

Sea Change?

The Impact of the US Presidential Election on
Central and South-Eastern European
Security and Defence



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INTRODUCTION

The election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris certainly brings a sea-change after four years of the US administration under the 45th President Donald Trump. This is true for US domestic politics as well as for American international engagement.

The focus of the new administration, clearly stated even during the presidential campaign, will be to try and overcome the polarisation of US society, robustly confront the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic which has claimed 400,000 lives by the last day of the outgoing administration, as well as confronting the racial crisis, and the devastating economic effects on the country.¹ An important shift, Joe Biden's foreign policy will be grounded in domestic policy. This reflects a concern among experts joining the new administration that domestic and foreign policy have for too long been siloed and the US's foreign policy has failed to tune in to what the American people want. This has informed Biden's campaign focus on building a foreign policy for the middle class and on the conviction that economic security is national security.² This will have implications for the US approach to foreign investment and trade relations with partners and adversaries alike, particularly when it comes to China.

In addition, as of January 20, 2021, the world expects the return of multilateralism. The Biden administration has expressed a willingness to rebuild America's image as an engaged actor on the international stage by means of a multilateral approach, demonstrating that it is an important ally in the struggle against climate change, a partner in international security, one upholding

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1 Josh Katz, Denise Lu and Margot Sanger-Katz, '471,000 More U.S. Deaths Than Normal Since Covid-19 Struck', *New York Times*, 04.02.2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/14/us/covid-19-death-toll.html>

2 Jake Sullivan, the National Security Adviser, is one of the architects of this terminology. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/23/making-u.s.-foreign-policy-work-better-for-middle-class-pub-82728>

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the international liberal rules-based order. Also, from the first days of the new administration, messages reinforcing the US's commitment to NATO have been strong.³ For European partners and allies, this is good news. This is probably the administration that is most versed in foreign and thus European affairs and, interestingly, the most French-speaking one. President Biden is one of the US politicians with the greatest experience in foreign affairs having served as US Senator from 1973–2009, and among other having chaired the US Congress' Senate Foreign Affairs Committee or having been the Ranking Member for many of those years.⁴ The new Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was then Vice-President Biden's National Security Adviser, is also a member of the Biden team who has devoted most of his career to foreign affairs.

The foreign and security policy team that the Biden-Harris administration has nominated for positions at the State Department, Pentagon and National Security institutions indicates some continuity with the eight years of the Obama administration in which Biden was the Vice-President and a number of important discontinuities with the four years of the 45th President, Donald Trump.

The question of continuity and change and what kind of regional formats of cooperation will be encouraged and empowered in order to advance America's security and economic goals remains an important one for America's allies. This will be crucial in a post-Covid world threatened by the economic fallout of the pandemic and the limits of the international cooperation system as exposed by the public health crisis. In some areas allies in Central and South East Europe might expect some level of continuity, particularly in fending off Russian and Chinese influence and penetration and in bolstering security and defence through US investment in the Eastern Flank. The return to a more normative foreign policy will shape the way President Biden and his team will engage with regional leaders and approach global competition with Russia and China.

How much change and continuity in foreign policy towards Europe should be expected? How is the Biden administration going to deal with the most daunting challenges in its policy towards Central, Eastern and Southern Europe?

³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180872.htm

⁴ James Traub Inside Joe Biden's Foreign-Policy Worldview, *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/joe-biden-foreign-policy-relationships-united-states/>

This report lays out some of the most important challenges and opportunities that the Biden administration will encounter in Central and South Eastern Europe. It explores the significance of the priorities and policies that the new administration might pursue with regard to the region and some possible future paths.

The following sections break down the region into three interconnected, but analytically distinct parts: The Western Balkans, the Black Sea and the Central and Eastern European sub-regions, respectively.

THE US AND THE WESTERN BALKANS⁵

The members of the new Biden administration have been intensely engaged in Balkan issues: President Biden since 1991, and the wars in the former Yugoslavia, was very engaged in supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in what in the US is called the Kosovo war. Both Biden and Blinken know most of the leaders of the region through their many trips and encounters with them. Biden also, in a little-known episode, helped save the Serbian Monastery of Visoki Dečani in Kosovo during the March 2004 violence by having written a 2002 letter requesting that Ramush Haradinaj protect it. Biden, as Vice President, last visited the Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo in August 2016. With President Biden the rhetoric and tone will change. There will be a reversal of a number of Trump's policies, and some continuity. As preceding US administrations have done, European NATO member states will be encouraged to raise their defence budgets to at least 2 percent of their GDP. This is still a goal most countries have not met.

In terms of grand strategy, continuity has been the hallmark of US policy towards the Western Balkans since 1989. The White House has consistently sought to foster the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries of the region—to complete the 'unfinished business' (in Washington DC parlance) of 'making Europe whole and free' as President George H.W. Bush put it in a speech delivered in Mainz, West Germany, in May 1989.⁶

For the United States, the Western Balkans constitute a part of core Europe and thus from Washington's perspective an EU and Euro-Atlantic alliance without them is incomplete.

As the crisis that followed the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia unfolded in the early 1990s and the EU and the international community became increasingly involved, the United States eventually came to play a crucial role in the Western Balkans, culminating in a first phase with the Dayton Agreement that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 25 years ago, and later with the NATO bombing campaign in the spring of 1999 that led to the Kumanovo agreement of June 1999, and the retreat of the Serbian state from Kosovo, while maintaining Serbia's *de jure* sovereignty through UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

Successive White House administrations since 1989, through the two Obama presidencies from 2009 to 2017, have favoured a concerted and unified transatlantic approach to the Western Balkans with the EU. This changed during the Trump administration. The EU has for the past decade had the lead role in fostering peace, stability and Euro-Atlantic integration with the full backing of the United States. The US during the past four years did not have the same close cooperation on

5 Part of this text is based on an article by the same author, Ivan Vejvoda, "The Impact of the United States", in *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, EUISS, Paris, 2017.

6 A Europe Whole and Free, Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz. President George Bush. Rheingoldhalle. Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany, May 31, 1989, <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>

Western Balkans affairs as it did during the Obama years and as will certainly be the case with the new Biden administration.

Continuity on Western Balkans US policy will thus be the main feature of the new administration. It will though at the same time support certain measures taken by the Trump administration. Most notably, as mentioned by Blinken in his US Senate confirmation hearing on 19 January, aspects of the Washington Agreement signed on 4 September 2020 by the President of Serbia Vučić and the Prime Minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti as well as prior agreements on transport, rail and air will be upheld.

Probably the most important result of the Washington Agreement was the decision to open the first overseas office of the US International Development Finance Cooperation (DFC), which promotes public and private investment projects. The opening of the DFC office in Belgrade in the immediate aftermath of the signing and the naming of the head of the office John Jovanovic, a New York investment banker, indicated the willingness to move swiftly. Interestingly this DFC office will cover the whole of South Eastern Europe including Greece. This is significant given the need for enhanced regional cooperation.⁷

In terms of foreign, security and defence issues the United States over the years has had overall a consistent and continuous policy of engaging the Western Balkans region and promoting Euro-Atlantic integration.

The main change that will occur compared to the prior four years will be a return to a much closer cooperation with the EU and its member states. NATO will be sustained and upheld as the backbone to the Western security

alliance. But things in some regard will not be the same given that the EU has become aware of a situation in which it needs to also seek strategic autonomy while working closely with its US ally. This is because Europe was confronted during the past four years with a US administration that was reneging on fundamental tenets of the post-World War Two transatlantic alliance.

Thus, on South Eastern Europe the new US administration will pick up where the Obama administration left off and build on the few elements that are deemed successful from the Trump administration. The US will work in close coordination with the EU to try to more vigorously advance the Euro-Atlantic agenda provided its domestic and larger foreign policy priorities allow for it.

The two EU and NATO members that were part of former Yugoslavia—Slovenia and Croatia—have played roles on supporting Euro-Atlantic enlargement and have been go-betweens between US and Europe on certain occasions. Slovenia will preside the EU during the second half of 2021 and the Western Balkans shall be one of its focal priorities. It is one of the paradoxes/curiosities of the broader region that the Prime Minister of Slovenia Janez Janša on 4 November congratulated President Trump on his “electoral victory”, something that prudently no other leader in the region or Europe did.

During the 2000s with the implementation of peace accords and the gradual stabilisation of the region the US progressively passed on the baton of engagement to the EU, while remaining involved in a number of security, foreign policy and development aid issues. Particular emphasis has been placed on the essential role played by NATO in the context of

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the Washington Agreement see: Ivan Vejvoda (interviewed by Wojciech Przybylski), Unpacking the Serbia-Kosovo Deal, Visegrad Insights, 10 September 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/western-balkans-serbia-kosovo-deal-vejvoda/>

the engagement of the US and EU in the region. USAID has played during all these years an important role in supporting reform processes in the region and the individual countries.

There have of course been periods when the US has been less actively engaged in the region due to other geopolitical priorities. As the region progressively stabilised, the engagement of the US State Department under the Obama administration inevitably decreased, as illustrated by the visits of lower-level officials such as Assistant Secretary of State and of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State (DAS).

The UN General Assembly resolution on Kosovo of 9 September 2010, adopted with the backing of the US, opened the way for the EU to take the lead in mediation efforts between Belgrade and Pristina. This was a landmark moment and signalled that the EU now had a leading role to play in the Western Balkans, overseeing the resolution of a key part of the most violent conflict to have taken place on European soil since the Second World War, with the US in a fully supporting role.

The Serbia-Kosovo dialogue

For the Biden administration the key issues will be the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue leading towards a comprehensive normalisation of relations; the Euro-Atlantic path of Bosnia-Herzegovina and enhancing regional economic cooperation—all this again in concert with the EU. Regional economic cooperation, the creation of a regional market and the promoting of the free movement of people, goods, services and capital will be crucial as the countries of the region all too slowly are complying with the needed democratic reforms of rule of law—building the framework of EU institutions in a regional context while pursuing the enlargement process.

The talks between Belgrade and Pristina that began in Brussels in March 2011, mediated by Catherine Ashton, the then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, led two years later to the signing of the Brussels Agreement in April 2013. The Obama administration gave its full support to this process, and throughout Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with the US State Department's DAS Philip Reeker, were actively involved in reaching out to all actors and facilitating the negotiation of the compromise.

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It is noteworthy that immediately upon signing the two sides and HR/VP Catherine Ashton went to NATO headquarters where NATO gave its support to guarantees for keeping stability and peace under the new agreement.

In a show of transatlantic unity, in October 2012 Hillary Clinton and Catherine Ashton travelled to Belgrade, Pristina and Sarajevo together to meet with all the relevant parties and emphasise concerted support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Those at the US State Department in charge of South Eastern Europe policy today remain some of the same actors. Philip Reeker (Formerly Ambassador to Macedonia) is now Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, while the Deputy Assistant Secretary is Mathew Palmer. Both have served in the region and have worked closely with EU officials on all relevant regional issues, even when there were certain tensions on the approach that the US was taking, especially when then US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell was appointed by President Trump as Special Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations in October 2019.

There was during the end of summer and beginning of autumn of 2020 some unfounded cautious optimism that the talks between Serbia and Kosovo could lead to elements of an agreement by late Spring of 2021. The vigorous push by the US Trump administration with Grenell, and the nomination of Miroslav Lajčak in April 2020 as the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, indeed gave a much-needed boost to the talks that had stalled for nearly two years. Interestingly, immediately after the Washington September meeting, Lajčak organised on 7 September a summit meeting in Brussels with EU High Representative Josep Borrell between President Vucic and Prime Minister Hoti. Yet overall progress has to date been meagre. Kosovo most recently on 14 February held parliamentary elections and will soon elect a new government reopening the path for continued negotiations.

Probably the most enduring aspect of the Washington Agreement of September 2020 that will remain are the economic aspects including the regional economic cooperation, as well as the reiterated underscoring of the need for energy diversification. The Agreement included an array of unrelated issues, including the mutual recognition between Kosovo and Israel, and the moving of embassies of Serbia and Kosovo to Jerusalem. Both of which, in all likelihood, will not materialise.

Towards Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkans?

Already some of these steps taken by the US and the EU are in part a response to the more active presence of what are termed 'third actors' in the region: Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf Emirates. The less active presence in the region of the US and EU during the past several years, for a variety of reasons, opened the space for these third countries to play a more active role in trying to promote their own diverse interests: Russia to show the weakness of the Euro-Atlantic process, China to invest in its Belt and Road project creating bridgeheads toward Europe. Russia's key leverage remains energy i.e., the dependence on Russian gas supply for most of the countries, and thus the importance is on creating greater diversification of supply of energy resources.

Specifically, on security and defence it should be noted that the Adriatic Charter is another somewhat less known regional cooperation alliance. Created in 2003 by Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia, under the aegis of the United States, it was later joined in 2008 by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and finally the same year by Serbia, an observer member.

More importantly, the Atlantic integration now has three of the six Western Balkan countries as full members of NATO: Albania joined in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2019. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace programme of NATO in 2006. Bosnia-Herzegovina was invited to join the Membership Action Plan in 2010 and has since remained at that level of cooperation since there is momentarily an opposition of the Serb representative in the tripartite presidency of the country, in spite of this joint decision in 2010 to

join NATO. Bosnia-Herzegovina now contributes to NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan. Serbia joined NATO's Individual Action Plan Program in 2015 enhancing cooperation with the alliance⁸ but is at present committed to neutrality and not joining NATO.

Each of the countries of the Western Balkan Six has developed extensive relations with the US military through the US State Partnership Program and the respective National Guards. Serbia with the Ohio, Bosnia-Herzegovina with the Maryland and Kosovo with the Iowa National Guard.

Most recently, during the month of January 2021 the Commander of the Joint Allied Forces Command in Naples, Admiral Robert Burke visited Sarajevo, Belgrade and Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Pristina, Kosovo. NATO has had a presence in Kosovo since June 1999 after the NATO bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Today KFOR, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo, numbers about 3,500 soldiers of which about 660 are US troops.⁹ Both Serbia and Kosovo agree on the importance of the presence of NATO troops for purposes of stability and peace. There are no plans in sight to end this mission.

The US is thus present in the region in multiple ways through its political, economic, military presence, development aid and most crucially in a supportive role to the EU in the joint endeavour of Euro-Atlantic integration. A significant additional dimension in the relations between the US and the region is cooperation in the fight against organised crime and corruption in which, among others, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) plays a very important role.

8 Marija Ristic, NATO Welcomes Action Plan With Serbia, 16.01.2015, / <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/01/16/serbia-nato-strength-ties/>

9 NATO Mission in Kosovo (KFOR), NATO SHAPE, <https://shape.nato.int/ongoingoperations/nato-mission-in-kosovo-kfor->

The current European Union Commission (2019-2024) declared itself a geopolitical one. France and Germany remain crucial in the policy of bringing the Western Balkans into the EU as illustrated by the Berlin Process initiated by Chancellor Merkel in 2014 but also by the increased role played by French President Macron in seeking a more engaged approach in finding the fundamentals of lasting peace and stability in the region. In a rapidly changing constellation of global forces the leaders of the EU and not only they have stated, that if the EU is not capable of integrating the 18 million people (roughly 4 percent of the EU population) constituting these six countries of South Eastern Europe, how will it project its power and model further afield? Thus, the integration of the Western Balkans is also fundamentally about the credibility of the European unification project.

Finally, the question of democracy. President Biden, among others, has spoken about the fragility of democracy witnessed *inter alia* by the dramatic events on Capitol Hill in Washington DC on 6 January and the need to stem rising authoritarian tendencies. He has spoken of the need to organise a community of democracies to rally against those who put it into question. The EU is itself confronted with the regression of democracy in the ranks of its member states. The US and EU as they go forward to uphold the fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law in a changing global environment have their credibility at stake. The countries of the Western Balkans region bear thus a great responsibility unto themselves above all to foster democracy. It behoves them primarily, with the support of the EU, to undertake the task of democratic reform, spurring regional reconciliation and cooperation to secure lasting stability and peace contributing to the European peace project.

THE BLACK SEA REGION

The new Biden administration—and with it a more predictable and reliable US foreign policy—was highly anticipated across Europe. As many observers agree, Biden's vision is Atlanticist at its core and could signify a 'pivot to Europe' in US foreign policy.¹⁰ Yet, others suggest that we may see a new 'pivot to Asia'.¹¹ Allies on the Eastern Flank of Europe can, however, find reassurance in the promise to uphold multilateralism, work within existing alliances and reinforce NATO and work closer with the EU. This will be in stark contrast to the transactional and unilateralist approach to foreign policy of President Trump. For the Black Sea region, the foreign policy shift that the Biden administration will bring is an encouraging sign.

The relationship with countries in the Black Sea region and the approach to regional issues has to be understood in the context of broader priorities shaping US policy in the next four years. Three main priorities of the Biden administration stand out: rebuilding the country domestically; re-establishing the US leadership role globally and filling in the gaps left by the Trump administration; and fighting against authoritarianism, re-emphasising alliances and strengthening multilateralism.¹² The new Biden administration has pledged to put the US back at the head of the table in global issues and it remains to be seen what concrete implications this will have for US leadership in the region. There is also an expectation that the Biden administration will work closer with the EU institutions. In solving many of the regional issues the EU will be expected to fulfil its geopolitical role—as previewed by

10 James Traub, "The Joe Biden Doctrine Exists Already. Here's an Inside Preview.", *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/20/the-biden-doctrine-exists-already-heres-an-inside-preview>

11 Michael J. Green, "Biden Makes His First Bold Move on Asia", *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/13/kurt-campbell-biden-asia-china-appointment>

12 See, Joe Biden, <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership>

the European Commission President.¹³ But regional countries hope the US will nudge the EU to do more in addressing security crises and the governance deficit and offer its backing.

The US has been perceived as absent in some important developments in the wider region, such as the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, with deep implications for the regional balance of power and stability. Key policy priorities in the Black Sea region might include: strengthening Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russia; promoting NATO enlargement and enhancing maritime military capabilities, not least by helping allies and partners work together; empowering democratic forces—particularly in countries like Georgia—and building democratic resilience; shoring up economic and investment tools that fully take advantage of the regional geostrategic position.

The Black Sea: the soft underbelly of European security

The Black Sea region is highly contested. Geopolitical competition has accelerated especially since the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. The transatlantic community's interests in the areas of diplomacy, security, energy, and trade intersect in the region — and clash with those of competitors. For Russia, the Black Sea has been a launching pad or a gateway to destabilise and project power in other regions such as the Middle East or the Western Balkans.¹⁴ The Kremlin uses the region as a testing ground for new strategies and tactics before exporting to other regions. It has also taken advantage of the lack of focus and cohesion of NATO allies and partners to increase its military and strategic dominance. For China, the Black Sea is also an important gateway into the European heartland and a key component of its global strategy to gain access to markets and consolidate political influence. The US and its European allies thus have a keen strategic interest in strengthening deterrence, security and stability in the region.

The importance of the Black Sea region has not always been acknowledged in US and Western European policy circles. In recent years there has been an increased realisation of the importance of the region and the nature of the threats, mainly because of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and increased militarisation of the maritime domain. This was also reflected in the establishment of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) under the Obama administration as a sign of US commitment to regional security post-2014 annexation of Crimea and continued with increased funding in subsequent years

Russia has also taken advantage of the lack of focus and cohesion of NATO allies and partners to increase its military and strategic dominance

¹³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)646148)

¹⁴ Janusz Bugajski, Peter Doran, "Black Sea Defended. NATO Responses to Russia's Black Sea Offensive", Center for European Policy Analysis, July 2016, https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2684

The focus on the Black Sea region in the NDAA has deepened since 2015 and can be expected to continue with an increasingly active Congress on foreign policy issues

as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).¹⁵ But allies in the region, particularly Romania, have also played a role in shifting the perspective of policy experts and explaining the relevance of Black Sea security for European security and US interests.

The salience of the region for European security and US national interest is also visible in the increased attention and efforts in the US Congress to cater to the specific security needs of the region and task other agencies with concrete steps. In the most recent National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2021 (NDAA FY2021) various Black Sea security issues are mentioned, including security assistance funds for Ukraine, a request to the Department of Defense to report on the 'strategic and operational significance of the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea', US military force posture and deployments, as well as hybrid tactics and influence operations by Russia in the region.¹⁶ The focus on the Black Sea region in the NDAA has deepened since 2015 and can be expected to continue with an increasingly active Congress on foreign policy issues. Apart from the legislative branch efforts, the region will matter for the new administration under all its foreign policy priorities—from security to fighting authoritarian adversaries—and the Biden campaign had tasked a group of experts following the region to already start shaping the administration's understanding of the Black Sea area.

A differentiated approach

The region is also changing, and the Biden administration is inheriting somewhat different political conditions than four years ago. Ukraine and Georgia face renewed democratic crises and increased fears of oligarchic capture; there are hopes of reform from Moldova and more political stability in Romania; a more assertive Turkey is expanding its regional reach; and Bulgaria seems to be trying to go unnoticed so as to not raise too much attention in Washington.

The Black Sea region is a complex setting for different levels of Euro-Atlantic integration, democratic development and types of regional cooperation and cohesion. Some countries are members of both the EU and NATO (Romania and Bulgaria); Turkey is a member of NATO, but not of the EU; and then others

15 Congressional Research Service, "The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview", June 16, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10946.pdf>

16 William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Section 1246, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6395/text>

are outside these two supranational bodies, but aspiring to join both (Georgia and Ukraine, as well as Moldova). There are also different challenges resulting from domestic issues and the various regional dynamics and history of cooperation between neighbours. To adequately deal with the region, the Biden administration will need differentiated approaches.

Turkey is the most important regional security player, but also the most problematic relationship for the United States. The US and Turkey have been on different sides on many issues in recent years, from defence procurement to energy, and involvement in regional conflicts (in the Caucasus and the Middle East). The Trump administration has held off on imposing sanctions and the US and Turkish presidents seemed to enjoy a special relationship.¹⁷ The Congress has shown more intransigence to Turkey's dealings with Russia and the NDAA FY2021 requests the imposition of sanctions on persons involved in the acquisition of the S-400 air defence system from Russia and expanding sanctions on the Turkstream energy project. The Biden administration will thus face many contentious issues, from domestic democratic backsliding to Turkey's aggressive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, or the S-400 system which has yet to become operational. It will also have an opportunity to build on the historically adversarial relationship between Turkey and Russia and the reassurance that the transatlantic alliance provides to Ankara.¹⁸ The US will need a new strategy for engaging with Turkey and will also have to consider an array of confidence building steps given Turkey's important role in the Black Sea wider region.

Romania on the other hand has focused its diplomacy and defence modernisation efforts on becoming a strong NATO member and reliable US ally. The country also wants to become a security

provider and a role-model in the SEE region and has worked in recent years to modernise its military, repair relations with Ukraine and increase its support for the Republic of Moldova. Also, Romania's relationship with the Trump administration has been a successful one. The Romanian President visited the White House twice, defence investments and cooperation were deepened and investments in the energy sector—both in gas transport infrastructure connecting the Black Sea shore to the western border and most recently in nuclear power—are likely to set Romania on a stronger path to energy independence. Some of these projects will likely continue, particularly as they benefit from strong support in the US Congress as well, but Romanians would like to see even more US involvement and presence in the region. Economic investment and cooperation will also make transatlantic moorings even tighter.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have benefited from US support in different ways in the past and are all confronting various degrees of oligarchisation and state capture. Also, Russia's subversive actions eat away at the root of EU efforts for modernisation and further integration of the two countries. Ukraine has featured many times in foreign policy statements of the Biden campaign and will continue to be a priority for the administration's policy in the Black Sea region.

The regional focus is also likely to increase as fighting corruption and increasing cross-border financial transparency are part of the new administration's agenda. All Black Sea countries have been struggling with consolidating their anticorruption frameworks for decades, while separatist regions in former soviet republics are utilised by Russia as conduits for political corruption and illicit money flows—most notoriously Moldova's involvement in a

17 David Ignatius, "Why is the Trump administration enabling Erdogan's Turkey?", Washington Post, September 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/why-is-the-trump-administration-enabling-turkey/2020/09/03/491ecea6-ee02-11ea-b4bc-3a2098fc73d4_story.html

18 Brian Whitmore, "A Limited Partnership", Center for European Policy Analysis, March 11, 2020, <https://cepa.org/a-limited-partnership/>

money laundering scheme uncovered in 2014.^{19, 20} The US have traditionally been deeply involved in supporting these countries in developing stronger rule of law and democratic institutions.

Under President Biden, restoring American credibility and moral leadership means focusing on democratic governance, fighting corruption, the rise of nationalists and populists and strengthening rule of law at home and abroad.²¹ Black Sea countries can expect a tougher and more consistent line when it comes to democracy and rule of law.

Reshaping regionalism

Regional security is a function of trust, just as much as capabilities. The Black Sea has seen many failed regional cooperation formats in the region.²² In the past, some of the old regional organisations have been used by Russia as vehicles to dominate, divide and conquer and keep issues under a lid. The information space is a rich environment for Russia to sow mistrust, suspicion and tension. A fragmented region with neighbours that don't trust each other is less likely to project strength and resist outside threats. This is yet another challenge that the Biden administration will have to face.

The most recent failure is the unsuccessful attempt to integrate NATO regional naval forces between Romania, Bulgaria (seen at the time as the main culprit for this failure) and Turkey.²³ This shows the volatility of regional political dynamics and lack of leadership the region is facing and is an important cautionary tale for potential new broad diplomatic initiatives—which have not been

as successful in the past. Regional cooperation cannot be a substitute of NATO and the EU, but rather a form of solidarity and engagement that would leverage these actors even more. The US can help catalyse some of these relationships and promote supranational cooperation formats on functional issues, such as energy diversification, defence or resilience to foreign authoritarian influence. The US has in the past been a broker in regional relationships to ensure that joint security interests are protected, and regional allies are hoping for a similar role in the future.

Given the history of mistrust, regional allies are also seeking to place the Black Sea region within broader formats of cooperation. On defence, Romania in particular has advocated for removing NATO's tiered approach to Eastern Flank security, which in its current form signals to the Kremlin that the Black Sea is less important—and less protected.²⁴ Strengthening deterrence by advocating for a single forward presence from the Baltic to the Black Sea would be an important sign of support from the Biden administration for Black Sea NATO allies. Equally important for the US is to establish more security partnerships in the region that include Georgia and Ukraine, particularly where Bulgaria or Turkey have a more hesitant approach.

The Three Sea Initiative (3SI) is another example that connects the Black Sea area to the broader Europe, and where US leadership might help galvanise already existing efforts. The Trump administration has made a pledge to support this format of cooperation and allies in the region hope the Biden administration will continue to push countries to make good on their commitments to increase connectivity and

19 Josh Rudolph, Thomas Morley, *Covert Foreign Money: Financial Loopholes Exploited by Authoritarians to Fund Political Interference in Democracies*, German Marshall Fund, August 18, 2020, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/covert-foreign-money/>
 20 OCCRP, *The Russian Laundromat*, <https://www.reportingproject.net/therussianlaundromat/>
 21 Joseph R. Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>
 22 Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "The Empty Shell of Black Sea Regionalism", *Ukraine Analytica*, 4 (6) 2016, <http://ukraine-analytica.org/wp-content/uploads/triantaphyllou.pdf>
 23 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bulgaria-refuses-to-join-nato-black-sea-fleet-against-russia/>
 24 Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, Ray Wojcik, Carsten Schmiedl, "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence. A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank", *Center for European Policy Analysis*, May 2020, https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf

As defence investments in the region are welcomed, more economic projects and technology transfers or joint ventures with US companies will be a helpful tool for regional cooperation

cooperation.²⁵ Investing in large, regional infrastructure projects can also support a more sophisticated understanding of burden sharing by looking at dual use transport and energy infrastructure.²⁶ This will also help the Biden administration better explain burden-sharing—which will continue to be a strong line in the dialogue with European allies—to the American public.

More US leadership in driving concrete projects and supporting new investment in the region, particularly in energy security (diversification of sources and interconnectors) and other types of critical infrastructure will be very important. These are areas where the countries in the region have struggled to act more cohesively and where adversaries like Russia and China have used divisive tactics whenever America retreated.²⁷ Also, as defence investments in the region are welcomed, more economic projects and technology transfers or joint ventures with US companies will be a helpful tool for regional cooperation.

The focus on democratic values and the rule of law of the Biden campaign has particularly important implications for the region. All countries struggle with various degrees of democratic backsliding and corruption. In some countries this emphasis on democracy can create some anxiety as governments are trying to separate their diplomatic efforts from domestic governance issues. In his last visit to the region, then Vice President Biden talked about corruption and rule of law and as president will continue to regard such issues as the cornerstone for stability and security.²⁸ Civil society representatives will be reinforced by this increased weight of good governance and rule of law principles in the foreign policy agenda especially after the Trump administration lack of interest and credibility in promoting democracy.²⁹ There is also a renewed opportunity to connect with citizens across the Atlantic, particularly as the appetite for strengthening democracy seems to

25 <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeo-delivers-remarks-at-the-three-seas-initiative-virtual-summit/>

26 Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, Ray Wojcik, Carsten Schmiedl, "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence. A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank", Center for European Policy Analysis, May 2020, https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf

27 See for instance the failed gas transport projects.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/nabucco-gas-pipeline-rivals-future-in-doubt/25030223.html>

28 See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-biden/biden-arrives-in-romania-pledges-u-s-backing-over-ukraine-idUSBREA4J0F520140520>; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/21/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-romanian-civil-society-groups-and-stude>

29 Poll results on Europeans' views of US leadership: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316133/leadership-remains-unpopular-worldwide.aspx> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/08/how-people-around-the-world-see-the-u-s-and-donald-trump-in-10-charts/>

also be growing among the population.³⁰ This will also support Biden's focus on pushing back against authoritarianism by leveraging alliances and the relationship with the EU justification and building legitimacy to push back against Russia and China.

Empowering allies

The new administration will be populated by professional, competent people who will have the backing and confidence of the president. Particularly, many experts in Biden's security and foreign policy transition team, as well as those already appointed in positions of responsibility for foreign and security policy have deep knowledge about and interest in Central and South East Europe inside. So Black Sea allies and partners have a lot to hope for from the Biden administration. But they also have to be aware that a long list of competing priorities awaits the president's attention, not in the least post-pandemic recovery and social and economic reconstruction at home.³¹ So regional actors need to set realistic expectations about how much focus the Black Sea area will enjoy in the new administration.

The Black Sea region will play a key role in containing adversaries like Russia and China, strengthening NATO—potentially by reopening the enlargement discussion to include Georgia and Ukraine—and enhancing cooperation with the EU, particularly in the Eastern Partnership countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. An open-door policy for these countries to join both the EU and NATO should be on the new administration's agenda. Countries in the region will also have to show they can be equal partners for the US by bolstering their own security and defence, increasing their resilience to Russian and Chinese influence and strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law. As Biden said in Bucharest in 2014, 'it's not what America can do for Romania, it's what we can do together for one another.'³²

Many experts in Biden's security and foreign policy transition team have deep knowledge about and interest in Central and South East Europe

30 Dalia Research and the Alliance of Democracies, <https://mailchi.mp/c588011a2174/3mmgu9dqod>

31 Richard Haass, "Repairing the World. The Imperative—and Limits—of a Post-Trump Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-09/repairing-world>

32 See, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/21/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-romanian-civil-society-groups-and-stude>

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The impact of US policy under President Biden on Central and Eastern European security will depend on number of interconnected factors, which include the Biden administration's ability to simultaneously address challenges at home and abroad while being able to convince US allies and partners to back its agenda (i.e., joint action with Europe on climate change, forming a united transatlantic response to the rise of China, etc.). Historically speaking, drastic changes in US foreign policy rarely happen, and if they do, it is by no means a speedy process. It can be argued that these changes have often been products of reactive rather than proactive tendencies and responses to the outside events.³³ By the same token, regardless of an ambitious international agenda of the Biden administration, expecting rapid transformation in current American foreign policy seems quite unrealistic.

Regarding Biden's potential policy towards Europe, the above-mentioned point could be even more reinforced once the entire cost of the political, social, economic and health crises in the United States is fully understood and accounted for. In other words, even though President Biden wishes to rebuild transatlantic ties and improve the overall multilateral approach towards its European allies, the grim significance of its situation at home might shift the administration's focus almost entirely to the domestic front. From the Central and Eastern Europe perspective such a development would be detrimental for the security situation, especially if Russia remains assertive in its policy towards its neighbours

(i.e., Ukraine, Georgia) and NATO allies (the Baltic States, Poland, Romania) while Europe fails to agree on a common security approach towards threats that come from both East and South.

As a consequence of the United States' grave internal problems, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, political and social unrest and a deepening economic crisis, Joe Biden's ambitious and robust agenda in international affairs will likely be tempered by the necessity of ensuring stability at home. That means that the US with its limited resources might look for their regional allies to step up (even more) to tasks that directly concern their security and defence, while the US will focus on global challenges ranging from competition with China to the climate crisis.

Nevertheless, it is expected that the Biden administration will make a conscious effort to intensify American relations with its European partners, including these located in Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly to other European regions, the US policy approach towards Central and Eastern Europe should be understood in a broader context of American foreign policy goals in Europe and its neighbourhood. Two of them—repairing ties with European partners and NATO allies; and deterring Russia from further destabilisation of Eastern Europe—will most likely shape the Biden administration's specific approach towards Central and Eastern Europe.

The first aim of mending transatlantic relations and strengthening NATO has already been signalled by then President-elect Biden when he promised to reboot traditional alliances and restore what he described as America's 'global . . .

33 This tendency has been aptly summarised by a panel of experts stating that "the fatigue of many, and distractions of some with special interests, leave American foreign policy hostage to television images and the momentary passions of domestic politics. Without a clear sense of priorities, (...) policy will continue to be reactive and impulsive". See: What are America's National Interests? Harvard Belfer Center, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/what-are-americas-national-interests>

[and] moral leadership'.³⁴ This sentiment was reinforced by President Biden in his telephone conversation with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 26 January 2021, during which he underlined the United States' commitment to the Alliance and its role in transatlantic security.³⁵ This has been a welcome sign for European allies including those in Central and Eastern Europe. Its second goal of deterring Russia while also finding a common platform to deescalate tensions between the Kremlin and the West might be much harder for the Biden administration to achieve, especially given Moscow's continuous aggressive policy in Eastern Europe and considering the different approaches and attitudes of NATO allies on how to deal with Russia.

How Central is Central Europe?

Contrary to most of the Western European allies of the US, many located in the Central Europe welcomed Joe Biden's victory with reservations and mixed feelings. Political leaders in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, in differing scale and form, publicly voiced support for President Trump during the election campaign of 2020.³⁶ They did so not only because they shared a certain thread of populist illiberalism with the Trump administration but simply because from their perspective President Trump intensified cooperation between the United States and Central and Eastern Europe.³⁷

Given the pro-democratic agenda of Joe Biden on one hand and Hungary's Victor Orban's illiberal turn on the other, it seems that Hungary will be among the ones in Central Europe that might lose the most after Biden's victory. During the Trump administration, Orban repeatedly used a similarity in views with the US president to strengthen his own domestic position while claiming that Hungary constitutes an important partner for the United States and hence its role in global affairs increased. The Hungarian prime minister even explicitly endorsed Donald Trump during the presidential campaign when he wrote in September 2020 that 'we root for Donald Trump's victory, because we know well American Democratic governments' diplomacy, built on moral imperialism. We have been forced to sample it before, we did not like it, we do not want seconds.'³⁸ Hungary's current situation might become complicated further, as Prime Minister Orban has been known to push Hungary for closer relations with Russia, even after the United States and NATO found themselves at odds with the Kremlin over Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014.³⁹ This might have been overlooked by Trump administration, as President Trump focused more on bilateral relations and often played intra-European differences to his advantage. It seems that the Biden administration, with its expectations for Europe and NATO to act in unison and strong opposition towards Russia's aggressive activity (including the Kremlin's crackdown on pro-democratic protests and Alexei Navalny), will be far more critical of Budapest's internal and external policies.

34 Katrina Manson, Biden's foreign policy: the return of American exceptionalism, *Financial Times*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7b687a78-109c-416e-9795-793bb017f964>

35 Rebecca Kheel, Biden pledges US commitment to collective defense in call with NATO head, *The Hill*, 26 January 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/535939-biden-pledges-us-commitment-to-collective-defense-in-call-with-nato-head>

36 Paul Taylor, The US election's other loser: European populists, *Politico*, 09 November 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-election-2020-other-loser-european-populists/>

37 Petr Tuma, What Biden's election means for Central Europe, *the Atlantic Council*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-bidens-election-means-for-central-europe/>

38 Hungary PM Orban endorses Trump in November U.S. election, *Reuters*, 21 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-trump-idUSKCN26C0K5>

39 Eszter Zalana, Hungary's Orban defends close ties with Russia, *EU Observer*, 31 October 2019, <https://euobserver.com/political/146485>

Additionally, some in the region (i.e., Poland) have viewed a possible Biden presidency as a continuation of Barack Obama's foreign policy agenda, an agenda which brought a much-criticised reset with Russia and the US pivot towards Asia, hence away from Europe. Some politicians in Poland remember that it was President Obama who cancelled plans to locate the so-called missile defence shield in Poland, even though they equally forget that after the 2014 Russian attack on Ukraine, the Obama administration was instrumental in supporting NATO's response in strengthening its eastern flank, for example the Enhanced Forward Presence and European Deterrence Initiative, and successfully deterring Russia. His administration also initiated efforts that later under the Trump administration led to closer bilateral military cooperation between the US and Poland, including transfer of arms sales and US troops to Poland.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it would also be hard to deny that in terms of bilateral relations, Central and Eastern European states enjoyed closer cooperation with the United States under President Trump than under his predecessor. For instance, Poland received substantial diplomatic and economic⁴¹ support for its joint regional project of the Three Seas Initiative to increase cooperation in energy, transport and infrastructure dimensions as the Trump administration viewed this project through the prism of great power rivalry with China rather than intra-European exercise in regionalisation. Warsaw also benefitted from the US European Deterrence Initiative which during Trump's tenure saw a significant financial boost and resulted in bringing additional US military presence in Poland.⁴²

In terms of bilateral relations, Central and Eastern European states enjoyed closer cooperation with the United States under President Trump than his predecessor

40 For a regional perspective on the European Deterrence Initiative see: Artur Kacprzyk, The European Deterrence Initiative: Record and Perspectives, PISM Bulletin, 04 June 2020, https://pism.pl/publications/The_European_Deterrence_Initiative_Record_and_Perspectives

41 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in February 2020 that the US would invest up to \$1 billion in the investment fund and on 10 December 2020 a \$300 million investment has been approved in the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund.

42 For figures see: The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview, Congressional Research Service, 16.06.2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10946.pdf>

VALUES AND INTERESTS

In the sphere of values and ideas, Biden's approach will likely depart from his predecessor, as the President and his team have often indicated that liberal democracy and rule of law are the values that they cherish and support at home and abroad. Therefore, some Central European states (including Hungary and Poland) might be expecting to hear some value-based reminders about the democratic foundations of transatlantic and European community. It seems unlikely that these concerns will trump hard US security interests in the region, yet they might become an obstacle in strengthening partnerships like one between the US and Poland.

Some Central European states might be expecting to hear some value-based reminders about the democratic foundations of transatlantic and European community

Despite all of this, Central and Eastern Europe has the potential to play an important role in the Biden administration's European strategy, especially given American engagement in deterring Russia on NATO's eastern flank and Washington's interest in restoring and maintaining stability in Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine.⁴³ Paradoxically, it has been Russia's aggressive behaviour in the region that brought US interest back to Central and Eastern Europe. Unless there is a substantial transformation of Russian foreign policy with regard to both Eastern Europe and NATO member states, continuity rather than change will guide the Biden administration's policy in this part of the world. Noteworthy, a stronger engagement with Central Europe was already set in motion by the Obama administration after Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. It led to the rotational presence of the US troops in the context of European Deterrence Initiative and NATO-led Enhanced Forward Presence. Furthermore, the Trump administration, in spite of his anti-NATO rhetoric, did not walk away from the US security commitment to Central and Eastern Europe. It would be surprising if the Biden administration did not follow this path.

In other words, the Biden administration will likely apply a firm policy towards Russia and its aggressive policy in the European neighbourhood. There have been some concerns in the region that Biden's foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe might be similar to that of the Obama administration. Given President Biden's own interest in the region and his advisors' experience, from Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Undersecretary of

⁴³ For example, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania bring to the transatlantic table 'niche competences and capabilities in cyber space, intelligence matters, and countering of Russian disinformation'. See: Andris Banka, NATO's eastern flank: retooling the US-Baltic security link, NDC Policy Brief No. 03, February 2021.

State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland to Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe Molly Montgomery, such a claim so far has been unsubstantiated. Yet, unlike for some Central and Eastern European states, Russia is not the number one security challenge for the US and Washington would seek to improve relations with Moscow, should the Kremlin decide to scale down its aggressive policy. There are a number of vital security issues waiting for improvement, such as nuclear proliferation and arms treaties, that would require the mutual cooperation of the US and Russia. Taking into account the current domestic situation in Russia (in the aftermath of Navalny's arrest) and its power projection in Central and Eastern Europe, chances for such a breakthrough remain dim.

President Biden is likely to continue US support for the Three Seas Initiative founded by Croatia and Poland in 2016 (currently including twelve states) and spanning from Baltic down to Black and Adriatic Sea. This regional project has been viewed positively by US officials on both sides of the aisle as a pragmatic format to counterbalance Chinese growing presence in Central and Eastern Europe while at the same time being a platform for stronger regional integration along with energy cooperation. Yet, given the Biden administration's emphasis on multilateralism and strengthening relations with the EU, US support for the Three Seas Initiative comes with certain caveats. It should not be treated as a substitute or competition to NATO or EU regional cooperation, but rather as leverage to enhance the solidarity of the states involved in it. From this perspective, the Three Seas Initiative should underline its inclusive regional platform rather than offer an alternative for some EU states. In other words, it is seen as a geopolitical project meant to counterbalance some of the Franco-German influence in the EU.

This picture of US foreign policy's impact on Central and Eastern Europe has been further complicated by another factor: the ambiguous stance of Germany, which on one hand has supported NATO's general policy of deterrence against Russia, while at the same time it has kept alive the Nord Stream 2 project together with Russia, the very same project highly contested by Warsaw and other states in the region who for years have been doomed to depend on Russian energy supplies. For the Biden administration—which has signalled a will for a new opening with Berlin and simultaneously has been critical of the German-Russian pipeline project⁴⁴—the question of how to deal with Germany in the current European geopolitical context will be one of the most important questions for US security and defence policy in Europe. Subsequently, it is hard to imagine a well-functioning NATO without proper US-German relations, which deteriorated significantly under the Trump administration.⁴⁵

Thus, the Nord Stream 2 project is likely to become a serious obstacle on the road to the improvement of transatlantic relations, especially given the Biden administration's opposition to this deal. As much as Berlin looks eager for a new diplomatic opening with the US it seems to be equally reluctant to walk away from the energy security pact with Russia. Central and Eastern European states, such as Poland and the Baltic States, view Nord Stream 2 not only as an energy security threat but also as a reward for Russia, whose aggressive policies and attack on the sovereignty of Ukraine in 2014 destabilised European security. Consequently, they see German-Russian cooperation as a serious security challenge, one that requires assistance from Washington rather than from Brussels. Berlin, on the other hand, has been reluctant to back down from the deal, disregarding both external and domestic pressure to terminate what *The Economist*

44 Timothy Gardner, Trevor Hunnicutt; White House says Biden believes Nord Stream 2 pipeline is 'bad deal' for Europe, Reuters, 26 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-nord-stream-idUSKBN29V29X>

45 Justyna Gotkowska, NATO in Transition, OSW Commentary, 12 April 2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-04/nato-transition>; Commentary, 4 December 2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-04/nato-transition>

referred to as 'Germany's biggest foreign policy headache'.⁴⁶ It will be hard to find consensus in this matter between Germany and other states in the region where many states share deep distrust towards Moscow's intentions. Poland's president Andrzej Duda in a recent interview has voiced his opinion about Russia, an opinion that actually seems quite common in the Baltic States, Poland and Romania: 'Russia is not a country which you can trust, or which shares the same values and goals from the point of view of the rules of democracy as Euro-Atlantic states. It is a different country. It is a country that has been showing for years that its imperial ambitions have returned.'⁴⁷

Beyond Poland's bilateralism

For the current Polish government, despite ideological differences with the Biden administration, at least three main US goals in the region align directly with Poland's strategic interests: reinforcement of NATO's primacy as a security actor in Europe; deterring Russia by strengthening the eastern flank; and American opposition to Nord Stream 2. Therefore, regardless of the diplomatic unease, Warsaw should be expected to adjust to new circumstances.⁴⁸

The adjustment period might appear difficult should Polish political leaders refuse to look closely into some established foreign policy routines including Poland's central expectation of the dominant role of the US in Europe and in NATO. Such a distinct approach has mostly been informed by a historical experience of Polish foreign policy that

dates to the early 1990s. The debate about NATO enlargement and steadily increased US support to bring Poland and other Central and Eastern European states into the Alliance had affected greatly the Polish political establishment's views on transatlantic security, Poland's role within NATO and bilateral relations with other members of the Alliance, including the United States. This emphasis on bilateral relations with the US has quickly become a trademark of Poland's approach to hard security issues and after 1999 NATO's enlargement to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, marked the birth of the Polish-American relations new myth. This myth was based on the conviction that a special bond between Poland and the United States was created, which revolutionised the paradigm of European security.⁴⁹

According to this myth, Poland is supposed to have become a new partner for the US in Europe and has played 'an independent role between Germany and Russia, creating therefore a new pillar of transatlantic relations.' The current Polish ruling party, including its one-sided pro-US stance showed scepticism towards pan-European security and defence projects; and the 'bilateralisation' of NATO has been reinforcing this approach. Interestingly, Warsaw's policy worked to some extent, as Poland became the main beneficiary of the US decision to deploy its troops to reassure its Central and East European allies in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Most of the troops were sent to Poland and it received a total of 4,500 US troops based on a rotational basis. The implementation of these decisions happened over the span of both Obama's and Trump's administrations.⁵⁰

46 Running out of Gas? Why Germany won't kill Nord Stream 2, *The Economist*, 01 February 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/02/01/why-germany-wont-kill-nord-stream-2>

47 James Shotter, Polish president calls on EU to step up sanctions on Russia, *Financial Times*, 24 January .2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/673021c5-12b5-4f52-9064-027e1d31f460>

48 Piotr Buras, Views from the Capitals: What Biden's victory means for Europe, *ECPR*, 10 November 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/article/views-from-the-capitals-what-bidens-victory-means-for-europe/>

49 Olaf Osica, O Stosunkach Polsko-Amerykanskich, "Nowa Europa" 2009, 1(8), p. 136.

50 Marcin Zaborowski, Joe Biden Is Central Europe's Best Chance, *Visegrad Insight*, 25 November .2020, <https://>

The above-mentioned tendency aptly summarises Warsaw's most recent approach to transatlantic security and allows us to expect that Poland will attempt to balance between its well-tested pro-US approach on one side, and the current need to implement a team approach among the EU and NATO partners. Consequently, it will be interesting to see how the state of Polish-American relations revises under the Biden administration. After all, it is often overlooked in Warsaw that Poland has been heard by the US the most when it stands with a majority of its European partners together, rather than remaining on the periphery. If Warsaw plays its cards well it could come back to a bigger transatlantic table, particularly on issues connected to the security of the eastern flank and EU and NATO relations with Belarus and Ukraine. For this to happen, Poland would need first to reverse some of its domestic decisions that undermined democratic values and rule of law in the country, which brought criticism from the Western partners including Joe Biden himself.

Gradual change

All in all, European leaders, including those in Central and Eastern Europe, should not expect tectonic shifts in the US approach towards the region. Some gestures—such as President Biden's reassurance of the US's commitment to NATO's collective defence—have already signalled a new approach in the region. Further steps would be welcomed, too. For example, reversing Trump's decision to withdraw over 10,000 troops from Germany would be a welcoming sign for European security and a message that the US under President Biden will be focused more on comprehensive European and transatlantic security rather than on deepening relations with individual states.⁵¹ However, as presented above, the Biden administration's policy towards Central and Eastern Europe will predominantly be a function of broader American goals aimed at improving transatlantic cooperation and deterring Russia's assertive policies towards its European neighbours. This geopolitical context should not imply that states in the region who unequivocally

European leaders, including those in Central and Eastern Europe, should not expect tectonic shifts in the US approach towards the region

visegradinsight.eu/joe-biden-is-central-europes-best-chance/

51 As of 3 February 2021, there has been a signal from the top US general in Europe, that Biden administration is currently reviewing president Trump's earlier decision to withdraw American troops from Germany. John Vandiver, US halts plans to move 12,000 troops out of Germany, Stars and Stripes, 3 February 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/us-halts-plans-to-move-12-000-troops-out-of-germany-1.660818>

A common interest to most of the states in these regions is a greater US engagement in transatlantic cooperation that would enhance the Euro-Atlantic ties and strengthen European security

embraced Trump and strayed from the rule of law should expect a pass. The Biden administration will surely put greater emphasis on respecting democratic values, rights of minorities and rule of law among its European allies, including the likes of Hungary and Poland. This would require Hungarian and Polish politicians to acknowledge some of the domestic mistakes they have made (including the nationalisation of mass media and unlawful changes in the Constitutional Tribunal respectively) as certainly the Biden administration and Western European states will hold both states accountable for their recent democratic downfall.

Finally, the main question remains whether Central and Eastern European states will be able to adjust their respective policies to contribute to a more pan-European role in transatlantic relations? After all, both Republican and Democratic presidents have expected Europe to meet US expectations to play a more active role in security dimensions on European borders and peripheries. And stepping up and 'doing more' on a European front would require much better coordination among European states.

CONCLUSIONS

The victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election brought a wave of optimism across many European capitals. Among the Biden administration's central foreign policy goals will be the aim to repair transatlantic relations that went sour over the last four years. As Biden and his close advisors are clearly keen to improve relations with US allies in Europe, expectations to mend strained ties have been voiced from Brussels to Berlin and Paris. Yet, as much as it is an important task, the revitalisation of ties between the US and its European allies will require not only a mutual democratic commitment to do so but a broader strategic vision that includes understanding challenges and limitations that go beyond transatlantic relations. Furthermore, good will, friendly rhetoric and even firm strategy might not guarantee a complete narrowing of the transatlantic gap as governments on both sides of the Atlantic will have to face daunting domestic challenges of their own.

The three regions analysed above are facing their own internal problems and challenges, yet they also share a potential for mutual security and defence cooperation, as well as strengthening political and economic ties. What constitutes a common interest to most of the states in these regions is a greater US engagement in transatlantic cooperation that would enhance the Euro-Atlantic ties and strengthen European security. The path will not be easy. Recent—and renewed—asperities in the transatlantic relationship when it comes to the Nord Stream 2 project and the commercial deal between the EU and China are likely to pose important challenges to Euro-Atlantic unity. But the US might find a lot more alignment with its foreign policy views among Central and South Eastern Europeans.

Not least, the US also plays a particularly important role in re-centring transatlantic dialogue on the importance of shared values and their actual manifestation through democratic institutions and practices. In this regard, the Biden administration's initial agenda towards Europe and its regions seem to be a step in a right direction. ■



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