

Transatlantic relations 2021: nostalgic rhetoric, disappointing results?

Edward Knudsen

US President Joe Biden has pledged to resurrect 'American global leadership', abandoning the caustic and unpredictable policies of his predecessor. While this departure is welcome, will Biden be able to decisively break with the failed policies that led to Trump's rise? In an era of rising geopolitical tensions, skyrocketing inequality, impending climate catastrophe, and diminishing faith in democracy, more than mere restoration is needed. Biden must take radical steps – both at home and internationally – to address imminent social, economic, and ecological calamity. Is he up to the task, or will his administration fall back upon familiar rhetoric, policies, and attitudes, allowing these crises to fester?

Several signs are not promising. While many politicians and analysts from both the US and EU insist that the transatlantic relationship will be 'revitalised', not just restored, most of the solutions they propose sound decidedly old-fashioned. Ideas like Biden's 'Summit for Democracy', German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas's 'Marshall Plan for Democracy', or various think tank proposals to confront China amount to little more than warmed-over cold war ideas. Moreover, Biden's appointments to key foreign policy roles represent an old guard of US foreign policy. They mostly hail from the 'end of history' era, when faith in free markets, the superiority of liberal democracy, and American power as a force for good were common sense among policymaking circles.

Events of the last two decades have discredited these beliefs. A series of economic crises have shaken liberal democracies, military interventions in the Middle East have proven fruitless and destructive, and Western countries have struggled to address climate change, public health, or even the security of their own legislative buildings. In the wake of these failures, the US and its EU partners must retool their economies to be greener and more equal, abandon international paradigms of competition, and show citizens that democratic institutions are still capable of providing for the common good.

Political divisions in the US have hampered its ability to effectively govern and act responsibly on the world stage. While this problem will not abate in 2021, an ambitious redistributive

domestic agenda offers the best way to begin to repair the damage. To do so, Biden must enact a massive recovery and infrastructural investment programme, spurring a green transition and repairing the economic damage of the Covid-19 crisis.

His current \$1.9 trillion recovery proposal and \$2 trillion climate plan are encouraging, but the administration should be clear-headed about how it can enact them. Biden's current preoccupation with bipartisanship belies either a hopeless optimism or a faulty memory. Senate Republicans will be every bit as obstructionist as they were under Obama when Biden was repeatedly outmanoeuvred by then-leader Mitch McConnell. To have any success in rallying the US around a common agenda, Biden must aggressively use the tools at his disposal. This includes expansive use of executive power, and either eliminating the filibuster or extensively using the budget reconciliation process (which allows legislation to pass with a simple majority, and which Senate Budget Chairman Bernie Sanders had pledged to facilitate). Refusal to do so will thwart Biden's legislative agenda, dash his hopes of reuniting the country, and reduce the odds of the Democratic Party retaining its majorities in the 2022 midterm elections.

Internationally, the US and EU must abandon old foreign policy paradigms, instead of cooperating with countries they consider rivals and eschewing disastrous military interventions. A rising distrust of 'forever wars' suggests that the latter goal is eminently reachable. Recent developments regarding China are more alarming. Biden has indicated that he will continue parts of Trump's combative approach, with European leaders increasingly echoing such rhetoric. Countless policy papers have urged a united front against China, couching bellicose policies in the falsely comforting language of "transatlantic partnership".

A full-on geopolitical confrontation with China would be catastrophic, both socially and ecologically. With economies struggling and inequality rising, strained government budgets must be put towards domestic welfare, not lavish military budgets. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear that international cooperation is vital, with nationalistic policies only increasing nativism and racism. Most crucially, a confrontational stance towards China almost assures ecological disaster. The US military, already the world's largest fossil fuel emitter, must be severely reduced, and the EU should follow suit. A clear indication that NATO powers are not set on a course of military domination will allow China space to rethink and reverse its own recent military build-up.

Beyond avoiding military confrontation, China and the West must reset their economic relationship. As the leader in green technologies, China is a vital partner for the EU and US in the fight against carbon emissions. All parties must set aside ideological differences to share green technologies, relax intellectual property rights, and change the global trading system to allow for the rapid introduction of sustainable practices.

Can Europe be a useful partner if Biden chooses a progressive governing agenda? The European Commission has taken some positive steps on climate change, but the Christian Democratic Union's selection of Merkel-backed Armin Laschet suggests that Europe's most powerful country prefers continuity over radical change. If Europe is ready to take up the global leadership role that many policymakers have been advocating, it can begin by abandoning its own forms of nostalgia. Namely, it must not see the transatlantic relationship solely in terms of

mutual defence and trade liberalisation. Rather, Europe should work with Biden to combat illicit finance and kleptocracy, coordinate climate action, and defuse international tensions.

Addressing the festering right-wing violence, deep political dysfunction, and unjust economic structures in the United States will be a formidable task. In the short term, most of these problems will worsen; America has not seen the last of the sort of violence committed in Washington on 6 January. However, a progressive domestic agenda and cooperative international outlook offer the best chance to repair the damages decades of failed neoliberal and militaristic policies have wrought. It is a long shot, but our best hope of making 2021 a turning point is Biden uniting the US behind a shared economic agenda and rallying the world around the common concern of climate change.