



BIDEN'S VISIT: FIVE MUST-DO'S IN BRUSSELS



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (11 June 2021)
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But there are real strategic questions to be addressed. Questions that Europeans see differently than Americans, but on which they also don't agree among themselves. If Biden's participation in the NATO and EU-US Summits in Brussels on 14-15 June becomes just another good news show (which both NATO and the EU are expert at putting on), that would actually be bad news. Better to have some initial differences if that is the consequence of a real willingness to see things through and make tough strategic decisions.

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For the two Summits to matter, here are five things that leaders must do.

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First, focus NATO on defence. That seems obvious, but it is not, for the NATO apparatus has a tendency to always broaden the agenda. Of course, NATO allies must discuss the climate crisis, migration, energy, terrorism, China etc. – to the extent that they have an impact on the defence of NATO territory. It does not follow that NATO is best placed to actually make and implement policy on all of these issues. In fact, the expertise and the authority are mostly with the states, and with the EU. That is why the EU-US Summit is crucial. NATO as an organisation must focus its new Strategic Concept on its core task: building up sufficient military force to deter and defend against any military threat.

Second, be frank about American priorities. What Europeans can expect, and what they cannot expect from the US, determines what they must deliver themselves in order to achieve sufficient military force. For Washington, the overriding priority is its competition with China, which mainly plays out in Asia. The US should make it clear then that it expects Europeans to take the lead in stabilising their southern flank; indeed, the EU could just be put in charge. But the implications of the US putting China first go much further: it means that the first line of conventional deterrence and defence in Europe must be European. Within NATO, the European allies must have sufficient force to signal that even if the US were preoccupied with a crisis in Asia, Russia could still not win a Blitzkrieg against them.

Third, focus the EU on defence. The Europeans can only ever achieve this level of military force if they make the leap from cooperation to integration. This is what the EU announced when it launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) with the aim of building a comprehensive full spectrum force package. But this is not what the EU is doing: of the large menu that PESCO offers, Europeans have only tasted a few appetisers. The Strategic Compass that the EU is writing is a chance to start making full use of PESCO. If the EU does, PESCO will become the integrated European pillar of NATO. If it doesn't, it will become another failed defence initiative remembered only by the odd academic who writes a PhD about it.

Fourth, remember Harmel. Deterrence and détente go hand in hand, that was the message for NATO from the 1967 Harmel Report. Put differently, the approach to the other great powers, Russia and China, should be one of “cooperate when you can, but push back when you must”. There will be other powers, and they too have legitimate interests and the right to pursue them in legitimate ways. It is not a law of nature that the West ought to lead the world, and Russia and China are not just going to abandon their aspirations. Europeans and Americans may not like Chinese or Russian values and politics, and they do have a moral duty to speak up when they violate human rights – but in the end they cannot change these countries. What

they can affect is their foreign policies, and it is when they cross the line there and threaten our interests that pushing back is imperative.

Fifth, focus on interests. There is no point in talking up an ideological confrontation. Neither

Russia or China is trying to export its political system. The number one challenge for Europeans and Americans rather is to safeguard democracy at home in the face of their own anti-democratic forces, the previous US president included. Europeans and Americans must further ensure that their interests stay sufficiently aligned, for no profession of friendship can cover up strategic divergence otherwise. Halting US extra-territorial sanctions against EU member states would be a good starting point. A pragmatic assessment of common interests rather than high-flown rhetoric about values will provide the foundation for continued transatlantic cooperation.

Living in Brussels since 2007, Sven Biscop will gladly be available as a tour guide for any party of wandering strategists, and explain his ideas for an EU-NATO "concordat" (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/eu-and-nato-strategy-a-compass-a-concept-and-a-concordat/>) in the process.


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