



**TDHJ
SPECIAL
EDITION**

01
FEBRUAR 2021

Geopolitics

USA - what next?

Josef Braml and Ulrich Schlie

Biden Administration – Effects on Multilateralism

Heinz Gärtner

(PHOTO)

India and China: Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific Decade (I)

Velina Tchakarova

Der Kaschmir-Konflikt - Neue Fronten am Fuße des Himalayas?

Simon Hartweger

Nagorno-Karabakh and Eastern Partnership – is there a Role for the EU?

Anna Steiner

Konflikt in Nordäthiopien – Wege zur Konfliktbeilegung

Matthias Leitner

What does Biden's presidency mean for multilateralism?

Author: Univ. Prof. Dr. Heinz Gärtner is lecturer at the University of Vienna. He chairs the Advisory Board of the International Institute for Peace (IIP). He was director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs. Among others, he chairs the Strategy and Security advisory board of the Austrian Armed Forces.

Abstract: President Trump's presidency not only was unsuccessful but left the world in disarray. He abandoned multilateralism and polarized the international system. Just as in the second half of the 19th century, the world today is witnessing a breakdown of a ruled based order. Under the Trump administration it became visible that the US has ceased to be the leading world power. This relative decline of the US implies that Europe will have to engage in world affairs. President Joseph Biden will certainly cooperate within some multilateral organizations. He will act more diplomatically. Tensions with China and Russia will remain, however. The emerging bipolarity will be structural. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 can be model for global cooperation. The world has now the choice: 1914 or 1975.

Bottom-line-up-front: Multilateralism will witness a certain revival. The Helsinki Final Act stands as a model.

Problem statement: Has the USA already ceased to be the leading world power? What about remaining tensions with China and Russia? Will bipolarity be structural?

So what?: Europe should seize strategic opportunity to use a bigger room of manoeuvre the Biden administration would open up.

MULTIPOLARITY WITHOUT MULTILATERALISM

New actors are emerging in the World after Cold War-bipolarity and US-unipolarity. The world is becoming more multipolar. More competing poles may lead to more polarization and (nuclear) arms race unless it will be accompanied by a strong multilateralism. However, multilateralism is in decline. Europe and Asia have to find their roles in this new world. The US-debate tends to ignore Europe's importance in the world while China's threat is often exaggerated. Asia itself is heterogeneous and consists of multiple political, economic and cultural centres. China is the most powerful state but Asia is not China led. Multipolarity with no or little multilateralism is a dangerous mix for the world. Europe's history offers some analogies for possible scenarios for the future.

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY LEFT THE WORLD IN DISARRAY

Just as in the second half of the 19th century, the world today is witnessing a breakdown of multilateralism, the emergence of nationalistic and ethnic xenophobia, the demonization of adversaries, the depreciation of international institutions, withdrawals from international agreements and treaties, and an expanding arms race. It is a breakdown of values in slow motion of what Europe holds dear: effective multilateralism, working international institutions, interdependence and interconnectedness, military restraint but peace support, engagement of adversaries, common and cooperative security. Simultaneously the world moves to a Great Power Conflict. The conflict of the US and China is not new but US President Donald Trump increased tensions with China.

President Trump's presidency not only was not successful but left the world in disarray.¹ He abandoned multilateralism and polarized the international system. President Trump left most of the international agreements, like the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA) and the Treaty on Intermediate Missiles (INF) and he attacked multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Paris Climate agreement. The Great Power

Competition with China and Russia became priority and he imposed heavy sanctions on Iran. He threatened European companies with secondary sanctions if they do business with Iran although the Europeans considered the JCPOA a masterpiece of "effective multilateralism". All the sanctions did not change Iran's behaviour according to his request. Neither "maximum pressure" nor friendly relations between Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong Un led to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But already before Trump, America had resisted international consensus on land mines, cluster bombs, the rights of women, and more, failing to ratify treaties, even when it signed them.²

The Europeans feel betrayed. Over decades they have built up a very positive image of the US. The US intervened in both World Wars, was the leading Western power against the Soviet bloc and provided the Marshall Plan for some European states. They remained mostly silent in the face of the brutality of the Vietnam War. This was not possible anymore when George W. Bush intervened in Iraq in 2003 under false pretenses. As former Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld observed that there was a division between "old and new Europe". Under the Trump administration again most parts of Europe felt that the US has ceased to be the beloved leading world power.

In addition, internal weaknesses of the US have become visible. Bad management of the Covid-19 crisis, a dysfunctional health system, a crumbling infrastructure and cities, social inequality and underfunded high school. In the Freedom of Press index the US ranks 45th!³ Joseph Nye's "American soft power"⁴ was losing attractiveness. "Soft power" was selectively concentrated on elite America, elite universities, high tech companies, famous popular culture, anyway.

GREAT POWER CONFLICT

Every ten years there is debate in the US whether the US is in decline. Joseph Nye⁵ argued that it was a normal offset by Germany and Japan, whose economy had been destroyed during the Second World War, gained a larger share in the world economy. During the Trump administration it became visible, however, that decline goes beyond

.....
"President Joseph Biden will certainly cooperate within some multilateral organizations. He will act more diplomatically. Tensions with China and Russia will remain, however. The emerging bipolarity will be structural. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 can be model for global cooperation. The world has now the choice: 1914 or 1975."

the economic dimension and comprises political, social and cultural dimensions. To be clear, the US will not lose its Great Power status but it will cease to be the exceptional or indispensable superpower and become a normal state.

This relative decline of the US implies that Europe will have to engage more in world affairs. The debate so far has been focused on enhancing European military capabilities. More importantly is Europe's political role. During the Trump administration it left the Middle East to the Kushner-Plan which abandoned the Two-State-Solution. On the Korean Peninsula, Europeans watched first the Kim-Trump war of words and then their love affair.

US-Russia relations were dominated by US internal affairs which had an impact on European-Russian relations. Also, Europe should develop its own China policy independent from the US-China Great Power Conflict. Europe was not able to keep the JCPOA functional because it was afraid of Trump's secondary sanctions. Europe should seize the opportunity to use a bigger room of manoeuvre the Biden administration would open up. Higher defence spending is not the solution for Europe to get a bigger leverage in the world but political engagement. The EU has not been very successful in getting engaged in international conflicts, however. Also, a European army would not be able to address these issues. It is becoming an excuse for European political deficiencies. Europeans must learn to manage international crises themselves – not without the US, but also not by waiting for the US to do so. If Europe is not in the position to take on this role either, we can expect a more dangerous and polarized world.

The historian Graham Allison⁶ found that in 75 percent of Great Power Conflict when a declining power is challenged by a rising power war occurred. He calls this Thucydides trap. Most countries in the world do not want to be entrapped in a future great power conflict. What will be Europe's options? In such a military conflict Europe will not side with China but to be drawn into a Great Power Conflict, which is not in its interest, on the side with the US would be disastrous as well. A rational choice would be to stay neutral. Some NATO members, however, will observe the security commitments (Article V) of the

Washington Treaty. If the EU stays neutral, NATO will likely become divided. Austria will be obliged to remain neutral according to its neutrality law.

Fareed Zakaria⁷ argues that the existence of two great power does not necessarily lead to war. "You can have bipolarity without war." He is referring to the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Counter examples would be the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta or the Carthaginian War between Rome and Carthage.

UNDER BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY SAME MULTILATERALISM WILL RETURN, GREAT POWER CONFLICT IS HERE TO STAY

Will President Joseph Biden change course? Biden will not bring the US back to the exceptional status. Many changes are structural. Trump was not only an aberration. Richard Haass speaks of a "disruptive superpower"⁸, Michael Beckley of the "illiberal superpower"⁹. Biden will certainly cooperate within some multilateral organizations like the WHO, the WTO and return to the Paris Climate Agreement. He will act more diplomatically. There will be no new international treaties, however, because they would require two thirds of the votes in the senate. Republican Senators will not support a treaty that has been negotiated by a democratic president. Presidential directives would still be possible instruments; they can be abandoned by the next president, however.

Joseph Biden will be more committed to NATO and work with US-allies in Europe and Asia. He also announced to create an "alliance of democracies". Let alone the definition of democracy (what about the US-allies Saudi Arabia or Egypt?), this alliance or association would exclude powers like China and Russia. This concept undermines per definitionem multilateralism which is comprehensive and not exclusive. Tensions with China and Russia will remain. The polarity too, is structural. Biden could, however, wage a big step like US-President Nixon took, when he visited Mao's China 1972. This was one of the most successful summits in post Second World War history.

THE MULTILATERAL NUCLEAR DEAL WITH IRAN (JCPOA)

As presidential candidate Joseph Biden said that he would return to the JCPOA if Iran also abides by the agreement. It is still not clear whether he would attach further conditions since the Congress will put pressure on him to take a tough position towards Iran. Iran for its part said it will not accept that the JCPOA will be renegotiated. Nevertheless, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani expressed the expectation that the newly elected US-President will correct the failures of the previous administration and return to international law and treaties. Probably, Joseph Biden will address the missile issue. Referring to the experiences of the war with Iraq, Iran argues it needs missiles for its defence. Therefore, Iran's missile program cannot be singled out. Saudi Arabia's missiles e.g. already have a longer range than those of Iran. In the framework of Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif proposal of regional dialogue, Iran could agree to regional arms control negotiations if all actors of the region will be involved, however. A multilateral regional dialogue would leave the JCPOA untouched.

President Trump wanted to prevent the next president to restore normal relations with Iran. He made Iran responsible for all the tensions in the region. The killing of General Soleimani and the alliance of Arab states with Israel should isolate Iran politically and diplomatically. If President Biden thinks within a larger context, he could ignore Trump's policies and offer new diplomatic relations with Iran in order to save the nuclear deal. Such an initiative would go beyond Obama's rapprochement with Iran. In order not to be isolated, Iran itself could request that all the regional powers cooperate on the basis of the Arab Peace Plan of 2002 that would recognize Israel but only within the borders of 1967. This would not alienate the Palestinians and would keep the door open to a Two-State-Solution which Joseph Biden supports. Trump's current peace plan for the Middle East confirms Israel's occupation of the West Bank and ignores the rights of the Palestinians.

In sum, on the one hand Biden's foreign policy will be more diplomatic and multilateral. He could establish some diplomatic relations with Iran. On the other hand great power competitions will remain and maybe even tensions will increase. Iran itself could offer multilateral regional arms control talks and confidence building. It could also get back to a regional dialogue with the Arab states if they returned to the Arab Peace Plan of 2002 that allows diplomatic relations with an Israel within the 1967 borders.

1914 OR 1975?

A historical analogy could be the CSCE-Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Even developments during the East-West conflict have been influenced by the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. For example, the principle of mutual recognition of systems stood the test of heightened tensions during the Cold War: In spite of US-president's Ronald Reagan harsh rhetoric and references to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire", he and his successor George H. W. Bush conscientiously respected the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, acknowledged parity between the superpowers and different systems during their various historic summits in the eighties.

China is not only a geopolitical power but engages in various institutional, political, economic and financial multilateral levels. It goes without saying that it tries to influence and shape the process according to its own political and economic interests - but so do other countries. Abandoning multilateralism means abandoning common values. Values can change environments.

It is the Helsinki-document which expresses best European values. It does not identify enemies or threats, not even opponents or adversaries. It requests cooperative security and analyses that security is indivisible. The Final Act is not only a guideline to reduce the tensions in the whole of Europe but can be model for other conflict areas in the world, for example the relations between the two Koreas. The EU itself has to be realigned to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The world has now the choice: 1914 or 1975.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).
2. Peter Beinart, "Biden Wants America to Lead the World," *New York Times* December 2, 2020.
3. "2020 World Press Freedom Index," accessed February 12, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.
4. Joseph S. Nye et al. *Soft Power, The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
5. Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
6. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: mariner Books, 2017).
7. Fareed Zakaria, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).
8. Haass, Richard, "Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2020.
9. Michael Beckley, "Rogue Superpower: Why This Could Be an Illiberal American Century", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020.