

Joe Biden and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

Written by Hendrik W. Ohnesorge

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HENDRIK W. OHNESORGE, DEC 1 2020

In these times of increasing polarization, there was little that pundits, politicians, and the media across the political spectrum seemed to agree upon at the eve of the 2020 U.S. election. In fact, a recent study by the Pew Research Center (cf. Dimock and Wike 2020) found a virtually unprecedented degree of division in American society. One thing that was shared across party lines, however, was the importance attributed to the outcome of the election. In his acceptance speech at the 2020 Republican National Convention, incumbent Donald Trump thus declared, “This is the most important election in the history of our country” (quoted in Thrush 2020). As early as mid-2019, Trump’s opponent Joe Biden, agreed, “You all know in your gut, not because I’m running, that this is maybe the most important election, no matter how young or old you are, you’ve ever voted in” (quoted in Selk 2019).

Although sentiments such as these can frequently be heard come election season, there seems to have been a particular justification for them this time around. Seldom, if ever, since the end of World War II have the contrasts been so stark between the two candidates seeking the highest elective office in the land. This holds true for substance and style of their policies, both foreign and domestic. Additionally, both candidates, and their respective running mates, embody starkly differing visions of America due to their own backgrounds and biographies.

Not for no reason, therefore, did the *New York Times*, taking up on such observations, headline on October 17, 2020, “The election has become a referendum on the soul of the nation” (Dias 2020). Now that the referendum with respect to the presidential race is, if not officially over, at least decided: What do we know about the “soul of the nation”? Which vision will govern U.S. foreign policy in years to come after Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will be sworn in as 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021? What, in particular, can the United States’ transatlantic partners expect from the incoming administration?

The following will start from some basic observations as to the nature and preferred instruments of U.S. foreign policy under President Biden and will subsequently identify policy areas crucial for the U.S. as well as its transatlantic allies, in particular Germany. Ranging from economy and trade to security and defense to the handling of a rising China to the challenges of climate change, key areas of interest and cooperation are discussed.

The Enduring Powers of Democracy

The long and hard-fought election itself gives some first insights into the “soul” of America: First, in light of the above-mentioned sentiments, unprecedented mobilization and consequently record numbers for voter turnout followed. According to the latest numbers, a turnout of more than 66 percent eventuates in a new high since the election of 1900 – more than a century ago (cf. Bokan-Lindell 2020). As a consequence, with some 80 million Americans voting for him, no individual elected president has ever received more votes than did Joe Biden in 2020. At the same time, however, incumbent Donald Trump was likewise able to expand his electoral support by almost 10 million votes in comparison to his 2016 win. These figures indicate the tremendous support and strong popular mandate for the Biden-Harris ticket, while also emphasizing the constant, even increasing, appeal of Trumpism, which is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

Second, despite repeated and enduring claims to the contrary, the election went smoothly, the prolonged vote (re)count notwithstanding. To date, no evidence for voter fraud could be substantiated (cf. Corasanti, Epstein, and

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Rutenberg 2020). In fact, the Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council Executive Committee even pronounced the election “the most secure in American history” (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Agency 2020).

While Trump’s obstinacy to concede the election has broken yet another time-honored code in U.S. politics, something that will put more tarnish on his grim legacy, his administration finally greenlighted the transition process on November 23 (cf. Mason and Hunnicutt 2020). At long last, therefore, the hard-fought 2020 election has demonstrated to a watching world the resilience of U.S. democratic practices and institutions, an important point at a time when democracy is increasingly under attack around the world.

Personalities Matter: A New Style in Washington

The current president and his successor do not only differ regarding the substance of their policies, but also regarding their respective styles in decision-making and leadership. In fact, Donald Trump had arguably brought an unprecedented blend of unpredictability, irrationality, and spitefulness to the White House. Additionally, he regularly alienated others, including traditional allies, with his scathing personal attacks. In the wake of the 2018 G7-Summit, held in La Malbaie, Canada, one commentator put this fickleness in Trump’s approach to foreign policy as well as his tendency to personally snub his negotiation partners in a nutshell, “On a Monday, you could be his best friend, on Tuesday his worst enemy, and by Friday, you’re golf buddies again” (quoted in Baker and Shear 2018).

As in many other aspects, Joe Biden could hardly differ more in terms of his leadership style. Known for his empathy, he is likely to ring in a new tone in both domestic politics and international relations (cf. Walker 2020). With particular respect to his handling of the Covid pandemic, Biden promised in his victory speech, “That plan will be built on bedrock science. It will be constructed out of compassion, empathy and concern” (quoted in Phillips 2020). In view of his decade-long track-record as Senator (1973-2009) and Vice President (2009-2017), and not least with an eye on Biden’s own biography, this approach can be regarded as emblematic for his leadership style at large, something that bodes well indeed for bringing together a divided nation and reinvigorating strained partnerships abroad.

In fact, it were not least these (expected) changes in tone and style which resulted in wide-spread rejoicing among many of America’s allies in the immediate aftermath of Biden’s victory, which, according to Mark Landler (2020), “provoked many emotions, but above all, a profound sigh of relief.” Among those world leaders, warmly congratulating the president-elect and indicating a willingness to restart relations, was German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Congratulating Biden via phone, Merkel subsequently stated, “America is and will remain our closest ally, but it expects more from us – and rightly so” (quoted in Ellyatt 2020). A few days later, Biden himself declared on the atmosphere of his first talks to fellow decision-makers, “I’ve spoken with over 20 world leaders and they are pleased and somewhat excited that America is going to reassert its role in the world and be a coalition builder” (quoted in Ellyatt 2020).

This wide-spread popularity of the next president, coupled with his distinguished track-record, his personal empathy, and his willingness to fundamentally change the tone in the conduct of international affairs, constitutes a powerful asset for U.S. foreign policy in years to come. While international relations is no popularity contest *per se* (cf. Layne 2010, p. 71), it certainly does help a leader to be popular when seeking to rebuild alliances abroad.

Rebuilding U.S. Soft Power around the Globe

In fact, the attractiveness of political decision-makers constitutes a key component of a nation’s soft power (cf. Ohnesorge 2020, pp. 112-134 & 160-171). Based on attraction rather than coercion and payments, this variety of power becomes all the more important in an age of global challenges which require concerted action, even for the most powerful of nations. While crucially springing from civil-society actors, universities or cultural institutions, and thus being anchored distinctly outside the governmental sphere, an administration can contribute to an enabling environment and decide whether it will actively seek to draw on the forces of attraction in international affairs (cf. Nye 2010, pp. 13-14).

The Trump administration, in this regard, did not hide the fact that its approach to foreign affairs was informed by

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hard power, and hard power only, from the start (cf. Berman 2020). Joe Biden and his administration, by contrast, will presumably return to drawing on the full range of American power in their quest to rebuild U.S. leadership in the world. Military strength and economic prowess will continue to be vital in this regard, of course, but soft power will feature more prominently once again. In his *Foreign Affairs* article entitled “Why America Must Lead Again,” Biden (2020, p. 65) thus made clear, “As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the United States is prepared to lead again – not just with the example of our power but also with the power of our example.”

A crucial step in this direction is to rebuild credibility and trust in American leadership. Given the strained relationships abroad and the deep divisions at home, this task is certainly not going to be an easy one. In fact, data collected by the Pew Research Center show that the image of the United States has suffered considerably around the world, especially among key European allies like Germany, the United Kingdom or France (cf. Pew Research Center 2020). While it will take some time to restore trust, the overwhelmingly positive reactions to Biden’s election by international leaders signify an auspicious start (cf. BBC 2020).

Different components come to mind in the new administration’s quest for rebuilding U.S. soft power: First, the Biden administration should revive the U.S.’ commitment to democracy and the rule of law with a renewed focus on strengthening justice and democratic institutions, at home and around the world. A revision of the immigration system, which has been transformed by the Trump administration to substantive international outcry, will be an important first step (cf. The New York Times Editorial Board 2020). Additionally, a global “Summit for Democracy,” promised by Biden to be held in his first year in office, offers a promising start in this direction on an international level (cf. Biden 2020, pp. 67-68).

Second, the Biden administration should revitalize U.S. diplomacy, both in its traditional and more innovative forms. As a recent report by Harvard’s *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs* suggests, “President-elect Biden and Congress should launch a major bipartisan initiative to revive, reform, and reimagine the Foreign Service” (Burns, Grossman, and Ries 2020, p. 3). Biden (2020, p. 72) himself has made clear on that score, “As president, I will elevate diplomacy as the United States’ principal tool of foreign policy. I will reinvest in the diplomatic corps, which this administration has hollowed out, and put U.S. diplomacy back in the hands of genuine professionals.” The selection of Antony Blinken as Secretary of State is highly indicative in this regard. Not only was Blinken one of the first picks by Biden (tellingly chosen before naming a Secretary of Defense), he is also known for his distinguished diplomatic career, his cultural empathy, and not least his personal and political closeness to president-elect Biden, for whom he served as National Security Advisor (2009-13). In fact, some observers have even dubbed him Biden’s “alter ego” as a consequence (cf. Sevastopulo 2020). Blinken, who has counselled U.S. engagement in Syria in 2013 and may take a more interventionalist stance in years to come, is generally known as “a pragmatic realist who believes in US power but understands its limits” (Sevastopulo 2020). Given his background, Blinken’s selection as 71st U.S. Secretary of State was widely greeted by European allies and understood as a clear setting of priorities by the Biden administration.

Third, the new administration should strive to re-open and strengthen U.S. institutions of higher education and make them more accessible and attractive for international students again. While the Covid pandemic has, of course, thwarted international students’ plans and programs, the Trump administration has also set new hurdles, for example with the introduction of new visa regulations (cf. Busta 2020). With the Biden administration coming in, major revisions can be expected in this field as well (cf. Redden 2020), once more making U.S. colleges and universities major assets for U.S. soft power, drawing the best and brightest to American shores and creating life-long ambassadors after visiting students and scholars return to their home countries.

Fourth, the United States should strive to work together with others instead of focusing on narrow-minded solo runs. Acting multilaterally has many advantages which will make it in America’s interest to summon international coalitions. For once, such an approach is much more likely to lead to success in an age when many of the world’s greatest challenges – from climate change to global pandemics to migration to international terrorism to nuclear proliferation – transcend national and even continental borders and consequently require collective action. In his recent *Do Moral Matters*, Joseph S. Nye accordingly emphasized the “power *with* others”, which proves much more promising in the interdependent world of the 21st century than “power *over* others” (cf. Nye 2020, p. 210). Additionally, acting

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multilaterally has itself been recognized as a crucial component of national soft power (cf. Ohnesorge 2020, pp. 105-106). Majorities in the Senate will be decisive in this regard, but Biden explicitly expressed his desire to work jointly with U.S. partners and allies on a host of different issues and rejoin multilateral frameworks abandoned by the Trump administration (cf. Biden 2020). Among those, he has promised to rejoin the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on the first day of his presidency (cf. Birnbaum & Morris 2020), promises that have already found favor in Europe, especially in Germany (cf. Atlantic Council 2020).

While these are just a few, if crucially important, starting points, the incoming Biden administration has already made it clear that it will seek to repair U.S. credibility and trust, which has suffered considerably over the course of the past four years, in order to restore U.S. global leadership. Past writings and statements as well as recent cabinet picks indicate that Biden will put special emphasis on soft power in this endeavor. Some of the United States' most crucial target audiences in this regard, are its traditional allies around the world.

Transatlantic Relations: A New Deal?

Among these, western European allies perhaps suffered most severely over the course of the Trump administration. While Trump repeatedly criticized the European Union as a whole, infamously ranking it among the United States' "biggest foes" (quoted in Contiguglia 2020), it was Germany in particular which bore the brunt again and again. Trump thus called Germany "very bad" in view of its massive trade surplus and, in line with the observations shared above, personally attacked Chancellor Merkel by calling her "stupid" (quoted in Bloch and Goldgeier 2020).

Joe Biden, by contrast, has repeatedly been described as a staunch transatlanticist (cf. Bloch and Goldgeier 2020; Karnitschnig 2020). In this regard, his close and long-lasting relations with leading European decision-makers have explicitly been highlighted, "In Joe Biden, a lifelong transatlanticist with strong links to many of Europe's most important leaders, including Germany's Angela Merkel, Europe has the next best thing to one of its own in the White House" (Karnitschnig 2020).

Not for no reason, therefore, has Angela Merkel spoken emphatically of the incoming president and expressed renewed hopes for the transatlantic relationship (cf. Landler 2020). Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, has chimed in to congratulatory and laudatory remarks shared across party lines, "Joe Biden's election victory means one thing in particular: new opportunities for the trans-Atlantic partnership. [...] We need a kind of new deal in the trans-Atlantic partnership, the basis of which would consist of responding to international challenges with international solutions and not with a policy of 'America First' or 'Europe First'" (quoted in Jordans 2020).

How could this "New Deal" for transatlantic relations look like in different policy areas? Four (interconnected) areas of special interest shall be glimpsed at in the following with regard to that very question: (1) economy & trade, (2) security & defense, (3) a rising China, and (4) climate change.

(1) Economy & Trade

Amidst the global Covid pandemic, which has hit the United States particularly hard, economic recovery at home will be at the very top of Biden's agenda. On that account, economic recovery and the fight against the virus go hand in hand. In his victory speech, Biden accordingly declared, "Folks, our work begins with getting covid under control" (quoted in Phillips 2020). Early in the current transition period, Biden has hence promised to restore White House leadership in the fight against Covid and established an advisory board to combat the further spread of the virus, addressing also social and economic dimensions of the crisis (cf. Subbaraman 2020).

Internationally, the Biden administration is likely to curb the ongoing trade war between the United States and Europe (cf. Bloch and Goldgeier 2020). In the later stages of the campaign, Antony Blinken, then a top adviser to the Biden campaign, thus declared, "The EU is the largest market in the world. We need to improve our economic relations. [...] And we need to bring to an end an artificial trade war that the Trump administration has started ... that has been poisoning economic relations, costing jobs, increasing costs for consumers" (quoted in Shalal and Lawder 2020). While a change in tone can thus be expected and the Biden administration will strive to improve relations, possibly re-

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opening negotiations for a free trade agreement, some underlying problems are likely to persist (cf. Karnitschnig 2020). Blinken, in the same online event hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce cited above, accordingly reminded his audience, “There is an objective problem, I think, with the EU in terms of a persistent, growing imbalance in agricultural goods trade because of rules that prevent us from selling goods where we are very competitive” (quoted in Shalal and Lawder 2020). Still, with the change of guard in the White House, relations can be expected to improve in this field. A further escalation of the trade war by the European Union, answering tariffs with counter-tariffs, on the home stretches of the Trump presidency, therefore, can hardly be in the interest of either side (cf. Hoppe et al. 2020).

(2) Security & Defense

As in trade, the field of security and defense will likewise witness the persistence of ongoing issues between the United States and Europe, again with Germany leading the way. Germany’s defense spending, consistently falling short of the 2% target stipulated in the 2014 Wales Summit Declaration, has been a bone of contention predating the Trump administration, and it will not magically disappear once Biden enters the White House (cf. Atlantic Council 2020; Jordans 2020). Again, however, a change of tone can be expected. While Trump has even flirted with the idea of abandoning NATO (something that might have come up during a second term), Biden has repeatedly expressed his unwavering support for the Alliance. In *Foreign Affairs*, he has accordingly written, “[T]he United States’ commitment is sacred, not transactional. NATO is at the very heart of the United States’ national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal – an alliance of values, which makes it far more durable, reliable, and powerful than partnerships built by coercion or cash.” Simultaneously, however, Biden likewise urged that “[o]ur allies should do their fair share” (Biden 2020, p. 73). Interestingly, and a strong indicator that changes in personalities and their respective styles of leadership matter profoundly in international affairs, German decision-makers across party-lines – from Federal President Steinmeier to Chancellor Merkel to Minister of Defense Kramp-Karrenbauer to Foreign Minister Maas – have already expressed their intention to increase German efforts once Biden takes the helm. Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer perhaps expressed this view most explicitly in her recent keynote speech, not only arguing in favor of closer transatlantic security cooperation and the indispensability of German-American cooperation, but also dismissing the concept of European “strategic autonomy” that French President Emmanuel Macron has long called for as an “illusion” (cf. Kramp-Karrenbauer 2020). This vehemence may have come as a surprise to some observers, and it certainly has upset decision-makers in Paris and other European capitals. With the change in government in Washington, German public support, however, is likely to increase for such endeavors. Still, the issue may also become a matter of both European and domestic discord, especially in view of the German federal election next year.

Ultimately, “[t]he U.S.-Europe security relationship should evolve from one of dominance and subordination to one of supportive partners” (Bloch and Goldgeier 2020). Such a supportive partnership, however, requires mutual efforts by both partners: a unequivocal backing of NATO and European defense on the part of the United States and, no less crucial, increased European efforts to finally step up to the plate.

(3) A Rising China

A major issue in this regard continues to be the approach towards a rising and increasingly assertive China. In Washington, “getting tough on China” is one of the few topics of cross-party consensus at present. Biden, while agreeing to such sentiments and emphasizing the importance of alliances in this effort, has also argued in favor of cooperation on certain issues, including climate change and health security (cf. Biden 2020, p. 71). With this combination of competition and cooperation, Biden, much more than Trump, plays into the hands of European decision-makers. The March 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook had in this sense termed China a “negotiating partner,” an “economic competitor,” and a “systemic rival,” something now apparently adopted by Biden (cf. Bloch and Goldgeier 2020). In view of these developments, Niall Fergusson (cf. 2020) recently argued that the incoming Biden administration may create a window of opportunity to move towards greater détente. While issues from economic and trade policies to alliances and partnerships to competition in technology and innovation to democracy promotion and human rights will continue to dominate the Sino-American agenda, and presumably create a lot of friction in the future, a general relaxation of relations would certainly be a welcome change from a European

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perspective.

(4) *An Existential Threat: Climate Change*

Finally, the battle against climate change is likely to take a markedly different shape. Early on, Biden (2020, p. 74) called climate change “the existential threat” and promised to immediately rejoin the Paris Agreement after taking office. As in other areas, he thus pledged to return to the table of multilateral fora and even convene a global summit on the issue in his first 100 days (cf. Friedman 2020). As in other fields, Biden will have to recover the loss of trust and credibility which the U.S. suffered during the Trump administration. In this endeavor, he is once again drawing on the powers of personal diplomacy, as the nomination of John Kerry as Special Envoy of Climate illustrates. The creation of this new cabinet-level office as well as the pick of the former Secretary of State (2013-2017), who played a major role in bringing about the Paris Agreement in the first place, indicates the paramount priority Biden puts on the global combat of climate change (cf. Friedman 2020; Herz, Guy, and Schmidt 2020). Biden’s promises in this area in general, and the selection of Kerry in particular, were again greeted warmly by leading German decision-makers, including Norbert Röttgen and Alexander Graf Lambsdorff (cf. Korbaki and Fras 2020).

Conclusion: Golden Opportunities – New Responsibilities

When after a long and hard-fought campaign Joseph R. Biden, Jr. was finally declared the winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the United States’ western European allies breathed a collective sigh of relief. Congratulatory calls, expressing the unmatched importance of close transatlantic relations and the willingness to undertake renewed efforts for their reinvigoration, were not long in waiting.

In a world beset with a wide array of global challenges – ranging from climate change to global pandemics to rising authoritarianism and strategic challengers – close European-American and especially German-American relations will indeed be vital. As the above analysis has shown, the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris has created a golden opportunity to rethink and restart this relationship for various reasons: First, a drastic change of tone in the conduct of foreign affairs has already set in during the transition period and will continue to make a difference once Biden has taken the oath of office. Second, the instruments of diplomacy and soft power will be back at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. As history has shown, the United States has always been strongest internationally when drawing on its unrivalled powers of attraction, flowing from its vibrant civil society, its universities, its democratic institutions, and not least its leading individuals. Third, major policy changes can be expected as soon as the Biden-Harris administration takes office: from a revision of immigration regulations to economic recovery in the midst of global pandemic to efforts in battling climate change. While the list of challenges confronting the administration from day one is certainly a long one, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, due to their own personalities and backgrounds, however, are in a strong position indeed to “build back better” – a slogan frequently used by the Biden campaign.

Karen Donfried and Wolfgang Ischinger (2020) have recently argued in a *Süddeutsche Zeitung* contribution, “There is a lot to be done.” Now, as the stars are aligned to jointly tackle the long list of pressing issues, it will be as much the task of Europe in general and Germany in particular to contribute to a common story of success. Only if the United States’ transatlantic partners are capable of taking on more responsibilities themselves, contributing their fair share on matters of global importance, a lot can be accomplished. The United States, in turn, will have to act as a trustworthy partner on eye-level, paying attention to European interests as well. After four years in which the world has lamented the lack of U.S. leadership, this seems to be a promising basis for a new deal in transatlantic relations.

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