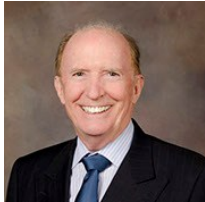


15 April 2021

Biden Administration Foreign Policy: Domestic Politics Intervene



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Less than three months into a new US administration, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict specific US foreign policies, beyond President Biden’s welcome overall change in approach: notably to return the United States to seek comity with friends abroad, to rejoin international institutions (e.g., the World Health Organization), and to recognize the systemic global threat of climate change.

Making predictions now is particularly difficult regarding the two most critical areas of contention: China and Russia. From the perspective of US-European relations, Russia is obviously more important. At the same time, for several years the United States has sought to line up its European allies (NATO) and partners (the EU) in [common approaches to China](#). But that is less relevant to transatlantic relations than Russia.

The Biden administration’s opening moves toward Russia can so far be expressed largely in generalities, as is also true with [China](#): the desire to cooperate where that is in US interests, to compete in some other areas, and [to oppose Russian aggression](#) (notably military and cyber) or other actions.

This limitation to generalities reflects in major part that, in foreign policy, the Biden administration is still largely operating on the basis of positions taken during the presidential campaign season. This is small wonder, given the snail’s pace at which senior political appointees are decided, vetted, confirmed by the Senate, and then installed in office. Thus while Biden has a functioning team in the White House (the National Security Council staff, which is not subject to Senate confirmation), the State Department has only two “confirmed” office holders, Secretary Antony Blinken and the ambassador to the United Nations.

Mostly, therefore, the Biden administration is acting toward Russia more-or-less on autopilot, largely set following Russia’s seizure of Crimea seven years ago and its continuing military involvement in the Donbas and other parts of Southeastern Ukraine – now raised in Western perspectives by current Russian military exercises on the Ukrainian border. The steps the US and NATO have taken since 2014 have reassured those allies (and non-allies) close to Russia as well as putting Russian President Vladimir Putin “on notice.” (Nevertheless, Washington and Moscow did agree to extend the critical [New START treaty](#), a clear mutual interest, which would otherwise have lapsed on February 5th.)

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Not all NATO allies agree about Russia. In general (with exceptions) those geographically farther away are less concerned, especially compared with the Baltic states and – a non-member -- Ukraine, which is hoping now to be provided a way-station to joining NATO: a Membership Action Plan. While Biden has cited [“Russia’s ongoing aggression”](#) toward Ukraine, he has not taken a position on its NATO aspiration; but it is a non-starter, given that there is no prospect of Ukraine’s ever gaining the needed unanimous allied support to join and thus be defended against military assault.

At least one carry-over US policy toward Russia does have negative implications for transatlantic relations (or at least US-German relations), even while President Biden’s full-throated endorsement of the [Washington Treaty’s Article 5](#) has contrasted with President Trump’s ambivalence. This administration is as set against the Nord Stream gas pipeline as was Trump’s, including possible congressionally-mandated [sanctions](#).

Beyond the specifics of the Biden administration’s approach to Russia is a major inhibiting factor: US domestic politics, beginning with the 2016 US presidential election in which Russia presumably interfered. There is no evidence that this tipped the scales, yet it became a rallying cry among dissatisfied Democrats to explain why Hillary Clinton lost. (To her credit, unlike Trump in 2020, she conceded defeat on election night.) Democrats’ unhappiness led to cries to impeach Trump, even before he was inaugurated. And when the “Russia case” failed, the Democrats turned to Ukraine as its replacement. A major casualty was any possibility because of US domestic politics to try changing relations with Russia, including opportunities discussed by Trump and Putin at the [July 2018 Helsinki summit](#), which were ignored in the American media’s zeal to attack Trump. Prospects for improved US-Russian relations have been further damaged by Russia’s later actions, including its mistreatment of [Alexei Navalny](#), and by Biden’s characterizing Vladimir Putin as [a “killer.”](#)

This week, Biden did try to employ carrot and stick in a [phone call with Putin](#), on the one hand strongly criticizing Russian actions regarding Ukraine, including major military exercises near its frontier; but – surprisingly -- on the other hand proposing a summit meeting in the next few months. Even with a summit, however, moving US -Russian relations from [confrontation to dialogue](#) is a long shot. As evidenced by the intensity of US criticism of Russia, US domestic politics would still inhibit basic change in relations, unless Putin were to undergo an unlikely sea-change in his own ambitions in Russia’s backyard.

Current limits on US strategic and policy analysis also extend to consideration of Russian-Chinese relations and the possibility that frigid Washington-Moscow relations could push Russia toward China – and with similar effect from frigid Washington-Beijing relations. It is a safe bet that this angle is not yet being seriously pondered in the Biden administration, given all else that is in play. Further, in its direct bilateral approach to Beijing, the administration is also on autopilot set by Trump. This was evident at the [US-Chinese senior-level meeting](#) in Anchorage, Alaska, when Secretary Blinken began by laying out an agenda focusing on China’s misbehavior at home and abroad; not surprisingly, the Chinese responded in kind: not an auspicious start.

To this point, the reader might infer that the Biden administration is adrift on analysis and policy planning in regard to both Russia and China, with little or no consideration whether what the US and others in the West (Europeans) do could drive Russia and China closer together. But President

Biden needs for now to be “cut some slack.” He has rightly set out first to be a “domestic president,” and not just to repair damage done by his predecessor. His domestic focus is also his Number One international requirement: dealing with the human and economic costs of the pandemic, rebuilding US infrastructure and competitiveness, and trying to restore civil society (as well as advancing civil rights) – all needed to undergird America’s role abroad. He deserves full marks for what he has done so far.

In time, with a full team and presidential attention turning more to foreign policy, there will no doubt be greater focus on the realities of geopolitics and geoeconomics. To aid in that process, America’s European friends also have responsibilities (as well as the need for patience): notably coaching the Biden team on the new realities of transatlantic relations in all of their dimensions and unstinting honesty in making European views clear.

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