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ROUNDTABLE

The Future of Transatlantic Relations and the EU's Role in East Asia¹

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Abstract

With the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the President and Vice-President of the United States, European leaders have voiced high hopes in the relaunch of the transatlantic partnership. The stance the Biden-Harris administration is going to take on issues such as nuclear proliferation, climate change, the promotion of human rights, diversity and pluralism but also on transatlantic alliances, the future of NATO, and – as a matter of principle – on the merit of multilateralism will also impact on Europe's relation with China and the EU's future role in Asia, particularly so regarding the Korean peninsula.

Introduction

First of all, let me thank you for the invitation and for this initiative. For me, it is really a pleasure to take part in this discussion. It is not only timely and very interesting but I also have a special connection with the Korean Peninsula. I visited Korea many times and worked with Korean colleagues in my different capacities. From these experiences, I have always been convinced that Europe and Korea not only have a kind of natural friendship and are bound together by common views regarding principles, values and common interests, I am also convinced that it is possible for Europe to assume her proper role in terms of the nuclear issue, but also concerning other pressing geopolitical, economic and regional dynamics throughout East-Asia, especially so in view of the Biden-Harris administration's revised take on transatlantic relations, multilateralism, the role of Europe and how this new transatlantic dynamic could be relevant for, and impact on, Asian affairs, particularly so on Korean affairs.

The Biden-Harris Administration: What to Expect?

Just a few days ago, we witnessed the inauguration of President Biden and Vice President Harris and we are currently following the confirmation process of President Biden's cabinet nominees as they appear before congressional panels and who will constitute the backbone of the future US administration. With the hearings of Janet Yellen for treasury secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas for secretary of homeland security, Antony Blinken for secretary of state, Lloyd Austin for secretary of defense, and Director of National Intelligence nominee Avril Haines there comes a shared sense of relief across the world, certainly in Europe. Biden, in his first official act as president, already put into effect a marked change in

1. This text is an edited version of a talk by Federica Mogherini, rector of the Collège d'Europe and former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and former Vice-President of the European Commission, given at the 2021 Human Security and Development Forum hosted by the Korea Europe Center (KEC), Berlin, on 27 January 2021.

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2. On October 4, 2021, President Biden and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met, in consecutive meetings, with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to discuss the international security and transnational threat environment. In this meeting, President Biden further “reaffirmed his strong support for NATO” and conveyed full US support “for the NATO agenda agreed by leaders in June, including ensuring the Alliance is fully equipped and resourced”. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/04/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg/>

policy by signing executive orders on a number of issues including the coronavirus pandemic, immigration and climate change. This sent strong signals about a change in attitude and, also in more general terms, I would say of a completely different approach to international relations than that taken by the previous administration. The Trump administration had a very one-dimensional, transactional approach. Simplifying somewhat, I would describe it thus: I win, you lose. I cannot win, if you don't lose. And yes, this transactional concept was a zero-sum game approach, following the logic of trade deals or commercial deals, a logic President Trump was familiar with from his previous life.

Antony Blinken, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also gave clear indications that the US would seek to revitalize diplomatic relations with partners around the world, addressing issues such as rising nationalism, growing rivalry from China and Russia as well as other threats to a stable and open international system. Biden's call with Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, one of the first phone calls the president made, strongly suggests that transatlantic relations will be strengthened and multilateral solutions sought.² So, I believe, President Biden will reverse the previous administration's approach to international and, indeed, transnational affairs and take a much more pragmatic approach that fully takes into account that the world is a complex place.

We are currently still in the midst of the COVID-pandemic and we are just starting to see the economic and financial impact of it. Very probably, it will develop its negative consequences for years, if not decades to come all over the world. Apart from that, there are tensions and conflicts that are far from being solved all around the world, for example, the issue of nuclear proliferation and other equally serious arms proliferation issues in different parts of the world. There are the challenges that climate change presents and which need to be addressed. So, the world, politically speaking, is a truly difficult place to be in, holding formidable challenges for all of us at this moment in time. The only approach to address these challenges, I believe, is the one that the new Biden-Harris administration apparently shares with Europe; the only approach that can realistically provide solutions or, at the very least, do damage control under the current circumstances is to find common ground with as many allies and partners as possible and work together. From what I gather, the Biden-Harris administration will look for partnership and co-operation and reach out to its allies, in Europe but also in Asia and South-America, and I am certain that South Korea is one of those allies. This will also include US reinvestment in multilateralism, particularly so in the UN-system and agencies. We have already seen President Biden reverse predecessor Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the 2015 Paris UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) as he pledged to return the US to the Paris Agreement and made the fight against climate change a top priority of his administration. Biden, in one of his first acts as president, also signed letters retracting his predecessor's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO). These are very clear signals that carry a strong symbolism: the United States are ready to re-engage and cooperate with others.

However, I believe that this will not mean that the United States will be readily taking the lead on all the different files that are open on the table right now, but I would expect that the US will systematically be looking for partnership and co-operation, not necessarily as a global leader on every issue but always in concert with others. The message “America is back” thus does not necessarily mean America is back as a *world leader* to lead in every regard, but it means that

America is back to work with partners to find sustainable, pragmatic solutions, principled solutions.

Key areas for policy revision

Three additional elements will carry great importance and be very relevant internationally. The first concerns the Biden-Harris administration's capacity to change domestic dynamics in the United States. As you may recall, President Biden, in his inauguration speech, has focused primarily – if not exclusively – on domestic dynamics and on the need to reunite the United States and to accept that disagreement does not mean division. I think this is the core mission the president identified for his term and it is also reflected in the diversity of his cabinet. I think no previous administration has been so diverse in the background of its members. This intention to heal the wounds of societal division, of ethnic division, in the United States is probably also something that the new administration will project internationally. I think that in Europe, but also in other parts of the world, this intention to accept and reflect the diversity of society in the setup of its political institutions will serve as an inspiration for other countries. I would therefore say that the first element of change will be the Biden-Harris administration's approach toward diversity, including a human rights-based approach, both domestically and internationally.

In Europe, this is bound to give an additional push to all those who are working to overcome, restrict or at least minimize the development and impact of xenophobic attitudes across European societies as extreme right movements have exploited immigration and diversity for their political goals, in some cases with considerable electoral success. I think that the Biden-Harris administration's stance on diversity is going to have, even if focused on domestic US issues, an impact also internationally, on the promotion of human rights, on diversity and pluralism, as well as on the empowerment of different sectors of society.

The second element that, I am quite certain, will constitute a marked difference in attitude from that of the past 4 years, is a renewed attention to values, principles, and a human rights-based foreign policy. As many of you will remember, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a public speech to state department employees in May 2017, made a statement saying that US foreign policy, from that moment onwards, was becoming more pragmatic and that the advocacy and promotion of values such as freedom and human rights “created obstacles” to the advancement of US national security and economic interests rather than constituting an essential component of those interests. This moment not only called into question some four decades of bipartisan consensus on the essential nature of human rights and democracy for US foreign policy but also, I would say, held sadness, also loneliness for many people around the world; certainly for Europeans but, I'm sure, also for Koreans. It also called into question the commitment of US foreign policy to the support social movements and human rights activists elsewhere. It also put a question mark behind the intention to ensure that national self-interest, including economic, commercial and security interests, provided no trump to promoting elsewhere those values that were coherent with the United States' own national ones. I believe that the Biden-Harris administration's reassertion of a value-based, a human rights-based framework of foreign policy will give Europeans, but also others in the world – I think of liberal democracies around the world such as South Korea, Canada, Australia – reason to re-engage and work together with them.

You may also recall the famous remark attributed to former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger from the early 1970s in which he supposedly complained that he did not know whom to call when he wanted to speak to Europe. This quickly became a very popular anecdote, in Brussels and elsewhere, and I mention it, however apocryphal it may in fact be, to illustrate the reality of communications with the Trump administration. Although the telephone number of the European Union, to maintain the metaphor, was very clear and everybody had it – there is the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council, there is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy that is the actual number telephone number to call – the EU faced the reversed problem over the last four years, as it was the telephone number of Washington that was no longer quite clear. There were different numbers, people responding or, for that matter, not responding to the calls, and at many times not only not responding to the calls of the EU but of all the allies. And even when there was a response, this response was often fraught with inconsistency, as it depended to a considerable degree on which particular interlocutor was actually picking up the phone in Washington. So, for the EU, there was really a sense of lack of a reliable interlocutor on the other side of the Atlantic. This situation has changed already and this will certainly prove to be of great help to the transatlantic community in redefining a common agenda, and for the international and multilateral cooperation that is based on a transatlantic agenda.

There will also be a close look at some priority areas on part of the Biden-Harris administration in the months to come. I am certain that one of these priority areas will be NATO. There has been tension in this area during the previous administration and there was no clear indication from Washington as to the nature, level and degree of its engagement and commitment to this transatlantic alliance at a very delicate moment in world politics. As you know, NATO is in the process of reshaping its core mission, for example, having included climate change in its scope of security threats. Another reason why I am convinced that NATO will constitute one of the main priorities for the Biden-Harris administration's foreign policy agenda is related to the polarized and divisive nature of politics on Capitol Hill. Considering this political climate, it seems safe to assume that the US State Department will focus on foreign policy files that will be *consensual* in Congress to the greatest degree possible. NATO, despite the stark divisions of the last years, is one of the most consensual issues across the political landscape in the United States. I also think that this reinvestment in NATO will entail reinvestment in relations with the European Union and other European allies. The fundamental difference between the two administrations, the outgoing one and the one currently seeking confirmation from Congress, is that, for Trump, the European Union was an inherently problematic entity because it was not only the clear living example that multilateralism actually works but also called into question the logic behind his zero-sum approach to foreign policy. This may have also been the reason why former President Trump always tried to bypass relations with the European Union in favor of bilateral negotiations with individual member states of the European Union. He sometimes did so with success, at other times not so much.

A third focus will certainly be on China. Although the message President Biden and his administration is sending at the moment is one of continuity, I believe that it will entail readjustment in terms of both, narrative and relations with China in the long run. These adjustments are likely to be based on a principled but pragmatic approach and it is in this regard that it will be useful and

3. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), now commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, is an accord reached between Iran and the UN Security Council's 5+1, and the EU in Vienna on 14 July 2015. It is part of the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and came into effect on 16 January 2016. See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>; see also the Joint statement by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/3244>

4. President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in 2018, which subsequently resulted in Iran, on 8 May 2019, announcing that it would suspend JCPOA implementation in some areas.

5. The US Senate confirmed Wendy Sherman as the deputy secretary of state on April 13, 2021.

valuable for the Biden-Harris administration to coordinate with European Union, because – speaking mainly from the trade perspective – there is indeed a set of shared transatlantic interests vis-à-vis China. Especially regarding questions of how to balance relations with China, Europe has something to offer and share in terms of the multi-layered approach to China the EU has developed over the past decade, recognizing partnership on some issues but also rivalry on others while clearly voicing disagreement on other issues, most prominently human rights issues. From the European perspective, relations with China have probably numbered among the most complex ones throughout recent years and this is why, I believe, it will be extremely useful to have an early conversation across the Atlantic; or at least exchange notes on how to coordinate and establish a concrete partnership with China. I talk about partnership, because there are some issues on which partnership between China and the EU is indeed already in place.

Finally, I believe that the Biden-Harris administration will seriously invest in preserving what is left of the non-proliferation architecture and try to renew or reinstate some elements and some chapters that were either dismantled or seriously damaged during the Trump administration. I believe that the new administration will refocus on the nuclear non-proliferation file in a way that will be markedly different from the past four years. As is well-known, the Trump administration pursued two different attitudes on the two biggest nuclear non-proliferation files currently open. It dismantled, at least it tried to dismantle the Iran nuclear deal³ which, I would say, is still alive, though not in good shape. The damages done by the Trump administration can possibly still be fixed by the new administration, provided that action is taken in a timely fashion.⁴ There are upcoming elections in Iran in June 2021 and this might lead to a change in political leadership, a leadership which might be less inclined to cooperation on an international level. So, I believe that, once Wendy Sherman has been confirmed as US Deputy Secretary of State⁵, this will constitute a very good basis for the US administration to look into how to revitalize the Iran nuclear deal and how to re-enter the agreement in a timely manner. I have worked closely with Wendy Sherman in my previous capacity and, as the lead negotiator for the United States, she has been one of the key figures in working out and negotiating the Iran nuclear deal, so I have full confidence in this regard.

As for the North Korean non-proliferation file: The Trump administration took a very peculiar approach to this matter. I have visited Korea several times, including during the Trump administration, having had high level talks with our Korean interlocutors. During this time, I have always had the impression that the Trump administration's method was that of bypassing those directly involved, of jumping over their heads if I may use a very undiplomatic expression, and trying to reach an agreement with one single person on the other side. It was the approach they have used with the Taliban in Afghanistan, sidelining the legitimate Afghan government. And this, at times, was also my impression regarding the Trump administration's approach towards talks with North Korea, not always affording these talks the right regional and international, indeed multilateral, framing that would have been called for. In the absence of a regional multilateral framework, any talk remains exposed to the changing moods of one of the leaders, and this carries obvious dangers, and grave ones at that, especially where nuclear issues are at stake.

6. How Trump Offered Kim a Ride on Air Force One, BBC, 20 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56118936>

The EU's prospective role in East Asia

Indeed, during my tenure as High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, I had the possibility to discuss at length the issue of how to engage with North Korea – politically as well as on the level of civil society – and what approach the EU should take toward the DPRK. The starting point for the European Union has always been to compare notes with our friends in the Republic of Korea. First of all, the EU had a great ambassador in South Korea and there also existed direct contacts between myself and the South Korean foreign minister, but also with the ROK's prime minister and the president. On the other hand, there were also contacts with the DPRK officials at different levels, including with its Minister of Foreign Affairs Ri Yong-ho during the 25th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in early August 2018. There were, however, opportunities for additional informal exchanges for very simple reasons that sometimes do have an impact on the practicalities of diplomacy and, in this case, it was that the DPRK and the European Union delegations were always sitting next to each other for reasons of alphabetical order. And this, naturally, provided the occasional opportunity for the exchange of a few words at the sideline of the plenary sessions.

One thing, however, seems very clear to me and this is that the North Korean non-proliferation file is not one that could be resolved in a bilateral manner, between Washington and Pyongyang. For sure, engagement from Washington is needed, but this will not be sufficient on its own. I think that there are at least two additional elements which are key to the advancement of negotiations that have the ability to produce sustainable outcomes. First, it requires the involvement of, but also the leadership by Seoul. I am convinced that Seoul not only has got the knowledge and insight which seems essential, even indispensable, and that this fact should be generally acknowledged beyond the Korean peninsula. I am equally convinced that South Korea should be steering the process. Secondly, long-term success will require, as I would call it, a safety net in form of a regional and international framework. This is the case because of the unpredictability and fragility of negotiations of this kind. Without such a stabilizing framework of international and regional players around the main negotiating parties, any incident has the potential to derail the entire negotiation process. So, if there is no safety net in terms of an international multilateral framework, or a regional framework in place that can accompany the main negotiating table and, more importantly, could mediate and use their weight to adjust the course of the negotiations once they are threatened to stall, then you expose the negotiations to quite great a risk of inconsistency which, I think, is exactly what happened regarding the early and mid-2019 Trump – Kim Jong-un talks. When things went well, this seemed an unprecedented and promising opportunity, when things did not go to plan, they risk, as then UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman put it, “an accidental war”.⁶ This was neither a serious nor a consistent way of leading negotiations of this importance.

On the Korean peninsula, there is not only the nuclear issue but there is also the issue of peace and reunification. These are the two different patterns, two different files which are both characterized by an immense complexity of elements – historically, politically, militarily, emotionally – carry a very real risk of escalation. As for the European Union: I do not expect that the European Union will have any direct or even prominent role in negotiating these files. However, and paradoxically so, the EU may be sought as a mediating power to support these negotiations, not by Washington, but by both, Pyongyang and Seoul, and possibly

also by China. Not least because of their own painful history, I think that Europeans will have an interest in accompanying or supporting a process like this. They certainly do have sufficient knowledge and experience to do so and I would be hoping that this will be recognized and also encouraged by others in the process.

The safety net that a multilateral framework has to offer is certainly something that the new US administration will take into consideration and this will include the need to work with its partners, in this case the Republic of Korea, and possibly also the need of enlarging this framework by including other regional and international partners that can be helpful in the process, through expertise on nuclear issues or sanction-related issues. I think, once again, that the European Union has a very significant contribution to make in that respect, because there is a lot of experience and expertise in terms of negotiating nuclear non-proliferation agreements. This type of negotiations not only requires a highly sophisticated level of technical knowledge of both, nuclear issues and sanctions related issues but also the skills necessary for setting up a choreography of international multilateral negotiation.

The non-proliferation issue may, however, not be approached with a high visibility-approach, as was often the case during the Trump administration, but with a more consistent, solid approach involving background work in order to build robust, longer-term solutions. Also, when looking at Northeast Asia in general, I believe that the Biden-Harris administration will work closely with partners and allies to build a regional cooperation network in some form or other. Personally, I believe that lack of a regional cooperative framework in Northeast Asia poses a problem and, indeed, is preventing further economic and security cooperation that would be much needed. Although I certainly do understand the reasons for inter-Asian disputes and tensions, I nevertheless strongly believe that overcoming these tensions would be extremely beneficial for all sides, first and foremost for Japan and Korea. Equally so, letting these issues remain unresolved and tensions unmitigated will prove to be beneficial for those players that are benefitting from and seek to exploit divisions around them. Therefore, it would be wise, it would certainly be in the self-interest of both, Korea and Japan to find a way to overcome contentious and conflict-ridden issues and this, at least, has always been the message that the EU has been trying to pass on and of which I hope the US will continue to do so in the future, but this is another story.

A multilevel approach toward China

As for China: The EU followed a very clear and transparent approach with China on the basis of different levels. There are issues on which partnership and cooperation with China is not only sought but already in place, for example the Iran nuclear deal. China has played a key role not only in the negotiations leading up to the deal, but also in implementing and preserving it at a time when the US were withdrawing from it. The same holds for the Paris agreement on climate change: Without the commitment of and partnership with China, as we all know, there's no effective climate action possible, so cooperation and partnership with China is essential. But on some other files also, cooperation with China is not only desirable but also needed, at least from a realist perspective.

I think that the European Union has also managed to clarify which are the elements of divergence from the Chinese position. These include human rights, trade investments, or security issues related to 5G. I think that this exercise that the Europeans have done and the Americans have not done in recent years of distinguishing between EU fields where cooperation is desirable, possible and, in

some areas, is already taking place, and those areas where disagreements and problems are clearly and transparently spelled out and addressed, I think that this process has been a healthy, although a very difficult one. It has nevertheless allowed some forms of cooperation on some of the key files to take place. Once again, China is not any irrelevant player in the world of today and, therefore, the United States will most likely go through a similar process of distinguishing the sectors in which cooperation with China may be desirable, needed and also possible, and those areas where there is disagreement. On the proliferation file, for example, this has been the first messages of Biden towards Putin: “Let’s try to find a solution to prolong the treaty in place”, even if we should disagree in principle on other issues such as human rights, respect, democracy or, for that matter, on Ukraine. There are still other files on which cooperation is called for and needs to be pursued to keep the world a safer place. I am certain that this is going to be the approach that the United States and the Biden-Harris administration will take towards China.

However, this also concerns academia and the wider civil society, the question being of how to maintain exchange and develop new cooperation with China while avoiding the kind of institutional cooperation that would not be a comfortable place to be in. Well first of all, it is very difficult to cooperate with China on anything without the question of institutional framing because, in China, everything becomes an institutional matter – and this is the critical point – including scholarly discourse or student exchanges. This constitutes a marked difference from how academic institutions are run in Europe and we have to be very aware of this fact and of the implications that different forms of cooperation may entail. Nevertheless, I believe that the Europeans have an interest in developing closer cooperation with the Chinese academic world for a number of reasons. First of all, for reasons of quality. I believe that cooperation in the academic field is always of value in itself, provided that, of course, it takes place on the basis of transparency, scholarly merit, and factual evidence. Secondly, because it is extremely healthy for any student, researcher, or academic professional, whether they are based in China or in Europe, to have contact with the outside world. I believe that there is added value, pedagogical value I would say, in developing relations with other scholars. In the *College of Europe* of which I have been the rector since September 2020, we also teach a number of Chinese students that are coming to us in order to study the European Union from the inside. It is quite clear that they are doing this, so that afterwards they are in a better-informed position to negotiate more effectively with the European Union once they have entered Chinese institutions. There is nothing inherently problematic in this. However, I think that it is important for universities and research institutions throughout Europe to be mindful of this and not to be *naïve* about anything. Again, speaking from my own experience as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, I did always prefer to have a negotiator on the other side of the table who knew the European Union and was familiar with its functioning because this helps a lot in facilitating the negotiations. Obviously, this also empowers your counterpart, because the greater the institutional knowledge of the EU, the more instruments your interlocutor has at his or her disposal. However, speaking again from my experience, I always found that negotiating with a well-informed interlocutor much less problematic because it alleviates the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, and the price for taking such risks can be too high with certain issues.

Generally speaking, I think that the more we connect with the Chinese academia, the better it is for the Chinese civil society, but also for our institutional relations. And once again, this would obviously entail being as clear and transparent as possible on our points of disagreement, starting with human rights issues. Whenever I visiting China in my previous capacity, I always meet with civil society representatives, paying attention to protect their safety, but I never once skipped a meeting with civil society representatives and this was accepted. These were, of course, not clandestine meetings, but they were accepted and recognized as constituting a priority for the European Union.

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