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Biden Says No More U.S. 'Rolling Over' to Russia

By AFP

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New U.S. President Joe Biden is pitching a tough stance against Russia. **Twitter.com/JoeBiden**

President Joe Biden said Thursday the United States will no longer be "rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions" and demanded release of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

In toughly worded remarks pivoting from his predecessor Donald Trump's muted approach to Moscow, Biden warned of "advancing authoritarianism" in China and Russia.

The speech at the State Department thrust Russia back onto the front burner of the U.S. diplomatic agenda after four years during which Trump largely pushed the worsening relationship with Moscow to the side and consistently refused to criticize Putin.

Biden said that in his first phone call with the Russian leader since taking office on January 20 he "made it clear" to Putin that the relationship was changing.

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"We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interest and our people," Biden said, highlighting a massive cyber attack and election interference blamed on Moscow.

"The days of the United States rolling over... are over," he said.

Biden also devoted part of his speech to unusually direct criticism of the authorities' treatment of Navalny — comments that are sure to irk the Russian leadership.

Navalny, one of the last openly active opponents to Putin, narrowly escaped death from a severe poisoning which he blames on Russian security services.

He has now been imprisoned in Moscow, while thousands of people have been arrested for protesting on his behalf.

"The Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are a matter of deep concern to us and the international community," Biden said.

"Mr Navalny, like all Russian citizens, is entitled to his rights under the Russian constitution. He's been targeted for exposing corruption. He should be released immediately and without condition."

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Biden said there were areas where he was willing to work with the Kremlin, notably the New START treaty on curbing nuclear weapons, which the two countries extended for five years this week.

Trump had planned to let the treaty expire, citing what he said was Russia's non-compliance.

However, Biden's national security team argues that the world's two most heavily armed countries need to do everything possible to keep a cap on nuclear stockpiles.

"We will be more effective in dealing with Russia," Biden said, reiterating his frequent call during the speech for the United States to rebuild traditional alliances with democratic countries.

Earlier, Biden's national security advisor Jake Sullivan warned that Washington was planning measures against Russia "at a time and a manner of our choosing."

"Unlike the previous administration, we will be taking steps to hold Russia accountable for the range of malign activities that it has undertaken," he said.

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