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Biden and Russia: Pressure, But Not Too Much

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the world awaits Joe Biden's inauguration as president of the US, Washington's relations with China are under primary scrutiny. However, ties with Russia are no less important, as the two states have numerous differences across Eurasia. Washington will have to apply a careful balance of pressure on Russia to keep it from growing closer to China, and Biden possesses the statesmanship and experience to accomplish this. US-Russia relations under Biden should be strikingly different from what they were during the Trump administration.

Moscow's muted reaction to Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election does not augur well for bilateral ties between the two states. The Russian political elite is bracing itself for a more confrontational US foreign policy.

And there are plenty of reasons why Moscow should worry. Nearly all [concepts](#) of possible US foreign policy over the next four to eight years entail undermining Russian positions abroad: global leadership; defending and strengthening the weakened liberal international order; promoting democracy and basic human rights; and preventing the rise of privileged spheres of influence across the Eurasian landmass.

The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 unclassified summary of its supporting national defense strategy (NDS) will likely remain the backbone of US foreign policy in the new administration. Great power competition with China and Russia will be further underlined, while support for US alliances across Eurasia will be reinvigorated. US support for NATO, as well as moves to improve US military capabilities to constrain Russia's potential geopolitical interests in eastern Europe, are likely to follow.

The new administration is likely to differ from the Trump presidency in important ways. Biden has stressed that he will seek to improve transatlantic

ties that were damaged under Trump, who had a tense relationship with the EU and NATO, imposed tariffs on European products, and withdrew from several international agreements.

In contrast to Trump, who in 2016 called NATO "obsolete," the new US president will underline the alliance's important role in global affairs. This means NATO will be in a more robust position against the various threats emanating from Russia. Biden has called Russia both an "opponent" and a "threat." In early 2020, he wrote that "to counter Russian aggression, we must keep the alliance's military capabilities sharp while also expanding its capacity to take on nontraditional threats, such as weaponized corruption, disinformation, and cybertheft."

Another indication of America's likely foreign policy in the Biden era is his stance on issues like Ukraine. Biden criticized Russia's seizure of Crimea and its alleged support for separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region. He also accused the Kremlin of meddling in US elections. US policy toward Russia will get tougher and more coherent, unlike the mixed messages sent by the Trump administration. Ominously for Russia, the new administration's position on Russia will likely enjoy bipartisan consensus in Congress.

Biden is likely to take steps to repair relations with Germany and France, which together are the backbone of the EU. Biden will thus work to create not only a more cohesive NATO alliance but also a reinvigorated Europe. This will inevitably concern Russia.

Over the past four years, Moscow showed itself to be unconcerned about its Western frontier. This was visible in the high level of Russian involvement in geopolitically important areas across Eurasia throughout the Trump presidency—a logical consequence of Washington's lack of interest in European affairs at the time.

The Biden presidency could counter the notion of American decline. American power along Russia's borders is currently receding, but the new administration could reverse that trend. Biden has a long record of foreign policy experience that extends from the Cold War period to the Obama era. He knows Russia well and has the statesmanship to improve America's position.

We could see an increase in American pressure on Alexander Lukashenko in light of the ongoing protests in Belarus against his presidency, as well as stronger military support for Ukraine to shore up its position in volatile Donbas. Further south, the US could work on filling the gap in the Black Sea,

where Russia's naval military power since the Ukraine crisis of 2014 has far exceeded the collective forces of other littoral states.

This brings us to Turkey. While Ankara has set a course of action in its immediate neighborhood that goes against US foreign policy objectives, Turkey and the US could work on improving their damaged ties. Indications of this possible scenario are already being [reported](#). Both countries have an interest in rapprochement. Consider, for example, Turkey's issues with Russia in the South Caucasus following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. While the war seemed to advance Turkish geopolitical interests, Ankara is unhappy with the role the Kremlin is trying to play. Ankara also has differences with Moscow over Syria and Libya. US support in some of these theaters could give Turkey a strategic advantage.

But none of this means Biden is planning to take a radical approach toward Russia. He will probably not attempt to corner the Russian government, as doing so could spur Moscow to take action in Eurasia that could be dangerous for Washington. Pressuring Russia too much could also drive Moscow into the arms of Beijing. The American political establishment will try to avoid both scenarios.

China will remain a major foreign policy issue, but tacit moves toward building a rapprochement with Russia on some issues might occur. After all, it is a long-term US vision to draw Russia closer to the West. Again, this would require tactical, limited pressure on Russia that allows the parties to find points for cooperation. As approaching negotiations with Russia without any strategic advantages would prove futile, a certain degree of pressure will have to be applied.

Some areas of friction with European allies will persist under Biden. His administration will probably continue to demand that its allies pay more for their own defense, as did Trump's, but the messaging will be less antagonistic and directed more toward finding a long-term solution.

Russia will be a major foreign policy focus for Biden. The great challenge for US policymakers will be to find the perfect balance between cornering Russia into granting concessions while preventing it from moving dangerously toward China.

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