaceted nature of Sino- US rivalry, which spans the political, economic, and technological dimensions, makes Europe's military limitations of lesser importance. America will need to join efforts with Indo-Pacific partners to dissuade Beijing from pursuing its territorial ambitions. At the same time, Europe's economic clout and its outsized role as a regulatory power, alongside the liberal democratic values it shares with the US, will make it America's natural partner in defence of democracy and in countering China's global ambitions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "[Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump](#)," Foreign Affairs, March/April 2020.

² NATO, "[NATO Secretary-General congratulates President Joe Biden on his inauguration](#)," 20 January 2021.

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⁵ Karen DeYoung, "[Blinken appears to be sailing to confirmation as Biden's secretary of state](#)," The Washington Post, 20 January 2021.

⁶ Ivan Krastev and Marc Leonard, "[The crisis of American power: How Europeans see Biden's America](#)," ECFR Policy Brief, 19 January 2021.

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