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What Biden's Team Tells Us About His Russia Policy

Biden's picks, who are mostly on the same page on Russia, give Moscow reason for relief and worry alike.

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Angela Weiss / AFP

A contested election and a failed insurrection later, the Joe Biden presidency is almost upon us.

In November, I wrote in these pages that "all signs point to a Biden administration pursuing a Russia policy that combines cooperation and confrontation," a conclusion I reached largely on the basis of the president-elect's record on Russia and Eastern Europe.

Yet personnel is policy — up to a point, anyway. As it happens, we now know who Biden's major foreign policy and national security appointments are, new information that invites a

reassessment of what we expect Biden's Russia policy to involve.

Most obviously, there is no real opposition to the aforementioned marriage of cooperation and confrontation, although some members of Biden's team are more skeptical than others.

CIA Director-designate Bill Burns and even Biden's pick for Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the infamous Victoria Nuland, welcome such a policy, reasoning that the U.S. must "not give up on the longer-term prospect of a healthier relationship with Russia" and should be prepared to "stretch out a hand [of friendship] again" one day, respectively.

For his part, incoming National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan endorses it but harbors doubts about its promise. "Believing that somehow Russia and the United States can ... see eye-to-eye on some of the major issues of the day," he has said, "is only going to end up in disappointment."

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There is consensus, or something approaching it, on several other counts. For one, the team agrees that the Russia threat is an asymmetric one.

Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken observes that President Vladimir Putin has made "an art form [of] tak[ing] a relatively weak hand ... and play[ing] it incredibly well," while Burns, a former ambassador to Russia, writes that Putin "regularly demonstrates that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising powers."

Many of Biden's appointees appear to have what two academics call a 'Wilsonian bias,' where Russia's international behavior is largely or entirely attributed to its domestic order.

Commenting on the sources of Russian conduct, Sullivan says that Putin "needs to be understood as having an overriding interest in preserving and extending his own power, first and foremost."

Meanwhile, Andrea Kendall-Taylor — the National Security Council's incoming Russia and Central Asia senior director, an intelligence analyst by background, and a comparativist by nature — holds that "Russia underscores the link between rising personalism and aggression."

Blinken similarly argues that Putin's Russia entered into conflict with the West because "when Western democracy is successful, it's the most profound indictment of the system that [Putin has] built in Russia," adding:

At a certain point, it became against Putin's personal interest to actually pursue Russian integration [with the West], because he couldn't accept the rules, the transparency, the norms that come with that. That would undermine the kleptocracy that he was building.

Where several picks stand on the Sino-Russian relationship has gone uncommented on, surprisingly so.

Blinken, Nuland, and Kendall-Taylor all perceive a need or opportunity to divide one country

from the other.

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Blinken has noted with cautious optimism that Putin is "looking to relieve Russia's growing dependence on China," while Kendall-Taylor has urged the U.S. to "clearly articulate what the off ramp [from sanctions] is" lest Russia conclude "there is not an option in the West" and decisively embrace China as a result.

For her, the stakes are high — so much so that she regards Sino-Russian cooperation as "a key determinant of America's strategic landscape for the foreseeable future" and may be willing to look the other way on Russian arms sales that violate U.S. sanctions where they hurt China more than they do the U.S.

Burns, however, questions the wisdom of such thinking.

The career diplomat, who as CIA chief will inform policy but not make it, counsels "war[iness] of superficially appealing notions like ... a common effort to 'contain' China."

And although several of Biden's appointees worry that Washington is increasingly misusing or overusing sanctions, Kendall-Taylor, her National Security Council colleague Peter Harrell, and CIA Deputy Director-designate David Cohen have indicated they want to see Russia sanctions maintained or expanded.

Given the above, the conspicuous geographical remit of Kendall-Taylor's directorate, which once included Ukraine as well as all of Eurasia, could be not only a statement on the limits of Russia's influence and the 'European choice' of Kiev — and Minsk — but also a reflection of deepening concern about the growing ties between Beijing and Moscow.

Whatever the rationale, the seeming incorporation of several major post-Soviet states into the Europe directorate that Amanda Sloat will head up may yet create difficulties.

It may be of some consolation to Russia that the team shows flashes of cognitive empathy when it comes to Russia, with Blinken, Sullivan, and especially Burns open about the fact that the U.S. has on various occasions sent Russia the wrong message with its actions.

Yet any resulting relief is likely to be offset by the visible appetite of most picks for bringing the fight to Russia after more than four years of political warfare. On the table: outreach to ordinary Russians and possibly even the exposure of high-level corruption.

Nuland, whose new position lacks the regional focus of her previous role as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, has spoken of going around Putin to get "the Russian people to question their own fatalism about the prospects for a better future."

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Kendall-Taylor has envisioned an "exogenous event" along the lines of Mohamed Bouazizi's

self-immolation in Tunisia in 2010 that could "weake[n] these loyalty bonds to Putin, such that maybe the elite won't rally behind Putin in that kind of situation."

And Sullivan has threatened "to rally our allies to combat corruption and kleptocracy and to hold systems of authoritarian capitalism accountable for greater transparency and participation in a rules-based system."

Amid Alexey Navalny's return from Germany and subsequent detention and jailing for 30 days and the upcoming tests of strength that are this fall's parliamentary elections and the 2024 presidential election, signals and moves aimed at subverting the Kremlin at home are certain to fuel, not reduce, regime insecurity.

In doing so, they may do more to complicate efforts at cooperation than anything else the Biden administration does in its relations with Russia.

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