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**More Coherence, Greater Tension:**  
**Prospects for US Policy toward Russia under Biden**

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**Under President Trump, the United States did not have a coherent and unified Russia policy. Congress maintained a traditional approach of using sanctions to push back against the Kremlin's malign activity, while the White House prioritized (an ultimately unsuccessful) cultivation of interpersonal relations with President Putin to improve bilateral ties and provide the US an advantage in the competition with China. Under President Biden, the gaps on Russia policy between the executive and legislative branches are expected to narrow, but the relationship between the two states will hardly become less complex. In an era of increased US-Russia hostility, Moscow could opt to calibrate the degree of friction with Israel in Syria for use as leverage against Washington, or the US may grow less tolerant of Israel's coordination with Russia along the northern front. Intensifying ideological competition between Washington and Moscow may also project beyond bilateral relations and increase tensions between the US and its autocratic allies in the Middle East, in which case Israel could seek to mediate between the parties.**

Presidents Trump and Putin may have had similar worldviews regarding the transactional and Darwinian nature of global affairs, but nevertheless they were unable to establish new venues for substantive cooperation for a variety of reasons. First, Trump's general foreign policy orientation – albeit with [some notable exceptions](#) – was to disrupt the existing order rather than to build something new. Second, one of Russia's key goals vis-à-vis the United States was to [lift the sanctions mandated by Congress](#), but the President's inability to deliver on this demand due to opposition from Congress reduced Moscow's interest in cooperation. Third, in a number of crisis zones where both countries are engaged and might theoretically cooperate to improve the situation on the ground, such as Syria and Venezuela, the US and Russia are competitors with starkly diverging interests. Finally, the years-long investigation regarding alleged coordination between the Trump campaign and Russia to interfere in the 2016 presidential election made positive interactions between Trump and Putin unpopular and politically costly.

In contrast to his predecessor, President Biden has a starkly different worldview from that of Putin, and he is expected to break with the decades-long “tradition” of newly

inaugurated presidents by not seeking a rapprochement with his Russian counterpart. In 2009, then-Vice President Biden heralded the opportunity to improve relations between the former Cold War foes when he noted at the Munich Security Conference, “It’s time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia.” This allowed for some initial success in advancing cooperation regarding issues of considerable significance to US national security, including the New START arms control treaty, supply lines for US forces in Afghanistan, and collaboration regarding nuclear sanctions on Iran. Within a few years, however, relations began to decline, following the 2011 US-led NATO intervention in Libya and popular unrest in the wake of 2011 Duma elections, which Putin blamed on then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The US-Russia relationship continued to deteriorate precipitously following Moscow’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and the attempts to influence the 2016 US elections.

During his 2020 campaign, [a centerpiece of the Biden foreign policy platform](#) was to “revitalize [US] national commitment to advancing human rights and democracy around the world.” If the new administration continues that line, it will likely find cooperation with Moscow extremely difficult, due to what Stanford’s Professor Larry Diamond observed as [Putin’s diametrically opposed](#) effort: “[Putin] seeks to invert Woodrow Wilson’s famous call to arms and instead ‘make the world safe for autocracy’... He is smart enough to know that he cannot undermine it everywhere, but he will subvert, corrupt, and confuse it wherever he can.” The two Presidents’ perceptions of security as collective produces a zero-sum approach in which inroads made by the other system of governance anywhere are viewed as a threat to his own system of governance everywhere.

Still, Biden will not be able to ignore Russia either. As former US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul noted in [a recent article for \*Foreign Affairs\*](#), the assessment of Russia as a declining power is “outdated,” and in fact Russia “has reemerged, despite negative demographic trends and the rollback of market reforms, as one of the world’s most powerful countries – with significantly more military, cyber, economic, and ideological might than most Americans appreciate.” Given the [importance Putin assigned to Russia’s global status as a “first echelon”](#) state since his rise to power, he would presumably expend some of Russia’s formidable resources in order to complicate US-led efforts to marginalize it.

Instead of either attempting a “reset” in relations or disregarding Russia, the US will probably seek to manage relations by containing Russia’s activities on most fronts. Biden will presumably attempt to deter, confront, and penalize Russian activities in the realms of disinformation, cyberattacks, human rights abuses, and military interference abroad.

One key instrument for doing so will likely be the NATO alliance, to which President Biden has already re-affirmed the US commitment. Recent White House appointments also signal that the US is likely to adopt a more muscular approach toward Moscow than the previous administration. Victoria Nuland, an experienced Russia hand and Biden's nominee to be Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, has [advocated a tougher policy toward Putin, explaining](#), "In no small measure, the United States and its allies have enabled Putin's boldness. Over the past 12 years, Putin and his cronies have paid a relatively small price for their actions." Newly appointed CIA director Bill Burns [noted in 2019](#), "Managing relations with Russia will be a long game, conducted within a relatively narrow band of possibilities exploring common ground where we can find it; and pushing back firmly and persistently where we can't."

However, in addition to being a means for managing Russia's aggressive actions, NATO is liable to become a point of contention in and of itself for the bilateral relationship. The expansion or reinforcement of the alliance could enhance deterrence against potential Russian attacks on its smaller and weaker Western-oriented neighbors that were historically within Moscow's sphere of influence. At the same time, such developments could augment Russia's sense of insecurity and elicit a dangerous response. "That which ceases to grow begins to rot," an oft-quoted line from one of Catherine the Great's ministers, encapsulates Russia's strategy of projecting power beyond its own borders to compensate for weakness in the face of internal and external threats.

On the whole, the US-Russia relationship will likely continue on a negative trajectory under the new US administration. The more unified and coherent American approach to the Kremlin under Biden is not one that seeks the elusive rapprochement with Putin and his regime. The bilateral US-Russia relationship that was already fraught with complications may see the intensification of ideological competition, due developments like the [imprisonment of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny and the US response](#), which could potentially amplify the existential nature of the rivalry. Also, US bolstering or enlarging NATO may serve to better deter Russian adventurism, but pushing too far or failing to deliver appropriate messaging [could worsen the "security dilemma"](#) and trigger a response from Moscow.

In parallel, however, the Biden administration is expected to pursue cooperation with Moscow on a limited number of global issues. The most probable venues for such cooperation include arms control and nonproliferation, climate change, and global health – but that list could change, expand, or contract in accordance with the bilateral dynamics and the evolving global environment. Indeed, what is projected to be an otherwise acrimonious relationship between Biden and Putin actually began on a reasonably

cooperative note, as days after Biden's inauguration, the US and Russia agreed to extend the New START treaty for five years, just weeks before the agreement's expiration.

The change in US administrations may also create a new context that limits the extent of the relationship's decline. Over the course of Trump's tenure, the formal and regular channels of communication between the two countries atrophied, and so the more organized and predictable modus operandi of the Biden administration may allow for their revival. That could be instrumental in heading off potential crises caused by mistakes, miscalculations, or misunderstandings. In addition, because it is not saddled with the political baggage of "[Russiagate](#)" that beset its predecessor, and it enjoys control of the House of Representatives as well as the Senate, the new US administration may be better able to capitalize on whatever opportunities arise to promote its national interests through bilateral cooperation.

From Israel's perspective, the continued deterioration of US-Russia relations could have significant implications for its national security. Along the northern front, Israel is engaged in a "campaign between wars" against Iran's efforts to entrench itself in Syria and stockpile precision guided munitions there. Russian forces, including air defense systems, are also present in Syria as part of Moscow's efforts to save the Assad regime from collapse. Therefore, Israeli and Russian forces have established a de-confliction mechanism and ways to coordinate so as to avoid tragic accidents between two actors that are not directly engaged in hostilities against one another. In an era of increased US-Russia hostility, Moscow could opt to calibrate the degree of friction with Israel in Syria for use as leverage against Washington. Alternatively, the US may grow less tolerant of Israel's coordination with Russia in Syria.

The increasingly ideological nature of the competition between Russia and the US could also lead to a greater emphasis on human rights in Washington's foreign policy. If that results in excessive pressure on US-allied Arab regimes to make democratic reforms or restrictions on arms sales, it may push states in the region to hedge toward alternative security guarantors. It is in Israel's interest to ensure that the United States retains its influence among traditional allies in the region, as alternatives would be less inclined to take Israel's national security into account. In that case, Jerusalem would do well to try to mediate between the US and its regional partners toward understandings on issues relating to human rights and democracy.