

Divided They Stand: US election outcomes and Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe

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The outcome of every presidential US election has major impacts on every aspect of the world order. The importance of the 2020 elections cannot be exaggerated, given the geopolitical crisis the country traverses and the internal polarization it experiences. A Joe Biden presidency will differ markedly in its foreign policy strategy from that of a second term under the leadership of President Donald Trump. However, regardless of the elections' outcome, there are transformations underway in the transatlantic relationship that go beyond the Trump administration and independent global processes with long running implications in the future. This observation is also valid in the case of Central Eastern Europe, which has faded from the US foreign policy agenda under subsequent administrations. Most US policies that affect Eastern European countries will be contingent on US – EU relations. Fewer will address the region specifically, with an eye on balancing competing interests from other active actors in the region, Russia and China in particular. This short brief aims to look at how a Joe Biden Presidency will differ from or continue in the policies of previous administrations in relation to the transatlantic relation.

The US in the World

American politics today is defined by the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans. What is less partisan in nature is the US establishment's commitment to a common policy tendency to be self-referential and define the world only in relation to itself. Similar to the European Union's own complacency with the irreversible nature of democracy and democratization in its midsts, US post-cold war politics was defined by over-optimism and flawed risk assessments of action or inaction. In his book, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, former National Security Adviser to President Trump and retired Lt. general H. R. McMaster, reignites the argument that not acknowledging other international actors' agency and authorship over the future is a major blind spot in how the US chooses to build its foreign policy. Taking this argument even further, we could ask whether America's long-running strategic narcissism and reliance on the myth of its exceptionalism is not a causal path to its dwindling role in affecting global order. The Donald Trump presidency has

deepened these problems by not accounting for complex causality in world affairs from the perspective of other self-interested principals.

A change of leadership in the White House is not likely to create a more empathetic America. In particular when it comes to its relations to Europe, the US remains a disproportionately outsized economic and military ally. All administrations, including that of Democrat Barack Obama, have used this advantage to advance US economic and strategic interests and relied on different combinations of opportunistic incentives to do so. Joe Biden also believes in the 'power of the American example' in foreign policy, and aims to recast the country back in its role as leader of 'the democratic world'.¹ This is an ambitious goal for anyone following the flood of authoritarian attitudes and attacks on liberal democracy that characterized White House communications and actions in the past four years, culminating with the spread of conspiracy theories and voter suppression on Election Day.

In achieving this goal, traditional European democracies are the most stable and legitimate ally alongside whom the US can rebuild its standing in the world. Contingently, the hybrid regimes of Central and Eastern Europe and their national-populist leaders are likely to feel the pressure of American-style calls for respect of the rule of law. There is no reason to believe Eastern Europe will reign high on Biden's agenda, but we can expect the emphasis of his administration's foreign policy to change from security commitments to the promotion of liberal values such as democracy, human rights, anti-corruption measures and rule of law.

To partner or not to partner?

Former President Trump and president elect Joe Biden hold very different views on the ways to deal with the international challenges the US is facing. The parties they hail from, as well as the voters they represent, also view the world in starkly different ways. According to a recent poll carried by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the rhetoric of US party leaders is convergent with that of their supporters.² When it comes to foreign affairs, Republicans consider the US should be self-reliant and remain independent from international organisations, which they see as constraints over American interests. Democrats favor internationalism and think that engaging in the international community boosts America's standing in the world. They value multilateral responses to global challenges and would prefer the US to work with other countries to meet its goals. The tools most often used by Democrats to

¹ See Joe Biden's Foreign Affairs Campaign Pledge here <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/#>

² *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs Report* <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/divided-we-stand>

achieve these goals include participation in international agreements, engagement in different international fora, providing humanitarian aid, and supporting key allies.

President Trump strongly identifies with the isolationist view of international relations through his "America First" nationalism. However, more than proclaiming complete disengagement with world affairs, he maintains an opportunistic view of the world, opting to jump in and out of issues based on transactional strategies. During his presidency, he took unilateral decisions to withdraw the US from major international agreements – the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia, the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the World Health Organization (WHO). Instead of integrating the efforts of likeminded countries, he preferred to explore bilateral relationships with authoritarian leaders and strongmen - Philippine leader, Rodrigo Duterte, Egypt's Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, North Korea and not least Russia's president Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping. He pivoted equally fast as his interests changed– most notably in the case of China.

His presidency was also a stress test for US – NATO relations. The role of the US within NATO, is, arguably the most binding and most straightforward transatlantic strategic partnership. Trump's predecessors had also pushed for an increase by Europeans on defense spending. Frustration with the slow pace at which many NATO members increased defense spending to reach 2% of the GDP characterized many in the Obama administration. Biden is also calling for NATO members to 'recommit to their responsibilities'. And yet the Obama- Biden rhetoric on NATO is punctuated by a strong belief that 'NATO nations never stand alone'. That is a major difference from the credible Trump explorations of a US withdrawal from the political - military alliance should member countries not move the needle on defense spending.

Biden has committed to rejoin the Paris climate agreement and stop the US withdrawal from the WHO. Climate change is uniquely a Democratic Party pursuit and would mark a major change of foreign policy. However, even when it comes to climate, it is likely that a Biden presidency would not pursue radical measures that would prove economically disruptive given the wealth of problems a Biden administration would have to deal with at home. Having once more the US on their side, the EU could strengthen its climate change agenda. Collaterally, Eastern European countries, for whom this has not been an important policy focus, will now be under more pressure to deliver policy change. On the Iran

nuclear accord, the situation is more unclear. Biden is likely to explore this idea should Iran agree to strict compliance, but the tension between the two countries has escalated greatly under the Trump presidency and an automatic spring back into place of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is not likely. On this issue, the diplomatic ties that the EU has maintained with Iran will come in handy in a Biden led decision making process.

Europe's role in US Foreign Policy

Historically, republican presidents and the republican electorate have valued independence and sovereignty as fundamental values on which they devised foreign policy tools to maintain US superiority in global affairs. After the Second World War, some Republican politicians championed a return to the isolationism that had characterized the policies of Republican presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. Ohio Senator Robert Taft was the strongest advocate for this faction of Republicans. In his book, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s*, history professor William I. Hitchcock, identifies republican president and victorious World War II General Eisenhower as the architect of powerful alliances of Western like-minded states, whose role to advance American interests had not been seriously brought into question until the presidency of Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, when it comes to US – EU relations, president George W. Bush did not act as a supporter of European integration and exploited Europe's internal divisions. During his first mandate, he drew heavily on the idea that the US can do without those European allies who do not wish to follow US policy on major issues. The fading importance of Eastern Europe from the US foreign policy agenda also continued under the Obama Administration, who had placed unprecedented importance on Asia. The focus on Asian countries necessitates continuous reassessment and re-evaluation of US military and economic capabilities in the region and it is likely to also be at the center of Joe Biden's foreign policy. A strategy of simultaneous cooperation and competition towards China will characterize US – EU relations, but it is unclear how an opening towards China will look like in the following years.

Biden's strategy to include Europe as an ally in global affairs will also have to mend what the Trump administration brought forth for the last four years. In 2016, while the transatlantic relation was already struggling and the EU itself was traversing structural challenges, president Trump added fuel to fire with a uniquely anti-European first mandate. Trump continuously weakened US – EU relations and worked to undermine European unity. It is worth recalling Donald Trump's opportunistic praise of the vote in favour of Brexit as 'a wonderful thing' and a 'blessing for the world.' Rhetorically, Trump has also allied

with other European leaders who contest the liberal order within the EU and threaten European integration in Hungary, Poland, or Slovenia. Throughout Election Day, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša supported Trump's unfunded claims of voter fraud and congratulated him on his victory before all votes had been counted.

These small countries of Eastern Europe have also responded positively to Trump's message of becoming more autonomous and enhanced their ties with non-Western states such as China, India, or Russia. Beyond the EU border, the countries of the Western Balkans pursued similar agendas. Within the region, Romania remained purely committed to transatlanticism as the major direction of its foreign policy. Together with the Baltic states, Romania could be tapped by a Biden administration as a principle strategic partner in the region.

America's standing in the region will also depend on how it aims to mend its loss of soft power. According to a Pew Research Center survey released in September 2020, since Donald Trump took office as president, the image of the United States has suffered and saw a steep decline over the past year due to how the US handled the COVID-19 pandemic.³ In the UK, France and Germany, the share of the public with a favorable view of the U.S. is as low as it has been at any point in the past twenty years. Pre-election polls showed Biden was the Europeans' favourite candidate by significant margins in most European countries except Poland. This puts a Biden administration under major pressure to re-engage with the anti-populist, anti-corruption and more integrationist policies of the Obama administration in Eastern Europe and sway once more the hearts and minds of Europeans. His personal connections and experience in Central and Eastern Europe during his mandate as US vice-president provide him with some diplomatic advantages. However, it is unlikely to see Joe Biden as actively engaged in the troubles of the region as during his vice-presidency given the multiple fronts he needs to engage in domestically. The brunt of this work will be carried by the diplomatic core who represents US interests in Central and Eastern European capitals.

³U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly', *Pew Research Center* <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>

What about Russia? A story of disinformation

Reimagining the transatlantic relationship also depends on the extent to which a Biden presidency aims to take on Russia and the rolling disinformation and misinformation that circles in the public space. The two policies are intimately connected. A Trump presidency or a highly contested Biden victory are in Russia's interest. For the past four years, Trump and Putin have aligned their foreign policies of weakening the transatlantic partnership, the EU and NATO. In preparation of the 2020 elections, Russia has gone all in to support Trump through active targeting and disinformation campaigns.

Russia's ability to deploy cyberattacks and hackings is often exaggerated by Western analysts. Disinformation and the amplification of existing societal conflicts are the Kremlin's most effective destabilizing tools. In achieving his goals, Putin had a strong ally in President Trump. While Trump played into Putin's hands by delegitimizing US democratic institutions, spreading conspiracy theories and subverting voters' trust in the democratic process, Biden will have to invest heavily to offset the damage done.

Kremlin's strategy is to play on existing divisions in targeted countries or coalitions – such as the US – European partnerships - and amplify them, weakening their balancing potential. The aim is not to make a particular story stick, but to create confusion and cast doubt that the public ever hears the truth; some stories are more successful than others. The US is flooded by a myriad of 'alternative' websites and people who are sympathetic to Russian views and who can sway public opinion on Russia. The elevation of such alternative sources of information in public standing works to break up alliances such as NATO or the EU.

Despite Trump's efforts to welcome Russian interference in the US elections, intelligence professionals in the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security worked to prevent cybersecurity attacks on election day and dismantle malign influencers in the run up to elections. Twitter and Facebook have also been more responsive in assuming some responsibility to defend election integrity. The major nodes in the system who failed to resist disinformation campaigns were the Congress and the White House, who amplified malign social media content or created their own. A Biden administration is not likely to engage in similar tactics, but the challenge of tackling deep seated divisions in American society will have to

consider the foothold that Russia now has in shaping Americans' opinions. Should this issue be given the attention it deserves, the contacts and collaboration with the intelligence community, the civil society and government representatives in the countries of the East are likely to intensify.

The EU also has a more restrictive view of how to manage the information environment and may serve as a model to the US. However, it lacks the means of the US to deal with 21st century technological challenges. The Joe Biden Campaign has repeatedly urged Facebook to monitor and intervene on how disinformation is spread on its platform, but this is a weak sign of commitment to the level of social media regulation and citizen private data protection the EU might envisage. The EU is also at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to accessing information. The US has privileged access to information, big data and the technological handling of such information through its intelligence capabilities and the tech companies it hosts on its territory. In many ways, the EU and EU members become clients of such information and are thus in an unfavorable position to also receive selective information when it comes to foreign policy decisions.

Conclusion

In May 2014, Joe Biden spoke in Bucharest to an audience of Romanian politicians, civil society members and members of the judiciary about how only countries that establish 'an economy and a government and institutions that abide by the rule of law' will thrive in the 21st century.⁴ He went on to identify corruption as 'a cancer that eats away at a citizen's faith in democracy' and called it a 'danger not only to a nation's economy, but to its very national security.' He was addressing an embittered nation struggling with attacks against the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. Six years later, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have either stagnated on their paths of democratic consolidation or have taken steps back. His own country is struggling with internal challenges to subvert democratic institutions and faith in democracy.

Domestic issues will demand the attention of a Biden administration. They will focus on spiraling divisions at home and less on those in Europe. Collaterally, a successful mandate to deliver on rule of law pledges would include advancing democratic processes in the transatlantic community, *y compris* Eastern Europe. Directly addressing the diminished strength of the transatlantic community is not a priority that will reign high on the US foreign policy agenda. Collaborations will not be automatic, but

⁴ Visit the *Obama Whitehouse Archives* to see the whole speech here <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/21/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-romanian-civil-society-groups-and-stude>

punctual and transactional. The European Union and EU member states remain like-minded, but their minds are not focused on each other.