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# country report

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## What's next for the United States?

### Part 1: Foreign and Security Policy

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How is the Biden Administration changing the direction of the U.S.? The KAS Office USA takes a first look, in a series of five country reports. This report analyzes foreign and security policy. President Joe Biden has announced to recommit the United States to multilateralism, cooperation with the European allies, and global alliances.

Two weeks after his inauguration, the president gave his first foreign policy speech. He mentioned Russia's "aggressive actions", committed to counter "advancing authoritarianism", and identified China as "our most serious competitor". With broad strokes, he painted a picture of pledging to confront human rights abuses and intolerance in the World. Despite a new tone, the new U.S. administration might soon expect "responsibility-sharing" from Europe to address the challenges in the world.

President Biden's speech was directed at career diplomats and civil service staff members<sup>1</sup>. This gesture of the former Senator and Vice president, who spent years in the U.S. Senate on the Foreign Relations committee, was well calculated, as he wanted to demonstrate the importance of America's diplomacy worldwide. It also served as a distinction from Donald Trump, who was critical of the State Department's work and visited the CIA and Department of Defense instead in his first week in office in January 2017.

### Change in style – also change in substance?

As first steps of a "course-correction", Biden announced an end to U.S. support for offensive operations in Yemen, and a "freeze" of troop redeployments from Germany. He also emphasized a change in style from his predecessor Donald Trump: "[Conversations with allies] are part of an effort to begin reforming the habits of cooperation and rebuilding the muscles of democratic alliances that have atrophied over the past few years of neglect..." As a result, there might also be seen a change in substance soon, which would be especially important for the transatlantic relationship.

President Biden's speech followed first steps which he already announced prior to and after his inauguration on January 20. He might focus on domestic issues, especially the challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, he has emphasized an "America is back" approach in the international arena.

With regard to the **Middle East**, he promised on the campaign trail an end of U.S. support in **Yemen**, which began under the Obama administration in 2015 in support of a Saudi-led

military coalition against Iranian-supported Houthi rebels. The UN had already considered the situation in Yemen as one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises. Almost a quarter million people have died so far in this country. Before his speech, the Biden administration already announced a halt on some arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Now the president went a step further and declared that arms sales associated with offensive operations in Yemen would be halted. Unlike his predecessors Obama and Trump, the new president has stopped making the case that U.S. support would bring the war to an end. His goal now is a diplomatic conflict management solution. The career diplomat **Timothy Lenderking** will serve as a special envoy in negotiations. A day after the speech, the State Department lifted a terrorist designation against Houthi rebels that the Trump administration had recently issued.



Joe Biden, February 4, 2021

Challenges in the Middle East are intertwined; thus, this reversal could have an impact on relations in particular with two other nations, **Saudi Arabia** and **Iran**. In the Trump administration's view, putting the Houthis on a terror list was a part of its pressure campaign against Iran. It also positioned the U.S. in Saudi Arabia's corner, even over objections of the U.S. Congress to provide billions of dollars in weapons and intelligence. Several thousand U.S. troops have been stationed in Saudi Arabia for several years now as part of an effort to protect regional allies against Iran.

The **Iran nuclear deal framework Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** was reached in 2015 and implemented in 2016. President Trump withdrew in 2018 and reinstated U.S. sanctions. Iran began to violate the agreement one year later. However, the JCPOA is still in place, and its remaining members are waiting for the next steps of the United States. The Trump administration claimed that its maximum pressure campaign was designed to push Iran to negotiate a new deal. During his campaign, Joe Biden stated a preference for restoring the JCPOA. The then-candidate emphasized in mid-September for a CNN commentary: "If Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement, as a starting point for follow-on negotiations." This carefully formulated statement has become the blueprint for the Biden administration's effort in the region. Four days after his speech at the State Department, the president announced that his administration won't lift sanctions as a precondition before Iran gets back to the negotiating table. However, and again, a change in style might also be a harbinger of a change in substance: Distinguished from his predecessor, Biden wants to give diplomacy another chance.

Strategically most important for his European allies and NATO members might be Biden's approach towards **Russia**. During Trump's presidency, often the uneasiness was felt on both sides of the Atlantic with regard to how Trump dealt with Putin. On the campaign trail, Biden called Russia "one of the biggest threats" to U.S. security goals, and vowed that Putin has to "pay a price" for interfering in the U.S. elections in 2016 and for multiple cyberattacks and intrusion into American government and private networks. Now, in his first weeks as president, he has re-emphasized this. He also called on Moscow to release Aleksei Navalny. In the meantime, the United States and Russia have formally approved a five-year extension

of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). While Trump hesitated to sign the extension and looked for amendments or to include China, Biden has now decided that it is more important “to preserve the only remaining treaty between our countries safeguarding nuclear stability”, as he said in the speech at the State Department. In a reversal of Trump’s policy, Biden also announced that he was halting any planned troop withdrawals from **Germany**.

The biggest challenge for the U.S. foreign and security policy is arguably **China**. More than twenty years ago, the then-U.S. Senator Joe Biden helped the Clinton administration to normalize trade relations with China and, as a result, supported China’s request to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). He emphasized then the “possibility of cooperation” and mentioned “China is not our enemy.” This has changed significantly. During his campaign, he discussed possible new economic sanctions on China and said it was time “to get tough on China”. But the world view from the White House is different than the one from the campaign trail. It may take some time to reassess an approach to China, be it security or be it trade policy.

President Biden’s foreign policy approach is evidently different than that of Trump. He pledged to repair alliances and restore trust and faith among international leaders and the U.S. allies. As a result, he shows a preference for cooperation and diplomacy on the multilateral level (UN, NATO, WTO) unlike Donald Trump. Over the next months, we will see how it unfolds.

## Organizational Changes and Important Players

In his first weeks, the new president has attempted to establish a new rapport with the many foreign and security staff members, as they will be the ones to implement his policies. The two most important departments giving life to Biden’s foreign policy vision are the Department of State (DoS) and the Pentagon (DoD). The morale in these branches seems to be low, as many U.S. diplomats have described the Trump days a “wrenching four years”. They were difficult for staff members as well as several of his political appointees, as they experienced multiple leadership changes at DoS, DoD and National Security Council (NSC), plus an impeachment in U.S. Congress based on Trump’s foreign policy approach. As a result, those who served are now looking to the new president and his leadership team for a different, inclusive approach, and a more open style of communication.

One of the U.S. president’s constitutional powers is the ability to nominate the top positions of the executive branch with the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate. Also, every U.S. administration has several thousand political appointment positions to fill, and roughly one fourth of those appointments require U.S. Senate confirmation. The nominees’ names can offer first signals of how this administration will govern and what the priorities might be. Biden can count on people who know the administration, each other, and the think tank and academia community in Washington very well. Especially regarding Europe and the transatlantic alliance, the following persons are expected to play important roles:

### Department of Defense

**Secretary Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III:** His nomination was surprising, as he is a respected military leader, but not known as especially political. He is the first African American to lead the Pentagon. According to “Foreign Policy”, he first came into contact with then-VP Joe

Biden in 2010 in Iraq. His military career CV lists leadership positions at Fort Bragg, West Point, in the Pentagon, and in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Mark Perry in Foreign Policy wrote, “[B]ut most crucially, it’s clear that Biden and Austin share common beliefs, including a healthy skepticism about America’s serial Middle East interventions, a deep-seated belief in the efficacy of diplomacy, and a nearly instinctive commitment to rebuilding U.S. alliances. These are the foreign-policy ideas that helped secure the White House for Biden—but have not always been as popular with the military as with the American public.”<sup>2</sup>

**Kathleen Hicks** is the nominee for United States deputy secretary of defense. She was most recently senior vice president and director of the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). She also served at DoD under Obama. Noteworthy for European Allies are her views on burden-sharing and the “two percent commitment” of NATO allies. According to Hicks, “We should always be focused on burden-sharing, ensuring that allies fulfill their commitments. But when it becomes that tactical issue that overrides the strategic value of the alliances, alliances that the Chinese and Russians could only hope to match ... if we get to that point, we have become astrategic.”<sup>3</sup>

**Mara Karlin** has been appointed to serve as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Prior to that, she was Director of Strategic Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Dr. Karlin has served in several national security roles. Regional affairs involving the Middle East, Europe, and Asia are key aspects of her work in international public policy and academia.

## National Security Council

**Jake Sullivan:** The new national security adviser is 44 years old and the youngest in nearly 60 years. He is also known for having a close connection to White House chief of staff Ron Klain. After holding top positions at the State Department under Hillary Clinton he served as then-Vice President Biden’s national security adviser. He arguably played a key role in negotiating the Iran nuclear deal JCPOA. The “major focus” of the Biden NSC’s work, at least initially, will be on beating the coronavirus pandemic and restructuring the NSC to make public health a permanent national security priority, Sullivan said.

**John Kerry:** The former Secretary of State is special presidential envoy for climate, underscoring his commitment to tackling the global crisis. Climate change is part of security policy – that is one signal sent out by the administration. John Kerry, who negotiated the Paris agreement which Biden rejoined several days ago, is a Cabinet-level official in Biden’s administration, and will sit on the National Security Council.

**Amanda Sloat** serves as the senior director for Europe on the National Security Council. She worked at the Brookings Institution before. Her areas of expertise include Brexit and British politics, Turkey and Southern Europe, the European Union, and trans-Atlantic relations. Dr. Sloat served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southern Europe and Eastern Mediterranean Affairs at the State Department until May 2016. She also served as Senior Advisor to the White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf Region and as Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. She previously worked as senior professional staff on the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, with responsibility for European policy.

## Department of State

**Secretary Antony Blinken** is a career diplomat. Biden's choice of Blinken sent out a clear signal that he counts on the expertise of the foreign service officers and their network to allies and other countries and into international organizations. He has worked for the DoS under two previous administrations. He was Principal Deputy National Security Advisor to former President Barack Obama (2013-2015), and National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden (2009-2012). He began his government service in 1993 at the State Department as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs.

**Victoria Nuland** is the nominee for Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Ambassador Nuland has worked at Brookings and the Albright Stonebridge Group. She was also CEO of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). Nuland served as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs from September 2013 until January 2017, and was responsible for U.S. policy and diplomatic relations with 50 countries in Europe and Eurasia, NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

**Molly Montgomery** is the new Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. She is responsible for relations with Western Europe and the European Union and leads the bureau's policy formulation and implementation on global issues. Previously, Montgomery spent more than a decade as a career Foreign Service officer. As a detailee to the White House, she served as Special Advisor to the Vice President for Europe and Eurasia. Her overseas assignments included U.S. Embassies in Riga, Sarajevo, and Kabul and the U.S. Consulate General Dubai.

The president has also picked **Linda Thomas-Greenfield** as UN ambassador, Thomas-Greenfield is a 35-year veteran of the foreign service who oversaw the Bureau of African Affairs during the Obama administration. She has served as director general of the foreign service as well as ambassador to Liberia. For the role as administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Biden has nominated **Ambassador Samantha Power**. She served in Obama's NSC and as UN ambassador. In her new role as administrator, she will sit on the NSC, which is a clear sign that USAID is expected to play a more prominent role in Biden's foreign policy.

President Biden has promised a new foreign policy approach, and new opportunities for the transatlantic allies to cooperate with his administration. The new most important players in Biden's foreign policy team know each other well – and have a deep understanding of Europe and its players.

## References

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