



# Metis

## Study

**Biden / Harris 2020:  
A look ahead at  
possible implications  
for security policy**

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# Summary

**A**n end to the presidency of Donald J. Trump would serve as an opportunity for Europe and Germany not only to repair the broken relationship with the US but also to play a more active role

in the future orientation of the West. Through early initiatives, Germany could shape US calls for more European responsibility and help transform current differences between the Allies into transatlantic progress.

## Scenario: Biden in the White House

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are running against the Republican incumbents Donald J. Trump and Mike Pence in the US presidential election on 3 November 2020. This study is based on the **assumption that there will be a change of government**. The authors are taking a look ahead at the possible implications of a Biden/Harris victory for security and defence policy.

Before we delve into the details of the Biden campaign's election manifesto and planned political initiatives and how they might affect a number of policy fields and geographical regions that are particularly important from a German and European perspective, it is worth remembering that **Biden's team** for security and defence policy issues includes a number of people who were already involved in shaping US foreign and security policy in the Obama administrations. This comes as no surprise as it is established tradition in the US for more junior staff members of previous administrations to be given senior positions in a new one. This means that we will likely see a return to previously established ideas and principles.

## The home front

Should Joe Biden assume the Presidency in January 2021, he will have to face and focus on the tremendous **domestic problems and social upheaval** in the US for some time to come. This challenge will include not only restoring the trust of marginalised and disillusioned sections of the populace in the country's weakened political institutions but also efforts to counter the polarisation of society and to rehabilitate the shared American Dream of social advancement. The momentum of the Black Lives Matter

movement will lead to political reforms and programmes aimed at addressing and correcting the economic, social and legal marginalisation of and discrimination against disadvantaged groups: social injustice, police brutality and disparities in the criminal justice system. In addition to social reforms, the Biden administration will also have to prioritise measures to repair the immense economic damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to fight unemployment.

Trying to accomplish all of this will necessarily shape Biden's presidency. Biden's calls to **restore democracy and the economy** and his reminder that **"a house divided cannot stand"** reflect the principles that underpin how he intends to respond to the domestic damage that the Trump administration will have left in its wake.

## Consequences for foreign policy

Despite the necessary focus on domestic policy, the new administration will also face massive challenges in terms of foreign policy. Unless its credibility is restored and previously established relations with partners and allies are repaired, even the US will not be able to act as the lead nation of the West and a key influencer of global politics.

In a piece published in *Foreign Affairs* in March 2020, Biden indicated what will be a core issue of his foreign policy: the **systemic rivalry between democracies and autocracies**. Biden is planning to host a summit of democratic states during his first year in office in order to strengthen cooperation and push back against the influence of autocracies. These plans – or at least the current campaign rhetoric does – suggest a political doctrine that is reminiscent of the 1947 Truman Doctrine. This statement



of wanting to strengthen cooperation between democracies makes it clear that a Biden administration will move away from Trump's unilateral course. Of course, this does not rule out future unilateral ventures on the part of the US. However, such unilateralism would surely be practised more in the spirit of Madeleine Albright: acting multilaterally when possible and unilaterally only when necessary.

Under Biden, the US will keep its focus on **China** as its primary autocratic rival. From a US perspective, China's rise and increasingly confident demeanour on the global stage are a **systemic challenge** of the highest priority across all fields of policy. Biden will seek cooperation on climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and health security. When it comes to China's ambition to project power at both a regional and global level and to define international standards, rules and institutions of the digital age, however, he has stated his intention to offer determined resistance. In terms of the balance of power across the entire Asia-Pacific region, Biden and his team have recently floated the idea of intensifying cooperation with Australia, Japan and South Korea as democratic partners of the Alliance and of establishing closer ties with India and Indonesia.

The new administration is likely to take a consistently tougher stance on **Russia** than the Trump administration's wavering one. Against the backdrop of recent Russian activities – the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine, poisonings and countless disinformation campaigns come to mind – a metaphor that emerged in this electoral campaign is that of **creating “antibodies against authoritarian attempts to interfere in democracies.”**

The **European Union** will thus not only be asked to contribute more to its own defence and increased resilience against hybrid interference in order to take some of the pressure off the US but also to provide greater support to the US in its stance on autocracies such as China and Russia. This could also include the explicit expectation that the EU will take on more responsibility when it comes to dealing with Hungary or Turkey, for example, but also with Iran, the Middle East and Africa. A Biden-led administration will surely want to normalise the currently troubled relations with Germany, France and other Allies and to refocus on commonalities. Since the US positions on the changing transatlantic relationship will, at their core, remain largely the same under Biden, **the only real difference will be one of communication style rather than substance.** From a European perspective, the 2% goal is the only area that offers any chance of wriggle room – assuming another metric could help strengthen the defence and intervention capability of NATO despite shrinking defence budgets in the wake of the COVID pandemic. The German suggestion of shouldering 10% of NATO capabilities could be such a new yardstick.

If the systemic rivalry of autocracies versus democracies becomes a key characteristic of the foreign policy

of the Biden administration, then it is possible that the **role of NATO** as a potential military pillar of Biden's plans for a Coalition of Democracies will become the focus of discussion. For Europeans, this would beg the question of whether they want to continue to define NATO as a purely transatlantic institution or whether they would be willing to expand it into a **global alliance of democracies**, including those of Asia.

A Biden-led administration will likely be reluctant to get involved in **military interventions**, particularly in Europe's periphery. Biden has already announced his intention to withdraw troops from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and bring them home. It seems likely that his administration will prefer to **lead from behind** on any military interventions, which will also have implications for European Allies when it comes to burden-sharing.

In terms of US military involvement in **Africa**, it is plausible that cooperation with NATO partners and regional key states will focus on countering terrorist threats and that the US will even try to delegate more responsibility to its European partners and the African Union.<sup>1</sup> A revitalisation of US economic activities in Africa, however, appears possible, given that increasing Chinese investments and the context of systemic rivalry would require the US to play an active role.

In the **Middle East**, a Biden-led administration will work to increasingly normalise Israeli-Arab relations and will commit to a two-state solution. Too many administrations, however, have already tried and failed to achieve a permanent resolution in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Another attempt is unlikely.

When it comes to **climate and economic policy**, however, a reversal of current policy is on the cards. Biden has already announced that the US will rejoin the Paris Agreement and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Renewed negotiations on a transatlantic free trade agreement to maintain the economic balance of power with Asia also seem possible.

Finally, when it comes to **nuclear arms control**, despite his expected tougher stance on Russia in other fields of policy, Biden is looking to extend the **New START** treaty – assuming this has not already happened by the time he assumes office. Rejoining the Iran nuclear deal agreed and signed under Obama would revitalise multi-lateral nuclear arms control efforts and has already been announced by the foreign policy team around Biden and Harris – provided Iran makes the necessary concessions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See “Africa – a continent on the rise?”, Metis Study No. 10 (February 2019).

<sup>2</sup> See “Nuclear arms control in crisis”, Metis Study No. 18 (August 2020).



### Conclusions and Recommendations


In his September 2020 piece in *Foreign Affairs*, Ben Rhodes, the influential former Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications under Barack Obama, called on the potential Biden administration to not repeat the same policy mistakes of the last two decades. He cited seemingly never-ending war since September 2001 and questionable involvements in the Middle East, such as the war in Yemen and relationships with countries (such as Saudi Arabia) with a problematic track record in terms of human rights. At the same time, he warned against attempts to restore the self-image of the US as a virtuous post-Cold War hegemon. According to Rhodes, the US has drifted too far to make its way back and the rest of the world has long since moved on.

A potential Biden presidency should thus not be weighted down with expectations of a return to the old normal. **The good old days, if those ever existed, are well and truly over.** As for avoiding the mistakes that Rhodes warns of, that will to no small degree also come down to how well a Biden presidency navigates the deeply rooted structural constraints of the international system.

A Biden-led administration, too, will thus make extensive demands of its European Allies and partners,

including that they take on more responsibility. When it comes to NATO and the EU, this highlights the need for stronger German-French cooperation and closer involvement of Poland in the Weimar Triangle format. If Europe is serious about its autonomy and capacity for independent action, Germany in particular will not be able to avoid increasing the operational readiness of the Bundeswehr and taking on greater burdens in order to help achieve these goals.

For Europe and Germany, a Biden administration would likely create a less toxic atmosphere for talks, which would bring an end to open confrontation, threats of sanctions and finger-pointing. For Germany, a return of the US to multilateral institutionalism also means a chance of more leverage and an opportunity to champion security, peace and a rules-based world order, in which international agreements and treaties are upheld and human rights and the climate are better protected.

The EU and NATO member states in Europe would be wise to present the Biden administration with an offer in good time, outlining the areas in which they would be willing to assume more responsibility. Germany should initiate such a process as soon as possible rather than wait and see what the US under Biden will ask of Europe. 



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