

What to expect from Joe Biden in US relations with other great powers and what it means for the V4

Anton Bendarzsevszkij

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The election of Joe Biden was met differently in Brussels, Moscow and Beijing. While Western Europe did not hide the fact that it was pleased about the election results of the 46th American president, Russia and China stayed cautious. However, there is one thing about the new administration, which is shared by most local experts in the respected countries: Joe Biden is a seasoned diplomat, who served in the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, and was the chairman of NATO Observer Group. "Predictability" is the main characteristic expected from Biden. The new administration will improve the relations with the European Union, but continue – and even increase Trump's tough approach to China and Russia. The Visegrad Group, due to its geographic positions may expect increasing pressure from the US regarding their relations with Moscow and Beijing. Washington may very well ask from its allies to take sides - when it comes to the issues of energy, trade, and technology. At the same time the US will increase its presence in the post-Soviet space, which might provoke Russia, forcing it to take more of an aggressive position.

Washington-Russia axis

When Donald Trump came to power in 2016, Russia had high expectations from the Trump administration – the Kremlin was hoping that sanctions introduced after 2014 by his predecessors will be lifted, while the NATO expansion might stop. This has never

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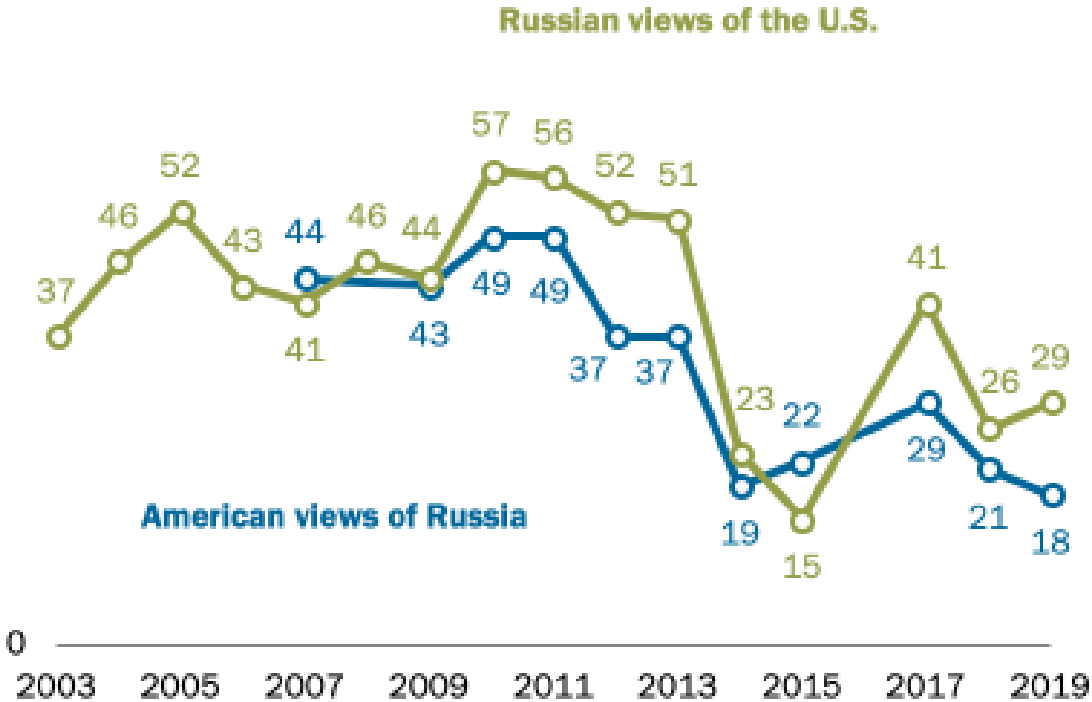
happened: in the last 4 years alone, the United States imposed 46 sanction packages against Russia.¹

Though, there will not be a lot of difference in the policy: the American political establishment, Republicans and Democrats alike, considers Russia a threat, therefore in terms of general policy it does not really matter, who is sitting in the White House. Donald Trump in the beginning of his presidency tried to take steps towards normalization with Moscow, but it did not play out well. Trump's rule in the end was determined by the constant accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 elections, which did not leave him with a lot of maneuvering power.

Few in Russia, U.S. see other country positively

% who have a favorable opinion of Russia/U.S.

100%



Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q8a & Q8c.

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Due to the joint expectations of Trump's presidency, the positive view of the other country increased in 2017, and fell again in the following years. According to Pew Research Center's survey, last year only 18% of Americans had a positive view of Russia, while the number was 49% in 2010.²

Today, the Kremlin does not have such expectations at all. When the foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov was asked in October, which presidential nominee would be better for Russia, he just shrugged: "United States doesn't like us". According to the Russian geopolitical expert, the leader of Carnegie Moscow, Dmitry Trenin, the American-Russian relations are now worse than ever since the beginning of '80s, but this is still not the bottom yet, and it could be even worse.³

In terms of the standards and values represented by the Democrats, this could be the hardest time for Russia, marked by the ongoing political crisis in Belarus (while the Belarusian leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenko is supported by the Kremlin), the poisoning of Alexey Navalny Russian opposition leader (and as a consequence the weakening of Russia's positions in Europe), the conflict in Transcaucasia, and the lack of progress in Eastern Ukraine.

A different approach

Probably the biggest difference between Biden and Trump will be their approach: Donald Trump had a very transactional, pragmatic approach to foreign policy.⁴ As a businessman, he used his common sense and business sense, acting instinctively. As mentioned before, Biden is more of a professional diplomat, having many years of experience in foreign affairs, while also having experience with Russian relations in the last decades. Due to his age, he knows what the cold war means, and he has visited Russia already in 1979 and 1988, leading American delegations at the negotiation table.⁵

Where Donald Trump have seen American interests and opportunities, **Joe Biden sees an aggressive and revanchist Russia, which poses a serious threat to the United States.**⁶ However, at the same time, this approach is based on confrontation and a dialogue from the position of strength: experiencing the cold war era, Biden will project these practices to his presidency in the future. He has already expressed this position two years ago in an article published on Foreign Affairs. "*Even while defending*

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*U.S. interests and safeguarding liberal democracy elsewhere, Washington must keep the channels of communication open with Moscow. At the height of the Cold War, American and Soviet leaders recognized that, whatever their differences, they could not afford a miscalculation that might lead to war. They had to keep talking. The same is true today: as two nuclear superpowers with military assets deployed in close proximity in many different parts of the globe, the United States and Russia have a mutual obligation to maintain strategic stability.*⁷ As he formulated in the same article - **“hang tough but keep talking”**⁸

Key elements of future relations

Increased involvement in the post-Soviet space. Biden represents a value-based perspective, putting more emphasis on the questions of human rights, morality, democracy and civic liberties unlike his predecessor. After the accusations of Trump’s Russian connections, the Republican president was overly cautious in everything related to Moscow, and Washington and rather preferred to stay away from the post-Soviet region, concentrating on China and the Middle-East.

This could change entirely in the next four years. Biden is expected to corner Russia in its close neighbourhood, supporting the opponents of pro-Russian leaders. *“Democratic transformation in Russia’s neighbourhood would serve as a powerful counterexample to Moscow’s kleptocratic and authoritarian rule and would delegitimize its authority over the long run”*⁹ – argued Biden in his 2018 article in Foreign Affairs.

American presence could significantly increase in Ukraine (especially since Biden was involved in the US-Ukrainian affairs during his time as vice president) and Belarus. Especially if the political crisis continues through 2021, Belarusian protesters may find more support from Washington against Russian backed Alyaksandr Lukashenka. **Moscow will stress more in fear of possible “colour revolutions” organized by Washington in its periphery.**

Pressure on Brussels regarding Russia. While we can expect improvement in US-European relations, this can also lead to joint, tougher positions on Russia. The recent assassinations of Russian and Chechen figures in European cities and the poisoning of the famous Russian opposition leader, Alexey Navalny resulted in weakening of Moscow’s positions in Europe. Even Germany, which has always handled Russia from

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the position of pragmatic approach and business relations, is considering to stop the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Tough position of Poland and the Baltic states is further leading to the conclusion that Russia could become a common enemy, which will unite Washington and Brussels during the presidency of Joe Biden.

Arms control. During the cold war, and even after, strategic arms control was the main element, the corner stone of the bilateral relations of the two countries. During the Trump presidency, this corner stone significantly eroded and was partly dismantled. Trump was sceptic of arms control, believing that US-Russian agreements are not enough, and the involvement of other global players (like China and India) is also needed for the system to work.



Joe Biden's meeting with the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Andrei Gromyko in 1988 on the ratification of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF).¹⁰

Under the Biden administration, the **USA could return to the previous policy, and we can expect cooperation in this field in the next years.** Joe Biden was working on arms control issues for decades – during the Cold War and also during the presidency of Barack Obama. He was involved in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the NEW START agreement. The latter, strategic arms reduction treaty will expire in February 2021. The prolongation attempts during the

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Trump administration did not lead to a result – Trump wanted to include China in the agreement – while Biden is expected to be much more flexible on the issue. The Open Skies treaty, which was left by Washington this year – decision heavily criticized by the European allies – might also be rejoined under Biden.

However, to ratify international treaties with Russia, Biden will need two-thirds of the Senate votes¹¹, which might not happen easily, so he might look for other options, where ratification is not needed. There is also the question of intermediate-range and shorter-range land-based missiles, according to the INF treaty signed in 1987, Moscow and Washington agreed to eliminate their stocks, but the USA withdrew from the treaty in 2019. Biden might not jump back into the previous agreement, using the opportunity provided by the previous administration to pressure Russia and deploy the intermediate-range category in Europe.

What it means for the Visegrad Group

Joe Biden's approach to Russia might be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, during his administration, V4 countries bordering the post-Soviet space will get more attention and help. Poland and the Baltic states were asking for increased military presence and support from the USA and NATO ever since the Russian involvement in Ukraine in 2014. The Belarusian and Ukrainian agenda might dominate the US involvement in the region in the next years. It will also result in a much more daring Ukraine, that will not hold back itself in the questions of minorities and its national interests in Transcarpathia, which will be problematic for Hungary. We can also expect increased pressure on Budapest to lift the veto in NATO imposed on Ukraine and a request to cooperate with Kiev may come up.

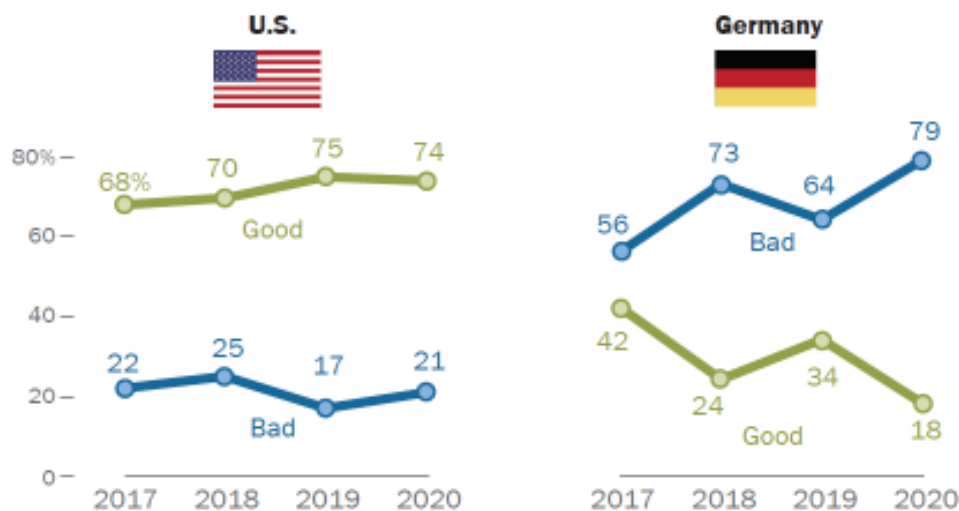
On the other hand, paradoxically Europe might become a much less secured place: potential deployment of the intermediate-range missiles (which are almost impossible to detect and counter in time, due to their proximity to targets), will make Russia nervous, and might push the Russian military approach into preventive direction. American involvement in the Russian sphere of interests - in its close neighbourhood, and growing Russian fears of US-backed "colour revolutions" may also result in a more aggressive, active position, which might significantly decrease the stability of our region.

Washington – Brussels axis

The election of Joe Biden was met with a sigh of relief in Brussels. “Great to speak with President-elect Joe Biden. I congratulated him on his victory. It is a new beginning for the EU-U.S. global partnership. A strong EU & strong US working together can shape the global agenda based on cooperation, multilateralism, solidarity and shared values.”¹² – tweeted Ursula von der Leyen, president of the EU Commission, after the results of the US presidential elections.

Americans see relationship with Germany in good standing, but more Germans now see it as bad

% who say relations today between the U.S. and Germany are ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center survey conducted in the U.S. Sept. 22-28, 2020. Q2. German results from Körber-Stiftung survey conducted Sept. 10-17, 2020.

"Americans and Germans Head Into 2021 With Divergent Opinions on Transatlantic Alliance"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The survey conducted by Pew Research Center in September 2020, shown that only 18% of Germans perceived relationship with USA as good – big drop from 42% in 2017, while in the United States during Donald Trump presidency the perception of Germany improved from 68% to 74%.¹³

The “America first” policy promoted by Donald Trump was not received well in Western Europe, and made the European countries rethink their transatlantic relations. Backing off from Obama’s free trade agreement, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

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Partnership (TTIP), the US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, and the tough position on NATO made the mutual relations colder than ever in the last decades.

Now Brussels hopes for a restart. In a way, Western Europe was reacting on the election of Joe Biden like Russia did, back in 2016 on the election of Donald Trump. However, for Russia the expectations were not met in the end, and the same might happen to Europe – the previous status quo in transatlantic relations might never return, even if Biden is president.

Key elements of future relations

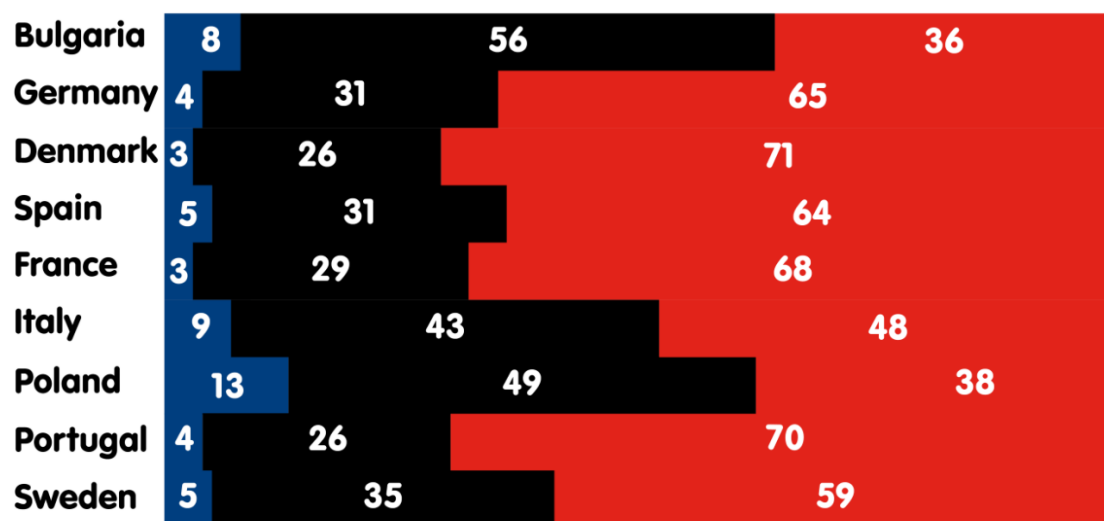
There are numerous areas, where Biden's presidency will matter for the European Union in the next years.

Restart of the economy and cooperation against global pandemic. The economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic affected all the countries around the world. First of all, the pandemic has to be stopped through mass vaccination in 2021, and currently there are at least three European and American companies capable of doing this – Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna. Mutual efforts to produce enough vaccines are needed, then the rebuilding of the economy may start. Reenergizing the transatlantic trade of the world's largest economic blocks could do the trick. However, it is also less likely that Biden will go against Trump's "America First" strategy in terms of trade, and the US interests may remain on top above all. A new attempt at the transatlantic free trade agreement is not likely at all.¹⁴

Climate policy. This is an important topic for Europeans, and according to several surveys, the decision of Donald Trump to quit Paris Agreement caused more negative impact on the view of USA, than other policies..¹⁵ Joe Biden promised to rejoin the climate agreement as soon as he becomes president. However, these commitments should be binding well beyond the timeframe of his presidency.¹⁶

Russian deterrence. The East-Central-European countries, and the Baltic states seek NATO's protection from Russia, but at the same time nobody wants escalation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the deployment of American intermediate-range missiles in Europe could make Europe less secure, and Brussels should act against it.

How has your view of the US changed during the coronavirus crisis? (%)



Improved Stayed the same Worsened

Source: ECFR

European opinion on United States has changed a lot because of the coronavirus.

Source: ECFR¹⁷

Energy policy. We can expect further promotion of American shale gas and building of LNG terminals in European ports. Especially Poland and the Baltic states will follow Washington to diversify their energy streams against Russia. Pressure on Germany based on the building of Nord Stream 2 will grow. After the US sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 were introduced in 2019, Berlin firmly defended the project – up until August, until the poisoning of Alexey Navalny Russian opposition leader. Biden could finish what Donald Trump started, and freeze the completion of the Russian pipeline at least for the next 4 years.

On the relations of China, the European Union does not have a unified position, however, Beijing is an important trade partner needed for the recovery of the economy in the post-Covid era. We can expect more pressure from Washington on the relations with Beijing and the use of Chinese technologies. Europe will need to find a smart approach to keep previous relations with China, while remaining a US ally in the future¹⁸, which might not be easy. In return for military support and climate policies Biden could demand a tough European position both on China and Russia.

Transforming the relationship

The European Union is now in the phase of wishful thinking, expecting almost impossible measures from the new president. Donald Trump demonstrated to Europe the problems that come with being overreliant on the United States¹⁹, and Europe now needs to rethink its transatlantic relations. According to other expert views, during the presidency of Donald Trump, Europe made more progress to secure its sovereignty, than it did under Barack Obama, George W. Bush and others.²⁰

The task should be to transform the transatlantic relationship, not restoring it²¹.

The EU needs to be self-reliant and united, when it comes to defending its interests – against Russia, China, or even United States. This is the time now to build a more balanced relationship - and a strong Europe is also in the interest of Washington.

What it means for the Visegrad Group

Under Donald Trump, United States' presence in Central-Eastern-Europe was just limited, but it can change now under Joe Biden. The geographic position of the region, being on the frontier of the European Union makes it strategically important for Washington. V4 countries are the entering point for the Russian energy resources and other goods to Europe, and the same stands for China. In the last years almost all of the countries of the region joined China's initiatives, entering a 17+1 format and taking part in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Poland's Małaszewicze became one of the most important hubs of Chinese goods, entering the European market on land. At the same time, the V4 countries promoted the idea of becoming a bridge, a connection hub for China towards the European Union. Washington may put all the efforts under pressure. As mentioned above, the US may also demand the use of American energy and technology in return for cooperation and military protection.

Based on Joe Biden's previous statements, Washington may also push hard on Brussels against Hungary and Poland on the questions of civil liberties, liberal values and the rule of law.

Washington – China axis

Relations between China and United States are currently at their deepest point in decades, since the normalization in 1979.²² Donald Trump blamed China with every real or putative sins: military aggression, technology theft, start of a global pandemic, the violation of human rights, American trade deficit and unemployment, spying, hacking etc. Increased custom tariffs and the trade war started by the American president caused significant losses to both sides.

After the election of Joe Biden, Beijing took a cautious, waiting position, mixed with some optimism. The optimism however might be temporary: similarly to Russia, the Anti-Chinese policies of United States are formed by the Congress and public opinion, therefore the person sitting in the White House matters less in such regards. Both the Democrats and the Republicans expect the president to be tough on China, **and he will definitely continue the overall policy of his predecessor, and could even surpass Trump.** *“On every relevant metric since Trump took office, Beijing’s position is stronger and America’s is weaker. The United States needs a president who has a record of standing up to Beijing and getting results. (...) I’ll rally our allies to set the rules of the road and push back on Beijing’s aggressive and predatory behaviour”²³* – said Biden in his statement in August 2020.

Biden has visited China already in 1979, representing the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee. Joe Biden and the Chinese leader, Ji Jinping have known each other for several years, before Xi Jinping became the president, meeting in China and in USA. Speaking in 2018 at the Council on Foreign Relations, Biden said that he has spent more time in private meetings with Xi Jinping than any world leader.²⁴ This is a good start, and Beijing could hope for the best, but despite the personal acquaintance, Biden was very harsh on Xi Jinping, calling him “thug”²⁵ – Donald Trump himself has never directly criticized the Chinese leader, respecting his opponent in public.²⁶

However, the general approach might change: in addition to the already mentioned predictability, **Biden might take a more strategic, long term approach, handling China as a dangerous competitor, but not an enemy**, with whom he is at war - an open geopolitical competition for economic and technical supremacy.²⁷



Xi Jinping and Joe Biden walk across the Dujiangyan Irrigation system in Dujiangyan in China in August 2011. Source: AFP.

After the presidency of Barack Obama, many Asian countries welcomed Trump's tough approach on China. **Obama tried to integrate China into global world order, Trump wanted to isolate it. We can expect Joe Biden to continue the Asian policy of Donald Trump, and not Obama's.** However, Donald Trump advocated for increased burden-sharing of US allies, threatening to curtail Washington's military presence in South-Korea, Japan and other countries.²⁸ A similar approach was used by Trump in Europe. Under the Biden administration we can expect increased American presence in regions surrounding China.

Key elements of future relations

Joe Biden will put much more emphasis on the issues of rule of law and democracy in connection to China and Russia alike. The Tibet and Taiwan situation in the South China Sea, Chinese policy towards Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, border disputes in India and the waning political rights of Hong Kong will become potential battlefields of harsh American position against China. However, more aggressive US policy in China's zone of interests – and even within its borders - will provoke China and result in further escalation.

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Strengthening alliances. Another important difference of Biden's approach might be the coalition against China's influence: under Donald Trump, the United States went to battle with Beijing on its own. This might change in the next years by Washington organizing a united front against China.²⁹ Australia, South-Korea and Japan will definitely welcome such policy.

Trade policy. Washington's allies are hoping for a recalibration: remaining tough on China, but being more open to trade is unlikely. Like in the case of Europe, Biden might pursue Trump's America First policy in its soft, unofficial form. This is why it is unlikely, that Washington will join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), signed by 11 Asian countries.³⁰ On the other hand, despite the US-Chinese trade agreement signed in January 2020, there is still 360 billion USD worth of US tariffs (and vice-versa) imposed on Chinese import goods.³¹ The tone and style might change, but the substance of this restrictive, protectionist policy will remain even under Biden. According to the 2020 deal, China agreed to boost purchases of US goods and services, but it is well behind the agreed schedule³², which can also become a conflicting point at the beginning of the Biden presidency.

Arms control. Washington was working on inclusion of China into the international agreements on arms reduction. The withdrawal of Trump from the INF treaty or NEW START was also connected to the new geopolitical situation. The Cold war era of the two dominant superpowers is long gone, and the world is becoming more and more multipolar. China, India, Germany or Brazil are at least as important global powers as Russia. Biden will probably continue to pursue this strategy in case of China, but Beijing so far refused to take part in the nuclear arms reduction treaties.

Questions of technological leadership. Donald Trump has introduced restrictions to Chinese companies in American technology, and banned some Chinese corporations from US markets. These measures have hurt Beijing, but also pushed them to technological self-reliance. We do not know if Biden will remove the restrictions of his predecessor (partly maybe), but **we can be sure that the technological competition between the United States and China will intensify. We can expect billions of dollars invested into Artificial Intelligence, telecommunications and quantum computing from the US side.**

What it means for the Visegrad Group

The topic of American pressure on the Visegrad countries regarding their China relations was already answered in the previous section. It is also worth noting that Washington might expect its allies to support its official position on the question of rule of law and democracy in the future – Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang province and Taiwan may all become subjects and tools of American diplomacy. The Visegrad Group needs to work out a smart approach to keep its trade relations with China while not offending the American partner.

Technology may become another important line of divide: China is currently at the forefront of such high-tech technologies like 5G and AI, in most cases offering their technology cheaper than its competitors. According to the estimations, by 2035, 5G technology will help create more than 22 million jobs worldwide and generate \$13.2 trillion worth of economic output annually.³³ This is why technology should be kept out of fight of the two global powers, to avoid creating a divide between Chinese and American technological standards. The countries of the Visegrad Group should advocate an approach based on their interests, while also keeping in mind questions of national security.

Conclusions

The president is new, but America's foreign policy will remain unchanged in many areas. In case of US-Chinese and US-Russian relations Joe Biden might even be tougher than his predecessor, emphasizing not just American interests, but questions of democracy, rule of law and human rights. This may result in further escalations in the periphery of Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing do not have high hopes for the new administration, but expect more predictability from the bilateral relations. On the contrary, US relations with the European Union probably will change and improve, leading to a more balanced approach, leading to American support in European security and cooperation in climate policies. However, the return to the level of cooperation of the previous US administration is unlikely.

For the Visegrad Group the relations of the new administration with Brussels, Beijing and Moscow will mean an increased pressure on the topics of rule of law and civil rights on one hand, and pressure on suspending business with Russia and China on

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the other. However, the countries of the group may experience also an increased level of support from the United States in security and in countering Russian influence and propaganda.

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