

Opinion – A New Atlantic Charter for a New Age of Competition

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JUN 15 2021

At the June 2021 G7 meeting in Cornwall, US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson signed a New Atlantic Charter to reaffirm their nations' commitment to a rules-based, and democratic international order. The original Atlantic Charter, signed in 1941 by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, helped pave the way for decades of transatlantic cooperation, as well as a 'special relationship' between the US and the UK. It was forged at a time when Britain was eager for the US to enter World War II, and the signs of a postwar American-led order were on the horizon. Now, the New Atlantic Charter signed by Biden and Johnson comes at a time of renewed strain in the international order that both nations helped create and for many years vigorously defended. For the US, the charter is a strong signal from Biden that 'America is back' and ready to resume its role as a guarantor of European security and as a promoter of democratic values. For the UK, the charter elevates its long-standing alliance with the US and confirms the alliance to be unaffected by Britain's departure from the EU and any subsequent disunion within the UK's constituent nations.

The first aim of the charter is to ensure that democracies are capable of 'solving the critical challenges of our time', with the important addition of 'starting with our own', a reference to Washington and London. The UK and the US remain strong, representative democracies, however the US is arguably more flawed and fractious in the wake of the Trump presidency and the January 6 insurrection. While Brexit has pitted neighbour against neighbour in the UK and led to increased partisanship, the UK's institutions, the rule of law, and public faith in elections have largely held in a way that has not occurred in the United States. However, the New Atlantic Charter is arguably more significant for Britain than it is for the United States. Now that the UK has officially left the EU and is in the midst of a strategic foreign policy and defence review, the charter allows London to craft new alliances that are guided by the weight of its historical alliance with Washington.

The alliance between Washington and London was forged when Churchill and Roosevelt met in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland in August 1941. As they surveyed the course of the war, they crafted a document that married a realist response to German aggression with idealistic postwar aims. At the end of World War II, the Atlantic Charter became a pivotal document of liberal internationalism, leading to the birth of the United Nations, and NATO, two pillars of collective security and global governance in which both the US and the UK play leading roles. Critically, the original Atlantic Charter also called for improved labour standards, economic advancement, and social security, which paved the way for Clement Attlee's dramatic reforms of British society in the postwar years. Now, the New Atlantic Charter comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the role of government in citizens' lives and revealed economic inequities that threaten global growth and prosperity. The charter calls for a strengthening of collective defenses and greater collaboration of health systems in advance of the next pandemic. In doing so, the charter rejects the model of authoritarian states such as China, and advocates for a unique combination of individual liberty and government protection. It is a bold cry for multilateralism, burden sharing, and the collective will that forces nations to serve not only their own citizens, but those of their neighbours.

As the New Atlantic Charter is signed, the transatlantic unity that underpins the original charter is now guided by a pivot to the Indo-Pacific. While Biden remains a true Atlanticist, geostrategically, the Atlantic is less important than it used to be. During World War II, it was a critical area of conflict between the Allies and Germany, and it retained its

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strategic value throughout the Cold War. Now, the Atlantic is a bridge between the old and established powers in the global order, with the potential for flashpoints that are unlikely to disrupt pre-existing geopolitical trends. It is a safe space strategically and ideologically – and a symbolic bridge that can help promote strength and unity in the Indo-Pacific.

Johnson likely has no illusions as to the extent of the US commitment to establishing dominance in the Indo-Pacific. As NATO adapts to the military challenge of China, and not just Russia, any effort by Washington to establish dominance in the region to counter China's rise will likely serve Britain as well. Similar to Churchill, Johnson has a firm understanding of how the US can help advance British interests, particularly at inflection points in history when British power is either waning or overextended. In crafting the new charter, both Biden and Johnson know that the world around them has changed dramatically, partly at their own making. Yet both men are determined to maintain some shred of the dominance and superiority that brought both of their nations to the height of their global power. In the wake of Brexit and Trump, the New Atlantic Charter serves to ground both nations in a common glory and greatness that is not jingoistic and divisive, but for the benefit of a shared security and prosperity.

In the 21st century, the New Atlantic Charter is bold, ambitious, and idealistic in its hopes and aims. It will conflict with the harsh reality that shared challenges do not always bring cooperation, and that democracy is not always the most inherent form of government. For any of its idealistic flaws, however, the New Atlantic Charter is also necessary, and when implemented by seasoned statesmen, capable of great reform.

The Atlantic may no longer be a point of conflict in the 21st century, but its ideals are long-lasting and capable of forging the alliances required to prevent the next conflict. In shifting to the Indo-Pacific, the New Atlantic Charter can carry the weight of the US and the UK's democratic victories against totalitarianism in the 20th century and bring them into a new era. The UK may not be the global power it once was, but as a signatory to a New Atlantic Charter, its power is firmly rooted in its principles. For both the US and the UK, those principles are sacrosanct democratic values that are applicable to any civilizational challenge.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for several political risk publications, including Global Risk Insights, Foreign Brief, and Geopolitical Monitor, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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