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Trump's Loss Not Necessarily Russia's

If Putin and the Kremlin exercise some moderation, they can expect from the next American president a readiness for serious dialogue.

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Evan Vucci / AP / TASS

It took some time to count the ballots, but the American electorate has rendered its judgement. While there may be legal challenges and a recount or two, Joe Biden will become the 46th U.S. president next Jan. 20.

This outcome will displease some in Moscow. The Russian government, in particular its security services, worked to support President Trump's election in 2016 and again this year. It is not hard to understand why. Trump has divided Americans, weakened U.S. alliances, and badly tarnished the American reputation abroad. For those sitting in the Kremlin, what's not to like?

Trump's loss thus may seem a defeat for Russia. But a Biden presidency can offer a silver

lining for the Kremlin.

First, Biden's foreign policy will be predictable. Few jobs in Moscow could have been tougher the past four years than America-watcher. How to explain Washington's policy under Trump to president Putin or Foreign Minister Lavrov? The U.S. president refused to criticize Putin or Russian misbehavior and talked about good relations. Meanwhile, the U.S. government sanctioned Russian individuals and entities, provided lethal military assistance to Ukraine, and bolstered the U.S. military presence in Central Europe.

With Biden, the president's attitude and the administration's policy will match. The Kremlin may not like certain elements of that policy, but it will understand it.

Second, Biden can be expected to professionalize relations, both on issues where interests coincide and where major differences divide the two countries. He recognizes that, even when bilateral relations are at a low point, dialogue matters. Trump proved an unreliable interlocutor. He had a weak grasp of the U.S.-Russia agenda, took little time to prepare, and paid no intention to implementation. The Trump-Putin encounters had, at best, insignificant results, and Secretary of State Pompeo had no regularized relationship with Lavrov to compensate.

Under the Biden administration, the Russians can expect a return to more regular diplomatic dialogue at senior levels.

Third, Biden will want guardrails to manage the adversarial aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, beginning with arms control. Over the past six months, the Trump administration badly overplayed its hand on extending the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. The former vice president has said he would extend New START without conditions. That would continue the treaty's limits and the flow of information from its verification and transparency provisions, benefiting the security interests of both countries.

A Biden administration, moreover, could go beyond that. For example, a regularized military-to-military dialogue could prove useful at a time when U.S. and Russian military forces operate more frequently in close proximity. Neither side has an interest in an accident or miscalculation triggering an inadvertent conflict.

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Fourth, Biden has the disposition to tackle problems that may require months, perhaps longer, to resolve. Trump wanted immediate results. Even had he bothered to take the time to get smart on a particular issue, he lacked the patience necessary to work out settlements to difficult disputes.

Biden's approach could help address the toughest nuts on the U.S.-Russia agenda, such as Moscow's conflict against Ukraine — which U.S. officials have termed the biggest barrier to a more positive development of the bilateral relationship. The Kremlin manages policy on Donbas; no one will solve it without talking to Putin. Trump achieved nothing. While Biden

has made clear his strong support for Ukraine, engaging his authority more directly alongside that of the German and French leaders could shake up a process that has devolved into stalemate.

In may rankle in Moscow that Biden called Russia the main threat to the United States, but that is objectively true: Russia is the only country in the world with the power to physically destroy America, and it has acted robustly in recent years to undermine U.S. authority and goals. (If it's any consolation, Biden sees China as posing the long-term challenge.)

The Biden presidency will not mean a new reset. The U.S.-Russia relationship has many troubled issues. Moscow should understand that Biden and his administration will push back against malign Russian activities. The Kremlin will have to rein its security services, which pursue unacceptable action such as stirring discontent in American domestic politics.

However, if Putin and the Kremlin exercise some moderation, they can expect from the next American president a readiness for serious dialogue — including on differences — of a kind that has been noticeably absent in recent years. That will not produce rapid or broad agreement, but it could help the two countries better manage their competition and, perhaps over time, chip away at the problems that currently divide them.

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