

# OPINION

DANIEL FRIED

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## AMERICA AND THE WORLD 2021

President-elect Joe Biden and his team have been clear about their world view and priorities: in general, they will seek to restore America's alliances—bringing together the world's democracies—to contend better with the world's autocracies, especially China and Putin's Russia. As Biden put it as he introduced Antony Blinken (his choice for Secretary of State) and Jake Sullivan (his pick for National Security Advisor), "America is back," by which he seemed to mean that America is back in its role as champion of a rules-based international order that favors democracy, aka the liberal international order, aka the Free World.

Biden's team also has made clear that they are not interested in restoration to an imagined "good old days". Instead, they argue, the US must tackle new challenges, not just the pandemic and climate change, but economic challenges building up over many years that are driving the rise of extremist populism. Sullivan, in his first interview after being named Biden's NSA, made clear his interest in a US foreign policy that helps Americans, particularly the middle class.<sup>1</sup> That's not America First, the Democratic Party version, but a welcome return to a basic truth that grounded US foreign policy of both parties after 1945: that a rules-based system, including in trade and finance, with more space for innovation and growth and less room for corrupt oligarchs, cheap speculation, and predatory or monopolistic behavior, was good both the world and for Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> N. Bertrand, *The inexorable rise of Jake Sullivan*, „Politico”, 27 November 2020, [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

Foreign policy often flows from domestic priorities. President Harry Truman, who established the American-led free world order after 1945, was trying to avoid the nationalism, depression, and political extremism that had brought about World War II. He resisted Stalin's aggression, applying to foreign policy the conceptual principles of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the democratic alternative to Stalinism and fascism: that meant strengthening international governance through new regulatory norms and systems to avoid or redress destructive social and economic imbalances that fueled nationalism. The thinking behind the New Deal led to the Marshall Plan, the IMF, World Bank, the GATT (now the WTO), and what eventually became the EU.

The Biden Administration won't have the political power in Congress to do its own New Deal domestically. But it will apply its reformist impulse abroad, to look to democracies working in concert to fix problems, and to re-gear and reform, not blow up, international systems, aiming to check autocratic powers and create better conditions for sustainable and more equitable prosperity.

Of course, no matter what Team Biden sets out to achieve, they, like all US Administrations, will be driven by events and surprises. Still, their starting framework will be the context for their actions.

## EUROPE

The Biden Administration is probably the most pro-European since that of George H. W. Bush, committed to NATO and supportive of the European Union. Biden's initial approach to Europe as President can be surmised by recalling Biden's first foreign policy speech as Vice President, given at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009 (and prepared by Tony Blinken).<sup>2</sup> Biden then declared that, after the George W. Bush Administration, America was back as a loyal ally and responsible steward of a values-based system of alliances; urged Europe needs to step up its contribution to that alliance system; and outlined priorities for the US and Europe to tackle together, working closely with the world's other democracies.

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<sup>2</sup> *Remarks by Vice President Biden at 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy*, The White House, President Barack Obama, 7 stycznia 2009 r., <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>.

Biden will likely send a similar message now, with greater emphasis on the US and Europe combining efforts to address flaws, including those within democracies, that have led to economic and social discontent, fed demagoguery, and allowed authoritarians to challenge the free world order. It will include calls for democratic powers to challenge China's predatory approach to the international economic system and its aggressive, repressive mode of behavior. Overall, Biden may urge Europe and the US to lead a global renewal, an international version of his campaign slogan "build back better."<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, Biden may welcome the call, e.g., by French President Emmanuel Macron, for Europe to play a larger world role, while accepting some of the rhetorical extravagance around advocacy of European "autonomy." He will almost certainly embrace, as has German Defense Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer, inalienable transatlantic ties, especially in security, i.e., NATO, while urging the Germans and other Europeans to match that principled commitment with commensurate capabilities, as the UK is already doing.

In short, Biden is likely to call for Europe to be more of a co-leader with the US and other democracies, offering a US that listens, not just leads, while remaining true to shared, democratic values.

## EUROPE'S EAST AND RUSSIA

Biden and his foreign policy team are unlikely to rush to a new reset with Putin's Russia. They've been there and done that (the Obama reset). Tony Blinken was critical in moving the Obama Administration to support sanctions after Putin's invasion of Ukraine; Mike Carpenter, one of Team Biden's European experts, was the State Department Desk Officer for Georgia during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. They and others in the Biden Administration's foreign policy team are likely to develop a Russia policy that (wisely) doesn't seek an ambitious Grand Bargain with Putin, but resists Putin's aggression; seeks to stabilize the relationship, e.g., avoiding military provocations; cooperates where possible, e.g., arms control, but

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<sup>3</sup> D. Fried, B. Haddad, "Biden Knows Europe, and Europe Knows Biden: That's Not Enough," *Foreign Policy*, 19 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

without sacrificing US friends, allies, or values in the process; and invests in a better future with Russia by reaching out to Russian society.

That's not visionary. But it's the realistic course given the nature of late Putinism that, like a similar period of "stagnation" under Brezhnev's Soviet Union, leaves little room for creativity except on Kremlin terms.<sup>4</sup>

As Senator and Vice President, Biden has a long history of support for the countries East of Germany and West of Russia that have sought to escape Kremlin domination and find a way to Europe and the transatlantic community. He follows in this respect the tradition of Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt (of the Atlantic Charter), Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan; not the tradition of Roosevelt at Yalta, or Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger during the era of "détente" with the USSR, or some in the Trump Administration.<sup>5</sup>

Biden supported NATO's enlargement to Poland, Czechia, and Hungary in the 1990s and to the Baltics and other Central European countries during the Bush Administration and later; and he has been staunch in support of Ukraine's and Georgia's Euroatlantic aspirations. He and his team are unlikely to flip and start looking at the countries of Europe's East as objects to be traded or through a Kremlin perspective. They will almost certainly be consistent in support for democracy in Belarus. Biden will also, however, match support for the sovereignty of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, with a steady push for them to deepen their transformations at home.

The tools will include continued military strengthening of NATO's eastern flank; coordinated use of sanctions to forestall new Kremlin aggression against Ukraine or Belarus, possibly to encourage the Kremlin to reach a settlement in the Donbas consistent with the Minsk Accords goal of restoring Ukraine's sovereignty there; common efforts to blunt Kremlin disinformation and support independent Russian and Russian-language free journalism; and, as the Biden team has made clear, intensified efforts to go after dirty money flows by kleptocrats and oligarchs that form the basis of Putin's rule.

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<sup>4</sup> For additional recommendations for US Russia policy, see *Report launch: How the West should deal with Russia*, Atlantic Council, 23 November 2020, <https://atlanticcouncil.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Professor Jan Malicki, I teach a course at Warsaw University's East European Studies Department devoted to these themes in US foreign policy.

## THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE AND NORDSTREAM 2

Incoming Administrations frequently reject policy initiatives launched or associated with their predecessors, but the Biden Administration may continue US support for the Three Seas Initiative. In fact, US support for reducing Russian energy leverage over Europe and especially Central Europe—one of the objectives of Three Seas—goes back to the Clinton Administration. The Biden team may seek to put its own stamp on Three Seas by adding a “green energy” dimension and strengthen the connection between Three Seas and the EU, but initial indications suggest it will be supportive.

The Biden team may also look at Three Seas as one way to mitigate the risks that the Nordstream 2 gas pipeline poses to Europe energy security. The Obama Administration—led in this by Amos Hockstein, a close Biden advisor who was the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Energy—was skeptical about Nordstream 2 from the start, because of its potential to allow Russia to cut off gas through Ukraine and to Central Europe while continuing to supply Germany, disrupting the integrity of the EU gas market.

The Biden Administration will face the dilemma of opposing Nordstream 2 while seeking to rebuild relations with Germany and therefore will not be eager to impose sanctions against Germany companies or institutions over Nordstream. While Nordstream 2 (like Nordstream 1) remains a policy mistake by the German government, it may be possible to mitigate the project’s risks, e.g., by increasing LNG capacity, building more pipelines to move gas east from Germany or northeast from the Adriatic or from other points not controlled by Russia, enforcing the anti-monopoly provisions of the EU Third Energy Package, and other means. The Three Seas Initiative could be a useful vehicle for Germany and the EU to increase support for Central Europe’s energy independence and an undivided EU gas market, making Nordstream 2 less of a strategic risk, if in fact it is completed.

## THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION AND POLAND

Poland and US, regardless of the partisan character of their respective governments, have worked together since 1989 to advance common strategic interests reflecting common democratic values: both supported a united Europe in alliance with a United States; both were thus committed

to NATO and NATO's enlargement and to the EU and EU enlargement; both have tried to achieve good relations with Russia but were not willing to ignore Kremlin aggression; both supported Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and, recently, Belarus as its peoples in various ways sought to defend democracy and sovereignty in their countries in the face of Kremlin pressure.

That common agenda is a solid basis for continued bilateral cooperation. Moreover, Biden and his senior team have a good history of working with Poland. Then Senator Biden was one of the pillars in the Democratic Party in the 1990s supporting Poland's membership in NATO; Tony Blinken, as a Clinton foreign policy speech writer, worked closely with me to make the case for NATO enlargement in the face of much reluctance within the US foreign policy establishment. They and others on his team have strong memories of Solidarity, 1989, and Poland's success afterwards in building free-market democracy and prosperity after the fall of ruinous communism.

Overhanging this hopeful background is the question of whether politics, on either side, will get in the way. Poles worry whether the Polish government's close relations with Trump will be a mark against them in the Biden Administration. Probably not, in my view: the Biden people are not vindictive and, despite affinity for Trump, Polish leaders did not endorse him and avoided explicitly partisan rhetoric in the US. (The same cannot be said for some other Central European governments.)

Of greater concern is whether some harder edge Polish policies can hinder what ought to be a strong, common agenda between close allies. Biden will support a strong Europe; Poland is seen as constantly fighting with Brussels; Biden will seek to restore close ties with Germany; Poland seems to sometimes use Germany as a rhetorical punching bag for domestic purposes. For decades, Poland, rightly, pressed the US to take democracy seriously as a core strategic objective. Now, Poland is sometimes seen as defending national sovereignty against assertions of responsibility for universal democratic standards. Sovereignty is a good thing. But Poles, particularly those from the Solidarity movement, for years made the case that democratic values could not be abridged by condemning "interference in internal affairs."

The Biden team will watch what Poland does in the weeks and months ahead; I suspect that if Poland finds ways to settle its current fights with the EU and avoid new conflicts (e.g., over media freedom, under the guise of greater national ownership, or over the judiciary), the natural commonality

of interests will prevail. The Biden team will have to be judicious in the issues it focuses on; the political character of democratically-elected Polish governments is nobody business but the Poles. Freedom, however, as Poles used to say (“Za Naszą i Waszą Wolność”) is everybody’s business.

President-elect Biden speaks of democracy as a core principle of US strategy. Poland has been a champion of that principle. Both countries will gain, and so will relations between them, as they recall their best traditions.