



# Biden's victory: the consequences for Poland

## Commentary

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**Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election in the United States is good news for Europe and Poland. However, even if it is followed by attempts to create a new transatlantic partnership, rebuilding this alliance will entail many difficult decisions. While a Biden presidency will affect bilateral Polish-American relations, it could turn out to be more significant for Poland's European policy.**

Poland's position in US policy has always been a function of America's European strategy. Other factors have only ever played a secondary role. Poland benefited from America's active interest in stabilising Europe after 1989, which included the expansion of NATO and US support for EU enlargement. The war in Iraq shook the symbiosis between the US and Europe, but the break did not come until Donald Trump was elected. Until 2016, Poland's Atlanticist stance was always important, as the US not only wanted close cooperation with

Europe – Europe represented a crucial focus in American foreign policy (albeit decreasingly so).

Over the past four years, Poland has somehow benefited from a completely different US policy towards Europe, one against EU unity and with an anti-German edge. Although he was not entirely effective, Trump attempted to play on the tension between EU member states. Poland was a particularly useful partner in this. The US administration's warm relations with the Law and Justice (PiS) government and president (partially based on ideological similarities) contrasted with its attitude to Berlin and Brussels, and served to entrench the divide into "better" and "worse" Europeans (from America's perspective). Poland helped America implement initiatives that were viewed critically by its EU partners (the Middle East conference), but could count on goodwill when it came to issues of great significance to it, such as the US military presence in Poland,

visa-free travel for Polish citizens and the Nord Stream 2 sanctions.

A Biden presidency will mark the beginning of a new stage in relations between Europe and the US, which will have a major impact on Poland's position. If it wishes to maintain its status as an important US ally, invoking its Atlanticist tradition will not be enough. Poland will also need to change its domestic policy and the direction of its European policy.

## **Towards a new transatlantic partnership**

The Trump era will probably not be remembered as an anomaly in transatlantic relations, but as a kind of volatile transition period – between the old European-American partnership and a new model, which we know little about for now. The reason is simple: although the tension between the EU and the US was caused by Trump's confrontational political style, his professed "America First" approach and his tendency to take steps without consulting allies (and occasionally against their interests), these changes in how America's international interests are defined are not the product of the most recent presidency. The need to reformulate these relations was clear during Barack Obama's presidency. Trump's time in office was characterised by the impossibility of implementing this goal, but it did not rescind it. It also demonstrated drastically how the roads taken by Europe and America can diverge and the scale of the problems that divide the partners, rather than unite them. In fact, the new conditions do not result only from the changes in US policy. Today's EU is also in a different position than in 2016, due to Brexit, the rule of law crisis and new efforts to strengthen it internally, as shown by the new budget for 2021–2027 and the recovery fund. The EU is banking on the European Green Deal and is more determined to defend its own system (e.g. using competition policy instruments). It is therefore a different partner than a few years ago.

Biden therefore won in entirely new conditions, with the US-EU partnership's foundations weakened and the conviction that its pillars must be built anew. Europeans should not expect that the move towards greater American assertiveness will be halted; the same goes for its reduced involvement as the guardian of the global order and its focus on China (rather than Europe). Biden's win will significantly reduce the tension between the US and Europe and restore cooperation in at least several crucial spheres (climate policy, human rights, multilateral diplomacy and probably Iran). Of course, it will not mean a simple return to the (often idealised) past in transatlantic relations. Most importantly, the Biden presidency might end up being a real test of whether the EU is able to build new relations with the US based not only on mutual trust, but also on an increased willingness to share tasks and responsibilities. For Europe, this would mean greater opportunities, but also greater expectations.

In this sense, the Trump presidency was, paradoxically, an easier challenge as it "freed" Europe from this test. Trump's open hostility to the EU in general and to Germany in particular made the option of rebuilding the partnership an illusion. He did not consult Europe about most decisions (e.g. the military withdrawal from Syria) or made them against its interests (withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal). In this context, Trump's declared expectations concerning major issues such as military spending and trade could be taken with a pinch of salt or viewed as the latest symptom of a reluctant policy towards erstwhile allies. In other words, the Trump presidency gave Europe (especially Germany and France) a good excuse to also put off those issues in transatlantic relations that would require a new arrangement, regardless of who is in the White House.

Biden's victory means the end of this policy. The EU will need to have a serious discussion with the US about the division of responsibilities in the world and the new arrangement of mutual relations. The awareness of a greater community

of interests and values will certainly be a crucial difference in relations after the Trump era. However, it is equally certain that if EU countries are to have the close cooperation with the Biden administration, based on rebuilt trust, that most of them crave, they should be willing to support the US on a raft of issues crucial for Washington. This will be the main difference between the new partnership and the previous one: the American security umbrella will shrink and Europe will be forced to solve some of its important problems alone or with limited US involvement. The determining factor in Atlanticism will no longer be merely an attachment to NATO and America's global leadership. It will now be measured by engagement in an EU that shares America's burden on the international stage and solves global problems. This evolution will create many challenges for Poland.

## An alliance of democrats

During a presidential debate, Biden referred to Belarus and Poland in a single breath as "totalitarian regimes".<sup>1</sup> These words were not intended for Poland, but should be interpreted as a reflection of the priority in his political agenda: defending democracy from authoritarian and non-liberal tendencies. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* outlining his foreign policy plans, Biden wrote: "The triumph of democracy and liberalism over fascism and autocracy created the free world. But this contest does not just define our past. It will define our future, as well."<sup>2</sup> This goal is a clear indicator of the problems in America's domestic policy and the threats to the democratic order linked to Trump's actions. The call to rebuild democracy and adding it to the global agenda links two goals and makes them dependent on each other. Biden intends to organise a global Summit

1 "Joe Biden wymienia Polskę razem z Białorusią, Węgrami i 'totalitarnymi reżimami'", <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetwiadomosci/wybory-w-usa-joe-biden-wymienia-polske-razem-z-bialorusia-i-wegrami/2fgzkt7,79cfc278>, accessed 20 October 2020.

2 J. Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>, accessed 20 October 2020.

for Democracy to "strengthen our democratic institutions [and] honestly confront nations that are backsliding". He claims that, under his leadership, the US will want the summit's participants to commit to aims in three areas: combatting corruption, countering authoritarianism and promoting human rights beyond their borders.

Biden's democratic offensive will obviously present a problem for the PiS government. In his article, Biden portrays Trump as a representative of the other team, which "takes the word of autocrats while showing disdain for democrats". It is hard to imagine that, when seeking a partner to implement his main task, Biden would take a kind view of a Poland that has undermined the rule of law, been criticised by democracy and human rights organisations and sympathises with Viktor Orbán. The US under Biden is more likely to authenticate (if not openly support) the activity of institutions, such as the EU, which support liberal democracy in Poland. Biden's principles may suggest that the US will not limit its diplomatic interventions to cases where American business interests are involved (e.g. the issue of media ownership in Poland). While the decline of democracy in Poland was not important in relations with Trump's America, with Biden it will be a crucial challenge – being too close to a Poland that is veering towards anti-democratic rule would undermine the credibility of Biden's political agenda.

## Washington–Berlin–Warsaw

Joe Biden is likely to be the last American president who will attach special significance to relations with Europe.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Trump, Biden does not view the EU as an opponent, but rather as a potential partner in solving problems that the US considers crucial. Even if he defines some problems in a way that is similar or identical to Trump's (the need to firmly resist China, limit military

3 J. Kirkegaard, "Europe Needs to Be Prepared to Jump through a 'Biden Window of Opportunity'", <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2020/10/09/europe-needs-be-prepared-jump-through-biden-window-opportunity>, accessed 20 October 2020.

engagement worldwide and extract a greater commitment from defence allies), his strategy for achieving these goals will be different. He will not use blackmail, confrontation or unilateral measures; instead, he will use the desire to cooperate and multilateral institutions.<sup>4</sup>

This approach will lead to a fundamental reorientation of US policy towards the EU. Biden will want a strong EU, even if differences of interest between it and the US persist in many areas.

Germany will play a significant role in this. Julianne Smith, one of Biden's closest foreign policy advisors, has suggested that his first overseas visit will be there.<sup>5</sup> She stresses that Trump criticised Germany unfairly. In her opinion, Biden should give a speech in Berlin outlining his vision for a new transatlantic partnership centred on defending democratic values from authoritarianism and setting out not only America's promises (as in the past), but also what it expects from Europe.

Under President Biden, the US will want to rebuild its crisis-stricken relations with Germany, even if many bilateral problems and pressures remain, such as Nord Stream 2, trade issues, defence spending and China policy. Germany will therefore return to its role as the US administration's main European partner, as the country with the largest clout when it comes to shaping EU policy. Once again, it will be a country that the US seeks to cooperate with, rather than confront. For Poland, this spells a return to the situation during Barack Obama's presidency (and even earlier) when US representatives clearly indicated that they expect Poland to cooperate with Germany in a spirit of understanding. During the Biden presidency, Poland's importance as a partner for

the US will in large part depend on how well it salvages its relations with Germany. The current tensions in Polish-German relations will be viewed as an unnecessary obstacle in America's European policy.

## Not only Eastern security

Biden is known to be critical of Russia and keen on NATO, so his presidency will have a positive impact on Poland's security. The Trump administration's decisions to strengthen the US military presence in Poland are unlikely to be reversed. However, Biden might reverse Trump's decision to reduce the American presence in Germany, negatively affecting the security of NATO's eastern flank. America is also likely to maintain its stance on the future of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Biden's critical stance on this project will not lead him to abandon the policy of sanctions against the project, especially since Congress plays the main role here, rather than the presidential administration.

America's eastern policy will be in line with Poland's interests and the change in president will make it less unpredictable. Nevertheless, another of its aspects is equally significant: policy towards Russia and the EU's eastern neighbourhood will not become the main area of discussion and transatlantic cooperation again. Firstly, the US will not return to being an active player in Eastern Europe (after ceasing to be one under Obama). Secondly, the US will expect the EU to become more involved in the strategically important (for America) Indo-Pacific region. Thirdly, the US will continue its withdrawal from regions of strategic importance for Europe: the Middle East and Africa. Biden has said that it is time to finish the "endless wars".<sup>6</sup>

A traditional Atlanticist stance (support for NATO) will no longer be a sufficient response to these

4 See: J. Traub, "The Biden Doctrine Exists Already. Here's an Inside Preview", <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/20/the-biden-doctrine-exists-already-heres-an-inside-preview/>, accessed 20 October 2020.

5 J. Smith, "What the Next President Can Do to Save Our Alliances with Europe", <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2020/what-the-next-president-can-do-to-save-our-alliances-with-europe/>, accessed 20 October 2020.

6 See M. Overhaus et al., "Jenseits der Wahlen. Sieben Trends, die die Innen- und Außenpolitik der USA prägen werden", <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/usa-langfristige-trends-in-der-innen-und-aussenpolitik/>, accessed 20 October 2020.

new challenges. Serious dialogue between the EU and the US on security is now finally possible and will concern many issues that lie beyond Poland's foreign policy priorities. Should NATO play a role outside Europe? If so, what kind of role? How can European countries fill the gap left by the US in the southern neighbourhood? Should NATO's European pillar be rebuilt in response to the new strategic context? And, if so, what should it look like? Or perhaps the focus should be developing European "strategic autonomy", its ability to act independently of the US?

Crucially, the Biden administration is likely to expect the EU to be able to take responsibility for security in places where the US no longer intends to be fully involved. Being a US ally means being prepared to actively engage in this way, too. America's gaze will of course focus on France, which not only has security interests in this area, but also has the real ability and will to act. This move from an unconditional security community towards a partnership more based on interests and task-sharing will sooner or later raise questions about other countries' involvement in the joint European effort – including Poland's.

## Conclusions

In coming years, the US will remain sharply focused on its growing domestic problems and, in the international arena, on its rivalry with China. Europe and its internal problems will play a less important role than before. Nevertheless, the Biden presidency will represent an enormous – and perhaps the final – opportunity for Poland and Europe to renew and strengthen the transatlantic partnership. It will be a major test for both the EU and Poland, though. It will be in Poland's interest in particular that the new partnership between the EU and the US becomes a solid and

lasting construction. However, meeting America's expectations and facing the consequences of the long-term trends in its policy will require a reorientation in many important policy areas. For Poland, its problems with democracy and the rule of law will be paramount. If it does not change course, it will cease to be a valued partner for the US and instead face criticism and pressure. Independent of that, though, fundamental importance will be given to the discussion within the EU that will arise due to the need for a new arrangement when it comes to relations with the US.

The prospect of a US administration favourable to Europe may somewhat weaken supporters of "European sovereignty" (i.e. the EU's capability to act independently in the international arena).<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, though, only an EU that is an independent and effective agent in international relations can be a useful partner – one that the US can treat seriously. Even though Biden has won, Europe will not avoid a serious discussion about how to bring this about. The renewal of the transatlantic partnership and the strengthening of European sovereignty will therefore have to take place in parallel – and be mutually conditional. The new model of Polish Atlanticism and Poland's significance for America are inseparably tied to Poland's responses to the difficult questions on the future of the EU.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Puglierin, "Touching the elephant: European views of the transatlantic relationship", [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_touching\\_the\\_elephant\\_european\\_views\\_of\\_the\\_transatlantic\\_relati](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_touching_the_elephant_european_views_of_the_transatlantic_relati), accessed 20 October 2020.

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