

Russia and U.S. Must Not Squander Chances For Cooperation

Sustained confrontation between Washington and Moscow would handicap Russia's own development.

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Joe Biden is the fifth U.S. president Vladimir Putin will have worked with since he entered the Kremlin at the start of the century. **AP / TASS**

A new chapter in American history has begun.

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. has been sworn in as the 46th President of the United States. The repercussions of his election and the fight — in the most literal sense of the word — for the Oval Office will reverberate for a long time to come.

The new U.S. administration has a difficult four years ahead. Then again, none of Biden's predecessors had it easy, always having more than enough problems to keep them busy. But the domestic and foreign policy issues facing the United States today run far deeper than ever

before. Both the future of the U.S. and the wider global political architecture will largely depend on how Biden tackles those issues.

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The new President has put the fight against Covid-19, domestic politics, climate change and the restoration of U.S. leadership in the world at the top of his to-do list. But it is quite clear that the country has a litany of ailments that extend far beyond these issues. Biden's main challenge on the domestic front will be to somehow mend a country that is divided along so many lines — political, national, racial, religious, cultural and generational. There is no way he will be able to respond to this challenge quickly, effectively and convincingly. But if his administration does not get a handle on the political confrontation inside the country — which is increasingly spilling over into the streets and manifesting itself in violence — then other problems, including foreign policy, will be incredibly difficult to solve.

In Russia, we should be most concerned with how U.S.–Russia relations will develop in this difficult situation. The legacy left by Donald Trump in this respect is ominous. Perhaps most distressing of all is not the fact that bilateral relations reached their lowest ebb for many decades, but rather that under Trump almost all the negotiating mechanisms that had been relied on in the past to solve problems or prevent them from spiralling out of control were destroyed. This is why some U.S. and Russian experts are already talking about the threat of direct military confrontation between the two largest nuclear powers in the world.

This state of affairs is extremely concerning. And any sane person — be they Russian or American — should realize this.

While there is no quick fix — nor can there be one — the opportunity to change the general course of U.S.–Russia relations is there. What we need is a dialogue — at least on those issues where we can come to some kind of agreement. This does not mean one side making concessions. There are many areas where negotiations and agreements no doubt meet the long-term interests of both countries.

Arms control

First, there is arms control. Extending the New START Treaty without any additional conditions meets the security interests of both sides. All that is needed for this is the political will of Moscow and Washington. Extending the Treaty would not mean that much for international security in and of itself, but it could signal both parties' readiness to engage in a broad dialogue on key issues of strategic stability. We have no reason to expect any other agreements on arms control in the foreseeable future — only the extension of the New START. But the sides have the chance to create a permanent negotiating mechanism on arms control, and it is essential that they realize this opportunity.

In this regard, we would do well to recall that the United States and the Soviet Union were in almost constant contact with each other in the 1960s–1980s over issues of nuclear capacity, carriers and delivery vehicles. During this time, the U.S. and Soviet delegations worked tirelessly, keeping their respective leaders abreast of the negotiations and acting on their instructions. In other words, it was not just special delegations and government departments

that were involved in this complex process, but those at the very top on both sides.

This was how a new atmosphere in bilateral relations — one that made concrete agreements possible — was formed. This is the kind of negotiating mechanism that we so desperately need today. All the more so because military technology is developing at a far more rapid pace now than half a century ago.

Just like during the Cold War, dialogue and potential agreements on strategic stability can, given the appropriate political will on both sides, act as a stepping stone towards the restoration of bilateral cooperation in other areas.

Regional conflicts

The second area of mutual concern are the regional conflicts in the Middle East, Syria and Libya, as well as the nuclear problem in Iran and North Korea.

It is unlikely that we will see any bilateral agreements on these issues in the near future. That said, the parties would certainly benefit from dialogue, given that both Russia and the United States have their own geopolitical and other interests in these regions.

The most realistic way for such a dialogue to take place at the moment is within the framework of multilateral mechanisms. Russia could step up its efforts to give new dynamics to such formats as the Quartet on the Middle East — made-up of representatives from Moscow and Washington, alongside the UN and EU — as well as other multilateral negotiating formats dealing with the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues.

Despite the difficulties of negotiating within multilateral formats, they do have certain advantages, as they allow parties that do not have direct lines of communication to engage.

Climate

The third area is climate. Joe Biden's statements during the election campaign clearly point towards the United States returning to a policy of international cooperation on global climate change. If the President starts to make good on his promises, then opportunities for a dialogue on this issue will present themselves. Preference should probably be given here to less-toxic multilateral formats.

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A related area is the Arctic. Competition for influence in the Arctic among regional and non-regional actors is intensifying. And if this is not translated into adequate international legal regulation, then this could lead to increased tension and even direct confrontation in the region over the coming years. Later this year, Russia will take over as chair of the Arctic Council until 2023, and could thus give a new impetus to dialogue and constructive cooperation in the region.

Seizing opportunities

Alongside those top concerns, there are many other industries and areas where Russia and the U.S. have a long history of cooperation, and where collaboration is needed today — ranging from space, science and education to culture and ties between NGOs.

The opportunities are there in all of these areas. But they mean little if they are squandered.

Thus, we must ask ourselves the key question: What serves Russia's long-term interests — persistent confrontation with the United States or mutual understanding on key global issues?

There are likely some who would prefer confrontation, and they would be able to provide various reasons to support their position. Polemics aside, I would nevertheless point out some of the negative consequences for Russia should it follow such a path in its relations with the United States.

A sharp confrontation with the United States would handicap Russia as far as its objective advantages for development are concerned, reduce its room for maneuver in the international arena, limit its access to modern technologies and international capital, and force it to allocate significant funds for the burgeoning arms race.

There is no reason to believe that these costs can be offset or reduced over time. And the fact that the United States would also suffer losses in a confrontation with Russia is not a reasonable consolation.

The moment of truth has come for both the United States and Russia. The sides must take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves at the correct time and in the correct manner. Otherwise, they will be lost forever.

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