

A photograph of Joe Biden, smiling and wearing sunglasses, pointing his right hand towards the camera. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a solid light blue color.

Transatlantic relations for the Biden era and beyond

by Ian Bond

Most European leaders responded to Joe Biden's election victory on November 3rd with undisguised enthusiasm. They expect him to repair some of the damage that the transatlantic partnership suffered in Hurricane Donald, but pre-Trump America no longer exists, and European policy must reflect that.

Following Biden's win, the EU published 'A new EU-US agenda for global change' in December, setting out a number of topics for possible collaboration: global health, climate change, trade and technology, and strengthening democracy. The Biden administration's first moves in these areas – re-joining the World Health Organisation and the Paris Agreement, for example – have been encouraging. But the EU must also learn the lessons of the last four years, in case relations run into trouble again after Biden.

The first lesson is that the US remains a deeply divided society. More people voted for Trump in 2020 than for any other presidential candidate in history, with one exception – Joe Biden. Trump may have left the political stage, but his supporters are likely to shape the future direction of the Republican Party for the next few years at least. They will not believe that there are benefits for them in the kind of policy co-ordination that the EU is calling for – on climate change, what the EU calls "open and fair trade" or the United Nation's sustainable development goals. Biden will prioritise narrowing divisions at home over winning favour in European capitals – as

shown by his January 25th announcement of protectionist 'Buy American' measures, which among other things increase domestic content requirements for government procurement.

European representatives in the US should work harder on influencing opinions in the South and the Midwest, where Trump's fans are most numerous. The EU delegation in Washington has various outreach programmes, mostly through universities; it should target these regions more. The larger European states should use their networks of consulates in support of the general European interest, not just national objectives. Though outside the EU, the UK can still use its posts in the US to encourage continued transatlantic co-operation and popular support for NATO.

The second lesson is that Congress still matters. The November elections reduced the Democrats' majority in the House of Representatives from 38 to 11. Many House Republicans remain loyal to Trump: two-thirds of them voted to reject Pennsylvania's election results, in an effort to deny Biden his victory. Biden is likely to struggle

to get much of his legislative programme through a Senate divided 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans. Under the Senate's rules, most bills require 60 votes to progress. For the rest, Vice President Kamala Harris will use her casting vote whenever she can; but one conservative Democrat voting with the Republicans will be enough to block legislation. Biden's best hope is that in 2022 the Democrats can win more seats in both chambers on the back of an economic rebound after the pandemic; but Republicans, strong in less populous rural states, enjoy a structural advantage in Senate elections, since every state, regardless of population, returns two senators.

European diplomats in Washington already spend a lot of time lobbying on Capitol Hill (not least against extraterritorial sanctions – with bipartisan Congressional backing – that target European companies involved in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project to bring Russian gas to Germany). The Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue between Congress and the European Parliament, and more contacts between national parliaments in EU and European NATO member-states and their US counterparts, can complement diplomatic efforts. When COVID-related travel restrictions are lifted, congressional delegations should be welcomed to Europe again.

The third lesson is that Americans of all political stripes see China as a growing threat, and want to contain its rise and preserve America's primacy. They might disagree about the coherence, tactical wisdom or effectiveness of Trump's China policy, but not its basic objective.

Though the EU described China in its 2019 'Strategic Outlook' as "a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance", it also called it "a co-operation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives" – words unlikely to be spoken in Washington. The Biden administration has already indicated concern about the EU's decision to finalise its investment agreement with China without prior transatlantic consultation. US Secretary of State-designate Tony Blinken has characterised China's actions against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang as genocide, a term no European leader has yet used. The EU told the US in the December 'new agenda' that their dialogue on China, initiated in 2020, should be the forum for "advancing our interests and managing our differences". There are plenty of differences to manage. Once the EU has a coherent policy of its own, including on responding to a systemic rival, transatlantic co-operation may become easier.

The fourth lesson is that Democratic and Republican administrations alike expect their

allies to do more for their own security. Obama and his team may have encouraged burden-sharing more politely than Trump, with his bombastic claims that Germany and others were ripping America off; but the message was essentially the same: a situation where the US is responsible for 72 per cent of NATO defence spending and European allies for 26 per cent is not sustainable in the long term.

The pandemic's economic impact will make it politically difficult for Europeans to maintain current defence spending, let alone increase it, but they must. China's rise will inevitably shift the US focus from the European to the Indo-Pacific theatre. Biden has surrounded himself with senior officials with European ties, but that will not keep US forces in Germany or Italy if the perceived threat is to Japan or Guam. Europeans speak of 'strategic autonomy'; and may be able to achieve it economically, to some degree, in areas such as supply chains and resilience in the face of sanctions; but in the defence field it will remain a meaningless slogan if Europe lacks the capabilities to carry out even modest operations without US help; and restoring and preserving stability in Europe's neighbourhood increasingly demands more than modest operations.

The final lesson is that Trump's frequent attacks on the real or invented shortcomings of the EU and NATO have changed European views of the US more than American views of Europe. Polling data shows that in 2020 more than 60 per cent of Americans saw US alliances in Europe as beneficial to both sides; yet only 26 per cent of Germans, 31 per cent of French people and 41 per cent of Britons had a favourable view of the US. The majority of Europeans think the US political system is broken. Biden will certainly benefit from a rebound in positive European feelings towards the US, but European political leaders must do more to stress the continued importance of transatlantic ties, and to shift their voters' focus away from the personality of the president towards the value of the overall economic, political and security relationship.

It will be tempting for European leaders to see Biden and the familiar faces around him, and think transatlantic normality is restored. But Europe needs to think about the longer-term trends in US domestic policy and transatlantic relations. Pre-2016 America is gone, and it is not coming back. European leaders should realise that one cannot step in the same river twice – or the same Atlantic Ocean.

Ian Bond
Director of foreign policy, CER @CER_IanBond