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Policy Analysis

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The future of the transatlantic partnership: US perceptions and debates

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Executive Summary

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, altered Europe's security architecture and long-term strategic planning. Many in Europe have shared with the Biden administration that the aggression is not only an existential threat to Ukraine but also to the liberal world order and its values. The war has revived transatlantic coordination and increased the popularity of NATO on both sides of the Atlantic. However, there are critical voices which have questioned the transatlantic commitment and its longevity. This paper examines whether and how the transatlantic partnership has been revitalized and whether it is long lasting. It does so by focusing on U.S. debates, differing opinions, and varying positions on the war and cooperation with NATO and the EU.

Keywords: transatlantic partnership, Ukraine-War, NATO, USA, EU, cooperation, US debates, Biden

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Introduction

"When Russia invaded, it wasn't just Ukraine being tested, Europe was being tested. America was being tested. NATO was being tested. All democracies were being tested" (Biden, Warsaw, 21 February 2023).

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022 altered Europe's security architecture and long-term strategic planning. Many in Europe have perceived Russian aggression as an existential threat not only to Ukraine, but to the liberal world order and its values. German Chancellor Scholz defined February 24, 2022 as a *"Zeitenwende"*, a major turning point in the history of the European continent (Scholz 2022, 7). *Zeitenwende* has led to the shifting away from the idea that engagement and economic interdependence will ensure peace and stability and might eventually lead to the democratization of authoritarian regimes.

Since February 2022, European states have been more geopolitically assertive, and many of them have brought large-scale military investments on the way. Even the EU which has traditionally conceived of itself as a liberal soft power sees the Ukraine war as the moment when "geopolitical Europe" was born (Brzozowski 3 March 2022). Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine also revived NATO. NATO has been united against Russian aggression and has coordinated arms supplies for Ukraine. Particularly for countries neighboring Russia, NATO membership has been considered as a guarantee against Russian aggression. Hence, Sweden and Finland, two formerly non-aligned states, joined NATO.

President Biden has been a strong supporter of Ukraine. Biden has framed the Ukraine war as "the latest battle in a long struggle" for democracy and against authoritarianism. His rhetoric has referred to the Cold War era when the "free" West jointly stood under American leadership against the Communist East, led by the Soviet Union. The Cold War reference and the emphasis on democracy and freedom has certainly helped unite the transatlantic partnership and revitalize NATO. After all, many European partners have perceived the fight of Ukrainians not only as the defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity but also as a proxy war where the rule of law, democracy and the core values of the European Union are at stake (European Greens 2022).

Biden's rhetoric is also driven by domestic politics. He has aimed to distance himself from his predecessor Donald Trump who ignored allies and pursued a transactional foreign policy which at times seemed to prioritize relations with autocrats.

However, President Biden's democracy emphasis is flawed for various reasons. Most partners of the transatlantic alliance - not least the United States - are themselves struggling with democratic decline and breakdown. NATO members such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland are ruled by authoritarian populist governments, which have consistently dismantled democratic institutions and processes.

Solidarity with Ukraine has become a domestic challenge for many European governments. High energy prices, high inflation rates and economic stagnation have supported the rise of far-right and far-left parties across Europe. Many of these

movements question the transatlantic partnership and US leadership and promise an end to the sanctions on Russia. Hungary was most vocal in criticizing the unconditional support for Ukraine and might in this regard be joined by the new Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico.

In the United States in turn only a minority of citizens see the defense of democracy, human rights protection, and the containment of Russia as US foreign policy priorities (Morning Consult 2023)¹.

Whereas the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has undoubtedly supported NATO cooperation and reinforced the transatlantic partnership, this paper questions whether this can be long-lasting. The authors do so by examining the US perspective. They analyze debates on the transatlantic partnership and its role in times of war. Less so on the military dimension, the paper rather focuses on how the US political and opinion leaders and the public assess the role of the transatlantic partnership in Europe and beyond.

1. US Foreign and Security Policy Priorities

1.1. The Foreign Policy priorities of the Biden Administration

¹ It is however difficult to track the American public's views on foreign policy because of the low salience of such issues compared to domestic concerns. When Americans are asked to name the most important issue

In October 2022, the Biden administration issued its National Security Strategy (NSS), presenting the administration's foreign policy objectives.² The NSS highlights that the war in Ukraine has not altered Washington's long-term strategic priorities and that the geopolitical focus of the US remains the Indo-Pacific. Despite Russia's aggression, China remains the biggest threat to US national interests and countering Chinese influence globally as "America's most consequential geopolitical challenge". However, constraining Russian influence in Europe comes as the second important foreign policy goal of the administration (Biden & Harris 2022, 11).

US geopolitics towards Europe have a political and a military dimension. The political dimension is concerned with fighting back Chinese and Russian influence, infiltration, and their negative impacts in European democracies, while the priority certainly lies on driving back Russian and Chinese influence rather than strengthening democracies. The military dimension aims at strengthening NATO and pushes European partners to share the burden and provide arms, equipment, and training for Ukraine – all necessary measures for defending US national interests.

From Obama's pivot to the East on, Washington's attention on transatlantic relations decreased. President Trump's foreign policy strategy was

facing the US, few if any mention a foreign policy or national security issue; instead, domestic concerns such as inflation rates tend to dominate (Gallup 2023).

² The NSS is the sole document highlighting the general foreign policy – including the role of alliances – of each US administration.

based on bilateral transactional relations and was hardly concerned with multilateral sensitivities, norms, and processes. The Trump administration's policies built on the conviction that the US is the biggest global player and Europeans have no options but to follow US leadership. Trump publicly demonstrated good relations with Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un and snubbed NATO partners. European allies became increasingly estranged. Coordination in regional and geopolitical matters between Washington and European allies became rare.

The election of President Biden ushered a new tone in the transatlantic partnership. Biden publicly paid tribute to the importance of the transatlantic partnership. However, US foreign and security policy strategies did not change, as prioritizing US interests and containing China have continued to be the top priority. The Biden administration's economic and energy policies, exemplified by the 'Buy American Act' of 2022 which aims to increase the domestic content threshold to 75% by 2029 (Office of Management 2022), prioritizes American interests at the expense of European partners. Nevertheless, cooperation and coordination have gained a new impetus after the war in Ukraine, and the NATO alliance has been revived, gaining two new strategically important members, Sweden and Finland.

1.2. Political Debates on Transatlantic Relations and the Role of the US

To better define general indications of bipartisan agreement and disagreement in the US political

environment, it is necessary to define the various institutional threads of thought that have emerged regarding transatlantic relations, democracy promotion and Ukraine since the outbreak of the war. First are those in alignment with the Biden administration – namely many Democrats and Republicans who strongly support aid to Ukraine in the name of human rights, democracy, and a commitment to the US as the leader of the free world. In May 2023, former Republican Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy announced his steadfast support behind security aid to Ukraine, marking a decisive shift in tone months after previously insisting Ukraine would not get a “blank check” from Congress (Vlahos May 2023). Notably, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, one of the most right-leaning Republicans, supported a \$1.7 trillion spending bill passed in December 2022 that included about \$47 billion for Ukraine (AP News 2023). Despite such support, McConnell and key House Republicans also criticized Biden for not doing enough for Ukraine. We categorize this group of voices in the context of the Ukraine war as strongly in favor of military assistance, informally defining them as the pro-war faction, as they have pushed Biden to step up weapon deliveries to Ukraine in order to ensure a swift victory. This faction consists mainly of Republicans motivated by defending US national security interests through the military and asserting American power to the rest of the world, especially Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. During recent Senate floor remarks, McConnell accused the Biden administration of “dithering” on providing military aid and called on the president to “get serious” about victory (C-Span 2023).

Others have pushed President Biden from the other side, calling for a diplomatic solution to the war. We refer to this group as the pro-diplomacy faction, and it consists of politicians from both sides of the aisle. Thirty members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, a liberal wing of the Democratic party, urged Biden in a publicly issued letter to push for direct diplomacy with Putin, soon-after retracting the letter and clarifying diplomacy should only be pursued with Ukraine's buy-in (Congress of the United States October 2022). The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) went so far as to suggest the US withdraw from NATO to "end the imperialist expansionism that set the stage for the conflict" (Bruenig 2022). A group of nineteen Republicans including three senators Rand Paul, Mike Lee, and J.D. Vance also called on President Biden to pursue diplomacy in a letter sent in April 2023, claiming they would no longer support aid packages to Ukraine without a clear plan for an end to the war (Vlahos May 2023). These Republicans cited concern over how much the US has spent on Ukraine and emphasized that their responsibility was to their American constituents and not towards fighting a proxy war with Russia (Vlahos April 2023). Therefore, the bipartisan push for diplomacy shares certain elements while also diverging considerably in motivation. The progressive wing of the Democrats supports increasing efforts in peacebuilding rather than in military, while certain Republicans are reluctant to spend money in conflicts which do not directly serve American interests, such as the domestic economy or immigration issues. The question of US support for Ukraine has increasingly

come to divide the Republican party, with the debate revolving around whether opposing Russia in Ukraine really is of vital strategic interest for the US, given the growing threat of China.

The last faction can be described as bottom-liners. They advocate for the US to refocus its foreign policy on China and leave Europe to deal with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine alone. At its core, this group makes a money-based argument, playing on the sentiment that the US does not have money to spend on problems which do not directly threaten US national interests. In a press conference in April 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron said that Europe should not become a "vassal" and avoid being drawn into any conflict between the US and China over Taiwan (Le Monde 2023). While Macron likely did not intend to alienate the US in his call for greater European strategic autonomy, certain Republicans such as Republican Senator Marco Rubio (Rankin April 2023) instrumentalized his position in justifying their arguments to cut American financial support to European partners. Additionally, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, seeking the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, further suggested that the US should back off its support for Ukraine: DeSantis stated that while the US has many vital national interests, "becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia is not one of them" (2023). In a similar vein, former President Trump – likely to be the 2024 Republican presidential candidate – has expressed his disgust with the extent to which the US is 'overpaying' for the war compared to Europe (Donald Trump 2023).

In reality, Europeans have significantly increased their investments in the NATO infrastructure, something which the debate in the US has yet to reflect. Thus, both of the leading Republican presidential candidates have advocated positions which, if elected, would drastically cut aid for Ukraine, thereby altering the state of affairs between the US and Europe. In comparison, aside from a progressive minority calling for more diplomacy, Democrats have largely been supportive of Biden's policies – likely due to the need for Democratic unity ahead of the November 2022 midterm elections and the upcoming 2024 presidential election.

While certain factions place more value in providing aid for Ukraine and engaging with Europe, none of these voices see the transatlantic partnership as central to US foreign policy. As the threat of China has grown over the past decades, the strategic importance of Europe for the US has diminished. Instead, the focus across the political spectrum is competing with China. Much of the debate surrounding aid to Ukraine has revolved around whether US involvement in countering Russia would be strategic in the larger US priority of outcompeting China. The pro-military assistance faction is motivated by the fact that countering Russia's ambitions would send a strong message to China in the context of Taiwan, asserting US power on the global stage. Given the lack of consistency with Biden's democracy-promoting rhetoric and foreign policy actions, his motivations do not diverge significantly from this line of thought.

2. Public Opinion

The recent restrengthening of the transatlantic partnership has been perceived by the American public – albeit mainly in context of US security. First, American support for NATO has skyrocketed since the onset of the war. As of September 2022, a strong majority of Americans (81%) favored the US maintaining or increasing its commitment to NATO – the highest level of support recorded since 1974 and a sharp break from former President Trump's threats to leave the alliance (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2022). The poll further revealed bipartisan majorities in support of the admission of Finland, Sweden, Ukraine, and Georgia as new NATO members, reflecting Americans' desire to further expand the alliance. While support for NATO was strong across the board, it was slightly stronger among Democrats (90%) compared to Independents (78%) and Republicans (75%) (Chicago Council 2022). This introduces the slight bipartisan divide that has come to define US public discourse regarding foreign policy since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, a divide that may grow as the war continues.

Indeed, over the past year, Americans have become split on the question of long-term support for Ukraine. Public support for military aid and economic assistance remained essentially stable among Democrats over the course of the year, and to a lesser extent Independents, while Republican support notably declined (Sullivan, 2023). This drop in support among Republican voters is likely

attributable to the rising frustration and discontent within the GOP over the sizable American financial contributions to Ukraine compared to its European partners. In a similar vein, Republicans were more opposed to continued support for Ukraine at the expense of the US compared to Democrats, with 61% of Democrats supporting continued aid compared to only a third of Republicans (Chicago Council 2022). Instead, a majority of Republicans (63%) favored pushing Ukraine to settle for peace to reduce costs to American households compared to a minority of Democratic voters (36%) (Chicago Council 2022). Overall, it appears as though the American public, while having strongly supported aid to Ukraine at the onset of the war, has increasingly become more divided along partisan lines, with many of the arguments made by high-profile Republican politicians pushing for less US involvement mirrored by Republican voters. Interestingly, the progressive wing's push for more diplomacy (i.e., the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the DSA) has not translated directly to Democratic voters who have continued to strongly support Biden's actions with regards to Ukraine, perhaps an indication of the lesser extent to which fringe progressives influence overall public opinion.

Third, since the start of the war, Americans view Europe as significantly important for US security but less so in other domains, such as trade. Europe emerged as the most important region for US security according to Americans, currently at 50% up from 15% two years ago (Pew Research Center 2022). These results indicate the significance of

Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the American public, greatly elevating the instrumental geostrategic importance of Europe for US national security. Despite this fact, Americans still ranked other countries as more important foreign policy partners, with the United Kingdom, Israel and interestingly China all above Germany and Europe (Pew Research 2022). The public sentiment of considering China a partner represents a clear contrast to the institutional positions of both Democrats and Republicans, perhaps reflecting a rupture with the political rhetoric of international competition with that country. Further, while the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has undoubtedly sparked a resurgence in strength of the transatlantic partnership, the American public is hesitant to prioritize Europe above other global powers. Indeed, Americans tend to view Europe as less significant in the economic dimension. Only a third of Americans (34%) consider European territory as crucial for the US economy; instead, 41% of Americans look to Asia as a more critical area for US economic growth (Chicago Council 2022). Therefore, while Europe's strategic value has certainly increased in the realm of security, the resurgence of the partnership is limited to this domain and does not translate to other elements of cooperation.

Reaffirming the focus on domestic issues, the US public is increasingly disinterested in foreign and international affairs. The majority of American citizens give precedence to issues that have a clear direct impact on the United States, such as terrorism (49%), immigration (45%) and cyber-attacks (41%) (Morning Consult 2023). This also points to

a growing divide between Washington and the interests of the broader public. While US competition with China is the greatest priority for US politicians, only 27% of the American public rank this issue as a top concern. Similarly, a minority of Americans prioritize the US' role in protecting human rights globally (25%), view the US as a defender of democracy in the world (14%) and consider Russia's invasion of Ukraine of major importance to the US (24%) (Morning Consult 2023). Interestingly, most Americans (64%) view Russia as an enemy of the US – slightly lower than last year's percentage directly after the start of the war (70%) – while the share of Americans who see China as an enemy has increased over the past year (Pew Research Center May 2023). The American media clearly influences how Americans perceive global actors, but when Americans are asked to rank what issues are most important to them, issues like the war appear far away and are not perceived as a concrete threat, thereby becoming secondary to more direct concerns such as the state of the economy and immigration.

While Biden's rhetoric certainly elevates transatlantic cooperation, the partnership has largely grown only in the security realm – as reaffirmed by the American public. Whereas support for NATO is at a decade high and the role of Europe as a region critical to US security has increased significantly, economic and political relations with Europe remain largely defined by bilateral cooperation with individual European countries and sometimes reflect a degree of alienation and competition. Thus, while the transatlantic partnership certainly has been reinvigorated due to the Russian

war of aggression against Ukraine, it remains to be seen how US-Europe relations will be perceived by the US public in the future, particularly in the eventual aftermath of the war. It however appears unlikely that Americans will suddenly prioritize foreign policy issues over historically felt national security concerns and domestic economic issues.

Finally, US Americans do not seem particularly interested in cooperating with transatlantic partners on issues concerning regions beyond Europe, such as the Western Balkans and the MENA region. Surveys on this particular subject have not been carried out recently, marking a relative disinterest also by pollsters on the US transatlantic relations in the immediate EU neighborhood. This might not only reflect Americans' low interest in cooperating with Europeans on democracy promotion, but also a decreasing interest in the MENA region as such. Indeed, in 2022, a large majority of US public opinion (79%) no longer considered the Middle East the most critical area for US military security (Chicago Council 2022). Instead, having determined the increased military importance of Europe for Americans and given the fact that Western Balkans are located in European territory, we could assume that the US public generally supports NATO and other transatlantic actions in Western Balkans. However, instead of being driven by democracy promotion and the aim to approximate and pacify the region, US policies are rather determined by the aim to push back Russian influence.

The rifts between Democrats and Republicans have only grown since summer 2023. The most recent showdown in the House at the beginning of

October with Republican Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy being ousted as Speaker resulted in a House without leadership and in chaos ahead of important legislative decisions. Just prior to this historically new situation in the House, Democrats and Republicans struck a last-minute deal – supported by McCarthy – to avert a government shut-down by passing a short-term funding package while at the same time dropping assistance for Ukraine. In the run-up to the presidential election, hard-right ranks of the GOP are gaining momentum. US President Biden called upon Congress to “stop the games” and underlined that not much time is left to keep aid flowing to Ukraine. (AP, October 2nd, 2023)

3. Will the renewal of transatlantic relations be long-lasting?

Despite a revival of transatlantic coordination and increased popularity of NATO, there are several factors that might threaten the future of strong transatlantic relations. Besides the US' strategic long-term focus on China, the tendency towards economic protectionism in the US, and growing disunity within the European Union, the transatlantic partnership heavily relies on military and security cooperation under NATO's framework. There is little to no institutionalized dialogue on cooperation and coordination in economic, political, social or environmental issues. The US and the EU have traditionally cooperated in regional and international areas but have failed to create binding agreements and mechanisms. Many of the decisions regarding security and geopolitical cooperation occur within NATO; however, not all EU

members are also part of the alliance. Moreover, decisions within NATO follow the principle of consensus without a voting system (NATO 2022), facilitating the dominance of the US compared to individual European states which do not constitute a bloc. This might be linked with the sometimes-unequal degree of burden-sharing, both military and political, between the US and European allies. In many ways, the US is still perceived as a security provider for Europe. Over the last decades, the US has gradually decreased its direct military presence in Europe while urging European NATO allies to increase their military spending. Although most European states have increased their military capacities, they can hardly keep up with the US.

At the same time, since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the US has emerged as the primary security investor and the EU as the main financial assistance provider. Indeed, the US has invested \$43.2 billion in military assistance to Ukraine (US Bureau of Political-Military Affairs 2023) and around \$40 billion in financial and humanitarian support (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2023). On the other hand, EU institutions have invested far less than the US in military (3.60 billion euro) and humanitarian aid (1.61 billion euro) but have spent more (30.33 billion euro) than the US (24.5 billion euro) in financial assistance (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2023). However, between 2021 and 2022, European allies significantly stepped up their defense spending (European Union External Action 2022). This could also be a result of the so-called German *Zeitenwende* – i.e., “historic turning point” – a concept introduced in February 2022 by

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Scholz February 2022). *Zeitenwende* signifies the fundamental shifting away from the German post-war approach "change through rapprochement" which built on the conviction that economic interdependence and political dialogue will secure peace and stability. Moreover, *Zeitenwende* has involved huge investments in military capacities and the restructuring of Germany's cautious defense policy. Germany's change in policy triggered military investment across the continent. Numerous European states followed suit – one of the most significant examples being Poland's recent rapid rearmament (Internationale Politik Quarterly 2023). Moreover, in June 2022, President Biden announced plans to introduce US permanent military bases in Poland to strengthen NATO's Eastern flank (Notes from Poland 2022). The bases were successfully introduced in March 2023 (The Defense Post 2023). Another possibility for 2023 is the militarization of the Black Sea by the US or NATO in Romania – a country with already three US military bases (TVP World 2023).

The focus on military burden-sharing however ignores the political, societal, and economic dimension of the transatlantic partnership. Indeed, the transatlantic defense strategy for the Russian war of aggression is inherently political in that it should not be limited to military spending but rather include a unified long-term US-EU strategy. This is particularly relevant with regards to economic and social issues. Sanctions against Russia and the efforts to decrease European countries' dependence on Russian energy supplies has helped promote US economic interests. Indeed, the boycott

of Russian gas has increased the import of US liquefied gas. Intensified cooperation in the military and security realms has not been accompanied by closer economic cooperation on the contrary, the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (House of Representatives 2021), as well as the more recent amendment to the Buy American Act (Office of Management 2022), have further cemented the tendency towards US protectionism which has been at the disadvantage of European exports. Moreover, in a competitive international market, lower costs of energy production have lured several European companies away to the US.

Thus, one can conclude that while President Biden has strengthened the security dimension and the normative dimension of transatlantic relations, he has neither invested in expanding and deepening economic cooperation or trade liberalization, nor has he supported political and societal cooperation on other pressing issues such strategies against the rise of authoritarianism, disinformation, guaranteeing supply chains or mitigating climate change. The neglect of these areas will impact European public opinion and weaken the efficacy of the transatlantic partnership.

4. Conclusion: Possible future trends of US transatlantic relations and policy recommendations

As a result of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the transatlantic partnership has experi-

enced a revival. However, the focus on the defense of democracy is more a rhetorical strategy than a political reality. Both in Europe and in the EU neighborhood, the US has broadly abandoned normative goals such as democracy promotion. Its engagements are primarily motivated by the strategic fight against the rise of China and Russian influence. Looking ahead, the American presidency is a significant factor in defining the nature of transatlantic relations, reflecting on the one hand the unpredictability of its future and, on the other hand, the certainty that defense of national interests usually constitutes a bipartisan objective. Thus, we expect transatlantic relations to remain generally strong in the security realm, at least as long as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine continues. The bipartisan sentiment that considers US national interests threatened by Russia's aggression has been instrumental for transatlantic relations. However, with the latest rifts in Congress with the ousting of McCarthy as House Speaker and between Republicans and Democrats more generally, cards are mixed anew.

In general, the degree to which the US coordinates with European allies is in large part determined by the US President, and both leading Republican candidates for the 2024 presidency have expressed concerns with continuing aid to Ukraine. If Trump or a Trump-like candidate should win the next presidential election, there is certainly the risk of potential trade wars with European allies as well as isolationist or unilateral foreign policies that could escalate tensions and further weaken the socioeconomic dimension of transatlantic relations.

On the other hand, if the Democrats win the presidency for another term, the tendency towards economic protectionism is likely to continue due to the binding nature of such policies. The political dialogue with the EU and the willingness to conduct non-competitive and non-belligerent international relations will instead depend on the president. Another term for President Biden would certainly mean an increasingly strengthened importance of NATO as a political instrument, while a more progressive president might instead be against the overuse of NATO and willing to deepen a diplomatic and increasingly multilateral dialogue, both with Europe and other global actors. The Progressive Caucus' letter sent in October 2022 requesting a more diplomatic response to the Ukraine war demonstrates this fact, clearly reflecting the willingness of a small part of US progressives to engage differently in international affairs, pushing for more diplomatic conflict-management. However, it is also fundamental to consider the American public's positions regarding transatlantic relations as US foreign policy priorities are undoubtedly also influenced by citizens. So far, it seems that the US public sometimes disagrees with President Biden's ideological strategy while agreeing with his practical foreign policy actions – underscoring that US rhetoric tends to be somewhat different from concrete actions.

An additional term for Biden would suggest that the US maintains its leadership role in international relations, though bilateral in nature. Biden would likely strengthen transatlantic relations in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe while aiming to expand its influence in other areas of the

world such as the MENA region and the Indo-Pacific. Biden's willingness to strengthen these alliances is consistent with US security needs but is certainly not coherent with the projects of 'democracy promotion' and competition against autocracies. Indeed, according to global rankings, most US partners in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the MENA region are considered 'flawed democracies', 'hybrid regimes' or 'moderate/hard autocracies' (Economist Intelligence 2022). In prioritizing the geopolitical competition with Russia and China, the US is sacrificing the supervision of its allies' compliance with the rules-based international order, hoping for their unconditional support in the fight against China and Russia.

The Biden administration continues to view the EU as a strategic ally rather than an equal partner. Strategies are laid out in Washington and not in collaboration with European allies. French President Macron's proposal of achieving "strategic autonomy" for Europe (Politico 2023) can be seen as a rebellion against US hegemony, an attempt to increase Europe's bargaining power, and as a sign for potential deviations when it comes to strategies towards China and other non-European regions.

The special outlook of the US administration towards Eastern and South-Eastern Europe seems to suggest that Biden is relying less on the EU. The inclusion of Eastern European and Western Balkan countries into both the Atlantic Alliance and European institutions would nevertheless help build a stronger defense apparatus to confront Russia and China.

While decreasing the attitude towards international competition and acknowledging the rights of US allies to differentiate their partnerships, the United States could facilitate an increased political role for the European Union in transatlantic relations. This way, US-EU cooperation would allow for the coordination of efforts, clarifying the role of each actor and combining security needs with peacebuilding efforts in the EU neighborhood. To define common interests, US and EU officials should increase the frequency of official meetings and formalize joint priorities to deal with the Western Balkans and the MENA region in writing. A heightened US coordination with EU institutions and affiliated NGOs would elevate the political impact of transatlantic relations in the MENA region and Western Balkans, improving human rights protection and including the dialogue local civil society organizations (CSOs). An example of a MENA country particularly active in engaging CSOs is Jordan: a transatlantic joint action in dealing with socio-political cooperation with this country could prove to be effective and constructive for promoting regional stability. All these actions might result in an increasingly strengthened transatlantic partnership, in which both the United States and the European Union could see their interests satisfied in the security, economic, energy and socio-political domains.

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