



President Biden went to Europe, and all we got was ...?

by Ian Bond, 10 June 2021

Biden is America's most Atlanticist president since Bill Clinton. Europe and the US will not see eye-to-eye on everything, but they should not waste this chance to strengthen their partnership.

As Joe Biden begins his first trip to Europe as US president, US officials are keen to [stress](#) that he is a “true transatlanticist” with decades of experience of European affairs, and that his visit is a signal that “America is back to work with our closest allies”. But Biden’s NATO and EU colleagues should not get carried away. Biden is above all an American politician, whose primary goal is to look after the interests of his voters before Congressional elections in 2022 and the 2024 presidential election – an aim encapsulated in [his phrase](#) “foreign policy for the middle class”. Nor will his successors necessarily share his interest in Europe’s problems.

Most European leaders were relieved when Biden beat Donald Trump in last year’s election: Trump’s mantra of ‘America first’ and his visceral hostility to the US’s international alliances and to multilateralism were an existential threat to Western unity and the institutions that had served Europe well since the Second World War. Certainly Biden’s positive attitude to the EU comes as a huge relief after Trump bracketed it with China as a hostile actor. But the new administration has yet to remove some of the irritants in EU-US relations, such as the tariffs on European steel and aluminium imposed – on spurious national security grounds – by Trump in 2018. Some of the industries that might be harmed by European competition are in swing states like Pennsylvania, vital to the Democratic Party’s chances in future elections. And the transition from Trump to Biden has not brought a solution to the long-running dispute over illegal subsidies to Airbus and Boeing – in which the WTO has given both sides the right to retaliate. Though the EU and US have agreed not to escalate their trade disputes with further tariffs, that does not mean that they have solved them.

At NATO, as with trade policy, Biden has not been quite the antithesis of Trump that Europeans hoped for. If anything, Biden’s announcement of the total withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, made without any prior consultation with other allies who provide the majority of NATO troops in the country, caused even more irritation than Trump’s surprise withdrawal from northern Syria. Europeans hope that when US officials talk about NATO as the primary forum for transatlantic consultation, in future that will imply

more than a place where Americans come to tell Europeans what the inter-agency process in Washington has decided they should do.

Biden's intensive programme of multilateral and bilateral meetings in Europe gives him the chance to correct any initial stumbles and set out a positive agenda. His administration came into office wanting to repair the damage done to the transatlantic relationship by Trump. In its first few months in office there have been intensive contacts with European allies, with Secretary of State Tony Blinken visiting Brussels twice, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin taking part in two virtual NATO defence ministers' meetings and Biden himself videoconferencing with the European Council in March. There have also been consultations and negotiations on trade, China and other issues. The administration seems satisfied that by showing the Europeans some attention, it has been able to patch up most of the worst damage caused by Trump. Now it wants to revitalise its relations with Europe and seek more ambitious outcomes from transatlantic co-operation.

Among the more promising areas for working with the EU are climate change, in the run-up to COP26 in Glasgow; a [common global minimum corporate tax rate](#) (already agreed by G7 finance ministers); and possibly the COVID-19 pandemic – though not all European countries (the UK included) back the US's proposal for a vaccine patent waiver to boost supplies for developing countries.

The NATO summit will kick off negotiations on a new NATO strategic concept, to be adopted at a summit in Madrid in 2022. This will give North American and European allies a chance to restate their commitment to NATO's core tasks of defence and deterrence, but also to show how the alliance can adapt to changing security challenges. Biden will want the new concept to show US audiences that having allies is an asset, not a burden.

Three issues that the US would like to take forward in both the NATO and the EU-US summits will be hard to agree on, however: how to stand up to Russia; how to increase Europe's contribution to its own defence and security; and how to deal with China.

On Russia, the mantra from US officials is that they want a stable and predictable relationship with the Kremlin. That is unlikely to be President Vladimir Putin's goal when he meets Biden in Geneva, the last leg of the European grand tour: it suits him to keep his adversaries off balance and guessing what his next move will be. Having already extended the New START treaty limiting nuclear weapons until 2026, the US wants to continue to reduce the threat from Russia's nuclear arsenal (especially from the novel weapons, such as hypersonic missiles and nuclear-powered cruise missiles, that Putin is introducing). For Putin, however, such weapons give him tactical advantages in the face of an adversary with larger and more advanced conventional forces.

In his meetings with NATO allies and the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, Biden will be seeking to ensure that there is a common transatlantic front in dealings with Moscow. The European Council on June 24th-25th is scheduled to adopt an updated policy on Russia, though this seems unlikely to break new ground, despite recently-revealed evidence of Russian involvement in assassinations and bomb attacks on EU soil.

While there seems to be consensus among NATO allies that a 'strategic partnership' with Russia is definitively a thing of the past, the Americans are frustrated by French and German efforts at NATO to emphasise dialogue with Russia rather than resistance to it. Meanwhile, Central Europeans feel that Biden

has been less tough on the Kremlin than he could have been, in particular because he waived sanctions against firms involved in the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, even though the State Department found them to have engaged in sanctionable activities. And Georgia and Ukraine – the countries most exposed to Russian aggression – are not invited to Brussels for this summit, and are no closer to joining the alliance than they were when they were promised membership in 2008. It will be hard to find a Russia policy that is both firm enough to deter Putin’s adventurism in his neighbourhood and to satisfy the Central and Eastern Europeans, but also accommodating enough to please Western and Southern Europeans.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 created the momentum for European allies to reverse the long decline in their defence budgets. Biden will approach the burden-sharing debate more tactfully than Trump, who frequently claimed that allies spending less than the NATO target of 2 per cent of GDP on defence owed the money to the US; but the substance of the US case will not change. Fewer than half of allies are meeting the target, according to [NATO](#) figures.

The US wants to increase NATO’s common budget, as well as national defence budgets, to invest more in developing high tech weapons systems and set up a ‘technology incubator’. But the US and France (as often in the past) do not see eye-to-eye on the roles of NATO and the EU. The US (backed by Germany, unusually) wants more NATO common funding for technology development, as well as for providing training for third countries that want to work with NATO; France [is opposed](#) to such an expansion of NATO’s role and budget. Paris’s emphasis is instead on using EU defence programmes to develop capabilities that increase European ‘strategic autonomy’, and the ability of European forces to work without US support. The Biden administration, like many of its predecessors, is likely to end up telling Europeans to do more for their own defence, but then complaining that they are doing the wrong kind of ‘more’. The US has agreed, however, to join the EU’s project to improve military mobility in Europe – upgrading infrastructure such as bridges and making it both physically and legally easier for NATO forces to cross borders and move around Europe rapidly in a crisis.

On China, the relationship between the EU and the new administration got off to a bad start when the EU reached a deal with China on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in December 2020, giving the US no chance to make observations on what was under negotiation. Since then, things have improved. US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and European External Action Service Secretary General Stefano Sannino held an initial high-level China dialogue meeting on May 26th and issued a [joint press release](#). The US side accepted the formulation, used by the EU since it issued its ‘[EU-China Strategic Outlook](#)’ in 2019, that the relationship with China comprises “elements of co-operation, competition and systemic rivalry”, and the two sides agreed to hold further meetings at senior official and expert levels on a number of themes including human rights, security and engagement with China.

There is still a basic philosophical difference between European and US views of China, however. Europeans have no objection in principle to China’s becoming a superpower, as long as it does so within the framework of international norms. By contrast there is broad consensus across the US political spectrum that the rise of China is inherently threatening to the US and that China’s rapid growth is only made possible by malign activity such as the theft of intellectual property. Fortunately for the US, maladroit Chinese behaviour is validating Washington’s argument that the differences between US and European views of China are minuscule in comparison with the gulf in values between Beijing and Brussels. The sanctions that China imposed on a number of MEPs and various European think-tanks, in retaliation for EU sanctions on Chinese officials involved in human rights violations against the Uyghur

minority in Xinjiang, have only served to harm China's standing in the EU. That may make it easier for Europe and the US to focus on common responses to Chinese actions, glossing over their underlying disagreement. A more sophisticated Chinese approach would have a better chance of widening the transatlantic divide.

US and European differences of view about China also limit how much NATO will focus on potential threats from China in the future. The US would like to see NATO paying more attention to China – which, at least in terms of information-gathering and analysis, it has already begun to do. Washington would also like the alliance to work more closely with partner countries in the Indo-Pacific region – but France and Germany would both prefer to keep the EU as the main forum for co-ordination on policy towards China. NATO is likely to say more about China in its summit declaration than it has previously; but it seems unlikely that there will be a big increase in China-focused activity.

Overall, therefore, Biden is likely to find a warm atmosphere (except in his meeting with Putin) but little substance in his European tour. That would be a pity, for both sides. A diminishing proportion of the US population think of somewhere in Europe as 'the old country' and America's security preoccupations are increasingly with China rather than Russia. Europeans need to show Americans that they are sensitive to the changed global environment, and that they are ready to be security producers as well as security consumers. And they can tell themselves that a bigger European defence and security effort will come in handy if another Trump-like isolationist comes to power in the US. Meanwhile, if Biden wants to avoid the return of Trumpism, he needs to be able to show that his European policy is delivering tangible security and prosperity advantages for ordinary Americans. The traditional souvenirs of an American president's European trip – a couple of 40-page summit declarations – will not be good enough.

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