

Russia Policy Priorities for a Biden Presidency

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No aspect of Trump's foreign policy has been more surprising than his relationship with Putin. A Biden presidency committed to rebuilding alliances and reviving democratic solidarity would result in a significant shift in presidential policy, explains Nigel Gould-Davies.



Andrew Harnik / AP / TASS

Russia will be a central priority of a Biden presidency. No other country threatens a wider range of American interests and values, foreign and domestic. Nor has any other country been the source of more domestic controversy and contradictory policy over the past four years. An incoming Biden administration will face a complex and urgent set of issues and legacies. Success or failure in addressing them will help determine the fortunes of its larger foreign-policy design.

Four facts about the U.S.–Russia relationship

Four features define Russia's role and relationship with America. Firstly, Russia is the only country capable of destroying the United States — and vice versa. Both countries recognize that their unique relationship as the two largest nuclear powers must be handled with special care. Their common interest in avoiding nuclear war and, if possible, a destabilizing and costly arms race, compels a minimum degree of cooperation. This will remain true however divided their leaders and systems.

Secondly, the U.S.–Russian relationship has reached its worst point since the early 1980s. Russia now sees the United States as its main adversary and seeks to challenge U.S. interests and values as a matter of course. It has repeatedly — indeed, increasingly — violated established international norms, including by annexing Crimea, intervening in eastern Ukraine, and using radioactive and nerve agents as murder weapons at home and abroad.

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Thirdly, since at least the 2016 presidential election Russia has invested in a large-scale capacity to influence and disrupt the U.S. political process, in particular elections. The extent and sophistication of this effort is unrivaled. This is not only a continuing national security threat recognized by the U.S. intelligence community but a personal issue for Biden. Russian military intelligence [hacked](#) Ukrainian gas company Burisma — where Biden's son, Hunter, had been a board member — as part of an effort to discredit Biden. In September, the [CIA](#) and [FBI](#) reported that Russia continued to undermine Biden's presidential bid.

Fourthly, President Trump's relationship with Vladimir Putin has departed radically from bipartisan norms. No American president has ever treated any other leader, let alone that of a major adversary, with such apparent deference and anxiety to please. As a result, America has pursued two contradictory Russia policies over the past four years: a presidential refusal even to criticize Russia for its actions and a Congressional consensus on the need for a robust and punitive response.

Four implications that follow

Four implications follow from these four facts. Firstly, an incoming Biden administration must urgently address the central nuclear relationship. The New START treaty, the only bilateral nuclear arms-control agreement that still binds the U.S. and Russia, will expire in February 2021 unless it is extended. Even if this can be agreed — and Putin has now proposed an unconditional one-year extension — this will only defer, not resolve, the challenge of averting a new arms race. Maintaining strategic stability will anyway present a growing challenge as a new generation of hypersonic weapons is developed and deployed. In the past year, Putin has repeatedly emphasized Russia's superiority both in offensive hypersonic missiles and in defensive systems against those of other countries.

Apart from nuclear arms control, the U.S.–Russian agenda looks thin. There are few issues on which both countries will now expect to benefit from cooperation. Even the common threat of global warming, a Biden priority, is unlikely to serve this purpose. Although Russia joined the Paris Climate Agreement in 2019, its emissions targets are undemanding, and Putin has shown only limited support for this issue.

A dialogue on confidence-building measures — at a minimum, to ensure [deconfliction](#) in theatres such as Syria — will be helpful. But achieving this is not in the gift of the U.S. alone, a point missed by critics who call on the U.S. to "[rethink](#)" its Russia policy. By assuming that the U.S. can change the status quo — and thus, implicitly, that the U.S. is primarily to blame for it — they beg the question as to where responsibility lies for the state of the U.S.–Russia relations. Biden, who was vice president when the last Russia "reset" was tried in 2009 is likely to be skeptical.

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Secondly, a Biden administration will challenge Russia's aggressive posture and seek to rebuild alliances and institutions to do so. Policy on specific issues will shift in ways unwelcome to Russia — notably Ukraine, which Biden has said he will make a priority.

Thirdly, a Biden administration will accept, in a way Trump has not, the intelligence and policy consensus on the serious threat that Russia poses to the U.S. political process. Indeed, Biden has proposed an [independent, nonpartisan commission](#) to examine and combat it. His administration would not only punish and deter Russia but reform domestic U.S. institutions and practices to make such interference harder. In a similar fashion, it will seek to reform domestic practices — both in the U.S. and, by agreeing on new international norms, in other countries too — that enable corrupt and malign money to be laundered through Western countries with shell companies, anonymous beneficiary ownership and related practices.

This could not only blunt Russia's attack on the U.S. but also weaken it domestically. At present, the ability of Russian elites to send assets to safety in Western jurisdictions helps to stabilize Russia's regime. If this becomes difficult and costly, major interests may re-evaluate the Faustian bargains they have struck with the regime. Since Biden believes the Putin system to be weaker than it appears, the implications could appeal to him.

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Fourthly, even if a Biden victory does not carry Democrat majorities in both houses of Congress, a shift to a more uncompromising Russia policy will enjoy bipartisan support. This will mean a more consistent, disciplined and effective Russia policy.

Hardening Russia policy outlook

Russia policy is also inextricably linked to two central elements of Biden's larger foreign-policy design. The first is to rebuild alliances damaged by a Trumpian unilateralism that often treats allies worse than adversaries. This is especially true in Europe, which has become more worried about America's commitment than at any time since the late 1940s.

The second is to revive international democratic solidarity against authoritarianism. Restoring a principled concern with the way that other countries treat their own citizens will add further discord to U.S.–Russia relations. This will deepen as Russia grows more authoritarian and repressive in the lead-up to its 2024 presidential election.

In sum, a Biden administration would see a major shift in presidential attitudes towards Russia and Putin personally. This would both harden foreign policy and enhance the domestic resilience that underpins it. Unusually for major change, it would enjoy bipartisan support. None of this would be welcome in Moscow.

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