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No Longer 'Ours': With a Biden White House, the Kremlin Is Facing a Tough New Reality

The problem for Moscow is not so much the deterioration of relations under Biden: it is the readiness of the new administration to minimize these relations.

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Carolyn Kaster / AP / TASS

As forecast, the Democrat Joseph Biden has become the new 46th president of the United States, after winning a confident victory (both in terms of electoral college votes and in the popular vote) over the current U.S. president, the Republican Donald Trump.

For Moscow, losing its "friend" Trump is unpleasant. Trump was personally fond of Vladimir Putin — a feeling that was reciprocated by the Russian leader.

Personal chemistry is important, especially for Putin, who prefers an "operationally tactile style" of presidential diplomacy. In the case of Trump this allowed him, since the U.S. president was not "well-read" on key issues on the agenda and overly susceptible to flattery, to unobtrusively influence the position of the American administration.

The accelerated dismantling of the system of global American leadership carried out by Trump was also a key factor. It weakened the worldwide hegemony of the U.S. and hastened the erosion of military-political alliances oriented toward the U.S., deliberately sparking conflicts with America's leading allies.

This reduced the likelihood of the West being able to close ranks and coordinate effectively in order to oppose the foreign and defense policy of Russia. In the course of his second term the American system of military-political alliances in Europe and Asia could have been weakened to such a degree that it would have lost all meaning for the member states.

A U.S. withdrawal from NATO, for example, would have been entirely possible during Trump's second term, according to the former national security adviser John Bolton.

Trump would also have attempted, by improving bilateral relations, to draw Russia onto the U.S. side in a strategic alliance against China. Putin would ultimately never have gone along with this, but in the bargaining process he could have extracted something useful for Moscow from Trump, for example, the lifting of sanctions and the recognition of a Russian sphere of interest in the post-Soviet space.

On the other hand, Moscow herself has not taken full advantage of the opportunities that opened up under the Trump administration. For example, it missed the chance to fully normalize relations with Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who used the lack of U.S. interest in Russo-Japanese relations for the resolution of the territorial question on conditions that were extremely profitable for Russia. However, with a new leadership in Tokyo, such an opportunity is already out of the question.

The internal chaos and disorganization created by Trump in the U.S. state apparatus did not allow Moscow to draw the American administration into a substantial dialogue (for example, a full-fledged negotiating team on arms control appeared in Washington only in 2020).

Yet to the very last Vladimir Putin was trying to send Trump signals and put forward an agenda for cooperation: the anniversary summit for the UN Security Council Big Five and online meetings on Iran; programs for the restoration of cooperation on international information security; unilateral U.S. concessions on the extension of the START treaty; the non-deployment of intermediate and short-range missiles in Europe. Unfortunately, these were structured in many respects in a propagandistic tone and did not come to fruition.

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Moscow's underestimation of the negative political effect of its covert activity to influence the political process in the U.S. (the so-called "Russian interference" in the 2016 U.S. elections) has led to catastrophic consequences for Russian interests and the formation in the American political class of a solid anti-Russian consensus. The harshest American sanctions against

Russia were imposed not over Crimea and the Donbass, but in response to interference in the 2016 elections.

Unfortunately, lessons have not been learned, and in the 2020 elections we have been caught yet again. In August the U.S. intelligence community, in the person of National Counterintelligence and Security Center head William Evanina, made an official statement that Moscow was attempting to discredit Biden's candidacy as a representative of the "anti-Russian establishment" through Andrii Derkach, a deputy from Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada with alleged ties to the Russian secret services.

The Kremlin was supposedly using Derkach to distribute specially edited recordings of telephone conversations between Biden and then-Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, and was also pushing these materials through President Trump's allies in the U.S. The CIA even "leaked" assessments that Vladimir Putin was allegedly personally directing the campaign to discredit Biden.

Furthermore, the U.S. security services have accused Russia of spreading disinformation about Biden's physical and mental health. It is likely that during Biden's presidency this will have negative consequences.

Biden and his team

With Biden there will be no personal chemistry with Putin. In recent years Biden has said many unflattering things about Russia and its leader, including the words he famously uttered during a visit to Moscow as vice-president in March 2011: "I'm looking into your eyes and I don't think you have a soul."

At the time he also hinted that the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidential chair in 2012 was undesirable, which he later communicated to members of the Russian opposition during a meeting at the U.S. embassy. Biden has never concealed his negative attitude toward Putin, calling him a dictator in his speech at the 2016 Democratic convention and basing his claims of Trump's unsuitability as U.S. president on the latter's "sympathy for Putin."

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In 2018 Biden published an article in Foreign Affairs magazine called "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin. Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies," in which he called for a tightening of sanctions against Russia, a buildup of NATO military power, the active promotion of democracy, the defense of the right of sovereign states to "choose their defensive alliances" and the refusal to recognize that any power has a "sphere of interests."

When in 2014 Biden became the main point man on Ukraine following Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent interference in the Donbass, he turned into the Kremlin's chief enemy.

In person, Biden can be extremely tough when necessary and, unlike Trump, will not get flustered in the presence of Putin. In addition, he is always "on top of the material" and

prepares carefully for every meeting. With an extensive experience of diplomatic contacts at the highest level and a powerful foreign policy team, Biden is the best-prepared man to govern the country since George Bush Sr.

The concrete make-up of Biden's team will play a big role in Russo-American relations and the first appointments to the most important posts — White House chief of staff, secretary of state, national security adviser, minister of defense, director of the CIA and Central Intelligence (FBI director Christopher Wray has been appointed to a six-year term until 2024 and is likely to keep his post) – will give us a lot of information about the new administration's plans on Russia.

Biden has a wide choice. Candidates for the post of secretary of state include Anthony Blinken (Biden's former national security adviser and deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration), Susan Rice (Obama's former national security adviser, but she may not be approved by the Senate if it remains under Republican control), William Burns (former deputy secretary of state and U.S. ambassador to Russia) and senators Chris Murphy and Chris Coons. For the post of national security adviser he can turn to Anthony Blinken and Jack Sullivan (formerly Hillary Clinton's closest adviser in the State Department and author of the nuclear deal with Iran). As for defense minister, it appears that the post will for the first time be occupied by a woman: Michèle Flournoy (who served as undersecretary of defense for political affairs under the Obama administration, a competent executive).

For now it is unclear who will be in charge of policy on Russia and the post-Soviet space. One candidate for the role is Biden's former adviser and former U.S. deputy defense minister Mark Carpenter, well-known for his tough rhetoric on Russia (in the Obama administration he advocated for the normalization of relations with Belarus, so as to stimulate Minsk into abandoning its alliance with Moscow).

But perhaps it will be Victoria Nuland, who we already know well, who will be in charge of dealing with the former U.S.S.R.

Her article in the August issue of Foreign Affairs magazine, in which she laid out a detailed Russia strategy that could be described as "contain and invite," was received positively in Moscow. Nuland's strategy proposes certain stimuli for the renewal of cooperation between Russia and the U.S. For example, she suggests reviving dialogue on a European security architecture on the basis of president Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 initiative, as well as dialogue on partnership in missile defense.

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On the whole, U.S. policy on Ukraine and now Belarus is not expected to be a priority for the Biden administration.

It will be depoliticized (after the catastrophic personal intervention by Trump) and based on a bi-party consensus in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two states, with emphasis on reforms in the economy, the judicial system and the upholding of human rights and freedoms.

On Belarus, the Biden administration will continue the current course. Everything will depend on how the situation with the protests develops: if they are suppressed, then new sanctions will follow against Lukashenko and his circle, but no more than that.

Where disarmament is concerned, Biden has a lot of highly qualified personnel with extensive experience of negotiation with Russia: Rose Gottemoeller (the architect of the START treaty), Jon Wolfsthal (former director for nonproliferation at the National Security Council), Tom Countryman (former assistant secretary of state) and others. The extension of the START treaty for another five years alongside a simultaneous continuation of dialogue on the future parameters of strategic stability is at present the only quick result that can be achieved between Moscow and Washington under Biden.

Unlike Trump's Republicans, Biden's Democrats are ready to extend START without any preconditions, and while there are only two weeks between Biden's inauguration on January 20 and the expiration of the treaty on February 4, 2021, the problem is solvable (the sides can agree on an interim compliance regime for START until a decision on extension enters force).

Other agreements on arms control, including in a multilateral format, look unachievable for now, since even in the best-case scenario Biden will not have the two-thirds of votes in the Senate that are required for ratification.

Whether the White House will go along with the implementation of a Russian initiative on a mutual moratorium on the deployment in Europe of intermediate and shorter-range missiles, including the Russian land-based 9M729 cruise missile (which the U.S. sees as "a violation of the INF Treaty"), is hard to say for now, all the more so since recent decisions by the U.S. military on the purchase of such weapons (Mid Range Capability) leave little chance for agreement.

New problems for the Kremlin

The main problem for the Kremlin with Biden and the Democrats is the new foreign policy consensus of the leaders of the Democratic Party (apart from Biden, this is Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren): the main geopolitical challenge for the U.S. is the global confrontation between authoritarianism and democracy, the "free and unfree world." The Biden team no longer speaks of the "liberal world order," which requires American hegemony in order to support the rules, but speaks of the "free world," which the U.S. and its allies are obliged to defend from the growing autocracies, led by China and Russia.

The emphasis here is on the protection of the existing "free world," primarily through internal consolidation and socio-economic modernization, rather than the liberation of the "unfree world," which must be contained.

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This is no restoration of the foreign policy of Obama, but a reinterpretation of it amid the realities of a world that has changed dramatically since 2012. Biden speaks of the infeasibility of using U.S. military power for regime change in "liberating" "unfree countries," but permits such use of force in the name of "humanitarian interventions" (as in Libya) to stop

violence or in the case of the use of chemical weapons against a civilian population (Syria).

While Washington may have formally renounced "regime change" as a policy, it continues to bet on the supply of non-military aid to opposition movements (Venezuela), the fight for human rights and a government accountable to the people (which for Moscow is tantamount to intervention with the aim of regime change).

Moscow cannot fail to be concerned by the restoration of transatlantic unity between the U.S. and the EU and the strengthening of foreign-policy coordination in relation to Russia.

Under Biden the U.S. will take greater account of European opinions on key questions of global politics and will devote more attention to Europe's preoccupation with the regional crises on its peripheries (Ukraine, Syria, Libya). We will also see more coordinated action on China and its expansion in Eurasia, as well as a joining of efforts by the U.S. and Europe in countering the growing power of the geopolitical rivals of the West.

And in Europe we will see a strengthening of the position of the Euro-Atlanticists, who are ready to stand shoulder to shoulder (including militarily) with the new American internationalism.

All this is not only a blow to the Kremlin's main foreign-policy narrative of the imminent decline of the West and the coming multipolar "era of mercy," but also seriously limits Moscow's room for maneuver in terms of reducing Western pressure on Russia, reducing the incentive for Europe to reach a "separate peace" with Moscow.

The prospect of a new geopolitical reality under Biden is even giving birth to conversations in Russia's foreign policy elite about the expediency of a new "Brest-Litovsk" peace deal.

It is unlikely that Biden will begin his chapter in Russo-American relations with a new round of sanctions, though the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, where the OPCW has confirmed the use of chemical weapons, leaves the administration with little choice according to the law of 1991, but the possibilities there are limited. The Democrat administration will carry out a reassessment of the effectiveness of sanctions and their role in strategy regarding Russia.

In reality, Biden needs merely to use the pressure of the imposing arsenal of sanctions that has already been approved by U.S. Congress.

But a significant part of his foreign policy team believe that sanctions need to be reconfigured in such a way so that they do not only "punish" Russia for acts already committed, but also act as a means of curbing new unfriendly moves. For example, Biden's influential adviser Jack Sullivan announced to Congress back in 2017 that a raft of sanction measures must be approved, including against Russian state-owned banks and companies, which would automatically be introduced if Russia commits "unfriendly actions."

The problem for Moscow is not so much the deterioration of relations under Biden (they couldn't really get any worse): it is the readiness of the new administration to minimize these relations, relegating them to topics of secondary or tertiary importance.

Sine 2014 Moscow has invested significant efforts in order to show that it is dangerous to ignore it and declare it "a regional power in decline," as Biden has declared, repeating Barack

Obama. As a result, the influence and significance of Russia for the U.S. now depends directly on the scale and acuteness of the problems that Moscow is capable of causing for Washington around the world — which will then trigger the American "containment and response" mechanism, including sanctions. The circle is closing.

Perhaps the way out is, as former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov suggests, to take a fresh look at Russian approaches to the U.S. and align Russia's policy goals with America's, reducing the costs and risks of excessive competition and allowing Russia to channel its main resources toward solving internal problems.

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