

Review of 2021 Summits



In roundtables for *Keeping Channels Open*, an array of experts gave their assessments of how far a common agenda was advanced during the series of June 2021 Summits, namely that of the G7+, NATO, EU-US and Biden-Putin.

Despite **hostile Chinese and Russian reactions** to the communiqués, the Summits were generally seen as successful in terms of resetting the transatlantic relationship, reframing a common set of priorities and sending the right messages - though short on detail, timeframes and implementation. Bringing together leaders for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic, the meetings were considered well-organised, professional and well-choreographed, building up to a credible display of solidarity for the final Biden-Putin meeting.

A UK participant stated that as G7 President, the UK Government had approached the Summit with a **sense of realism** about what could be achieved in light of great expectations and a busy calendar year, with a focus on delivery and practical next steps. While admitting it was fair to criticise the level of ambition in some areas, the UK was pleased with overall outcomes which “sent strong signals about the West resetting, rebuilding and coming together” and served as a positive milestone on the way to COP26, further G7 & G20 meetings and a handover of the baton to Germany.

“These Summits started to define a path for the next decades and what needs to happen for the success, if not survivability, of the democratic world.”

Commitments were made in the Summits on climate change, Covid, a values-driven, green and digital recovery; reinigorated rules-based trade and reformed institutions, and enhanced security measures to face multilateral threats. Agreements included ending the financing of coal plants, launching a \$100bn Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative on climate finance and establishing a global minimum 15% tax rate for multinationals. Progress was also made on gender equality, with an agreed target of getting 40 million more girls into education. The EU and US agreed to partner on a *Democracy Summit* as well as to establish a number of trade and technology cooperation councils. NATO endorsed a new cyber defence policy and climate security action plan.

Democratic Reset: From a geopolitical perspective, participants viewed the Summits as a “relaunch of the transatlantic agenda and democratic world’s agenda” with concepts of liberal democracy and values infused into the language of the communiqués on many topics including the China relationship.

Specific challenges for democracies were singled out in our sessions:

- Addressing climate change.
- Revitalising democracy, accountability and political ethics at home
- Addressing big challenges like inequality, seen as corrosive to public confidence in democracy
- Formulating common strategies to deal with China and Russia.
- Defending the new borders of democracies in cyberspace.
- Ethics-based technological and trade rules

Breadth of Agenda: Participants noted that Summit agendas were **much broader** than in the Bush and Obama years and particularly different from Trump, who did not even pay lip service to democracy and focused only on China and repeated demands for greater burden-sharing from partners. However, previous summit topics such as terrorism in the Middle East got little attention in the 2021 agendas.

For some, there was now too much on the table: **“In the new “everything goes” agenda, who is going to do what? Are institutions geared up to deal with all these issues? And will the US have sufficient bandwidth to engage 24/7?”**

Level of Ambition: While many saw the overall summit visions as ambitious and a step in the right direction, there were some concerns about a lack of real political will to address challenges. One participant felt the “G7 was remarkably thin, demonstrating a rather strange inability to focus on anything other than one or two narrow issues, suggesting weakness in the Western Alliance which we haven’t seen in a long time.”

Some felt commitments on vaccine distribution and climate change did not meet the scale of the challenge, especially since “we do not have the luxury of time on our side.” Others felt the pledges were a good start, which did not preclude further action.

Transatlantic Relations: The most welcome development was the commitment, after the turbulence of the Trump years, to engage across the Atlantic and work out common positions on key issues. President Biden arrived in Europe determined to adopt a more multilateral approach, repair damage and reset the parameters for future actions. Participants generally agreed with relief that **“America is back”** and had returned to the heart of the Western Alliance: **“The professionals are back in control in Washington and it showed.”**

Arriving with a clear agenda on Covid, climate and China, the new administration demonstrated, once again, the “convening power of America” when it puts its mind to it. There were some caveats as American participants warned that gains could be reversed by a future US leader and opposition challenge in Congress, so safeguards were needed.

On the US-EU relationship, there was clearly a lot in common, but some signs the US was already disappointed with European leadership. Lack of consultation was highlighted, for example over the withdrawal from Afghanistan – this later played out in a chaotic way, threatening progress in Afghanistan, undermining the image of Western support and potentially inspiring a resurgence of Islamic terrorism.

Other Partners: Bringing in major regional partners like India, South Korea and South Africa was widely seen as a positive development, in recognition of the fact that the Western Alliance must broaden its reach in order to advance its agenda and the strength of a global rules-based democratic system.

Post Summit Recommendations

- The Biden administration must take the time this year to level-set with partners, assessing areas of agreement and gaps on how to deal with China and climate change.
- Partnerships: Follow-up meetings with ASEAN and Indo-Pacific partners are needed to build an effective approach to China and other regional issues.
- Strengthen coordinated response to cyber-attacks and the effective use of sanctions. Some called for new tools, methods and instruments as many were outdated and lacked impact, citing ineffective approaches to democratic back-sliding in Turkey, Belarus and Myanmar.
- Strengthen democratic resilience and support for human rights and rule of law, as referred to in the 'Open Societies' statement, backed by tangible commitments through the UN, G20 and Democracy Summit.
- In terms of Summit success, "proof will be in the legacy: it is now all about implementation and measurable progress."
- Follow-up action is needed on expanded agendas, division of labour and how nations will engage systematically on the key questions.

"Looking back, we'll judge these Summits a success if they were a moment that began to catalyse shared approaches from the world's democracies to these issues. If there's not a lot of follow through, then we'll look back and say, people were too far apart, or the Chinese were too deft at exploiting divisions or the Russians pushed back so much that they continued to unravel the ability of people to cooperate. So obviously - it's too soon to tell."

