

Past as Prologue? The United States and European Strategic Autonomy in the Biden Era

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Europe breathed a sigh of relief after Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election, following a difficult period for transatlantic relations under Donald Trump. Yet, a friendlier tone in Washington has not so far translated into markedly better relations between the US and Europe. This article inquires why Biden – a pro-European President by disposition – is not proving more amenable to transatlantic relations in general, and European strategic autonomy in particular. It suggests that the considerable continuity between Biden and Trump can be explained by an interplay between the historical legacy of transatlantic relations, international and domestic structural factors, and on-going ideational contests over US grand strategy. Considering these factors, the US approach to Europe in the Biden era looks to oscillate between a 'primacy' model, marked by a US expectation that it will continue to lead and determine the direction of the transatlantic alliance, as well as 'benign neglect' of Europe in an age marked by 'strategic competition' with China. Neither approach is particularly conducive to the development of European Union (EU) strategic autonomy. In the meantime, the transition from Trump to the Biden era continues to hold little promise for a mutually negotiated 'major reform' of the transatlantic relationship.

Keywords: transatlantic relations – foreign policy – European Union – United States – strategic autonomy, grand strategy – primacy – restraint – Biden – Trump

1 INTRODUCTION

Europe breathed a sigh of relief after Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election, following a difficult period for transatlantic relations under Donald Trump. The former denounced the European Union (EU) as a foe, whilst constantly berating allies about defence-spending within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Trump even cast doubt on the United States' commitment to Article V security guarantees. Granted, the picture was not uniformly negative, with the US actually investing more than it had during the Obama years in the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), designed to bolster NATO's Eastern flank.

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However, such a step was generally the exception during an otherwise challenging time for transatlantic ties. Beyond NATO, the Trump administration resorted to secondary sanctions that stifled Europe's ability to preserve the Iran nuclear deal. The president also shunned multilateralism, withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO). Thus, Trump questioned the value and utility of *both* the transatlantic bond *and* the liberal international order writ large. By doing so, he effectively endeavoured to keep 'Europe ... divided, weak and relatively inconsequential as Washington sought to outcompete Beijing in order to retain global primacy'.¹

It is therefore unsurprising that the push for *European strategic autonomy*, defined as a more holistic drive to allow Europe to 'shape international politics based on a distinct set of European values and interests',² gained momentum after 2016. Concerned about the reliability of the US, many EU Member States argued that it was time for the EU to develop the requisite capabilities and will to forge a more independent path in the international arena – militarily, economically, and in terms of technology.

Once in office, President Biden lost no time in trying to reassure America's allies, quickly announcing US re-entry into the Paris climate accord, reversing its impending withdrawal from the WHO, and stopping a troop drawdown from Germany previously announced by Trump. In June 2021, he also visited Europe for a string of summits and consistently drove home the message of America's return to the fold, keen to signal a stark break from his predecessor.

Yet, a friendlier tone in Washington has not necessarily translated into markedly better relations between the transatlantic partners. The US' unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in August 2021, and the sudden announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) agreement the following month, which torpedoed France's lucrative submarine contract with Australia, were reminiscent of the alliance management shortcomings that marked the Trump years. The Biden team has also embraced other core Trump policies, especially in the field of trade and the 'strategic competition' approach toward China.

This beckons two pertinent questions: Why is a pro-European President in Biden not proving more amenable to transatlantic relations in general, and European strategic autonomy in particular? And why are we not observing a sharper departure from the Trump era? We suggest that the answer lies in how deeper structural forces, especially the legacy of history, and how the US views its role on an evolving world stage, are limiting the ability of Biden to dramatically

¹ L. Desmaele, *Unpacking the Trump Administration's Grand Strategy in Europe: Power Maximisation, Relative Gains and Sovereignty*, Eur. Sec. 1–20, 14 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1987224>.

² N. Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe's Global Agenda*, 119 FIIA Working Paper, 1–13, 4 (2020), <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/eu-strategic-autonomy> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

deviate from Trump, who – despite being a ‘disruptor’ – was likewise constrained by such forces.³

This article starts with a brief review of the Biden presidency so far. We emphasize the significant continuity with his predecessor, partly a function of how the Biden administration exercises its foreign policy agency against the backdrop of international and domestic structural drivers and contending ideas regarding US global engagement.

We then focus on the evolving US partnership with Europe since 1945, with the analysis uncovering three main pillars, namely: (1) Europe’s centrality as a theatre and the related US *commitment* to the transatlantic relationship, (2) the role of American leadership and the *expectation* of European alignment, as well as (3) US *confidence* in European capabilities and its ability to assume a more autonomous role. The choices made in the field of security during the early part of the Cold War, in Washington and in European capitals, have become deeply enshrined, making a restructuring of the Transatlantic partnership in the present that much more difficult.

The article then pivots to key structural factors, including fraught great-power dynamics, the crisis of the liberal international order, as well as domestic-political drivers in the US. Each of these feed into current elite-level debates over the US’ role in the world – its grand strategy – pitting advocates of primacy against the restraint camp, with neither group particularly open to *actively* supporting greater European strategic autonomy.

We then follow our discussion with a presentation of three distinct models that the US under Biden might follow in regard to European strategic autonomy, namely *benign neglect*, *primacy* and *major reform*. Each of these models implies a different mix of US commitment to, expectations of, and confidence towards Europe. The conclusion assesses the prospects of each model in light of the preceding discussion. While European strategic autonomy is a broad concept, this article concentrates predominantly on the security angle; and it is most concerned with deciphering American perceptions toward strategic autonomy, as opposed to explaining European actions to promote this agenda.

2 THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

The honeymoon period for transatlantic relations turned out to be short lived, despite the high hopes that accompanied Biden’s election. Domestic woes and international drivers have hindered Biden’s envisaged reset with European allies,

³ Compare J. Peterson, *Structure, Agency and Transatlantic Relations in the Trump Era*, 40(5) J. Eur. Integ. 637–652, 640–644 (2018).

which in turn has not been helped by blunders in alliance management with Afghanistan and the AUKUS agreement. After a year in office, Biden's foreign policy shows clear continuity with the Trump years.

Biden has certainly distanced himself from his predecessor by stressing the centrality of alliances and international cooperation. Thus, the US quickly rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and the WHO. During his first trip to Europe in June, Biden struck the right tones with assurances to NATO allies, while the US and the EU also resolved a long-festering dispute over airline subsidies.

However, the fallout from the January 6 storming of the Capitol – at the urging of former president Trump – was a dramatic reminder of Biden's domestic priorities. While campaigning and in office, Biden and close aides have advocated for 'a foreign policy for the middle class',⁴ tying the president's expansive domestic legislative agenda to US global engagement. Improving the lives of ordinary Americans is thus seen as tantamount to rebuilding the domestic sources of American power.

Biden has prioritized vaccinating Americans and passing a USD 1.9 trillion Covid relief package. Another headline initiative, a USD 1.2 trillion infrastructure bill, passed in early November with some bipartisan support in Congress; yet, Biden has failed to push his ambitious Build Back Better Act covering education, social welfare, and climate policies through the Senate. This underscores Biden's razor-thin electoral mandate in a polarized country. In the meantime, the administration has committed to ending America's 'forever wars', and indicated little appetite for pursuing free trade agreements, while keeping most Trump-era tariffs in place.

Biden has been slow to undo Trump's agenda in other areas as well. A deal with the EU on easing Trump-era steel and aluminium tariffs only occurred in late October and talks on the Iran nuclear deal have dragged on into 2022. In Afghanistan, Biden honoured an agreement that Trump had struck with the Taliban. Ultimately, the swift collapse of the Afghan security forces precipitated a chaotic evacuation operation of US, allied and Afghan nationals before the 31 August deadline. European allies grumbled about the unilateral withdrawal decision and haphazard coordination during the evacuation, while domestic critics blamed the administration for undermining US credibility.⁵

⁴ J. R. Biden Jr., *Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World* (Washington, D.C. 4 Feb. 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022); S. Ahmed et al., *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/23/making-u.s.-foreign-policy-work-better-for-middle-class-pub-82728> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁵ K. Schake, *The Roads Not Taken in Afghanistan*, *Foreign Affairs* (25 Aug. 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-25/roads-not-taken-afghanistan> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

Additionally, while the Biden administration prefers ‘strategic competition’ to his predecessor’s slogan of ‘great-power competition’, its underlying message remains similar. Of course, Russia is still acknowledged as a near-term security threat. This reality has been driven home by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, preceded by threatening troop movements and President Vladimir Putin’s maximalist demands to renegotiate the European security architecture. The Biden administration initially took the lead on diplomacy, and has since coordinated closely with the EU to place crippling sanctions on Russia’s banking and financial sectors, as well as Putin’s inner circle. The US has also signalled resolve by bolstering the defence of Eastern Europe and providing, along with its European allies and partners, weapons to Ukraine.

In the longer run, however, the strategic compass of the United States will slowly but surely shift towards the Indo-Pacific. In a divided country, competing with China qualifies as a rare item that has broad bipartisan support, and the US remains bent on challenging China holistically.⁶ Per Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the US-China ‘relationship [...] will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be’.⁷ This means retaining parts of the Trump approach, including the ‘Phase One’ trade deal and tariffs, spiced up with sector-specific cooperation, particularly on climate change.

The Biden administration is also intent on bringing allies and partners, via different fora, on board in a common front to combat Beijing’s influence. The Quad – which includes the US, Japan, India and Australia – has already held two unprecedented leaders’-level summits during Biden’s tenure, underlining their joint vision of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP), a moniker popularized in the Trump era.⁸ On 15 September, the US, the UK and Australia also announced the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, which would give Australia access to nuclear propulsion technology in the development of its submarine fleet. However, this left France infuriated, as Paris lost a USD 66 billion contract to build diesel-powered submarines for Australia.⁹

⁶ J. R. Biden Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022); E. A. Colby & A. W. Mitchell, *The Age of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy*, 99(1) *Foreign Aff.* 118–130 (2020).

⁷ A. J. Blinken, *A Foreign Policy for the American People*, U.S. Department of State (3 Mar. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁸ J. R. Biden Jr., N. Modi, S. Morrison & Y. Suga, *Opinion: Our Four Nations Are Committed to a Free, Open, Secure and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, *Washington Post* (13 Mar. 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/13/biden-modi-morrison-suga-quad-nations-indo-pacific/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁹ M. Leonard, *The False Promise of AUKUS*, *ECFR Commentary* (29 Sept. 2021), <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-false-promise-of-aukus/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

Finally, the administration wants to revitalize democracy worldwide. Unlike Trump, Biden is deeply wedded to America's indispensable role in upholding a liberal international order.¹⁰ In keeping with his campaign promise, the administration held a first 'Summit for Democracy' on 9–10 December 2021 albeit to little fanfare. However, by frequently defining the contest between democratic and authoritarian systems of government as central for the twenty-first century, Biden has built a bridge between strategic competition and his democracy agenda.¹¹

Despite Biden's rhetorical departure from his predecessor, the necessity of navigating domestic and international structural imperatives have resulted in considerable foreign-policy continuity from the Trump years. Biden has played to domestic concerns by withdrawing from Afghanistan and preserving some pre-existing barriers to trade. The administration has also prioritized relationships that deliver for the imperative of strategic competition, be it raising the profile of the Quad or engaging in 'minilateralism' with Australia and the UK whilst snubbing France.¹² In these instances, Biden's alliance management has occasionally taken a transactionalist turn, the recent coordination with allies on Ukraine notwithstanding. The new administration's China policy retains the hawkishness of the Trump years, despite the added nuance. Biden's frequent references to the virtues of democracy, for their part, actually mix with the broader framework of strategic competition. These apparent continuities have even spurred observations that Biden has pursued an 'America First' policy, albeit with a more polite demeanour.¹³

Against this backdrop, there is limited cause for enthusiasm for a mutually agreed upon reform of transatlantic relations. That scepticism is only further reinforced by the legacy of over seventy years of US primacy and leadership of the Western alliance.

3 A SYNOPTIC HISTORY: FROM THE FAILURE OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE COMMUNITY (EDC) TO THE ERA OF AMERICA FIRST

How the European security architecture emerged after 1945 in the Western part of the continent, and how it evolved in the following decades, still deeply shapes US views of common European defence initiatives. This does not mean American

¹⁰ A. Ettinger, *Rumors of Restoration: Joe Biden's Foreign Policy and What It Means for Canada*, 27(2) *Can. Foreign Pol'y J.* 157–174 (2021).

¹¹ H. Brands, *The Emerging Biden Doctrine*, *Foreign Affairs* (29 June 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

¹² L. Vinjamuri, *Biden's Realism Will Drive Competition Among US Allies*, *Chatham House* (23 Sept. 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/bidens-realism-will-drive-competition-among-us-allies> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

¹³ R. Haass, *The Age of America First: Washington's Flawed New Foreign Policy Consensus*, 100(6) *Foreign Aff.* 85–98 (2021).

perceptions have remained static in the last seventy-six years, with noticeable differences between the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. But, this historical legacy has undoubtedly made Washington more reticent, or even hostile, toward the idea of rethinking its major assumptions about the desirability of greater European strategic autonomy in the present.

Initially, the US worried primarily about the ideological and economic menace posed by the Soviet Union, and how communism might try to benefit from the economic despair and slow recovery in Western Europe to gain power via the ballot box. The Marshall Plan was thus a very generous, but one time effort, to revitalize the economies of the Western European partners so they did not succumb to communism. Yet, the growing East-West tension in 1948, be it the communist coup in Czechoslovakia or the sudden Berlin blockade, raised fears in the US and Western Europe that the Soviet Union might pose a credible military threat as well. It also strengthened the case for establishing some sort of Atlantic pact; absent a clearer security commitment from the United States, Western Europe might struggle to regain its prosperity.¹⁴

What form such a pact might take, however, and the extent of US entanglement was up to debate throughout 1948 and 1949. George Kennan, for one, favoured a ‘dumb-bell’ approach, a mostly European organization with the US prepared to intervene only under worst-case scenarios.¹⁵ There were, additionally, significant debates between American and Western European partners, including over the duration of any such defence treaty and how ironclad the US guarantee would be to defend Europe (*see* Article V).¹⁶ Although established in April 1949, it was only after the outbreak of the Korean War that NATO developed a clear military integrated structure, and the US fully cemented its commitment to the defence of Western Europe.

In the same manner, the choices in the early years of the Cold War also limited the space for greater European defence autonomy. French Prime Minister René Pleven first proposed the EDC in 1950, as a direct response to US calls for West German rearmament. However, the planned supranational army under the umbrella of NATO would have also helped develop a distinct European pillar in defence.

The eventual failure of the EDC, torpedoed by French opposition in 1954, proved particularly consequential. It enshrined NATO as the sole security institution in Western Europe for the rest of the Cold War, confining European integration largely to economic matters. It also cemented the ‘Atlantic choice’,

¹⁴ J. Shea, *1949: NATO'S Anxious Birth*, NATO (12 Dec. 2016), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_139301.htm (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ North Atlantic Treaty, Art. V (4 Apr. 1949), 34 U.N.T.S. 243.

and the US' unquestioned leadership of the alliance. Future European defence initiatives would be assessed according to how they were received in Washington, as opposed to how they might contribute to European security.¹⁷

The following decades, for several reasons, left little room for greater European autonomy in the field of defence. First, throughout the rest of the Cold War, the United States generally considered Europe a central theatre for its overall foreign policy. Washington displayed a significant commitment to defending Western Europe, symbolized in particular by the high number of US troops stationed in allied countries. Granted, the importance of Europe occasionally ebbed and flowed during the conflict with the Soviet Union, with the Vietnam War capturing a large part of the US attention in the 1960s and 1970s. But the occasional threats that the US might disengage from Europe were never very credible. That was equally true of John Foster Dulles' veiled warning of an 'agonizing reappraisal of basic United States policy' over the EDC,¹⁸ as it was for the August 1966 Mansfield Resolution calling for a substantial cut in US troop levels in Europe.¹⁹

Second, the extensive American commitment to defending Western Europe meant Washington regarded itself as the unquestionable leader of the Western alliance, and consistently expected that its allies would follow in its footsteps in the fight against the Soviet Union. This is not to say that Washington's partners were always pliable. The Suez Crisis of 1956, the French withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966, or the Euro missile crisis in later years show that Western European allies had no compunction thumbing their noses at Washington. Yet, the fundamental role of the United States as underwriter of Western European security, buttressed by its large nuclear arsenal, meant there were few other credible options for Alliance leadership.

Third, US administrations consistently expressed frustration with their allies' capabilities, as well as over burden-sharing. As John F. Kennedy stated in 1963, 'we cannot continue to pay for the military protection of Europe while the NATO states are not paying their fair share and living off the 'fat of the land'.²⁰ When Europeans did take initiatives, such as General de Gaulle's Fouchet Plan in

¹⁷ S. Keukeleire, *European Security and Defense Policy: From Taboo to a Spearhead of EU Foreign Policy*, in *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* 51–72, 52 (F. Bindi ed., Brookings 2010).

¹⁸ US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1952–1954*, Western European Security, vol. V, Part 1 (1983), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v05p1/d462> (accessed 29 Nov. 2021).

¹⁹ See T. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* 122 (Harvard University Press 2003).

²⁰ US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961–1963* vol. XIII, Western Europe And Canada (1994), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v13/d168> (accessed 27 Nov. 2021).

1961–62,²¹ which proposed greater intergovernmental cooperation in the field of defence between the six members of the European Economic Community (EEC), the US reacted with suspicion. Besides the concerns that de Gaulle's visions for European defence might undermine NATO, US reticence was also connected to negative views of the French president.²²

The Cold War era thus enshrined three key pillars regarding the US attitude toward common European defence initiatives: US remained highly *committed* to Europe as a key theatre; the US regarded itself as the unquestioned leader of the Western Alliance and *expected* European support; and NATO had sole responsibility for military affairs, with Washington having low *confidence* in Europe's defence capabilities.

Naturally, these same principles underwent some evolution after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1991, we have witnessed a clear recalibration of US interests, with a lesser investment in Europe. Thus, the US presently stations less than 70,000 troops in Europe,²³ down from a Cold War peak of over 300,000.²⁴ Additionally, other theatres have increasingly competed for attention from leaders in Washington, be it the greater Middle East following the 9/11 attacks or the Indo-Pacific in the past decade.

The US has certainly not abandoned Europe. After all, crises have occasionally drawn the US back to the continent, whether the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s or Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014; and Washington has continually supported the expansion of NATO. But, absent existential threats, the US has still somewhat disengaged from Europe in the post-Cold War period.

This lesser focus, however, did not translate into meaningful support from Washington for greater European autonomy in the field of defence, despite the EU committing to greater integration in that field after years of neglect. Instead, the US' attitude has remained Janus like in the post-Cold War period: 'On the one hand, the US tends to recognize that Europe needs to have a more dynamic and responsible defence role. On the other hand, Janus' other face is determined to limit that role at all costs in order to safeguard classic alliances'.²⁵ Successive administrations ebbed and

²¹ CVCE.eu, *Draft Treaty – Fouchet Plan II* (18 Jan. 1962), https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/draft_treaty_fouchet_plan_ii_18_january_1962-en-c9930f55-7d69-4edc-8961-4f12cf7d7a5b.html (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

²² M. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* 393 (Princeton University Press 1999).

²³ J. Siebens, R. Lucas & J. Wang, *US Global Force Posture and US Military Operations Short of War*, Stimson Center (14 July 2021), <https://www.stimson.org/2021/us-global-force-posture-and-us-military-operations-short-of-war/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

²⁴ T. Kane, *The Decline of American Engagement: Patterns in U.S. Troop Deployments*, Hoover Institution Economics Working Paper (2016), <https://www.hoover.org/research/decline-american-engagement-patterns-us-troop-deployments> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

²⁵ C.-P. David & F. Ramel, *The Bush Administration's Image of Europe: From Ambivalence to Rigidity*, 8(1) *Int'l J. Peace Stud.* (2003), para. 16, https://www3.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol8_1/David%20and%20Ramel.htm (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

flowed in their attitude, but they rarely shifted from either opposition or scepticism as it relates to common European defence initiatives.

Thus, the George H.W. Bush administration appeared hostile to common European military aspirations. It applied pressure in 1991–92 against the Franco-German Eurocorps plan, fearing that this initiative would undermine NATO.²⁶ With the end of the Cold War, the US was particularly concerned that its European allies might be tempted by alternative security arrangements, which could weaken NATO, ‘thereby depriving the United States of its main lever of influence over the continent and severing the transatlantic bond’.²⁷

The Clinton administration, unlike its predecessor, did show a greater openness toward common European defence and the emergence of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). But, it was not an absolute support either. Following the December 1998 St Malo Declaration,²⁸ whereby the UK and France agreed that the EU needed autonomous capacity backed by credible military forces, the US responded with a clear warning. At the NATO Council, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright indicated that common European defence initiatives would be acceptable if they respected the ‘3Ds’: ‘no diminution of NATO, no discrimination and no duplication’.²⁹

The US attitude under the Clinton administration could therefore best be characterized, in the words of Stanley Sloan, as ‘yes, but’: Washington, with its low confidence in its allies’ capabilities, would accept European defence initiatives as long as they placed US interests at the forefront.³⁰ Moreover, the US ambivalence in the 1990s was very much a by-product of the particular geopolitical context of the time, reflecting concerns about NATO’s future.³¹

Washington’s mindset regarding European defence did not change with the times in the following two decades. Granted, the George W. Bush and the Trump administrations showed more open hostility in respect to European initiatives than

²⁶ M. Fisher, *Germans Caught in U.S.-French Drift*, Washington Post (27 June 1992), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/27/germans-caught-in-us-french-rift/a7ef5d96-6548-4a54-a844-5713f90b2bd8/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

²⁷ L. Horowitz, *The George H.W. Bush Administration’s Policies Vis-à-vis Central Europe: From Cautious Encouragement to Cracking Open NATO’s Door*, in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War 71–92*, 78 (Daniel S. Hamilton & Kristina Spohr eds, Brookings 2019).

²⁸ CVCE.eu, *Franco-British St. Malo Declaration* (4 Dec. 1998), https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/franco_british_st_malo_declaration_4_december_1998-en-f3cd16fb-fc37-4d52-936f-c8e9bc80f24f.html (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

²⁹ NATO On-line Library, *Press Conference by US Secretary of State Albright* (8 Dec. 1998), <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1998/s981208x.htm> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

³⁰ S. R. Sloan, *The United States and European Defence*, Chaillot Papers, 39 (European Union Institute for Security Studies 2000), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/united-states-and-european-defence> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

³¹ M. Bergmann, J. Lamond & S. Cicarelli, *The Case for EU Defense: A New Way Forward for Trans-Atlantic Security*, Center for American Progress (1 June 2021), <https://americanprogress.org/article/case-eu-defense/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

the US under Obama. Yet, fundamentally, as Max Bergmann et al. suggest, ‘The fact that US policy toward European defence has remained relatively unchanged since the 1990s and continues to all but ignore the EU represents a total strategic failure’.³² That deep historical legacy has only been further reinforced by the evolution of grand strategy debates among US circles in recent years, which centre on the extent of US engagement in the world and competition with China, as opposed to genuinely reconsidering the approach to European defence.

4 GLOBAL CHALLENGES, DOMESTIC DRIVERS AND GRAND-STRATEGIC DEBATES

The Biden presidency is navigating tense great-power relations, particularly between the US and China, a related crisis of the liberal international order, and a wide array of domestic challenges. These structural factors have triggered a frenzy of debate in policymaking, think tank, and academic circles over the United States’ future role in the world, over the very ideas that inform US foreign policy agency. However, these elite-level ideational contests between primacists and advocates of restraint have not centred on the future of the transatlantic relationship and European strategic autonomy *per se*, shedding some light on the continuity from Trump to Biden.

The rapid growth of China’s economic and military power is arguably the most important structural change in international politics since 1991. The US now regards China as a full-spectrum challenge, spanning military, economic, institutional, and technological arenas.³³ This more confrontational stance has been spurred on by fears that China is endeavouring to overtake the US as the leading state in the international system. Such an assessment rests on various factors, including China’s recent authoritarian turn, increasing assertiveness in its neighbourhood, trade-distorting practices, weaponization of economic relationships,³⁴ as well as domestic human rights violations. Incidentally, the EU has picked up on these changes, and now refers to China as ‘a negotiating partner, an economic competitor *and a systemic rival*’.³⁵

Great-power tensions have also exacerbated the crisis of the post-World War II liberal international order.³⁶ It is not merely that China, along with Russia, have

³² *Ibid.*, at 16.

³³ *Great-Power Competition and the Rising US-China Rivalry: Towards a New Normal?* (V. Sinkkonen & B. Gaens eds, FIIA 2020), <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/great-power-competition-and-the-rising-us-china-rivalry> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

³⁴ Poutala, Sinkkonen & Mattlin, this issue.

³⁵ U. von der Leyen, *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary* (Brussels 16 Sept. 2020), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655 (accessed 4 Mar. 2022), emphasis added.

³⁶ G. J. Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, 94(1) *Int’l Aff.* 7–23 (2018).

been unwilling to ascribe to aspects of this order's normative framework; they are also openly contesting its key pillars and offering up institutional alternatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³⁷

In addition, the current order is increasingly contested because of the perception it no longer delivers for the people of the traditional 'West', instead breeding economic and ontological insecurity.³⁸ Such dissatisfaction has been harnessed on both sides of the Atlantic by populists and nationalists, including former President Trump.

Finally, the United States faces manifold internal challenges, including the raging Covid-19 pandemic, the opioid crisis, and crumbling infrastructure. Addressing these tasks is complicated by the polarized and hyper-partisan domestic-political environment in the country, which has also weakened the post-World War II 'consensus' on US global engagement.³⁹

The grand-strategic debates in the US have become, in this complicated environment, more heated, illustrative of the ideational elite-level contestation over the United States' global role.⁴⁰ At present, this debate revolves particularly between supporters of *primacy* and those advocating for greater *restraint*.

Primacy – arguably the orthodox approach to US grand-strategy since 1945 – entails a robust US commitment to lead the world. It relies on a considerable military footprint in key regional theatres, namely Europe, East Asia and the Middle East, control of the global sea and air commons, and sustaining America's global alliance network. In the economic domain, primacy centres on a dedication to free trade, further supported by multilateral institutions and treaty regimes.⁴¹ However, some proponents of a forward-leaning military posture do treat multilateral institutions with suspicion and view them as unnecessary constraints on US freedom of action.⁴²

During the Obama, Trump and now Biden eras, restrainers have increasingly challenged primacist ideas, and pushed for varying degrees of US disengagement from the world. In the military realm, some restrainers call for 'offshore balancing',

³⁷ A. Cooley & D. Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford University Press 2020).

³⁸ Ikenberry, *supra* n. 36.

³⁹ K. A. Schultz, *Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy*, 40(4) Wash. Q. 7–28 (2017).

⁴⁰ Compare T. Wright, *The Folly of Retrenchment: Why America Can't Withdraw from the World*, 99(2) Foreign Aff. 10–18 (2020); E. Ashford, *Strategies of Restraint: Remaking America's Broken Foreign Policy*, 100(5) Foreign Aff. 128–141 (2021).

⁴¹ Primacy is often also called 'deep engagement' or 'liberal hegemony', see E. B. Montgomery, *Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline*, 29(4) Sec. Stud. 769–796, 772–775 (2020). On key primacist tenets see e.g., S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press 2016); H. Brands, *Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era*, 1(2) Texas Nat'l Sec. Rev. 8–33 (2018).

⁴² N. Schadow, *The Conservative Realism of the Trump Administration's Foreign Policy*, Texas National Sec. Rev. (2018), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-conservative-foreign-policy/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

the reallocation of the US military footprint by shifting US assets from Europe to Asia,⁴³ while others would pull back most US global deployments.⁴⁴ Restrainters differ also over the level of commitment to free trade, as well as the support for multilateral cooperation.⁴⁵

The primacy-restraint debate also reveals stark differences insofar as the three pillars of US policy toward Europe mentioned previously. For the first pillar of *commitment*, even primacists have begun to scale down their regional objectives. The most popular adjustment is a less prominent role in the Greater Middle East.⁴⁶ This would free up resources, especially for contesting China in the Indo-Pacific, but also for checking Russia's ambitions in Europe. In practice, these reformulations would be status quo oriented insofar as Europe. The US military role would stay the course, and the centrality of the US' global alliance network would be maintained.⁴⁷

Restraint advocates largely agree regarding the necessity of ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,⁴⁸ but divisions subsist when it comes to military reprioritization. Rightsizing could entail the US pulling all its forces 'onshore' and intervening in various global theatres only when necessary.⁴⁹ Less drastically, the US could end deployments only in Europe and the Greater Middle East, as it focuses on thwarting China's growing hegemonic ambitions in Asia.⁵⁰ In both options, the US role in Europe would be piecemeal at best.

This leads to the second pillar of *expectations*. Preserving US leadership and military ascendancy in Europe is a sound long-term investment for primacists. Doing so helps check Russia's ambitions, avoids intensified regional competition and nuclear proliferation, and might even stifle nationalist influences in allied countries.⁵¹ Even when supporters of the transatlantic alliance want Europeans to invest in their defence capabilities,⁵² they expect that their allies should support America's forays, military and otherwise, in Europe and globally.

⁴³ J. J. Mearsheimer & S. M. Walt, *The Case for Offshore Balancing*, 95(4) *Foreign Aff.* 70–83 (2016).

⁴⁴ B. R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press 2014).

⁴⁵ Compare Ashford, *supra* n. 40; S. M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2018); J. J. Mearsheimer, *Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order*, 43(4) *Int'l Sec.* 7–50 (Spring 2019); J. Glaser, C. A. Preble & A. T. Thrall, *Towards a More Prudent American Grand Strategy*, 61(5) *Survival* 25–42 (2019).

⁴⁶ Wright, *supra* n. 40; M. Karlin & T. Cofman Wittes, *America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less*, 98(1) *Foreign Aff.* 88–100 (2019).

⁴⁷ M. Rapp-Hooper, *Saving America's Alliances: The United States Still Needs the System That Put It on Top*, 99(2) *Foreign Aff.* 127–140 (2020).

⁴⁸ See Ashford, *supra* n. 40.

⁴⁹ Posen, *supra* n. 44.

⁵⁰ Mearsheimer & Walt, *supra* n. 43.

⁵¹ Wright, *supra* n. 40; H. Brands & P. D. Feaver, *What Are America's Alliances Good For?*, 47(2) *Parameters* 15–30 (2017).

⁵² Rapp-Hooper, *supra* n. 47; T. Wright, *All Measures Short of War 197–199* (Yale University Press 2017).

Conversely, some restraint advocates argue that the US should revoke permanent alliances altogether.⁵³ Others would – pragmatically – settle for a less drastic renegotiated division of labour between the US and its European allies.⁵⁴ Either way, the expectation is that pulling the plug on transatlantic alliance commitments and/or removing US troops would lead US allies to make the necessary investments to maintain a balance of power in Europe. US interests would benefit almost automatically, when American power, an apparent impediment to European balancing behaviour,⁵⁵ is subtracted from the equation.

This is in turn related to the third pillar of *confidence*. Advocates of primacy are wary of Europe's ability to assume a leading role in its own defence, especially in the face of an assertive Russia. They point to internal divisions over threat perceptions and shortfalls in capabilities, along with a fragmented military-industrial base.⁵⁶ Moreover, primacists have been sceptical that the removal of US security guarantees would alter European threat perceptions and create a common European position vis-à-vis Moscow, or incentivize Europe to better pool its military resources and invest to offset shortfalls.⁵⁷ For European strategic autonomy, this means that the US would only welcome developments that bolster its current military posture.

The restrainers offer the opposite message. The argument turns on a more optimistic reading of Europe's capabilities and intra-European dynamics. The Europeans, rich industrial democracies and chronic free-riders on US largesse, should not only be able to fend for themselves,⁵⁸ but would be able to do so in fairly short order given the current balance of military forces between NATO Europe and Russia.⁵⁹ The restrainers, then, are not so-much ill-disposed towards European strategic autonomy as they are agnostic.

5 THREE MODELS OF TRANSATLANTIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE BIDEN ERA⁶⁰

The reflections on the ingrained history of US leadership, structural international and domestic factors, as well as the current state of ideational contestation between primacy and restraint help explain the greater than expected continuity between

⁵³ Glaser, Preble & Thrall, *supra* n. 45; Posen, *supra* n. 44.

⁵⁴ Ashford, *supra* n. 40.

⁵⁵ Compare Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley 1979).

⁵⁶ H. Meijer & S. G. Brooks, *Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back*, 45(4) *Int'l Sec.* 7–43 (2021).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ T. G. Carpenter, *NATO Is an Institutional Dinosaur*, War on the Rocks (25 Aug. 2016), <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/nato-is-an-institutional-dinosaur/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁵⁹ B. R. Posen, *Europe Can Defend Itself*, 62(6) *Survival* 7–34 (2020).

⁶⁰ These models build on G. Martin & V. Sinkkonen, *Transatlantic Relations and European Strategic Autonomy in the Biden Era: Neglect, Primacy or Reform?*, 301 FIIA Briefing Paper (Feb. 2021), <https://www.fia.fi/en/>

Trump and Biden. But, they can also help shed light on the road ahead. This section presents three distinct models of transatlantic engagement for the rest of the Biden era: *benign neglect*, *primacy* and *major reform*. Each of them is marked by a different mix of US commitment to Europe, US expectations of allies' alignment with American policy positions, and US confidence in Europe's aspirations and capabilities (see Table 1 below).

5.1 MODEL I: BENIGN NEGLECT

The first option, *benign neglect*, would involve low US investment in Europe, combined with low expectations of European alignment, and low confidence when it comes to the development of European capabilities. It is also the model most in line with the views of the restraint camp.

Here, the imperative of strategic competition with China effectively marginalizes other foreign-policy concerns. As the first year of the Biden presidency has illustrated, this path holds plenty of appeal in Washington D.C. It addresses the geopolitical challenge posed by a rising China to US interests across the world, and it is a course with bipartisan support.⁶¹ Framing China as a common enemy could also help Biden in addressing the deep domestic polarization at home, while tackling Beijing's unfair economic practices resonates with a foreign policy for the middle class.

This China-centric model would clearly impact other key US foreign policy goals. Rhetorical indications suggest that Biden's international democracy agenda blends well with the imperatives of strategic competition, while rejuvenating democracy domestically builds up America's sources of 'usable power' in the protracted competition with Beijing.⁶² Here large-scale multilateral forays like the Summit for Democracy have at best symbolic value, as the US pursues unilateral coalitions of the willing to combat China's influence. In the Indo-Pacific, and elsewhere, such groupings would likely include autocratic regimes.

As for transatlantic relations, this model would entail a continuation of the unsentimental approach of Biden's first year in office. Admittedly Biden has eschewed the divisive rhetoric and actions taken by Trump towards Europe, and his foreign policy team includes many committed Transatlanticists. US leadership in key international fora like the UN Climate Change Conference 26, or NATO,

publication/transatlantic-relations-and-european-strategic-autonomy-in-the-biden-era (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁶¹ Pew Research Center, *Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights*, Economic Issues (4 Mar. 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/04/most-americans-support-tough-stance-toward-china-on-human-rights-economic-issues/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁶² Compare P. Trubowitz & P. Harris, *The End of the American Century? Slow Erosion of the Domestic Sources of Usable Power*, 95(3) Int'l Aff. 619–639 (2019).

would have been hard to imagine in the Trump era, indicating that transatlantic common ground exists regarding some key global challenges.

However, despite such positive signals, in this model the US would downgrade Europe to secondary theatre status.⁶³ In terms of bandwidth, a laser-like focus on China inevitably limits Washington's ability to engage with other regions. More importantly, Biden's transatlantic policy would essentially be a function of strategic competition; any new transatlantic forays would need to pass the 'China test'.

The US would prioritize areas where it could expect European alignment on China, like investment screening or combatting Beijing's unfair market practices. However, Washington's doubts over the EU's reliability would hamper such cooperation. The signing of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in late December 2020 indicated to the US that Europe remains sensitive to the economic costs of US-China competition. There would be little appetite in Washington as well for addressing US-Europe disagreements deemed peripheral for strategic competition – data privacy, for instance.

Initially, Biden might have hoped that he could leave transatlantic relations on cruise control after rhetorical flourishes and limited action to reassure allies of US commitment and leadership. However, given the Afghanistan withdrawal and the AUKUS fracas with France, such signalling – even when coupled with avoidance of the abrasive rhetoric and worst policy impulses of the Trump years – might not be enough to align Europe with America's China policy.

Finally, lack of confidence in European ambition would also make Washington wary of pinning too many hopes on the transatlantic partnership. Keen to focus on other matters and shaped by past failed experiences, the Biden administration would refrain from pushing Europe to bolster its defence capabilities. As such, the US would essentially ignore the concept of strategic autonomy, viewing it as neither credible nor relevant.

5.2 MODEL 2: PRIMACY

The second option, *primacy*, entails high US investment in Europe, high expectations of European alignment and low confidence regarding the development of European capabilities. It is, obviously, the path that is most consistent with the history of US leadership of the Western alliance.

Here, the Biden administration would still regard US leadership as 'indispensable' for sustaining the liberal international order, even if it entailed considerable investments. The US would also consider domestic democratic renewal and defence of its values abroad as two sides of the same coin.

⁶³ L. Simon, L. Desmaele & J. Becker, *Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition With China and the Future of America's European Strategy*, 53(1) *Strategic Stud. Q.* 90–115 (2021).

At first glance it might seem that domestic conditions are not favourable for reasserting American primacy. Even putting aside the pandemic and political polarization, public support for shouldering the costs of global leadership remains ambivalent at best,⁶⁴ so the model does not fit perfectly with Biden's pledges to the American middle class. Yet primacist ideas are deeply ingrained within the Washington foreign policy establishment.⁶⁵ The allure of a decades-long policy orthodoxy may prove too hard to resist.

Pursuing primacy would likely lead the Biden administration to prioritize the *ideological* contest between democracy and autocracy.⁶⁶ While China factors prominently in this competitive framing, it would be viewed as part of a broader authoritarian challenge to liberal models of governance. The Summit for Democracy, for instance, reflects Biden's appetite for once again leading the 'free world'.

A new reset in transatlantic ties, strained by Trump and the fallout of Afghanistan and AUKUS, would be paramount for primacy to work. At present, re-establishing US leadership and credibility requires trust-building measures that go beyond rhetorical support for NATO, or re-engagement with the EU on fora like the EU-US Trade and Technology Council.

This could take the form of agreeing on a joint EU-US agenda for WTO reform or resolving divisive issues such as the regulation of big tech and data privacy. This model, however, could undermine European aspirations of strategic autonomy, especially in defence matters. Primacy rests on the assumption that enhanced European capabilities, especially outside of NATO, would make it more difficult for the US to persuade its allies to follow its lead. The US might even revive old reservations about the potential duplication of capabilities or discrimination against non-EU NATO Member States, and scepticism about Europe's ability to maintain adequate levels of defence investments.

The Biden administration could also conclude that without US prodding the Europeans might fall prey to Chinese temptations or Russian pressure. Despite striking transatlantic unity in the face of Kremlin's pressure to renegotiate the parameters of the post-Cold War European security architecture, not to mention European resolve in the first weeks following Russia's attack on Ukraine, these fears are not entirely unwarranted. Weariness and cracks might yet appear, especially if the war drags on for a long time. Primacy thus presents a potentially attractive status quo option for a US that hopes to forestall such scenarios.

⁶⁴ Compare C. A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* 346–350 (Oxford University Press 2020).

⁶⁵ Walt, *supra* n. 45.

⁶⁶ Brands, *supra* n. 11.

5.3 MODEL 3: MAJOR REFORM

The third path, *major reform*, would involve high US investment in Europe coupled with high expectations of alignment and high confidence when it comes to both the development of European capabilities and its levels of ambition.

Here, the Biden administration would not simply seek to repair the damage caused by Donald Trump's policies. It would pursue a broader agenda, believing that the four years of Trump's tenure had revealed a crisis of US leadership *and* a crisis of international governance. The US would have to shore up a badly weakened multilateral order, challenged by great-power competition, the erosion of guard rails, and the inability of the world to cooperate in tackling Covid-19.

The Biden administration would still pay attention to China's rise as one core challenge but prefer prioritizing major transnational challenges like climate change and pandemics. Since these are complex problems that require the involvement of all major powers, the Biden administration would de-emphasize the opposition between democracies and autocracies, toning down the strategic competition paradigm. Instead, the US would adopt a fluid approach, building shifting coalitions depending on the issue, and blending competition and cooperation with China.

This major reform path would also rest on a profound rethinking of the US role on the world stage; a more chastened internationalism. It would start with the recognition that rebuilding the United States' credibility and repairing the extensive reputational damage of the Trump years, will be a long-term endeavour. Allies would also be acutely aware that US domestic politics could bring a new disruptive president to power in the 2024 or 2028 elections.

This model would require the Biden team to accept a key trade-off: democratic renewal at home would mean shouldering less of a burden on the international stage. The US would also question its ability to effectively promote democracy abroad in the medium term. Future Summits for Democracy, for instance, would expressly concentrate on rebuilding democratic systems at home, instead of entrenching a new bifurcation of the world into democracies and autocracies.

This cautious approach would not entail full-scale retrenchment. However, the US would accept that growing parts of the American public, on the left and the right, are less enthused about the costs of primacy.⁶⁷ Such a less engaged US would, in turn, expect other powers to help in rebuilding a more robust system of international governance.

What would this approach of 'humbled leadership' mean for transatlantic relations and strategic autonomy?⁶⁸ Europe would be a key partner in this model,

⁶⁷ Kupchan, *supra* n. 64.

⁶⁸ J. Goldgeier & B. W. Jentleson, *The United States Is Not Entitled to Lead the World*, Foreign Affairs (25 Sept. 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-09-25/united-states-not-entitled-lead-world>.

by virtue of being a committed supporter of the liberal international order. The Biden administration, in this case, would not simply engage in minor steps to repair ties with Europe, but pursue bolder actions to rethink the partnership.

This would start with Washington viewing strategic autonomy not as a threat, but a long-term asset to be actively encouraged. The Biden administration would invest in improving independent European capabilities, regarding this as a wise bet to enable Europe to shoulder more of the global burden.

The major reform model would require a more strategic discussion about the geographical parameters of more equitable burden-sharing, especially determining a clear division of labour in key theatres of interest, such as the Eastern flank, the Indo-Pacific, or the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁹ Furthermore, it would depend on a thorough commitment to revitalizing political cooperation, whether within NATO or between the EU and NATO.

Such an ambitious model would require a long-term effort with appreciable investments. A stronger Europe could at times mean more case-by-case friction in the transatlantic partnership; but the benefits of a more capable ally would outweigh those costs and better serve the US' goal of shoring up international order.

Table 1 Three Models for the US Stance on EU Strategic Autonomy

	<i>US Commitment to Europe</i>	<i>US Expectations of European Alignment</i>	<i>US Confidence in Europe's Aspirations and Capabilities</i>
Model 1: <i>Benign neglect</i>	Low	Low	Low
Model 2: <i>Primacy</i>	High	High	Low
Model 3: <i>Major reform</i>	High	High	High

6 CONCLUSION

Despite Europe's relief at seeing Trump gone, the new Biden presidency is not a complete break from its predecessor. The legacy of history, structural drivers, and concomitant ideational contests over grand strategy hamper the ability of the US to

⁶⁹ O.-R. Bel, *What European Strategic Autonomy Requires: Smarter Talk, More Action*, Atlantic Council (7 Jan. 2021), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-european-strategic-autonomy-requires-smarter-talk-more-action/> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

dramatically change course when it comes to transatlantic relations and European strategic autonomy. To illustrate this, our article has outlined three broad models that the Biden administration could opt for in the coming years. While each of them is possible, they do differ in terms of feasibility, as well as desirability from the standpoint of both the US and Europe. Ultimately, we argue that model 2 – primacy – with a sprinkle of benign neglect remains the most likely longer-term path for the Biden administration, with the caveat that fast-moving events in Ukraine might yet tip the scales in the direction of major reform.

Model 1, the *benign neglect* option, and the preferred choice of the restraint camp, is certainly feasible. Beyond the structural shifts in the international system and the bipartisan consensus on China, key players in Biden's team have underlined the importance of competing with Beijing and the virtues of a tougher approach.⁷⁰ Beijing's actions and the weight of events, for example around Taiwan or the South China Sea, might also force Biden to pursue a more China-centric approach.

Benign neglect would, however, be a regrettable development for transatlantic relations. It would not only reduce US attention toward Europe, but also downgrade European agency in the relationship. Attempts to develop ties with Europe beyond the China frame would struggle to find traction in Washington. Facing polite indifference, the EU Member States and institutions would be left to work out policy differences about strategic autonomy amongst themselves – an unsavoury prospect for European Atlanticists, who regard deep American engagement in the continent's affairs as vital for their security.

Model 2, *primacy*, is arguably the most likely outcome. There is an inherent appeal in familiar policy courses and maintaining the status quo, and President Biden is steeped in primacist ideas regarding US global leadership. Moreover, early indications point to the Biden administration seeking to repudiate Trump's neglect of values-based concerns in US foreign policy by marrying leadership, democracy, and human rights with the imperative of strategic competition vis-à-vis both China and Russia.

For the transatlantic relationship, primacy presents a double-edged sword. The US would remain invested in Europe, and it could be amenable to some concessions on transatlantic disputes. However, the US would prefer Europe to be a dependable junior partner, which would leave little room for meaningful European strategic autonomy. Of course, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has

⁷⁰ D. Sevastopulo, *Biden's 100 Days: Hawkish Approach to China Stokes Beijing Frictions*, Financial Times (30 Apr. 2021), <https://www.ft.com/content/7bbe215b-9424-4f71-8444-d776f4badea7> (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

made clear, some European states, notably in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, welcome traditional US leadership. Yet, reverting to primacy would constitute a missed opportunity to forge a more equitable and sustainable transatlantic relationship.

The *major reform* necessary for *model 3*, finally, appears unfeasible, even if such a rethinking of the transatlantic relationship would be highly desirable. While many on Biden's team acknowledge the imperative of a humbler approach to global engagement, the apparent urgency of thwarting China's regional and global designs, as well as the weight of decades of foreign policy orthodoxy, make a major overhaul difficult. Moreover, political polarization means that the Biden administration may struggle to persuade allies that the US is willing to stay the reform course.

The major reform model would require the US not only to see Europe as a vital and trustworthy partner in tackling global challenges, but also to rescind the long-held belief that America is first among equals. On the European side, the new transatlantic agenda put forth by the EU certainly indicates that it prefers a broad renegotiation of its relationship with the US.⁷¹ Yet such willingness to seize the initiative does not go far enough; it must be coupled with a concerted effort to make meaningful and forward-looking investments in capabilities. There are some positive signs here. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the initial marginalization of the EU in the diplomatic forays between the West and Russia has given way to a concerted and unified European response, mixing unanimous condemnation of Russia, use of unprecedented economic coercion against the Kremlin and weapons deliveries to Ukraine.

Still, the EU needs to swiftly paper over any remaining internal divisions regarding its envisaged role in the world. The current crisis notwithstanding, this remains a tricky prospect in a Union that includes states like Poland and Estonia, which worry about the sidelining of NATO, non-NATO members like Finland, which welcome the building of capabilities in many different frameworks, and cheerleaders of strategic autonomy like France.⁷² Domestic politics in Member States are likewise important. Germany, traditionally Atlanticist but willing to explore strategic autonomy, has taken unprecedented steps to increase defence spending and send arms to Ukraine under its new coalition of the Social Democrats, the Green Party, and the Liberals. France, for its part, will be holding key elections in April 2022. The impact of the vote on European aspirations of strategic autonomy is by no means certain.

⁷¹ European Commission, *Joint Communication: A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change* (2 Dec. 2020), https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/joint-communication-eu-us-agenda_en.pdf (accessed 4 Mar. 2022).

⁷² See Helwig & Sinkkonen, this issue.

What, then, would be the longer-term implications of a US approach that ultimately oscillates between primacy and benign neglect? Both Afghanistan and AUKUS illustrate that Washington's more flexible approach to building alliances and partnerships – 'a latticework ... fit for purpose for the twenty-first century'⁷³ – will not leave Europe untouched in the long run. If an arrangement supports the broader rubric of strategic competition, the US is willing to utilize minilateral coalitions and prepared to forgo the views of non-participating allies. When push comes to shove, the US may sidestep the concerns of European allies on a case-by-case basis for the sake of deterring China, while remaining adamant that it should possess a veto on the direction of European security policies. With the implications of the war in Ukraine still unclear, the transition from the tumultuous presidency of Donald Trump to the Biden era holds less promise for a genuinely renegotiated transatlantic relationship than might have initially appeared.

⁷³ J. Sullivan, *2021 Lowy Lecture*, Lowy Institute (11 Nov. 2021), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>.