

US, UK & EU PERSPECTIVES on FOREIGN POLICY



US Perspectives

Summary of Expert Contributions at KCO Dialogues

> Restoring US leadership

While Biden's more positive approach to allies was welcomed, notes of caution were raised in our sessions around the premise 'America is Back'. European capitals were still wary of a return of Trump 2.0 in 2024.

"The rest of the world is looking at the 2024 election and the continued dysfunction in American democracy, and until they feel we are on a more sustainable and stable footing, it's going to be hard to completely trust in US initiatives - particularly where we are asking allies to make multi-year commitments with large resources and take on greater risk vis a vis China."

There were also concerns about strategic unalignment on issues such as China and Afghanistan. Some also commented on a striking "lack of US ambition" towards Europe, and a tendency towards US unilateralism and an 'America First' approach.

The US approach to conflict resolution was also restrained: **"Biden is no great fan of pushing the US forward for international crisis management - we've seen pull-back from Afghanistan and quite low-profile initial engagement over Israel and Gaza."**

The US was keen for Europe to become more independent from the US and solve its own problems. And the dysfunctional relationship between the UK and EU was also proving problematic: **"UK and EU posturing is not helpful to the Biden team. The US doesn't want to know who is the best pupil in the class, they want each leg of the three-legged stool to work in harmony."**

> Making foreign policy deliver at home

The key driver of US foreign policy now was cited as the need to focus on domestic politics.

“The US is in very deep trouble - should the Republicans win in 2022/2024, we are at risk of losing our democracy. We're not so very different from Poland and Hungary right now in terms of what one party is willing to do to seize power. So Biden's order of concerns in terms of prioritising domestic policy, is exactly correct...Other countries are also looking inwards.”

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was attributed to Biden's long-standing belief that the war was soaking up precious resources and attention that should be directed towards China, climate change and democratic challenge at home. The Administration was aware of a credibility hit due to the withdrawal and that China would exert its influence, but still did not see Afghanistan as a “great game” venue.

Expert Recommendations

- The US needs to be persuaded to invest time and resources in the transatlantic relationship as an important pillar of the international order and to gain crucial backing for its agenda
- The US needs a more affirmative agenda about what it wants to accomplish in Europe, independently of what Europe can deliver.
- Europe must adapt to the fact that US now has other national security priorities, including China and the Indo-Pacific.
- To safeguard against future Trumpian damage to relations, a US law could be passed requiring an act of Congress before a President can pull the US out of NATO, for example, or international agreements like the 2015 Paris Accords

EU Perspectives



> Strengthening EU foreign policy

There is much focus in diplomatic circles on how to strengthen EU foreign policy, and a sense that EU is punching below its weight in the world. Examples include failure to agree sanctions in 2020 on Belarussian crackdown on protesters, or to forge an effective strategy towards Hungary and Poland.

But in dialogues, participants suggested that the EU is effective in areas where the Commission is strong: **“EU is a superpower in regulation of technology and is becoming expert in the regulation of cyber and social media, as well as in investments and production and labour standards. These are very important components of competing and confronting China. So, we do have a lot to bring to the table and to our American allies.”**

The issue of strategic autonomy remains alive, especially as events in Afghanistan unfold, exposing European weakness to act independently or influence US strategy. It was also suggested that ultimately, Germany should be persuaded to take on a much larger role in European defence, providing the framework for smaller countries to hook onto.

> **US-EU relations**

A European participant commented that on foreign and security policy, the EU-US relationship is moving up a gear, reflected in the establishment of a strategic US-EU dialogue on security and defence and by the new post of EU defence attaché in Washington.

It was noted that the US wanted a more independent EU and set of allies that would make its own decisions, and provide more input and leadership. The US would wait till after the German and French elections before trying to make progress.

However, the Biden administration was warned against making the same mistake as the Obama administration in overly focusing on a pivot to Asia. **“This only works if the US has the support of a strong transatlantic relationship, and at the moment this is not the case. Without sufficient economic clout, the US cannot start dictating the rules of the game.”**

On trade issues, it was noted that there is no EU-US free trade agreement on the horizon and increasing scepticism and protectionism. While the two sides had ended tariff wars over Airbus-Boeing subsidies they needed to resolve differences on steel and agriculture, and focus on areas where they can work together - setting standards in artificial intelligence, technology and tackling unfair trade practises. The new **US-EU Trade and Technology Council** would help facilitate common positions and set limits, especially in response to China’s use of emerging technologies in ways that are ‘contrary to democratic practise.’ WTO reform and EU proposals on a new trade strategy should also be advanced.

UK Perspectives



> **Aspirations for global leadership**

The UK’s [Integrated Review](#) offered clarity on the meaning of Global Britain and UK’s place in the world. While some participants commended the UK’s global ambitions, others commented that cuts in UK development aid at such a critical time would dent its soft power. Choices would need to be made as post-Brexit Britain worked out its priorities, partners and balance of interests.

The UK could also not be a ‘solo superpower’ in the world since its agency derives from “clever engagement with others, putting together alliances and working through international institutions.” Hosting the G7 summit and [UN Climate Change Conference](#) in 2021 presented the UK with opportunities to be a relevant global broker.

> **Fixing UK-EU relations**

Participants underscored the importance of the UK and EU working productively together on the global stage, despite differences over “the politics of the Brexit divorce.” The continuing “scratchy relationship” was said to have “cast a bit of a shadow” over the otherwise well-organised G7 summit in Cornwall in June 2021.

The UK still rejected formal structured foreign and security policy co-operation, relying on the framework of the [Joint Committee](#) governing both the Withdrawal Agreement and the [TCA](#), as well as traditional diplomatic structures and forums. Many participants stressed that both sides needed to find a way forward since they were “**natural allies**” on foreign policy - a fact unchanged by Brexit. It was noted that the UK Government had stuck with mainstream European consensus during Trump’s Presidency and should build on recent positive engagement with EU on common concerns such as climate change, Myanmar, Belarus, Russia and Iran.

It was stated that the UK did not feel excluded from new US-EU councils and dialogues since it was appropriate that the UK was no longer under the EU negotiating umbrella and could still offer its unique perspective to these important allies.

> **Solving Northern Ireland conundrum**

In our discussions, it was suggested the UK and EU are “absolutely united by a desire for long lasting peace and stability in Northern Ireland” and the UK wants to work collaboratively with both the Irish government and the EU to find solutions, as with chilled meats and medicines.

However, it was suggested that trust had been harmed by recent UK actions in not implementing existing agreements and attempting to rewrite aspects of the Protocol. **“The UK government hasn’t really come to terms with the challenges posed to Northern Ireland by Brexit. Even five years later, we’re still going round in circles with the same debates.”** Continued UK media framing of a “punitive” EU was also antagonising Brussels. For its part, the UK wanted more respect for its red lines on sovereignty and the integrity of its own internal market.

Another participant saw the way forward as a veterinary agreement that would require respect for both sides’ red lines, which had scarred previous negotiations. This would require political will. An overall agreement on the Protocol could also be found along the lines of the level playing field compromise, which involved a basic promise and a range of remedies to be deployed if either side were unhappy.

It was noted that the US had similar views of the Good Friday Agreement to the EU and most Northern Irish parties and this could sour the US-UK relationship. This “ripple effect” could even affect wider relationships, including the UK reputation in terms of adherence to international law and agreements.

In terms of a Brexit benefit, one participant highlighted the advantages the UK would get from becoming the only European member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which has a combined economy of around £9 trillion. UK membership of the CPTPP would represent a huge change to the UK’s commercial positioning.