



BIDEN AND EUROPE, VALUES AND INTERESTS



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (18 June 2021)
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But international politics is not just a clash between the democrats and the dictators. Indeed, Americans and Europeans count quite a few authoritarian states among their allies and

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Biden’s deeply-felt rhetoric on values cannot change the reality that interests drive international politics. Most states cooperate with most other states when interests overlap, quite regardless of their domestic political system. That demands a nuanced approach, and that is exactly what a week of summitry produced.

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China and Russia

The fact is that the US moved closer to the EU view than the other way around, notably on China. All three summits rightly condemned China’s coercive practices, both at home and abroad, and NATO for the first time stated that China presents systemic challenges. But the Alliance also welcomed opportunities to engage with China on areas of relevance to the Alliance and on common challenges such as climate change”. Likewise, the EU-US Summit

spoke of “multi-faceted approaches to China, which include elements of cooperation,

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competition, and systemic rivalry”. That is precisely how the EU has been framing its China strategy since 2019.

EU-China relations are at a low ebb, because of China’s overreaction to the EU’s human rights sanctions of last March. The European Parliament can indeed not ratify the *Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* (CAI) that Brussels and Beijing announced last December as long as China’s countermeasures have not been lifted. But the EU should be careful of strategic slippage. Some now pretend that the CAI can never be ratified as long as human rights abuses in China continue. That would be a change in strategy. It would effectively be the first step towards ending all cooperation and moving to the “new Cold War” that leaders including President Macron, Chancellor Merkel, and NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg explicitly stated they do not want.

Cooperation with China is possible, on the condition that it does not make the EU complicit in human rights violations. That is why the Commission is developing legislation to block the products of forced labour, for example, from entering the single market. “Cooperate when you can, push back when you must”: this must remain the approach.

What exactly the US strategy towards China will be remains to be seen. China itself would do well to heed President Xi’s call, earlier this month, to “expand the circle of friends” and present an image of a “credible, loveable and respectable China”. The more assertively it behaves, the more it risks to undo the constructive spirit that, for now, still rules most European capitals.

On Russia, Europeans and Americans are much closer, as a result of Russia’s own aggressive behaviour. The meeting between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, the last of the US President’s trip, was important just because it happened: if it is the beginning of a process of dialogue, it will reduce the chance of escalation. And if that enhances Russia’s status as a great power: why not? It satisfies one of Russia’s strategic objectives without any cost to the West.

Multilateralism

“Building Back Better for the World” is Biden’s response to China’s *Belt and Road Initiative*. This sound approach is basically the same as that of the 2019 *EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy*: convince states that maintaining a level economic playing field is in their own interest, both to avoid becoming overly dependent on China and to take up rules-based European and American investment offers. But it suffers from the same weakness too: who will put up the money? Brussels and Washington should not delay putting this strategy in practice.

The EU and the US must indeed set a positive agenda for the world. “We’re not China” is not sufficient to gather support from other countries. They want to know what Brussels and Washington have to offer. Important building blocks of a positive multilateral agenda are the plans to impose a minimum tax on multinational companies, and to reform the World Trade Organization. Both issues will be the subject of complex negotiations, between the EU and the

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US as well as with the rest of the world.

In the same vein, the EU and the US pledged to partner in a Summit *for* Democracy – rather than a Summit *of* Democracies. The latter would all too easily become an alliance against the non-democracies – but the EU and the US need to create thematic coalitions that include the non-democracies to advance multilateral cooperation on specific issues. A Summit *for* Democracy is more about defending democracy within the EU and NATO against internal anti-democratic forces (such as Biden’s predecessor and the homophobic Hungarian government, to name but two).

Resilience and Defense

Indeed, the precondition for engaging the world is to secure one’s home base, hence NATO’s strong emphasis on resilience against “hybrid” threats, notably from Russia and China. The Alliance affirmed that it can activate Article 5 after a hybrid attack, including a cyber-attack, and when these cause casualties or mass disruption, they can indeed be considered acts of war. But most hybrid actions stay below that threshold, so it is questionable whether Article 5 will have a strong deterrent effect.

Instead, a doctrine is needed on a multidimensional response, including diplomatic and economic sanctions, and even cyber-counterattacks. Many of these instruments are not in NATO’s remit, but in that of the EU. It is through the EU that the Europeans can build strong solidarity and deterrence: any cyber attack or economic coercion of one Member State should be retaliated against by all. Controlling access to one’s market is a major part of resilience – and who can or cannot trade or invest on the EU single market is not a decision for anyone but the EU itself to take. The NATO summit rightly pointed out, therefore, that its resilience goals must be compatible with EU competences.

In NATO, the Europeans would do well to urgently address the real defence implications of China’s rise: that the first conventional line of deterrence and defence in Europe must be European, since the US may well prioritise Asia in case of a simultaneous crisis there and in Europe. Biden spoke strong words about the “sacred bond” of Article 5, but in a future crisis American reinforcements might nevertheless come later and in smaller numbers. For the first time since World War II, Europe no longer is the primary theatre for US strategy.

All in all, Europeans are relieved to have an interlocutor again in the White House, and keen to work with Biden. Without, however, abandoning their objective of strategic autonomy. That predated Donald Trump, so it should not be dropped because Trump lost the elections, all the more so because he, or someone like him, may well win the next time. Cooperate when you can – but even against the US, the EU must occasionally push back, if it wants to safeguard European interests.

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