

THIRTEEN POINTS ON JOE BIDEN AND RUSSIA

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1. Narratives

Russian leadership tried hard to avoid any statements that would indicate its preference for Donald Trump. Still, it is clear that the election of Joe Biden does not quite fit into the official Russian narrative on the contemporary international system. Biden's predecessor in the White House with his explicit nationalistic, unilateralist, and transactional approach to foreign policy, was regarded in Moscow as a graphic manifestation of prevailing global trends away from globalization, value-based politics, and Western hegemony. If Biden is at least partially successful in his attempts to restore multilateralism and Western solidarity and to promote a global shift to a new cycle of globalization, his success will be a blow to the image of the world that the Russian leadership likes to present. A new consolidation of the West, no matter how temporary, is at odds with the official Kremlin narrative about the inexorable movement of the international system toward a polycentric world order. Worse still, it might give the collective West new confidence. In addition, a new reconciliation between the US and its traditional Western allies will be a major blow to the various Western populists and nationalists for whom Trump is a role model, and will tip the political scales against them. It will also hurt some of the Kremlin's political partners abroad. A Biden victory can inject new life into proponents of the Western liberal values that Vladimir Putin has already written off as hopelessly obsolete.

2. Priorities

When the Democratic President finally gets down to his foreign policy agenda, it is not likely that the Russian portfolio will sit on top of it. The new US President is not obsessed with Moscow to the same extent as some Republicans were (e.g. late Senator John McCain). Joe Biden is more likely to focus on the transatlantic relations that were seriously damaged by his predecessor. Another burning matter is a trade agreement with China: it will not end the US-Chinese economic or technological competition, but can at least help to prevent a full-fledged trade war between Washington and Beijing. In sum, Biden can allow himself to put most of the Russia files on a back burner, with the possible exception of the pending strategic arms control question. It implies that we will not see an early US-Russian summit in 2021; at best, the two leaders could meet on the margins of a multilateral event, like the G20 or APEC, to compare notes on issues of common interest.

3. Attitude

Donald Trump never drew a line between Vladimir Putin and Russia. He always argued that Putin was a very strong, skilled, and efficient leader, doing his best to advance Russia's national interests. Joe Biden does not share this admiration for the Russian President; on the contrary, he seems to believe that Putin is a major contributor to the historic decline of Russia as a state and as a society. In the eyes of Biden, Putin's kleptocracy, political authoritarianism, the so-called "vertical of power", and other specific features of his system constitute a major obstacle for Russia's social and economic modernization. In Biden's view, to be anti-Putin does not mean to be anti-Russian; on the contrary, fighting against Putin in the end is the best assistance to the Russian people that the US could possibly offer.

4. Domestic Constraints

The good news for US-Russian relations is the fact that so far US authorities have detected no significant Russian involvement in the election of 2020. This does not necessarily mean that this matter will disappear completely from Biden's radar screen, but it is not likely to affect the American domestic political agenda of 2021 as much as it did back in 2017. On the other hand, with Republicans in control of the Senate, Joe Biden will be significantly constrained in what he can do in foreign policy, the Russian dimension included. Capitol Hill will be in a position to play an active role in sanctions policy toward Russia, in the modernization of US nuclear forces, in limiting White House autonomy in matters like the JCPOA or in decisions related to the US military presence abroad. The influence of the legislative power on US-Russian relations is likely to be mostly negative, especially if Russia remains in some way an issue in US partisan politics.

5. Human Rights

The "bad side" of Biden for Russia will start manifesting itself in much harder and uncompromising rhetoric targeting the Russian leadership. Since Joe Biden, unlike Donald Trump, is not a fan of Vladimir Putin, the former will not be shy to express his uncomplimentary views on the Russian leader. Moreover, Biden will pay more attention to human rights problems in Russia; he will extend more support to political opposition in Russia as well as to politicized civil society institutions. He will also demonstrate more sympathy for democratic states in the Russian neighbourhood, from Ukraine to Georgia (that might also include more active support for the democratic opposition in Belarus). US support of Kyiv is likely to grow, including various forms of military assistance.

6. Sanctions

Anti-Russian sanctions will undoubtedly remain one of the prime US policy instruments in dealing with Moscow. We will see more of them and the only question is whether the Biden Administration preserves the overall approach of the Trump Administration, or whether it will rather try to bring these sanctions to a new, much higher level. No doubt, there will be temptations to suffocate the Russian economy by imposing a comprehensive set of sanctions on Russia's energy and financial sectors, and by treating Moscow the same way the US treated Tehran during the four Trump years. However, bringing sanctions to a new level would create too many risks for the global economic system in general and for the US economy in particular. It is not likely that the Biden Administration will be ready to take such risks, especially when it has to deal with so many other economic and financial challenges.

7. Arms Control

The Biden Administration is likely to be generally better than the Trump Administration. The President elect has never supported the irresponsible attitude of his predecessor to arms control at large or to bilateral US-Russian arms control in particular. He might well try to rescue the New START and to abide informally by the provisions of the INF, which the United States withdrew from in the summer of 2019. He is likely to pay more attention to the NPT, the CTBT, and other multilateral nuclear arms agreements that Trump did not consider of top importance for the US. However, this does not mean that bilateral US-Russian arms control has a bright future under Biden – any agreements beyond the New START will be very difficult to negotiate and to get ratified by the US side. Many fundamental disagreements between Moscow and Washington, on such issues as tactical nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defence, engaging China and other nuclear powers, etc., will not disappear under the new administration. It is also clear that the Biden Administration will have to start reviewing and revising the old paradigm of strategic arms control,

in order to catch up with the latest technological developments (space, cyber, AI, autonomous lethal systems, prompt strike, etc.).

8. Regional Problems

Another change in US foreign policy under Biden is that Russia can benefit from is the potential softening of the US position on Iran, and a more balanced US approach to the Middle East peace process. The Kremlin would undoubtedly welcome the US getting back to the JCPOA, or putting more emphasis on multilateral approaches to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Unlike some of his colleagues in the Barack Obama administration, Joe Biden has always been quite sceptical about US military interventions abroad, and he actively opposed US engagement in Libya back in 2011. However, it is unlikely that the Biden Administration will actively seek collaboration with Moscow on Libya ten years later, or that it will seek more US-Russian interaction in and around Syria. One can predict that Biden will be more persistent than Trump in accusing Russia of destabilizing actions in fragile states, primarily in Africa. It is also possible that the Biden Administration will exercise more pressure on Russia's illiberal allies in Latin America (Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua).

9. Global Commons

The decision of Biden to get the US back to the Paris agreements on climate change might open new opportunities for limited US-Russian cooperation in this domain. However, it remains unclear to what extent the Kremlin is ready to commit itself in a serious way to the global climate change agenda. Another area for cooperation on global commons is the Arctic region. In the spring of 2021, Russia takes the leadership of the Arctic Council and both sides are interested to keep this institution separated from the geopolitical competition in other regions of the world. This task does not look impossible to achieve, though there are risks of the Council turning into yet another podium for US-Russian political infighting.

10. European Dimension

A likely change in transatlantic relations will also have an impact on Russia's foreign policy. Of course, the numerous political, economic, and strategic differences between Washington and Brussels will not just disappear, and certainly, there will be no return to the good old days of Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. Still, Biden, with his foreign policy experience and his inclination to compromise, will work diligently to restore transatlantic relations. Under Biden, we will likely see more flexibility from Washington on trade talks with the EU, more readiness to consider the EU's opinion on US approaches to global problems, and increased attention to European positions on regional crises. A change of administration in the White House will likely reduce, though not eliminate, the EU's interest in normalizing relations with Russia. Having agreed a truce on the western front, Brussels will be more than capable of swiftly transferring its forces to the eastern front, taking a harder line towards the Kremlin. A Democratic US President will likely applaud such a strategic move, seeing the standoff with Russia as a way of cementing the transatlantic partnership. In all likelihood, a Biden victory will severely limit Russia's room for manoeuvre in its EU policy, and perhaps in its broader foreign policy too. A more united West might consolidate itself not only on an anti-Russian platform, but also, to a lesser degree, against China.

11. Chinese Dimension

The incoming Biden Administration might try to tear apart the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership by trying to cut a deal with either Russia or China and to focus on the remaining

opponent. Biden can follow Donald Trump, who called for accommodating Moscow and confronting Beijing. Still, it is highly unlikely that Joe Biden can be more successful in pursuing this goal than his predecessor was. The US simply has nothing to offer to President Putin to make him reconsider his current close friendship with Chairman Xi Jinping – be it in the economic, political or strategic domain. Biden can play on the opposite side of the stage, seek an acceptable accommodation with the stronger Beijing, and put the squeeze on the weaker Moscow. However, in this case the Biden Administration will have to abandon its claim to global American leadership. Certainly, neither Biden nor his entourage are ready to do that, and Washington-Beijing relations will remain complicated and tense. Even more importantly, just as Donald Trump saw repeatedly throughout the four years of his presidency that it was impossible to tear Russia away from China, Joe Biden will repeatedly see that China cannot be torn away from Russia. Beijing needs Moscow regardless of the current state of and prospects for China-US relations. Under the current circumstances a version of “dual containment” appears to be the most likely approach of this Administration towards Beijing and Moscow, with China being treated more as a peer competitor and Russia as a global rogue state. To cut the costs of dual containment, Biden will try to mobilize the US’ Western allies in Europe and in East Asia. It will also try to keep Eurasia divided by forging stronger ties to Chinese adversaries in Asia – above all, to India.

12. Diplomacy

Biden may decide to stop the ongoing “diplomatic war” with Russia – he arguably values professional diplomacy much more than Trump did, and he is not likely to keep the Russian Embassy in Washington (and the US Embassy in Moscow) in the state of a besieged fortress. In general, Biden will delegate more authority and more power to foreign policy experts and professionals (“Deep State”) including those of them who will hold the Russia portfolio; therefore, US policy toward Russia is likely to be more consistent, realistic, and predictable. Some of the now frozen diplomatic, military, and expert communication lines between the two countries are likely to be reactivated, which will also mitigate risks of an uncontrolled confrontation. However, this does not mean that the relationship will get much better.

13. Beyond Biden

Today we can only guess whether President Biden will serve his full first term in office or whether we may see him succeeded by Vice-President Kamala Harris. It also remains to be seen what she has to contribute to US foreign policy in general and to US-Russia relations in particular. Still, any “re-set” in these relations looks very unlikely under either Biden or Harris. At best, one can foresee a very limited détente and a better management of the very difficult and mostly adversarial relationship. A real shift in this relationship might take place after the Presidential election of 2024, when new generations of political leaders replace the “old guard” in both countries. These new generations are destined to have very different views of the world and of their respective country’s role in global affairs.

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