



# TOWNHALL DISPATCH

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## A Good Place to (Re-)Start: Acknowledging and Advancing the Role of Cities in Transatlantic Relations

Cities are key to making the transatlantic relationship future-proof. Not only does the inclusion of urban actors increase resilience and sustainability, but the spirit of innovation and closeness to citizens warrant a greater role of cities in transatlantic cooperation. While the transatlantic partnership is generally strong, it has been characterized by considerable ups and downs during the last decade. Closer ties between urban actors from all parts of society can help to deepen transatlantic collaboration during politically rocky times. However, city cooperation is more than a safety net for difficult periods, and city diplomacy is not second-choice diplomacy. Across a wide range of issues, cities are an undisputed part of the solution to many of today's most pressing issues and rightfully deserve a place at the table.

Since the start of his administration in January 2021, President Joe Biden's foreign policy has been led by the seemingly simple slogan of „America is back“. The past 20 months have not only been a significant departure from his predecessor's „America first“ rhetoric but have also been marked by a shift and commitment towards more liberal policies and a return to multilateral approaches. When it comes to the transatlantic partnership and the relationship with the European Union (EU) in particular, President Biden has made it a priority to go beyond simply repairing the cracks, which the previous administration left behind, or returning to business as usual. Instead, his administration has worked tirelessly to innovate the transatlantic relationship and has strived for a further deepening of U.S.-EU ties “not [as] a matter of convenience but rather of necessity” as Carnegie scholars Dan Baer and Rosa Balfour put it in their assessment of Biden's first year in office. This conviction is mostly shared by Europeans, and the common response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that the newfound transatlantic unity is sincere.

Nonetheless, the high hopes EU policy-makers place on President Biden could easily be disappointed due to the recalibration of U.S. interests and related shifts in U.S. foreign policy. Several episodes during the first months of the administration not only left European counterparts – in the words of Dan Baer and Rosa Balfour – “feeling quizzical or worse”, but

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also offer early indications of where the United States might be headed. Europeans were caught off guard by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the launch of the AUKUS alliance, a new security network between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. At the same time, perceptions of China continue to differ on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps most strikingly, the Biden administration has not completely abandoned its predecessor's stance on international trade. Protectionist trade policies in line with a so-called foreign policy for the middle/working class do





not only spell trouble for the EU's own international trade agenda, but even more so demonstrate the domestic constraints President Biden faces on the international stage.

### Uncertain Months Ahead

The international reputation of the United States is heavily influenced by its domestic politics. The trust in the United States, the state of its democracy, and the commitment to the transatlantic relationship has increased as a result of the resolute stance amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, domestic developments such as the debate over gun control or women's rights in light of the Supreme Court's recent decision overruling *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed a right to abortion for decades, demonstrate the continuing and deepening polarization of U.S. society. This has almost reversed President Biden's reputational gains in Europe according to surveys conducted by Morning Consult in July 2022.

In the coming months, the Biden administration will face a major test as the midterm elections in November 2022 present a first touchstone of the Democrats' 2024 chances. Going into 2022, the outlook for Democrats was rather bleak. With his approval rating falling to below 40 percent in July according to FiveThirtyEight's poll aggregator, President Biden was increasingly perceived as a liability for Democratic candidates across the country. However, the recent improvement of key economic indicators has shifted the field (ever so slightly) in favor of the Democrats owing to the drop in gas prices below the psychologically important threshold of four dollars in most of the country at the end of August and a robust labor market with an unemployment rate of 3.5 percent in July. Additionally, the Biden administration could score points on two major legislations after Democrats in Congress overcame internal divisions: the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has further mobilized progressive forces and grassroots organizations in the run-up to the midterms. On the other hand, the Republican party and base have consolidated amid the FBI's search of Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate. Overall, the election results

are far from certain, but international implications are bound to be impactful. According to aggregate data from FiveThirtyEight, Democrats are favored to retain control over the Senate as of September 2022. In the case of the House of the Representatives, the outcome of the midterms is also a question of geography: Redistricting and gerrymandering in recent years could give Republicans the deciding advantage as they are favored to win a majority of seats.

### Future-proofing Transatlantic Relations

No matter the ultimate outcome, the midterms already demonstrate an increasing focus of the Biden administration on domestic issues – with the next presidential elections practically right around the corner. Despite the best intentions of the Biden administration to repair and advance transatlantic relations, partisan politics and the focus on domestic challenges, such as inflation, limit the administration's ability to maneuver at the international level. Therefore, the upcoming elections also signify the closing of a window of opportunity for transatlantic relations. The United States – but also its European partners – have yet to put the transatlantic partnership on more solid footing, with the notable exception of flagship initiatives such as the EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council (TTC).

### Cities are an essential component to diversify transatlantic relations and make them fit for the future.

Recipes of the past are ill-suited to achieve future-proofness. The strategy of building on existing frameworks has not fully yielded the results that are necessary to make the partnership more resilient and fail at truly revitalizing transatlantic cooperation. Going forward, bold approaches will be necessary to confront common challenges in the transatlantic context. While there are many possibilities to re-start and advance transatlantic relations, one venue for cooperation has been undervalued: Cities are an essential component to diversify transatlantic relations and make them fit for the future.



## Cities in Transatlantic Relations: Resilience and Renewal

The difficulties of transatlantic cooperation during the Trump era necessitated collaboration beyond the federal level. Cities stepped up to diplomatic challenges and demonstrated the tangible impact of cooperation in dealing with today's most pressing issues.

**City diplomacy is fit-for-purpose when it comes to making the transatlantic partnership fit for future.**

Additionally, many cities and their initiatives had an absorbing effect on the negative consequences of several Trump policies. Domestically, cities cushioned the impact of Trump's immigration policies by declaring themselves sanctuary cities, and associations such as the Climate Mayors demonstrated commitment to the principles of the Paris Agreement even after the Trump administration had decided to withdraw from the international treaty. Globally, networks such as C40 have been instrumental in advancing climate cooperation among cities, and institutions like the Under2 Coalition underscore the creativity and effectiveness of transnational cooperation including subnational entities. Accordingly, the involvement of cities and the reliance on city diplomacy are key to advancing a vision of transatlantic relations that emphasizes resilience. In

light of the uncertainty concerning the state of U.S. domestic politics and the future configuration of the international system, as well as an ever-increasing set of policy challenges, it will pay off to have a multitude of reliable bridges across the Atlantic on the subnational level.

However, city cooperation is more than a safety net for difficult times, and city diplomacy is not second-choice diplomacy. Across a wide range of issues, cities are an undisputed part of the solution and rightfully deserve a place at the table. Cities are responsible for the concrete implementation of policies and reforms on the ground and, therefore, more closely impact the everyday lives of their citizens than other types of administrations. With the continuing urbanization worldwide the importance of cities is only set to increase in the coming decades. Cities were on the forefront of handling the COVID-19 pandemic and countermeasures have had a lasting impact on cities' economic ecosystems. The list of future challenges is long – adaptation to climate change, fighting racial injustices, opportunities and limitations of digitalization, preventing crime, rise of inequality, transformation of the mobility sector or providing for refugees – but all of them will have to be addressed first and foremost in and by cities. Owing to their diverse economic and societal structures, cities serve as innovation hubs as well as testing grounds for policy solutions to these challenges.

## Future Cities: First Steps and Way Forward

"Future Cities – A Transatlantic Townhall Project" aims to raise awareness about the complexity of the city of tomorrow and to provide new impetus for the development of future scenarios. This project brings together a diverse group of urban actors in Berlin, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, supporting sustainable and future-oriented development within these cities and promoting transatlantic exchanges.

What should the city of the future look like? How can we make the cities we live in more sustainable, inclusive, innovative, and resilient? The application of scenario planning methodology enables participants to think outside known structures and to develop concrete future scenarios in their search for solutions. The cities on both sides of the Atlantic face similar challenges and share the same goals for a socially just, sustainable future in urban areas. Berlin, Atlanta, and Los Angeles are united in their efforts related to digitalization, job security, and transportation. However, some issues demonstrated a transatlantic divergence when it comes to the assessment and urgency of addressing certain problems such as gun violence and homelessness.

To engage with the broader public and exchange ideas on how to make urban spaces more sustainable, Aspen Germany hosted a hybrid discussion on "Fit for Future? A Sustainable Path Towards Urban Construction and City Planning." The event served as a space to develop solutions and visions concerning sustainable housing, construction, and mobility.





### Learning by Doing: City Diplomacy in International Relations

In order to advance the role of cities in transatlantic relations, the existing channels and networks of city diplomacy should be leveraged and built on. Cities have taken on a more prominent role in recent decades owing to an increasingly globalized world. Accordingly, cities have started going beyond the local level by taking a stance on foreign and security issues.

City diplomacy is as diverse as cities themselves and consists of an array of formats. Bilaterally, cities have often formed close bonds as sister cities and cooperate closely on common projects in politics, business, and society. These ties and the transatlantic partnership between German and U.S. cities often reach back decades. Additionally, cities have banded together in a broad range of networks – sometimes referred to as Transnational Municipal Networks – to facilitate cooperation and knowledge exchange among municipalities. These networks are often issue-specific with climate-related cooperation being among the most visible. Far from being merely symbolic, the significance and tangible impact of city networks has been acknowledged by institutions such as the (nation-state based) G20

in the form of the Urban20 or the United Nations (UN) which have addressed and included urban actors in various frameworks. Cities have also been included in commitments and concrete actions in the context of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Cities participate in a growing number of cross-level initiatives and frameworks with urban actors and city governments being awarded a place at the table. However, cities are not yet accepted as equals; they often cannot access and distribute the same levels of funding as states or federal governments. There still is potential to expand city cooperation quantitatively and qualitatively. While exchange of knowledge and best practices is essential, city cooperation could also include a more extensive pooling of responsibilities and resources. Formalizing links between cities and implementing common solutions is ambitious but also necessary in tackling a growing array of problems.

The responsibilities of cities are growing. Going forward, a focus on an all-sector approach involving city administrations as well as urban businesses and civil society will be necessary to adequately address a growing portfolio of urban issues and keep up the development and implementation of innovative solutions. City diplomacy is fit-for-purpose when it comes to making the transatlantic partnership fit for future.

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