

HOW WILL BIDEN STRENGTHEN THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE AND HOW WILL IT AFFECT TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY?

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The valid expectation is that when Joe Biden becomes the 46th President of the United States, he will undo most of the damage done by President Trump and will revitalise the institutions of the Western multilateral arrangements. He may do this differently than many allies hope but it will still mean a sharp break up and affect US's relations with fellow NATO partner Turkey. The changes will also influence Ankara's foreign policy decisions and Turkey's relations with the EU. In this analysis, I will break down the question in the title of this paper into three parts and explain how the Biden White House may reshape the transatlantic alliance, what the changes may push the EU to do and the cumulative effect of these changes on Turkey's foreign policy.

The change in the White House has already sent shockwaves around the world pushing for changes in foreign policies of governments.

Now that US President-elect Joe Biden named his foreign policy team, we have more clarity regarding the framework that will shape US foreign policy through 2025. Antony J. Blinken, the secretary of state nominee, is a committed defender of global alliances. His vision, according to reports, is shared by Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser nominee.

Biden himself is also a confessed transatlanticist. A reversal of US President Donald Trump's hostile policies towards allies would

strengthen the traditional building blocs of the transatlantic alliance, with NATO at its centre. This will affect Turkish foreign policy and US-Turkish relations in two ways. First, Turkey will see more substantial pushback on its co-operation with Russia and its purchase of Russian-made S-400 air defence systems. Second, it will affect Turkey's relations with other NATO partners, including Greece and France, narrowing the room to manoeuvre for Ankara regarding developments in the East Mediterranean.

Foreign policy priorities of the new administration

The change of personnel in the US administration, however, won't change what has

been the central focus of US foreign policy under Trump: China. This is the principal issue of concern that will frame the US approach to existing Western multilateral arrangements such as NATO.

In their past writings, both Blinken and Sullivan point to China as the primary strategic threat for the US. Sullivan favours rallying free market democracies to establish a new framework of rule-setting initiatives to be layered over the World Trade Organization (WTO) system, with aims to push China to improve its standards and regulations if it wants to enjoy equal access to a new economic community.¹ Blinken suggests this should be done through a global perspective as well as new institutions to forge a shared strategic, economic and political vision.

The emphasis on “new institutions” suggests that the US administration is worried that NATO, a political and military alliance might be ill-suited to out-compete China economically, technologically, militarily and, in some parts of the world, diplomatically.

The president-elect is unequivocal about his desire to revitalise NATO, but his desire is not simply to strengthen the traditional institutions of the alliance. Biden also wants to coalesce traditional partners into a new competition with China. A geostrategic union like NATO may be less useful against the geoeconomic threat posed by Beijing.

But the NATO structure is still the best platform the US could use to recruit partners for its great power competition against China.² The giant economic power of the combined

European Union member-state economies is an indispensable card to that effect. To organise a NATO-EU summit to that end is a suggestion voiced multiple times by insiders of the upcoming administration.³ If it takes place, such a summit would be the first of its kind.

Another potential framework for the alliance stems from Biden’s idea of a US-led ‘Summit for Democracy’, which could end up with a new international grouping of leading democracies by expanding the G7 and bringing in India, Australia and South Korea, with a primarily anti-China agenda. In a 2019 article Blinken asks: “Why shouldn’t Germany and France work with India and Japan on strategic issues?”⁴

The EU’s attempts, over the last few months, to pushback on China to forge a more balanced relationship with Beijing, could provide a foundation for Washington to take a common cause with Europe.⁵ COVID-19 has exacerbated existing concerns about China-dependency in Europe, as the pandemic raised questions about supply chain security. But it is unrealistic to expect the EU to follow the US blindly on China. The transatlantic unity against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, therefore, is unlikely to be replicated in opposition to Beijing.

Russia, the other great authoritarian rival, poses lesser but more immediate problems for the transatlantic alliance. Containing Russia may be higher on the agenda for Europe than for the US, due to European countries being more vulnerable to Russian revanchism. While Europe needs NATO to protect

itself from the Russian threat, the US doesn't have such a requirement. The fact the US, under Biden administration, will divert from Trump's policy of reconnecting with Russia will create much room for cooperation between Brussels and Washington.

Misplaced expectations and retrospective illusions

However, policymakers in Europe may be suffering from a certain level of retrospective illusion, which is combined with a failure to factor in the significant geopolitical changes when it comes to their understanding of transatlantic ties. The expectations that the US will take initiative 'again' to put European regional problems in order might be misplaced. "The good old days of the transatlantic alliance," that is anticipated to come back after Trump vacates the White House, may not be as promising as many people have in mind.

Take the record of former US President Barack Obama. As Trump's predecessor and one of the most popular US presidents in Europe, Obama didn't take initiative on Syria and refused to implement what the British and the French governments were pushing for: a military intervention against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Before that, in Libya in 2011, the US was pulled in by the UK and France, but still didn't take the lead. Instead, Washington restricted itself to 'leading from behind.' Going further back, Washington also exhibited restraint in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea. And during all this time Biden was serving as vice president under Obama.

Similarly, former US President George W. Bush also looked the other way when the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, again in the European neighbourhood, led two former regions of Georgia to break away under Moscow's protection. This was the initial trial of the developments that transpired in Crimea in 2014. Such events are stark reminders that European expectations that rely on the US to establish stability in Europe's backyard are misplaced, and this is not because of Trump's doing.

There are also internal challenges facing the transatlantic alliance. Up until the election on November 3rd this year, NATO's biggest challenge was the US president himself. But the challenges don't stop with Trump's demise. France's push for the strategic autonomy of Europe is also causing tension with the US defence establishment. Adding to that is Turkey's belligerence towards other NATO countries such as Greece and France in the south and east Mediterranean.

All these challenges add up against the backdrop of the great rise of China on the global stage.

Europe and Turkey could affect the change of policy in the White house

Given these truths, Europe will have to decide on two things to achieve a cohesive transatlantic partnership: the bloc needs to decide whether it will take sides or play the role of mediator in US-China rivalry. Secondly, EU heavyweights like Germany, France and maybe Italy, need to get their act together concerning leadership in their own backyard.

Rather than being a platform against China, NATO for Europe is first and foremost a security umbrella against Russian revanchism and a mechanism to ‘project stability’ in the Middle East and Europe’s southern borders. Therefore, several most European countries would welcome a more operational role for NATO in the Middle East.

The change of government in the US still means a sharp break from Trump’s policies. The US will be more focused on preventing the erosion of NATO, especially in deterring Russia.

However, the Middle East and North Africa may no longer be a top geostrategic priority for the US. To strengthen the role played by NATO in these regions, Europe will have to take the lead. From that perspective, US involvement in the Middle East will depend on Europe’s leadership. Julianne Smith, who served as Biden’s deputy national security advisor, argues “now would be a good time for European leaders to start thinking about where they are willing to lead and how they can help.”⁶

It is not very likely that Europe would forge both a unified position and the political will to lead in the Middle East and North Africa, East Europe and the Caucasus anytime soon. The ongoing German-French debate about how the EU should conduct its foreign policy will be up in the air for the next two years. German Chancellor Angela Merkel will be stepping down next year and French President Emmanuel Macron is facing an election in 2022. The new German government and Macron under the pressure of elections may

not have the bandwidth to steer Europe to assume leadership by pushing through many risky decisions.

Europe has been on the receiving end of the crises in the Middle East that followed the US withdrawal from the region. The political and military vacuum left by US disengagement has been filled by Iran, Turkey and Russia. Serious migration and security challenges emanating from instability in the region have reshaped the European political landscape with the rise of far-right political movements in multiple countries.

A robust re-engagement of the US with the Middle East is unlikely, but the balance the new administration will strike may be more interventionist than both Trump and Obama. “In Syria,” Blinken says, “we rightly sought to avoid another Iraq by not doing too much, but we made the opposite error of doing too little.”⁷ This could provide an opportunity for Europe to play a more significant role.

Erdoğan’s pre-emptive moves

A revived and redefined transatlantic alliance will leave less room for Turkey to manoeuvre. Ankara might need to step back from some of its ambitions in the East Mediterranean and possibly Libya, where it came close to clashing with fellow NATO partners Greece and France. It will also mean that Turkey will need to tread a fine line regarding its cooperative mode of engagement with Russia and its purchase of S-400 air defence system.

Turkey has been accused not only by France and Greece, but also recently by the outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of un-

dermining NATO's cohesion. Ankara is also the target of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which mandates the US executive branch to impose sanctions on countries that buy Russian defence equipment. It is not clear how strong the sanctions will be, but the Senate will re-examine the situation in early December.

Bringing Turkey more in line with US interests regarding the health of transatlantic relationship will send a strong message to NATO and US allies beyond the Atlantic alliance about the importance the US gives to cohesion within Western multilateral arrangements. However, expecting Turkey to regress to its earlier position where Ankara outsourced its foreign policy towards Russia and the Middle East to the US is not realistic. Since the early 2000s, Ankara has been taking steps to follow a more independent foreign policy, and it is unlikely that it will change course.

Another way the rejuvenation of Western multilateral arrangements will affect Turkish foreign policy is that it will push Ankara to strengthen its institutions. This goes against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's preferred way of managing bilateral disagreements through leader-to-leader negotiations. Political divisions within the EU allowed Erdoğan to engage in leader-to-leader dialogue with

Chancellor Merkel at the expense of the EU. In the US, the Erdoğan-Trump rapport helped to shield the Turkish president from sanctions and more aggressive reactions by US lawmakers. Erdoğan also has a successful working relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Now that both Trump and Merkel are leaving the stage in 2021, such dynamics will push President Erdoğan to change his style, especially when these developments are complemented with revived multilateralism.

President Erdoğan is therefore acting fast to start on a right foot with Biden in January. Turkey's recently surfaced efforts to mend relations with Israel which, if successful, may be followed by a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This is a pre-emptive move to strengthen Turkey's position vis-à-vis the US. These moves are also coupled with Erdoğan's sharp shift away from his hostile rhetoric towards the EU.

Yet, it is unlikely that Erdoğan will find a better political atmosphere than the one present in recent years by a Trump administration along with a divided EU and weak Western multilateral arrangements. Ankara may also face backlash from Russia when it takes steps to re-integrate its policies with the West in anticipation of a bargain for a new transatlantic alliance.

NOTES

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