



**THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION:  
FACING CHALLENGES GALORE  
AT HOME AND ABROAD**

**DAVID J. KRAMER**

# **The Biden Administration: Facing Challenges Galore at Home and Abroad**

*by David J. Kramer*

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January 20, 2021 marked a new chapter in America. The inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States brought a sense of relief among a wide swath of the American population. In his inaugural address that day, Biden stressed the theme of unity, arguing that together, the United States can confront its many challenges and accomplish great things.

The challenges are daunting. They start with the coronavirus pandemic that continues to exact a staggering toll in infections – more than 25 million cases in the United States alone – and deaths – expected to reach 500,000 by the end of February. The pandemic, of course, has taken a major toll on the economy, which will not be able to recover in a serious way until the virus is brought under control. Inequality, racial tensions, white extremism and polarization also remain high on the list of challenges.

The Biden administration entered office having inherited a multitude of problems. To address some of the most urgent needs, Biden has signed more than 100 executive orders and directives on issues from fighting the pandemic and overturning the Muslim travel ban to ending construction of the border wall and rejoining the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization. Many of these steps reflect campaign promises intent on undoing much of Donald Trump's agenda.

Trump himself, however, has not gone away. Despite being booted off social media platforms, Trump continues to exercise considerable influence over the Republican Party from his new home in Florida. Hinting at another run for president in 2024, Trump remains the focus of much media attention.

Few Republican members of Congress dare to cross him. Ten House Republicans, in true profiles in courage, supported impeaching Trump, but they already are paying a political price from within their own party with calls for their removal and resignation. That impeachment is the second time the House of Representatives took such action against Trump. The first time last year was for his efforts to abuse his position to pressure a foreign government, Ukraine, to interfere in the 2020 election against Biden. The more recent time was because of his incitement of an insurrection on the Capitol on January 6.

No other public official in U.S. history has ever been impeached twice. Only one Republican Senator, Mitt Romney, voted to convict Trump last year in the Senate trial. This time, several more may join in voting to convict, but the majority of Senate Republicans appears unlikely to convict out of fear that Trump will target them for turning on him. To convict Trump and disqualify him for a future run for office, 17 Republican Senators would need to join their Democratic colleagues. As this goes to print, that appears exceedingly unlikely.

The Republican Party has other problems as well. Some new members of Congress such as Marjorie Taylor Greene from Georgia and Lauren Boebert from Colorado have become lightning rods for their inflammatory and threatening tweets, comments and actions. While some Democratic members in the House of Representatives are calling for their expulsion, the Republican leadership, including Kevin McCarthy, show little interest in picking fights with this extremist wing of the party. Instead, McCarthy traveled to Mar-a-Largo in late January to pay his respects to and stay in the good graces of Trump.

The turmoil in the Republican Party, however, should not detract from the encouraging start of the Biden presidency. President Biden nominated many highly competent and qualified professionals to fill key government positions. Their confirmation by the Senate, after a slow start, is finally moving ahead. Antony Blinken, who was confirmed by the Senate to be Secretary of State, is a highly respected expert and policymaker with experience in Congress as the key staffer to Biden when he was a Senator and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, and as Deputy Secretary of State in the

Barack Obama administration.

Jake Sullivan also brings strong credentials to his new position as Biden's national security adviser. Retired General Lloyd Austin, confirmed to be Secretary of Defense, is a little less known but has an impressive track record from his service in the military. Janet Yellen brings an excellent reputation to her new position as Secretary of the Treasury. Those chosen to head the various intelligence agencies – Avril Haynes as Director of National Intelligence and William Burns to be CIA Director – are highly regarded.

Biden will need this roster of solid talent in the foreign policy realm, since he won't simply be able to focus on domestic issues first and later turn to national security. The world just doesn't work that way – there is no pause button for Biden to hit to ask the rest of the world to wait while the United States fixes its internal problems. That would take years anyway. Biden will have to confront both domestic and foreign policy issues at the same time.

Biden likes to say that the United States must not only lead by the example of its power but by the power of its example. And yet many wonder whether the "shining city on the hill," as Ronald Reagan famously said about the United States, has lost some of that shine. There is no doubt that events of the last few years, and especially of the last few months, culminating in the deadly storming January 6 of the U.S. Capitol, in which five people were killed, has dulled the shine.

But it is important to remember that hours after the Capitol was overrun by an insurrectionist mob, members of the House and Senate, along with then-Vice President Mike Pence, returned to finish their job of certifying the results of the election. Exactly two weeks after a mob overwhelmed police and security to attack the Capitol, that same setting served as the location where Biden and his Vice President Kamala Harris, were sworn into office. The contrast is stunning, and it speaks to the resilience of American institutions. Still, one should not be complacent about the sturdiness of our system; after all, the rioters came within minutes, if not seconds, of storming the House and Senate chambers just before members, including then-Vice President Mike Pence and House speaker Nancy Pelosi, were evacuated to safety. As awful as the riot was, it could have been far worse.

## TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

In addition to all the internal challenges facing Biden, he assumes office with the reputation of the United States in tatters. According to a new poll of 11 countries conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations, a majority of Europeans are happy with Biden's election victory — but many (32 percent) say that, after Trump, Americans can no longer be trusted. Only 27 percent disagreed with that statement. Fifty-three percent of German respondents said Americans couldn't be trusted, versus 35 percent of Britons. In France, the most popular answer was "don't know."

Overall, more than 60 percent of respondents — including 81 percent of Britons, 71 percent of Germans, and 66 percent of the French — said the American political system is "completely" or "somewhat broken." Some six in ten surveyed think China will become more powerful than the United States over the next decade. Only in Hungary and Poland, where the leaders curried favor with former Trump, is there a more positive than negative view toward the United States. Restoring the standing of the United States is a top priority of Blinken and Biden, but it will not happen overnight.

To be clear, the image of the United States has been in decline for years. Unhappiness with the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq started this trend. While Obama was viewed very favorably in Europe when he was elected president in 2008, his "pivot" to Asia was not well received on the Continent, and there was a general sense that Europe was considered less important to America than it had been in the past. It was during Trump's tenure that attitudes in Europe took their steepest declines.

Accordingly, it should be no surprise that many in Europe were relieved and even ecstatic that Biden won last November. After all, over the past four years, Trump denigrated America's allies in Europe, with personal attacks on a range of leaders. The scene captured on camera of Trump rudely pushing Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic out of his way at a NATO gathering in 2017 encapsulated Trump's treatment of America's European allies. He characterized the European Union as one of America's biggest "foes" and sowed doubts about the U.S. commitment to NATO. It is no wonder that Europeans, with transatlantic relations at their lowest point in a long time, are ecstatic to see Trump gone

and Biden coming in.

But recent actions and behavior by the European Union and specific European governments suggest that they think it is the United States alone that has to atone for its recent trespasses. The relationship requires give and take on both sides. In fact, the Europeans have work to do if they want to repair relations with the United States. Recent developments do not bode well on this front.

For instance, the trade deal with China reached last December suggests the EU places mercantilism above principles, given the egregious human rights abuses committed by the Chinese government against the Uyghurs and its ugly crackdown against the citizens of Hong Kong. At the same time that the EU adopts an accommodating stance toward the Communist Party-run leadership in Beijing, Chinese authorities continue to block any investigation into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic and flex their muscles toward countries in Asia, most notably Taiwan. Making matters worse, several European countries, most notably Germany, seem willing to accept Huawei's 5G network into their countries despite strong pressure from the United States to abandon such pursuits because of security and surveillance concerns.

Europeans are making a serious mistake if they think it was only the Trump administration that favored a tougher line toward Beijing. Many Democrats agree that the time has come to push back against the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, China looms as a major irritant in U.S.-EU relations, and Europe is making the situation worse with its craven approach.

Then there's the issue of NATO and defense spending. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in an interview with the Washington Post, "There is a need to rebuild trust between Europe and the United States. I don't believe in 'America alone.' I don't believe in 'Europe alone.' I believe in North America and Europe together." Acknowledging tensions with the previous U.S. administration, Stoltenberg said, "It is no secret that we had, I had, difficult discussions with him [Trump] on issues ranging from arms control, Russia, burden sharing and many other issues." And yet some of these issues are not going away with a new administration in Washington, even if the tone and approach will be very different.

In 2006, all NATO members committed to spend at least two percent of their GDP on defense by 2024. To date, only eight European allies, along with the United States, have fulfilled this pledge; six of those eight joined the Alliance within the last 21 years. American criticism of this perceived free-riding by many Alliance members will continue under the Biden administration, albeit with more cajoling than badgering that characterized Trump's approach.

Another irritant in transatlantic relations is the recent decision of the European Union to no longer recognize Juan Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela following fraudulent legislative elections organized by the discredited Nicolás Maduro last December. This unforced and unprincipled error involving a country in the Western hemisphere will not go over well in Washington.

The new U.S. administration has announced its return to the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization. Reengaging in international bodies will be a key foreign policy objective; withdrawal had opened these agencies to Chinese exploitation and manipulation in the absence of the United States and alienated partners in Europe. Biden also has made clear his interest in returning to the nuclear deal with Iran from which the Trump administration withdrew. On this, the EU and certain member states can play a critical role, especially since many Republicans in Washington will resist such a move.

The controversial and nearly completed Nord Stream 2 pipeline going directly from Russia to Germany, obviating the need for Russian gas to transit through Ukraine and deepening European dependence on Russia, is another source of friction, not just between the United States and Europe but within Europe itself. The European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in late 2018 to condemn Nord Stream 2 as "a political project that poses a threat to European energy security"; it voted again this year to end the project after the poisoning and arrest of Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny. The U.S. Congress joined the Trump administration in opposing the pipeline, to include mandating sanctions for companies and others involved in its construction, which is 90 percent complete.

After the poisoning of Navalny by Russian agents in August, there were hopes that Merkel and the government would cancel the pipeline, but those hopes have vanished. By insisting on completing the pipeline, the German government is creating a source of disagreement not only with the new Biden administration but with the vast majority of the U.S. Congress and with many fellow Europeans. Such disagreements play right into the hands of Vladimir Putin.

On Navalny, the initial European outraged reaction to his poisoning was encouraging. That has since dissipated, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel resists pressure to cancel Nord Stream 2 and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell plans to visit Moscow for consultations, over the objections of a number of EU member states in the east. Signs that the EU might be softening toward the Putin regime would clash with a tougher approach likely to be adopted by the Biden administration.

On his second day in office, Biden requested his intelligence community to look into Russian interference in America's elections; the poisoning of Navalny; reports of Russian bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan; and Russian hacking of American computer systems. In his first phone call with Putin, Biden raised these issues with his Russian counterpart and expressed support for Ukraine. The contrast with Trump's coddling of Putin could not be starker. Extending the New START treaty is a top arms control priority for the Biden administration, but that should not be interpreted in Europe as the precursor to a softening in Washington toward Moscow.

Indeed, the Biden administration will continue to oppose the Nord Stream 2 pipeline – legislation will not give them a choice anyway. Additional U.S. sanctions over the poisoning of Navalny are likely in the works. And Biden himself will not look to make a new friend in the Kremlin, the unseemly way his predecessor did. With a deteriorating political situation in Russia likely to worsen as Duma elections near in September, it is critical that the United States and European Union stay on the same page toward the Putin regime.

This would entail new sanctions for its ongoing conflict with Ukraine, its illegal use of banned chemical agents against regime opponents, its interference in European and American domestic politics and elections, and the appalling situation inside Russia itself when it comes to human rights. The West should also put the Kremlin on notice that any overt moves to prop up longtime dictator Alexander Lukashenka would be met with a serious response. Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgian territory must not be forgotten either, and new approaches should be considered to force Russia to respect all of its neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity, and right to orient their foreign policy as they deem fit, without Russian interference.

Both sides of the Atlantic can and should be doing more to fight the raging pandemic and collaborate on vaccine development and distribution. While in the U.S. and Europe the top priority is taking care of one's own citizens, both need to recognize that the Chinese and Russians are looking to fill voids with countries without indigenous production of any vaccine to score political and diplomatic advantage. Washington, Brussels and other European capitals cannot cede the field to authoritarian regimes when it comes to generosity to other countries in need of live-saving medications.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR GEORGIA?

Georgia, of course, is a country in need of such help. It has been devastated in the second wave of the virus after handling the first wave last spring comparatively well. The country's economy also has taken a major hit, with no rebound in sight. Making matters worse, since last October's parliamentary elections, the country has been saddled with a political crisis. The party in power, Georgian Dream, essentially has established monopoly control over the parliament following an opposition boycott over claims that the election was fraudulent. Western efforts to mediate a compromise have failed, and Georgia's image as an island of democracy amid a sea of authoritarianism has taken a hit.

Nonetheless, support for Georgia should be high on the list for the new Biden administration as it determines its policy priorities toward Europe. Longstanding close ties between Georgia and the United States combined with the country's strongly pro-American population and unstinting determination to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community, make it deserving of such support, notwithstanding the current political crisis playing out in Tbilisi.

Together with former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly, this author has produced a report that will be released in February under the auspices of the Economic Policy Research Center and the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The report makes the case for why the new American administration should support Georgia – and also what Georgia should do to make an even stronger case for such support. These challenging times demand that Georgia and the United States work more closely together.

