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Strengthening EU-US relations to face today's security challenges

In conversation with Wendy Sherman,
United States Deputy Secretary of State

EVENT REPORT



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Introduction and context

What is the future for EU-US relations in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Is Russia now the leading security challenge for the US or is it China? And what of Russia and China's burgeoning relationship? How will the Ukraine conflict oblige Washington to rethink its global strategy?

These were some of the issues tackled by Wendy Sherman, United States Deputy Secretary of State, as part of the Friends of Europe 'In Conversation with...' series, on 21 April 2022 at Townhall Europe - Davignon Centre For New Leadership in Brussels.

Moderated by Dharmendra Kanani, Director, Asia, Peace, Security & Defence, Digital & Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe, the Deputy Secretary shared her views and vision with an audience of experts, policy makers and College of Europe students, and took questions from the floor.

The discussion comes at a distinct moment in time: on the back of the global health crisis which has led to economic crisis, fundamentally changing our economic health and stability; now to be suddenly hit from left field with Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine. These events deeply unsettle the rules-based world that we live in. The question now is whether it is time to rethink if the rules of the game – the norms, set post-war, of peace and diplomacy - are fit for purpose in the 21st Century.

Underlining the importance of relationships

The Deputy Secretary commenced by paying homage to Sophie Wilmès, Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, who had just announced that she would take a leave of absence due to her partner's ill health. Deputy Secretary Sherman emphasised the importance of one's family and friends, alongside our work and careers, and of striving for a balance in our lives.

Deputy Secretary Sherman noted that the first year of the Biden-Harris administration has seen the restoring and strengthening of the US's network of alliances and partnerships. This has included NATO and the G7, but also treaty alliances and bilateral and multilateral partnerships around the world. Prime amongst these relationships is that with the EU, which the US sees as the 'partner of first resort'.

“ No nation can address the biggest challenges of the 21st Century, or take full advantage of its opportunities, by action alone.

It is clear that the major issues of our time, like the Covid-19 pandemic, climate crisis, cybersecurity, disinformation, and food and water security, are all challenges which cross borders, regions and domains of expertise, and can be better tackled by working together.

“No nation can address the biggest challenges of the 21st Century, or take full advantage of its opportunities, by action alone.”

Investing in these relationships helps strengthen dialogue and deepen understanding, on both sides, of policy positions and priorities, and build mutual respect and trust. These key relationships are critical to being able to act decisively in moments of crisis, like that currently in Ukraine.

Response to Russia strengthens alliances

The Deputy Secretary reiterated that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was clearly premeditated, unprovoked and unjustified, and has rightly been condemned across the world. The USA has been an integral part of the international community's response, providing defensive support and humanitarian aid, and imposing severe sanctions upon Russia. The US also applauds European nations for welcoming Ukrainian refugees with open arms.

Such collective and unprecedented action has only made the transatlantic alliance stronger. The rules-based international order has not broken down – indeed, Russia's actions have rallied the world to reinforce and revitalise that order.

“**Thirty NATO allies all said the same thing to the Russian delegation - it was extraordinary – because we believe in these principles and we thought Russia did too.**

Deputy Secretary Sherman also noted her surprise at Russia's actions, given that Foreign Minister Lavrov had previously placed great weight upon the UN Charter – the founding treaty which enshrines the responsibility of its members to respect peace, security, freedoms and human rights – describing it as “everything”. And yet, with the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has thrown out the UN Charter and shown utter disdain for our shared principles and values. Deputy Secretary Sherman recalled a powerful moment at a recent UN meeting, whilst trying to solve the issue diplomatically:

“Thirty NATO allies all said the same thing to the Russian delegation - it was extraordinary – because we believe in these principles and we thought Russia did too.”

Nevertheless, such violations risk undermining the rules-based international order everywhere, and make everyone less secure.

Challenges to energy and food security

It is important to recognise that everyone is feeling the impact of the war in different ways. We are already seeing chaos in the oil and gas markets, driving up energy prices, and disruptions to the supply of basic commodities like wheat that people rely on to survive, forcing up food prices. Following close on the heels of two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, this turmoil is threatening to push more and more families into poverty and hunger.



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1. **Dharmendra Kanani**, Director, Asia, Peace, Security & Defense, Digital & Chief spokesperson; **Wendy Sherman**, United States Deputy Secretary of State

2. **Jacek Saryusz-Wolski**, Member of the European Parliament

3. **Valentina Vasileva**, Journalist, Voice of America



“Ultimately, Putin's war against Ukraine will impact every nation and every person in the world.”

It is incumbent on the international community to step up and take action to prevent a global food security crisis. The UN Security Council is discussing this very issue and the US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen recently convened a high-level meeting to urge greater action from international financial institutions – these steps are just the start.

Severe sanctions taking effect

The sanctions imposed upon Russia, by the US, Europe and other countries around the world, have the same aim and will have a long-lasting effect. Hundreds of US companies have already left Russia and are not returning.

“ We have tried to make sure that whatever we do, hurts Putin. What we are aiming for is a strategic failure for Vladimir Putin. And I believe that is already happening.

The Deputy Secretary acknowledged that secondary sanctions – used by the US but not by European countries - were not always universally popular, but are in this instance a justifiable enforcement tool. We will all pay a price though for shutting down part of our economic system.

“We have tried to make sure that whatever we do, hurts Putin. What we are aiming for is a strategic failure for Vladimir Putin. And I believe that is already happening.”

Robust relationship with China

Relations with China are a further priority – and the Deputy Secretary remarked that she was in Brussels for the third round of the US-EU Dialogue on China, which she had launched with Stefano Sannino, Secretary General of the European External Action Service, in 2021.

The US has been clear that it will compete vigorously with China, on trade and the economy, and technology and innovation, amongst other areas.

“We are committed to managing this competition between our countries so it does not veer into conflict.”

The US also wants to work collaboratively with China where it is in their joint interest to do so – on issues like climate change, health and narcotics – but will challenge Beijing when it must. Actions by China which go counter to our values, and amount to coercion and bullying of both companies and other countries, cannot be tolerated.

Recent such behaviour includes examples against Lithuania, which opened a Taiwan representation office in Vilnius, and companies such as H&M, Adidas and Nike who removed products made with Chinese forced labour.

“ We don't want to start another cold war, we don't want to conflict. We want channels of communication. We hope there are areas where there can be cooperation.

In response to a question, citing former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's comment in 2011 that “A thriving China is good for America and a thriving America is good for China”, the Deputy Secretary remarked that of course the US wants to see China thrive. But, it should also conform to the rules-based system which other countries follow.

After all, China has benefitted greatly from that same rules-based system – with booming trade and economic development building a new middle class and lifting millions out of poverty - which it now seeks to undermine.

'No limits partnership' causes concern

By extension, the burgeoning relationship between China and Russia is cause for concern. It was only three weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping announced their “No limits partnership” with “no forbidden areas” of cooperation. Notably, China has since failed to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, voted against the resolution to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, and been complicit in spreading disinformation.

In response President Biden has spoken to Xi Jinping directly, and other political leaders to their Chinese counterparts. The US has been direct and transparent, indicating the sanctions and export controls which could be brought to bear on the country. It is very unlikely that China will want to see its economy impacted like Russia's, but there has to be some strong encouragement for it to ‘play by the rules’.

“We don't want to start another cold war, we don't want to conflict. We want channels of communication. We hope there are areas where there can be cooperation.”

This was the rationale behind launching the US-EU Dialogue on China: to better understand each other's experiences and perspectives, share information, raise concerns, and converge on a common approach.

Deputy Secretary Sherman expressed hope that China would learn the right lessons from the current isolation of Russia. It has shown abundantly that the US and Europe will not be separated from their alliances, partners or from other like-minded countries: we are presenting a united front.

“We all surprised ourselves, to be perfectly honest, at how much we came together and how fast we got the work done.”

Readying NATO for future challenges

The future of NATO was also a significant area of interest, with the alliance engaged in designing its next Strategic Concept, which is due for adoption at the Madrid Summit at the end of June, and the NATO 2030 initiative.

Deputy Secretary Sherman had met with several NATO permanent representatives a day earlier to discuss China and Russia. And it is clear that the influence of current events means that the new Strategic Concept is very different to what would have been drafted even one year ago.

The security challenges to be faced in the years ahead are numerous, particularly in areas of technology like AI, quantum computing and cyber – but even climate and food supply present security challenges. The world is without question a very different place from when the last Strategic Concept was written in 2010.

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Nonetheless, NATO and the transatlantic alliance continue to enjoy strong bi-partisan support in the US - as indeed do US relations with the EU - so there are unlikely to be any foreign policy changes stemming from the vagaries of US domestic politics and the upcoming mid-term elections.

Recognising different forms of leadership

In response to a question on successful leadership, Deputy Secretary Sherman highlighted the importance of recognising the different ways people lead: leadership is not always about being the person in the spotlight.

“It’s perfectly fine if the best way that you lead is from behind the curtain, instead of in front.”

What is key is valuing talent and bringing different talents to the table.

On how to maintain a healthy work-life balance, the Deputy Secretary said that she now preferred to talk about ‘work-life integration’, but acknowledged it was very hard to maintain balance.

“What I say to people who want to have it all: you can, just not all at once. There are choices and sacrifices one has to make.”

One positive which came out of the Covid-19 pandemic was how many people worked at home, spending more time with their families. People have shown great resilience, especially children – but we all need to pay attention to mental health and if we see a colleague struggling, we should urge them to get some help. New US Ambassadors, departing on missions overseas, are reminded that their priority is the wellbeing of their team and colleagues.

Women leadership and peace building

Speaking about the role of women as enablers, builders and keepers of peace, the Deputy Secretary noted that there is data which shows when women are involved in peace and security that the peace achieved is more durable over time.

She recalled the unusual situation while leading the US negotiating team for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - known as the Iran Deal – alongside Helga Schmid, former Secretary General of the European External Action Service, and first Catherine Ashton, then Federica Mogherini, as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, faced with an all-male Iranian delegation.

“ Ultimately, wrestling with difficult issues openly, based on facts and evidence with accountability and transparency, helps us come to more durable solutions, it surfaces new ideas and new voices, it makes us stronger.

Ultimately though, what a diplomat brings to the table is the power of their role, their country and their presence. Women should be fully engaged in peace building, not least because they come at things differently and tend to create more durable solutions, but also because of the abundance of talent.

“There is so much talent out there. Why wouldn't we use all of the talent we possibly can?”

Championing democracy and human relationships

Deputy Secretary Sherman's overall message was to consider what is really important to us in our lives, and the choices and the responsibilities we have as people. She underlined the necessity for respect, relationships and human interaction, between individuals as much as between countries.

This outlook comes down to a simple question: what do we want the world to look like? A free, open, democratic society with transparent and accountable governments – or a society where protest and dissent is not tolerated, and governments seek to consolidate power and control over their citizens?

“Ultimately, wrestling with difficult issues openly, based on facts and evidence with accountability and transparency, helps us come to more durable solutions, it surfaces new ideas and new voices, it makes us stronger.”

It is critical that the US and Europe commit to not only strengthening their relationship with each other, but to delivering results for our own people and people around the world. A strong US-EU relationship can show just how democracies deliver growth, prosperity and higher standards of living, while embracing human rights, freedom of speech and diversity.

Deputy Secretary Sherman concluded by evoking the principles of her former boss, colleague and friend, Madeleine Albright, the first female US Secretary of State, who had passed away just one month earlier. She had arrived in the US as a refugee in 1948, her family fleeing oppression in Europe. Becoming a fierce champion of democracy, she knew all too clearly what the alternatives could be.

“She believed that we could always do better – and so do I. And so does the United States. So does Europe.”

The way forward

- It is critical for the US and Europe to commit to a robust and resilient US-EU relationship.
- Sanctions on Russia and support for Ukraine will lead to a strategic failure for Putin.
- Presenting a united front in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine strengthens the transatlantic alliance.
- A healthy competitive and cooperative relationship with China is in everyone's best interest, but Beijing must be challenged when it is necessary to do so.
- The Strategic Concept for NATO needs to adapt to the many diverse current and future security challenges.
- It is vital to prioritise human relationships, recognise talent and allow everyone to engage in the way that they can best contribute.



1. **Mark Gitenstein**, Ambassador of the Mission of the United States of America to the EU
2. **Kirsten van den Hul**, Change Agent and Columnist at The Change Agent and European Young Leader
3. **Viktoriia Omelianenko**, Student at College of Europe
4. **Daniel Michaels**, Brussels Bureau Chief for The Wall Street Journal Europe



More pictures of the event

