# The World HandCOV'd: The priorities of the US security policy will stay the same

Paul Linnarz

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## Key takeaways

- COVID-19 will not fundamentally change the focus of U.S. security policy. However, the crisis has increased the pressure for accelerated reforms in some areas. The keyword for these reforms is "enhanced resilience".
- Regardless of who will reside in the White House for the next term starting in 2021, U.S. security policy will continue to be inextricably linked to the country's economic, trade and energy policy interests.
- Although the broad lines of U.S. security policy will not be changed by COVID-19, specific steps and political initiatives of the upcoming years will of course depend on the outcome of the presidential election in November and future majorities in the Congress.
- The future multilateral security engagement of the U.S. will depend even more than before on whether existing agreements and alliances serve the national interests.

## COVID-19 and the strategic baselines

The priorities of the U.S. security policy are laid down in the National Security Strategy (Dec. 2017). Among other things, it states: "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence." (NSS, p. 2) Furthermore, the U.S. wants to "pursue an economic strategy that rejuvenates the domestic economy, benefits the American worker, revitalizes the U.S. manufacturing base, creates middle-class jobs, encourages innovation, preserves

technological advantage, safeguards the environment, and achieves energy dominance." (NSS, p. 18) The strategy promises that the U.S. "will counter all unfair trade practices that distort markets using all appropriate means, from dialogue to enforcement tools." (NSS, p. 20)

The DoD's summary of the National Defence Strategy of 2018 also leaves no doubt that "long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department, and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future." (NDS, p. 4) The U.S. Department of Defense "will assist the efforts of the Departments of State, Treasury, Justice, Energy, Homeland Security, Commerce, USAID, as well as the Intelligence Community, law enforcement, and others to identify and build partnerships to address areas of economic, technological, and informational vulnerabilities" (NDS, p. 5).

Neither will COVID-19 change U.S. security policy priorities outlined in both strategy papers, nor will the Corona crisis cause Washington to deviate from its comprehensive security policy approach involving all relevant government departments including Energy and Commerce.

## Enhanced national resilience

Since 2016, the public debate about cybersecurity in election years has centered around the protection against disinformation campaigns. This year, COVID-19 has added various new components to the question of enhanced digital resilience, though. In mid-May, for example, Republican Senator Ron Johnson (Wisconsin) pointed out that the "COVID-19 pandemic necessitates an even greater need for vigilance to protect against these threats to the healthcare system." Various U.S. experts go even further and, like Ian Wallace of the GMF, emphatically demand: "Once the initial crisis is over, Congress and the White House should finally get serious about national resilience, including to cyberattacks, as a key component of national security."

The topic is by no means new to the U.S. In September 2018, the White House has published its National Cyber Strategy so that "the American people continue to reap the benefits of a secure cyberspace that reflects our principles, protects our security, and promotes our prosperity." (NCSS, p. 1) However, numerous studies and media reports indicate that the risks have increased significantly because many people are currently working in their home offices due to COVID-19 and not in their better protected company IT environments.

The "stay-at-home" order for Washington D.C. has also affected Congress in recent weeks. In the area of security policy, this order has already delayed the initial bipartisan consultations on the draft of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the 2021 fiscal year. The bill is prepared annually by the Armed Services Committee of the House of Representatives and specifies the procurement projects, technologies, equipment, recruitment and training on which the $740 billion in the U.S. defense budget will be spent. The NDAA for the coming fiscal year will also provide funding for military support to civilian agencies in the fight against COVID-19. In addition, money is likely to be earmarked for medical research on the corona virus. The next NDAA will most likely also provide a budget for research on the impact of the virus on military operations. The Chairman of the Committee expects the law to be adopted by the end of the year at the latest.

## What might (perhaps) change?

Depending on which party and which candidate will win the election in November, the rhetoric of tweets and statements as well as the political approach to solving international conflicts and challenges will change. However, hopes for a kind of "status quo ante" are deceptive. After all, many of the directions of U.S. security policy (assessment of China, Russia and Iran, 2% share of GDP in the defense budgets of NATO member countries, etc.) were set many years ago. Public opinion (Afghanistan, Iraq) in the U.S. also changed significantly before Donald Trump took office.

Based on these policies, Washington will strengthen the presence of the U.S. Navy in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming years. The aim is to provide an effective counterweight to China. It remains to be seen how strongly countries such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia, but also India, will be involved. As president, Biden intends to build a "united front of allies" against China. This may mean that Washington will again become more involved in selected multilateral organizations, for example to shape global standards for the dissemination and use of new technologies, including artificial intelligence. Joe Biden criticizes the U.S. government's policy in this context as "counterproductive", because in his opinion it has alienated important allies from the U.S. Yet, should he win the election, Biden also claims to form not only global norms but also institutions. Regardless of who is going to win the election, the U.S. will continue to demand far-reaching reforms for important multilateral organizations. Biden would also use the existing trade laws for targeted retaliation against China.

Joe Biden's strategy for fighting terrorism in the Near and Middle East includes the use of unmanned drones, small groups of U.S. special forces and air strikes instead of large troop deployments. The primary goal is to prevent a re-emergence of al-Qaida and the IS. This is not a fundamental shift or turnaround, though. If Biden were to become president, however, depending on future majorities in the Congress, there could be a new initiative next year to close the U.S. detention camp in Guantanamo Bay.

For cybersecurity, new scope for multilateral collaboration emerges with the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity and with more international pressure on key tech companies. However, as the handling of 5G technology from China shows, it will not be easy to reach a compromise between the U.S. and its allies on some of the topics, including data protection. For this very reason, cybersecurity would be an area in which the U.S., the EU and countries such as Japan, Australia and South Korea could invest in new multilateral initiatives to coordinate their policies even more closely. Based on the experiences with COVID-19, the protection of health care systems and the intersection of artificial intelligence, machine learning and cybersecurity might be suitable starting points for this.

Joe Biden has called NATO "the single most important military alliance in the history of the world" and has repeatedly expressed skepticism about unilateral efforts. Yet, even if Donald Trump is re-elected, the U.S. and the other NATO members will continue their cooperation also in new areas. After NATO declared space an “operational domain” at the end of 2019, the collaboration with the new U.S. Space Force and the U.S. Space Command deserves special attention in the next few years. Both Biden and Trump will continue to urge other NATO members to spend more money on defense.

The U.S. withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and, on 21 May, announced to also withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty. Several NATO members have asked the U.S. government to maintain the agreement. At the same time, Washington has announced negotiations with Russia on new provisions for nuclear arms control. These talks will also deal with the extension of the New START agreement for the period from 2021. The biggest challenge for this extension is that the U.S. administration wants to bring China to the negotiating table alongside Russia. According to Joe Biden, the withdrawal of the U.S. from existing treaties and agreements, in addition to the above-mentioned arms control agreements, the UN Global Compact for Migration, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Transpacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), "bankrupted America's word in the world."

A significant change could occur in U.S. climate policy in the next few years. Joe Biden calls climate change "the greatest threat to our security". As president, he would return to the Paris Climate Agreement, Biden promised. In the fight against COVID-19 and other pandemics, Biden has announced close cooperation with the World Health Organization and the United Nations.

Joe Biden also takes the position that "economic security is national security." His support for existing agreements and multilateral organizations suggests that if Biden wins the election in November, the U.S. would again come closer to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as well. This does not mean, however, that a new U.S. administration would act according to the saying: 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'. Biden not only argues for "aggressive" retaliation against countries that break international trade laws or steal intellectual property, he also calls for better enforcement of existing trade laws and for the U.S. to use its economic leverage to negotiate better deals. If Biden becomes president, he will not sign new trade agreements without "major investments" in jobs and infrastructure. Globalization, Biden notes, had "eroded" the middle class in the U.S., accelerated inequality, and led to the loss of millions of jobs in manufacturing.

As president, Biden would closely cooperate with multilateral organizations to meet these economic and security challenges, yet, he also demands that the U.S. "write the rules of the road for the world." Washington will therefore not deviate from its core negotiating positions if compromises run counter to its own interests, regardless of who is going to win the election in November. Richard Grenell, U.S. ambassador to Germany, stated recently on Twitter: "You make a big mistake if you think the American pressure is off. You don't know Americans."

Against this backdrop, COVID-19 puts additional pressure on viable multilateral agreements and solutions. The billions of US Dollars spent to deal with the economic consequences of the pandemic are significantly increasing national debt. Unemployment has reached record levels. Oil prices have plummeted. It is not yet clear how quickly the U.S. economy will get back on track. Any proposal for new agreements in trade or security policy must generate clear benefits in the face of these difficulties. During the Transatlantic Security Jam in mid-May, Amb. Cameron Munter asked the core question for this challenge. He is „curious whether current structures are adequate to bring together the domestic focus of leaders with the strategic needs of multilateral organizations like NATO."

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***Paul Linnarz*** - *Director Country Office USA, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Germany.*

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**Paul Linnarz**