

Policy Paper

100 Days of Biden's New
Transatlantic Strategy – Where
Does Central and Eastern
Europe Stand?

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Introduction

This April marks the first 100-days of the new United States' leadership under the Biden and Harris administration. An administration that has had to balance a range of domestic issues including combatting the ongoing pandemic, rebuilding the economy and healing a divided nation while maintaining early campaign promises in the White House to put America back at the proverbial global table.

So far, Biden has delivered on his global reengagement. He has sought to recommit on multilateral agreements such as the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement among others. More importantly, after four years under Trump's unilateral and often dismissive term, there has been a strong emphasis to restrengthen its relations with global democratic partners, especially with the EU. US-EU relations have an opportunity to realign on various multilateral efforts and foreign policy items including covid recovery, climate change, NATO, digital and trade relations, while dealing with geopolitical challengers such as Russia and China. As Biden calls upon stronger global cooperation based on common values, interests and global influence, the EU has an opportunity to become a more balanced and equal player on addressing these global challenges.

While this reengagement will be key for the EU in further positioning itself as a global leader, growing sentiment towards strategic autonomy and tensions within the EU, particularly by member states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), may hinder this progression. Over the last decade, the region has been displaying troubling authoritarian tendencies, which have placed them in the hot seat with their EU partners. While this may have gone unchecked under the Trump administration, this will likely have political and security consequences under Biden's presidency.

As the world continues to watch how the US develops its new foreign policy orientation, one

thing is certain – if Central and Eastern Europe want to play a strategic role in building the new transatlantic agenda, they should focus on areas including: strengthening their security posture especially under the framework of NATO, countering geopolitical threats such as Russia and China, and addressing the growing democratic backsliding and rule of law in their neighborhood. If not, the region can become susceptible to further division by internal and external actors and undermine EU cohesion. This remains a core aspect of building the new transatlantic relationship as the US wants to engage with a cohesive EU, not a fragmented one. This analysis will take a snapshot of Biden's foreign and security policies towards the EU and in particular, the Central and Eastern European region. It will provide a range of recommendations on how they can engage closer as partners over the next four years and beyond.

A new sheriff (back) in town

President Biden stated that “America cannot afford to be absent any longer on the world stage”¹. Without any surprise, the first few months of Biden's presidency has been to reestablish the US as a global leader – but also to undo some of the previous administration's foreign and security mishaps. As outlined in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance issued by the White House in March, Biden stressed the need for the US to “reclaim our place in international institutions; lift up our values at home and speak out to defend them around the world; modernize our military capabilities, while leading first with diplomacy; and revitalize America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships.” Biden further outlined the shared global security challenges, calling for stronger collective and international action to counter not just pandemics and other biological risks but to mitigate the escalating climate crisis, cyber and digital threats, economic disruptions, humanitarian crises, violent extremism and terrorism, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, among a laundry list of other existential dangers.² To specifically address these global and paramount issues, Biden has called for

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>



reestablishing and strengthening multilateral partnerships including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Further expanded during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's first global tour as Biden's foreign policy right hand, Blinken's stop in Brussels was focused on recommitting the US towards NATO. He addressed NATO's ongoing mission in Afghanistan, regional security efforts in Europe, in particular in response to Turkey, Iran, Russia's aggression, and the NATO's 2030 agenda. Along the sidelines, a meeting with fellow Visegrad Four (V4) leaders—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia took place emphasizing the important role NATO has and continues to play in strengthening Central Europe and the transatlantic alliance. In a press statement from the V4 members, Blinken emphasized collective security, including its adaptation through the NATO 2030 initiative which outlines new threats and challenges, including from a more assertive and aggressive Russia and China. Blinken underscored the transatlantic values that form the foundation of the NATO Alliance and congratulated the V4 on 30 years of partnership since its establishment and noted their leadership in addressing European energy security and economic recovery.³

However, under regional concerns, there was a described "veiled warning for NATO allies who are regressing in democratic practices, like Hungary, Poland and Turkey."⁴ It was reported that without naming and shaming, Blinken inferred that "some of our allies are moving in the wrong direction" and that NATO allies must "all speak up when countries take steps that undermine democracy and human rights".⁵ Despite these concerns, Central and Eastern Europe's geostrategic position and role within NATO remains to be an asset to the relationship, especially when dealing with Europe's Eastern flank and growing concerns around Russia. CEE members have been strong NATO supporters both financially and operationally since their independence. For

instance, Poland remains one of the largest countries on NATO's eastern flank which hosts approximately 4,500 rotational U.S. military personnel.⁶ While not all CEE members hit the financial pledge of spending 2 % of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, security spending and investment continues to be a priority within the region and an area that they are willing to further develop.

Growing mechanisms for further European defense and security coordination through avenues such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) have added to the region's security arsenal by pooling European finances, capacity and military capabilities in pursuit of European strategic autonomy, forming a stronger pillar of NATO. While strategic autonomy has gained traction during the Trump years, political support within Europe is also gaining. This debate has contributed towards a growing a rift in the EU between those who want more autonomy versus those who rely heavily on US engagement – including the CEE region, who are still keen on the US security and nuclear umbrella. While CEE countries have showed that they value EU's this platform as a positive development in the upgrading old Soviet tech and integrating further resources and military tech between other European countries - it should not serve as an alternative to NATO. Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki stated recently that "the consensus on this term in security and defense has not been reached at the EU level. If misunderstood by our allies, this concept might negatively affect transatlantic relations".⁷

³ https://pl.usembassy.gov/meeting_v4/

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/world/europe/Blinken-Biden-NATO-Europe.html?referringSource=articleShare>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/world/europe/Blinken-Biden-NATO-Europe.html?referringSource=articleShare>

⁶ <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/03/31/putins-pipeline-of-aggression-how-the-nord-stream-2-threatens-the-west/>

⁷ <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/polish-pm-voices-a-clear-stance-on-eu-strategic-autonomy-at-eu-summit-20174>



Biding for Central and Eastern Europe

So far, the US administration's focus on tackling immediate shared threats has called upon their EU allies to take a stronger role and to continue to invest in its own defense capabilities. This includes not just investing in stronger NATO cooperation, but also the strengthening of economic and security support in CEE region through various avenues.

For example, Biden has called for the continued development of the region's defense capabilities, prioritizing the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The 3SI helps the US to build "strengthened transatlantic business, energy, and geopolitical ties to Central and Eastern Europe, while also counterbalancing Chinese and Russian efforts to forge inroads to the region."⁸ In March, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a bipartisan resolution in support of the 3SI, which included 43 bipartisan cosponsors, signifying the robust bipartisan support in the Congress for the transatlantic alliance and seen as a "key step to complete the vision of a Europe that is undivided, prosperous, secure, and free from Russian and Chinese malign influence."⁹

On the security front, Biden has looked into reinstating the various treaties including seeking a five-year extension to the New START arms control treaty with Russia. The arms control treaty, which was due to expire in February, limits the United States and Russia to deploying no more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads each and is deemed a national security interest of the US.¹⁰ The New START was outlined in Biden's National Security Strategic Guidance as active steps in reducing the role of nuclear weapon, while ensuring that the US's strategic deterrent remains "safe, secure, and effective and that our extended deterrence commitments to our allies remain strong and

credible"¹¹ – an area that CEE particularly looks to the US for.

In addition, despite the previous administration's withdrawal, Biden has indicated that the Open Skies treaty should be reconsidered. The treaty allowed the United States, NATO allies, Russia, and other European countries to fly over each other's territories and take images to observe military forces and facilities which is vital to transparency and coordination as Russia continues to be a threat. The US withdrawal from the treaty under Trump prompted Russia to consider the same measures earlier this year stating that the US withdrawal "destroyed the balance of interests of the State-Parties" and "inflicted a severe damage to its functioning and undermined the role of the Open Skies Treaty as a confidence and security building measure."¹² During his campaign, Biden condemned the move by the previous administration and is now considering a possible to return the treaty, which would give members of the CEE a sigh of relief as the treaty remains an essential tool for allies to manage the region's military and security.

The threats that bind them all

These bolstered security and policy orientations towards strategic partners, such as CEE, adds to Biden's objective to rebalance the global landscape and engage in strategic competition with Russia and China on various security, economic and geopolitical issues.

Russia, in particular, continues to grow as a strategic threat not just towards the US, but towards the EU and CEE neighborhood. Russia's recent move to mobilize troops along its border with Ukraine presents "a fresh challenge at the Biden administration and threatening to upend a cease-fire between Ukraine and pro-Russian fighters."¹³

⁸ <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-three-seas-initiative-strategic-investment-deserves-the-biden-administrations>

⁹ <https://3seas.eu/media/news/resolution-supporting-three-seas-initiative-unanimously-passes-u-s-house-of-representatives>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-nuclear-idUSKBN29Q2I4>

¹¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

¹² <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-03/news/russia-may-leave-open-skies-treaty>

¹³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-troop-movements-on-ukraine-border-test-biden-administration-11617230084>



Potential flare ups along the border could test Biden's support for Ukraine and to see how far allies will support Europe's east under the new tutelage of Biden's leadership. In addition, continued tensions around the gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 between Germany and Russia, which, once finalized, could pose as an "intelligence threat to the West"¹⁴ leading to an increased presence by the Kremlin to engage in the Baltic sea, but also revive or intensify its military activity in Ukraine. More and more countries, including the new Biden administration have raised red flags and "bipartisan consensus that Nord Stream 2 is a threat to national security." This debate will remain at the forefront along with other concerned countries within Europe, particularly with the countries on NATO's eastern flank.¹⁵

Despite shared security concerns over Russia between CEE and the US, China remains a more challenging security and economic issue. Concerns over China's growing influence is tied to their eagerness to take its place as a global leader on issues such as technology, trade, security, economic and even climate issues, while simultaneously challenging the shared values and the rules-based international order that link the US and EU together. To add to this complexity, the US, the EU and countries within CEE have often taken diverging approaches on dealing with Beijing, often playing into the hands of China.

On the EU side, the recent EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) which allows greater level of market access for EU investors, is the latest example of the growing divergence on US-EU policies towards China. The CAI, which aims to even out the playing field and creating a better balance in the EU-China trade relationship, has been viewed and described as a "geopolitical win for China, and a blow to transatlantic relations"¹⁶. For the EU, it was a chance to display its "strategic autonomy" on foreign

relations before the new Biden administration took place, but for China it could be seen as a "way to drive a wedge between the EU and the United States."¹⁷

For CEE, their complicated relationship went into full force when they joined the now "17+1" where China planned to invest in various European countries, utilizing CEE countries as their 'gateway' into the market. In the words of Andreea Brînză from The Diplomat: "that for the US, the 17+1 mechanism is China's tool to create a sphere of influence in Europe by using soft and hard power; for the European Union, the 17+1 is a mechanism whose ultimate goal is to divide the Union. For the CEE region, however, it is just an annual summit featuring a plethora of unfulfilled promises and projects."¹⁸ And so far, that is what it has proved to be; it was supposed to build infrastructure and invest in new projects and industries, but so far has not yielded the measure of success that China had planned. A big setback started when Romania announced to restrict Chinese companies not only from its transport infrastructure but also from its digital one, and signed a memorandum of understanding with the US to restrict companies like Huawei from building its 5G infrastructure. This now includes CEE as being one of the more restrictive regions for 5G development.¹⁹

So far, CEE has proved itself to be a formidable ally when dealing with an entrenching Russia and an encroaching China. The Biden administration has thus far taken foreign and security approaches to ensure a strong partnership continues. However, under the surface, mounting concerns not just within the EU or US, but across democracies around the world, over specific CEE members, in particular Poland and Hungary's democratic backsliding, may be cause for concern when thinking long-term transatlantic relations.

¹⁴ <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/03/31/putins-pipeline-of-aggression-how-the-nord-stream-2-threatens-the-west/>

¹⁵ <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/03/31/putins-pipeline-of-aggression-how-the-nord-stream-2-threatens-the-west/>

¹⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/the-strategic-implications-of-the-china-eu-investment-deal/>

¹⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/the-strategic-implications-of-the-china-eu-investment-deal/>

¹⁸ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-171-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>

¹⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-171-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>



There's trouble in the neighborhood

Biden's strong pro-democratic rhetoric can be considered the backbone of his foreign and security policy approach. Outlined in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, Biden cautioned that we are "At a time when the need for American engagement and international cooperation is greater than ever, however, democracies across the globe, including our own, are increasingly under siege. Free societies have been challenged from within by corruption, inequality, polarization, populism, and illiberal threats to the rule of law."²⁰ While democratic backsliding has been prevalent across Europe, over the last decade, it has become more mainstream with the help of Trumpism, fueled further by Eurosceptics who have used divisive issues like migration, climate and energy issues and even the pandemic as ways to implement severe measures that restrict fundamental rights.

For the CEE region, it will be a true test to see how they adapt towards a Biden administration – the deterioration of democratic processes and rule of law will certainly come to haunt the region, but the question remains to what extent? For Poland and Hungary, whose relations flourished under Trump's administration, may have to reevaluate their posture to adhere to the pro-democratic policies that the Biden administration will certainly call for, and this can lead to a splintering within the V4 particularly between Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland and Hungary. While the V4 construct and purpose has shifted since its original development, the region may lose its cohesion and approach with the rest of Europe, which for Slovakia and Czech Republic may be a good thing as they lean closer to the EU. The latest example of Poland and Hungary using their combined efforts to block the EU's €750 billion post-pandemic recovery fund, only to later relent, highlights the breakdown in joint policies which may continue to diminish the V4's collective role in Europe and can potentially affect their relations with the US, already raising concerns over their growing democratic deficit.

The implications of democratic backsliding and undermining of the rule of law will certainly have an impact on the future of the transatlantic relationship. However, any economic or security measures taken by the US directly towards these countries may not have the intended outcome. Examining the EU's approach so far, which has been driven by a mixture of legal and infringement procedures along with finger pointing, has unfortunately, not gained traction within these countries, if anything, it has often fueled anti-EU rhetoric even further. The US's approach, as we have already witnessed by Blinken's side comments at the NATO meeting, will not likely pinpoint specific regions, but rather be addressed in the larger transatlantic framework. The US could also stress to their EU counterparts to take a stronger approach towards these countries since EU cohesion is a vital aspect of their continued global leadership and partnership with the Biden administration. Like the US, it will become more and more difficult to call out other authoritarian regimes, when you have issues within your own borders.

Let's wait and CEE

Now that the Biden administration has outlined their main security and policy objectives, which directly and indirectly affect the CEE region, CEE will need to take some stock of their region and consider what kind of future relationship they want as well. If CEE wants to build a stronger partnership with the US, they will need to showcase their combined assets as a unified security and democratic partner to counter today and tomorrow's global challenges. If not, the CEE region may become susceptible to external threats and influence, areas that the region has fought hard to deter since their independence.

Moving forward, in order to stay on Biden's barometer, CEE countries should consider adapting the following recommendations:

- **Security, security and security:** Of the main global security issues, the Biden administration will look to the EU and CEE region to partner on. Continued investment in security and military infrastructure both

²⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>



within NATO and the EU will provide a security insurance for themselves which is where PESCO, EDF, and CSDP can come into play. CEE should stick to their security strengths and develop themselves further as a security leader for NATO and the EU.

measures, rule of law in the CEE region and create more economic and security incentives for Poland and Hungary to course correct. A little peer pressure couldn't hurt.

- **Closing the gate on China:** As the EU develops its economic and trade relationship with China, CEE should remain vigilant as the 17+1 partnership evolves. By closing the gate or making it more difficult for China to 'divide and conquer' the region, they are positioning China to deal with the EU as a cohesive unit. This strategic positioning will also give leverage to the region's relations with the US as they also work to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative with the continued investment in the Three Seas Initiative.
- **Russia's backstop:** Ukraine is proving to be a potential hot spot for US-Russian relations. By developing a stronger regional approach both within the NATO framework and as a collective, could help position themselves as a vital bridge for the US. The V4 in particular, have a strategic advantage in the area and should continue to develop and flex their defense capabilities and assets.
- **Common grounds:** Biden outlined many global issues including climate, energy, and post-pandemic economic recovery as the US' main policy challenges. These issues should not just be driven by the EU, but CEE can position themselves by taking on these challenges within their policy objectives. This could put them on the map as some of the leaders and the US will see them as allies in these issues, rather than obstacles.
- **Lastly, listen to thy neighbor:** As mentioned, Poland and Hungary have stood out as problematic democratic partners not just for the EU, but for the US. Other countries within the region like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, should take a stronger stance in promoting liberal values such as democracy, human rights, anti-corruption



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