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Can Biden Turn a Corner in US-Russia Relations?

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Summary

It's no secret that US-Russia relations are in a bad way. New US President Joe Biden's first two months in office give cause for both hope and despair about the bilateral relationship in the years ahead. There is genuine potential to lower tensions, but missteps will prove costly and neither side can afford a spiralling nuclear arms race as the world recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

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The art of diplomacy

The paradox of US-Russia relations under Donald Trump derived from two features. First, while the US president entirely lacked diplomatic decorum, he rarely spoke a bad word about Russia's president Vladimir Putin. On the presidential election campaign trail in 2015, Trump had said Putin 'is getting an "A"' for leadership. His refusal to criticise Putin's Russia infuriated his critics at home. Asked by talk show host Joe Scarborough about the murders of journalists and politicians in Russia, a tone-deaf Trump replied: 'Our country does plenty of killing also, Joe.'

The second feature of Trump's foreign policy reveals the paradox. He indulged a series of foreign policy actions that only put greater distance between Russia and the US. Few of Trump's decisions pertaining to arms control, Iran, Ukraine, North Korea or Venezuela helped US relations with Russia. It was only his policy with US allies in NATO and the European Union that can be said to have much favoured Russia.

> In all cases, Trump's focus on bilateral grievances and apparent inability to see the wider picture damaged US foreign relations.

Trump's uncouthness ensured that Biden took up office with a pocketful of diplomatic capital – even with Russia. Biden quickly squandered some of that capital by agreeing with a television interviewer's statement that Putin was a 'killer'. Undoubtedly, this is a popular line of thinking in the West that Putin bears ultimate responsibility for many deaths in conventional wars in Ukraine, Syria and elsewhere, and for assassinations (and attempted ones) on both domestic and foreign soil. Still, Biden erred by agreeing to label Putin a 'killer' so lightly. He should be less concerned about showing his 'toughness' on Russia, more concerned with a post-Trumpian return to careful and fair-minded language about foreign leaders.

Good deeds, bad words

Biden's Russia policy got off to a decent start. Agreeing to extend the bilateral New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) was prudent, while a renewed willingness to engage with Iran will help US-Russia relations as well. Biden's team has also signalled a welcome commitment to multilateralism: welcome not only to Russians, but to people all round the world. This fosters the predictability that makes all states and their citizens feel more secure.

Let us first consider arms control. Trump's goal of bringing China into the nuclear arms control framework was well-intentioned but naïve; one senses that Trump's narrow focus on China came at the expense of any broader strategy. For the US and Russia, there is now only a gap where the INF Treaty (Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty) once operated. Biden, by contrast, appears to better grasp the wider picture. No one needs to pretend that New START is without flaws, but it's far easier to address issues within an ostensibly agreed framework than in the absence of one. A framework gives normative and legal weight to disputes over either side's actions.

Moreover, since the thrust of US dissatisfaction with New START concerns weapons and technology outside the scope of the treaty, it's not obvious what end would have been achieved by Trump's willingness to let the treaty lapse. On arms control, then, so far so good for Biden and Russia.

Under Trump, the US-Iran relationship further revealed the US President's blinkered approach to foreign relations. Persuading Russia to endorse the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran had been a signal US achievement under Barack Obama. Russia had supported Iran's nuclear programme in the 1990s, yet the US persuaded Moscow to stop building Iran's nuclear power plant at Bushehr and cancel sales of air defence systems. The US achieved these outcomes – which were contrary to Russia's

economic interests – by sharing intelligence on Iran's activities with their Russian counterparts, and there being sufficient trust between the two sides on the provenance and reliability of the intelligence.

For America to walk away from the JCPOA in 2018 was short-sighted and neglected the broader benefits to America's international relationships that stemmed from the Iran deal. It may be too late to save the deal, but at least Biden's team has shown some willingness to change US policy on the matter. Otherwise, US policy risks encouraging Russia to work more closely with Iran in opposition to US interests and global leadership.

Implicit suasion

I would argue, therefore, that these beginnings are more promising than many people claim. Biden's willingness to label Putin a 'killer' was a misstep, but actions speak louder than words and Putin will shrug off the unhelpful remark. Biden's administration will do well to focus on lowering tensions rather than media soundbites on Russia. There will be challenges whatever happens: the US is expected to introduce new sanctions on Russia soon for election interference. Moreover, there is little to suggest that Putin plans to change course in Russia's foreign policy.

> In a situation where the US and Russia each blames the other almost exclusively for deteriorating relations, the lowering of tensions is the only impartial measure by which to gauge Biden's policy over the coming years.

Otherwise, since the US and Russia presently define their interests so differently in respect of the other, a *sine qua non* of 'success' for one side is failure for the other. Ambitious goals for improving relations are commendable, but modest goals in lowering tensions are more realisable for now.

This does not mean that Biden's team should shun issues of concern when it comes to Russia. It certainly does not mean soft-pedalling on human rights. Rather it means that, because Russia's leaders care deeply about their status and image in the world, messages from the US are better communicated through back channels. By toning down the international slanging match, America's public diplomacy can hope to play a positive role in (rather than be ever more excluded from) Russian society. Meanwhile, America can be quietly confident its behind-the-scenes messages are backed up by credible threats. What we might call 'implicit suasion' – the unspoken fact that America has force

available – will likely work better for Biden than open confrontation. Theodore Roosevelt's dictum to 'speak softly and carry a big stick' could take Biden's administration far.

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