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Russian-American Relations: From Trump to Biden

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The incoming Biden Administration will inherit the same concerns about Russia that the Trump Administration had with it. These include arms control issues; Russian activity in Ukraine, Georgia, and other former Soviet republics; Russian involvement in conflicts in Syria and Libya; increasing European energy dependence on Russia despite European security concerns about it; Russia's close relations with several authoritarian regimes which Washington finds problematic (such as Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, and most especially, China); and Russian interference in the domestic politics of many countries—including the United States. Further, these concerns about Russia that Biden is inheriting from Trump (who inherited them from Obama) are occurring at a time when rising Chinese power and influence have been affecting international relations more broadly.

There will, though, be some important differences between how the Biden Administration approaches Russia compared to how the Trump Administration did so. First and foremost among these is that while the Trump Administration did not want to renew the 2011 Obama



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era Russian-American New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) that expires in February 2021 (but which can be renewed for five years by the two presidents without legislative approval), Biden has already signaled that he intends to renew this agreement. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who repeatedly sought without success to renew New START with Trump since shortly after the latter's 2017 inauguration, has expressed satisfaction with Biden's willingness to renew this agreement even though he has not yet (unlike Beijing) acknowledged Biden's election.

One of Trump's objections to simply renewing New START was that it did not include China which is increasing its own strategic nuclear arsenal. While the bilateral U.S.-Russian New START agreement is highly likely to be renewed after Biden's inauguration, Moscow and Washington will sooner or later have to confront the issue of China's growing strategic nuclear arsenal. One of three paths forward will have to be chosen: 1) Washington and Moscow will persuade Beijing to join them in what will be a trilateral strategic arms control process which up to now China has unequivocally expressed its unwillingness to enter into; 2) failing this, Washington and Moscow will have to agree to a common approach to dealing with the growing Chinese strategic nuclear arsenal which may involve Moscow and Washington increasing their own arsenals; or 3) Biden or whoever is elected in 2024 will have to consider well before the 2026 expiration of the extended New START agreement whether continued U.S. adherence to it allows the U.S. to adequately respond on its own to China's growing strategic nuclear arsenal if Russia will not join it in doing so.

Further, while Biden might want to revive arms control agreements with Russia that Trump pulled out of such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement and the Open Skies Treaty, he will have to confront the main reason that led Trump to withdraw from them: Russian non-compliance with their terms. Withdrawal from these treaties may not have been an effective means of altering Russian behavior, but the U.S. rejoining them without somehow ensuring Russian compliance with their terms won't be either.

Similarly, just as Biden is likely to share Trump's and (where applicable) previous presidents' disapproval of Russian military involvement in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, Libya, or anywhere else, Biden is likely to be just as unable to induce Putin to change his behavior in them. In addition to maintaining sanctions against Russia imposed during the Obama and Trump administrations, Biden will probably maintain security assistance to Ukraine in order to discourage Putin from trying to take any more Ukrainian territory than he already has. But any attempt to induce Putin to return territory to Ukraine is unlikely to succeed. And just like under Trump, Russian support for anti-American authoritarian regimes in Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela will continue under the Biden Administration. Even if Putin finally acknowledges that the rise of China has negative security implications for Russia, he is less likely to join with the U.S. in countering Beijing than to "buck pass" by hoping that Russia can either benefit or just not get hurt from Sino-American hostility.



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It is doubtful that Biden's opposition to Russian propaganda aimed at voters in the U.S. and elsewhere will result in Moscow ceasing them. On the other hand, Biden's 2020 electoral victory when it was believed that Moscow still favored Trump like in 2016 may actually help improve Russian-American relations since whatever efforts Moscow made to help Trump in 2020 were obviously ineffective. Putin's anti-American policies led House and Senate Republicans to pass, despite Trump's initial objections, the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) with specific provisions aimed at Russia in 2017. On the other hand, if Putin decides that Biden might revert to what Putin saw as U.S. efforts under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations to promote democratic "color revolution" seeking to overthrow authoritarian governments allied to Moscow and even his own regime in Russia, then Russian-American relations are likely to grow worse after Biden becomes president. Indeed, the Trump Administration's attempt to persuade Venezuela's Maduro to leave office did not bolster Putin's confidence that Trump could be counted on to abstain from supporting color revolution if he thought there was an opportunity for one.

Whatever differences there are between Biden's approach to Russia and Trump's, Putin might well see their policies as more similar than different. While Putin might not welcome Biden's election, in truth Trump was a disappointment to him. For if Trump's praise of Putin while on the campaign trail in 2016 raised Putin's expectations that Trump would be a friendlier toward Russia than previous presidents, Trump disappointed Putin on this many times after he took office: Trump would not renew New START. Trump did not lift U.S. economic sanctions against Russia imposed under Obama as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for secession in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, U.S. sanctions against Russia increased under Trump. Trump even gave military assistance to Ukraine that Obama would not. Nor would Trump agree to provide reconstruction assistance to the Assad regime in Syria despite how (in Putin's view) preserving Assad was better for America and for Russia than the most likely alternative to it—a hostile jihadist regime—that would be a threat to everyone. Further, Putin probably sees Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran not as resulting in the happy prospect of forcing Tehran to rely more on Moscow, but on Beijing instead. Is this, Putin may ask himself, what Washington really wants? Even the Trump-brokered "Abraham Accords" between Israel on the one hand and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan on the other undercut Putin's pretensions about Russia now being a better Middle East peace negotiator than an America which Trump had hitherto given the impression was withdrawing from the region.

Still, despite all Moscow's disappointment with Trump as well as his unwelcome unpredictability (which would have continued if Trump had been reelected), Moscow regards Biden's becoming president with foreboding in one important regard: Russia much prefers it when the U.S. is at odds with its allies as it has been under Trump than when the U.S. cooperates closely with them as Biden and other Western leaders have all said will occur.



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Indeed, if U.S. cooperation with its major Western allies is restored under the Biden Administration, this will help America deal more effectively with Russia in conjunction with them.

But whatever differences occur in Russian-American relations as a result of the change from the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration, one thing will remain the same: Russia will continue to be ruled by Vladimir Putin, just as it has since he first came to power at the turn of the century. And with Putin having overseen changes in the Russian constitution that allow him to extend his rule until 2036, he could continue to rule Russia until well after even a two-term Biden presidency. And as long as he is in power, Putin is unlikely to deviate from his long-established pattern of seeing the U.S. as Russia's principal adversary. Biden cannot change this, just as Trump and previous presidents could not either. The best that may be hoped for is to avoid the illusions that previous incoming presidents have had about how they could somehow improve U.S.-Russian relations, take actions that contain Russia's aggressive behavior as well as limit the damage from it, and yet engage in cooperation with Moscow on those occasions where there are mutual interests that can be advanced. Nothing more may be possible.

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