

The Biden era: What can Europe expect from America's new President?

With the election of Joe Biden as the next President of the United States, the transatlantic relationship is set to enter a new era. Effie G. H. Pedaliu examines what Biden's presidency will mean for the EU and the post-Brexit UK.

What can the EU expect realistically from a Biden presidency? An awful lot really. At a minimum, decorum, civility and predictability in a world of growing uncertainty. Anything more than this will depend, ultimately, on Europe. It can no longer expect the US to act as a *deus ex machina* to cure its woes.

The EU's wish list when it comes to a Biden administration is on the long side. The transatlantic relationship is not only about NATO, but also about economics. The combined size of the US and EU economies shape the global economy. Therefore, the first thing the EU needs from the US is to re-energise the global system from its '[creeping paralysis](#)'. Equally important is for the US to retract President Trump's thinly disguised threat in July 2018 to pull the United States out of NATO – the cornerstone of European defence – and to reengage fully. Furthermore, the EU would like to see more American involvement at its eastern border and the MENA region and a lowering of tensions in Sino-American relations.

Biden's priorities are to unite his politically polarised society by reducing social and racial divisions in America, to restore its people's trust in democratic institutions, to tackle the pernicious advance of Covid-19 robustly and rebuild the American economy. At the same time, he will wish to restore multilateralism, continue to withstand the challenges posed by the relentless rise of China and confront Russian provocations. Biden will also seek to resolve the conundrum of finding a golden mean for climate change, energy security and economic growth as well as expanding international trade.

A known quantity

What the EU, the UK and NATO are getting in Biden is somebody who has been a known quantity over the last 47 years. Foreign policy is in his blood. He understands how diplomacy works, knows how to work across ideological lines and recognises that security and economic growth are more easily achieved through international collaboration. His long stints in the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, as chairman of its NATO Observer Group and its Sub-committee of European Affairs, his opposition to President Reagan's policy towards Apartheid in South Africa, his support for humanitarian intervention in the Balkan Wars of the early 1990s and his time as President Obama's Vice President reveal him to be a liberal, a traditionalist and an institutionalist who will seek to work together with other democracies.



Joe Biden, Credit: Adam Schultz / Biden for President (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Biden gets the transatlantic relationship and the value of allies. He will not hurl gratuitous insults at his NATO allies or describe them as 'delinquents' and NATO as an 'obsolete' institution. He believes in the values of the West. He realises the importance of European integration and will not launch destructive attacks on the European Union which he [rates](#) as 'an indispensable partner of first resort'. He will not use the UK to harm the EU.

He has high regard for multilateralism, international institutions and the rule of law. Biden is unlikely to ever use the words 'America First'. He does not define American security and interests as narrowly as his predecessor who approached American defence through a bunker mentality. He is on record as [saying](#) that, 'in exactly 77 days a Biden Administration will rejoin' the Paris climate agreement. He has [promised](#) that 'if Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the US would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations.' How much of his policy agenda he will be able to fulfil is ultimately down to the composition of the US Senate, which will not be known until 5 January 2021.

In sum, Joe Biden's election as the 46th President of the United States brings an end to a Trump era based on 'alternatives facts' and populism. Donald Trump's legacy is increased global uncertainty, division and distrust. It has made the world a more dangerous place. Europe and the UK have watched on tenterhooks the playing out of the American democratic process as the global and economic shocks of Covid-19 gather strength. News of the final victory of the Biden/Harris ticket came as a relief to Brussels, EU capitals and probably, even in Brexiting London.

In a Covid-19 plagued era, unpredictability has now lost its strategic gloss even among those who courted it and used it wantonly. What the Trump administration chalked up as foreign policy 'successes', namely the withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, have been seen from this side of the Atlantic as dangerous liabilities. His courting of chaos, his attraction to 'strong men', his disregard for etiquette and his aversion to international cooperation have injured the transatlantic relationship as well as America's position in the world, and have had a detrimental effect on global cooperation in dealing with the threat from Covid-19.

The need for a strong EU

The turbulence in the international system has put a soft power like the EU under severe stress. Many in Europe hanker for a new golden era in transatlantic relations. But, the reality is that although transatlantic cooperation will be restored, this will still be a difficult time and some strains in the transatlantic relationship may even grow. This is because the EU's systemic weaknesses and many pressures over a short time have reduced the EU into adopting a policy of appeasement towards all threats and waiting for both Trump and Covid-19 to disappear.

For Biden, the EU is a natural ally, but he needs the EU to be a strong international actor. He needs it to be a reliable ally that does not merely pay lip service to supporting NATO. Biden will want a Europe that pulls its weight on defence and security so that it complements NATO, pays its fair share and does not turn a blind eye to Russian skulduggery because of its energy needs.

Trump demonstrated to Europe the limits of an overreliance on the US, yet the EU has still to become an assertive and confident voice on the world stage. Its efforts in foreign and security policy continue to be diffident and plagued by an inability to speak as one. Its legendary cacophony on foreign policy-making does not originate primarily from its rule demanding unanimity, but from 'the rule of double standards', where immediate and short-term economic interests outweigh long-term strategic thinking.

A Biden administration will want to see an EU that forsakes appeasement and stands up to the aggressive revisionism of Russia, Turkey and Iran that destabilise its eastern and southern borders. He will happily partner a purposeful EU but will not act as its border guard.

Biden's approach to the Middle East is likely to be more circumspect than the EU wishes. He has [described](#) Trump's withdrawal of US military forces from Northern Syria as a 'complete failure', a 'betrayal of [our] brave Kurdish partners' and 'taking the boot off the neck of ISIS'; and, above all, as 'demolishing the moral authority of the United States of America'. However, Biden, too, [wishes](#) to 'end the forever wars' and Europe will have to find a means of dealing effectively with its troubled neighbourhood. The cavalry is not likely to be dispatched from the other side of the Atlantic any time soon.

A Biden administration will also want the EU to join it in pursuing a more active agenda on human rights and civil liberties with regards to China as well as 'problematic European states' such as Hungary and Poland. China may complicate relations between the US and the EU as the President-elect will raise, quite forcefully, the issue of Hong Kong with President Xi and will also expect the EU to adopt a less 'mild approach' to China's economic penetration of European territory.

Flash points and the special relationship

Matters of economic and technological cooperation are likely to be flash points between the EU and the Biden administration. He is unlikely to use the vacuous term 'America First' but he, too, will seek a 'fair deal'. He won the elections primarily by recreating 'the blue wall' therefore, he will seek to rectify perceived imbalances in trade between the two blocs especially in agriculture and industry. Biden will expect the EU to act as a partner not a competitor on issues of technology and economic and trade policy. It is quite likely that there will be friction over the aviation industry, AI, 5G and tech in general. There is still scope for close cooperation between the US, the EU and the UK as the Biden administration tries to re-purpose the US economy to overcome Covid-19 and become more competitive against the Chinese. The question then is how far are the EU and UK prepared to go to keep the US happy.

With the UK, the 'special relationship' may become thornier than it was even during the Clinton-Major years and this time, disgruntlement will not be mitigated by joint efforts to bring about peace in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it will be the sanctity of the 'Good Friday Agreement' itself that may cause tensions. A new trade agreement with the US will not be about the UK having to eat '[a little bit of humble pie](#)'. It will be about the realities facing the UK in negotiating with an economic giant like the US.

Pleasant, even successful, meetings on international trade in DC rarely mean that an agreement with the US is likely to emerge quickly. As President Obama warned when David Cameron recklessly gambled the economic certainties the UK enjoyed on a Brexit referendum, the UK will have to take its place in a long queue. The Johnson government may have to perform some quick finessing of its foreign and trade policy negotiating stances at an awkward time as the transition period comes to an end. Yet, Biden's victory may concentrate minds and a 'deal' may emerge.

The Biden era

The Biden administration will not seek to 'Make America Great Again', but its mission will be to keep America great. For the EU, to capitalise on the opportunities arising from Biden's presidency, it will have to tidy its messy house, stop ignoring geopolitical truths, discontinue wishful thinking and take the realities underlying its defence seriously.

There are no better words available to President-elect Joe Biden than those of President Abraham Lincoln in his 1861 inaugural address: 'We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection'. Lincoln's words address directly the domestic and international challenges Biden faces, namely, a deeply divided American nation and alliances worn down by four years of scorn and petulance.

Finally, no piece on the result of the presidential election of 2020 should end without mention of the profound and historical significance of the election of the first woman and the first woman of colour as Vice President-elect of the United States, Kamala Harris.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Adam Schultz / Biden for President \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)
