

Will the Democrats and Biden Continue to Treat Russia as the Enemy?

Ted Galen Carpenter

November 19, 2020

An early foreign policy challenge facing Joe Biden's administration will be how to deal with Russia.

Unfortunately, the president-elect is in a somewhat awkward position with respect to that issue given the anger among many Democrats regarding what they believed to be Russia's role in helping elect Donald Trump in 2016.

In addition, the underlying message was Russia is a ruthless, existential threat to America, and no anti-Russia accusation seemed too far-fetched to circulate. The most recent thinly sourced and non-confirmed allegation — that the Kremlin had placed bounties on the lives of American military personnel serving in Afghanistan — highlighted the credulous animosity. Yet given the issue was raised numerous times in the Congress and on the presidential campaign trail, it will not be easy for Biden to dial-back the hostility to Moscow, even if he decides that the anti-Russia campaign has exhausted its political utility.

Ironically, the entire contention Trump pursued an appeasement policy toward Putin was the opposite of reality. Washington's policy toward Moscow actually hardened in multiple ways during the Trump years. Numerous measures, including repeated U.S. arms sales to Ukraine, continued expansion of NATO's membership, an increase in both the number and size of NATO war games near Russia's borders, U.S. withdrawal from the INF treaty, and Washington's efforts to unseat Russian client regimes in Syria and Venezuela, confirmed that point. Some would argue he did this all under pressure from Congress, nevertheless, the mythology Trump spent four years cozying-up to a murderous aggressor now has a tenacious hold on the collective American psyche.

One can only hope Biden will adopt a pragmatic approach and accept the need for a rapprochement with Moscow — however much such a course correction might offend those in his own party, and probably many within the GOP establishment as political posturing starts to set in. Continuing a hostile relationship with a power that not only is an important player in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, but is the one country possessing the military wherewithal to end America as a functioning society is profoundly unwise.

It is even more myopic to continue antagonizing Russia when U.S. relations with China clearly are deteriorating. The last thing the new administration should do is risk driving Moscow and Beijing together into a de facto alliance against the U.S. There already are signs of growing collaboration, and U.S. policymakers must seek to reverse that trend, not exacerbate it. Henry Kissinger once observed it needed to be a key objective for the United States to have closer ties to both Moscow and Beijing than they have to each other. That was wise advice during the latter decades of the Cold War, and it is wise advice today.

A genuine reset in U.S.-Russia relations will not be easy. Long before Trump, Washington's actions had created increased bilateral tensions. The fateful decision to expand NATO eastward to the borders of the Russian Federation, in violation of implicit promises given when Moscow agreed to accept not only Germany's reunification but united Germany's membership in NATO, soured relations with the new, noncommunist Russia. So, too, did Western military interventions in the Balkans that humiliated longtime Russian ally, Serbia. Finally, meddling by the United States and European Union countries to unseat Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian president completed the poisoning of relations with Moscow. Putin's seizure of Crimea was the Kremlin's uncompromising response and an emphatic warning to the West.

A blueprint for repairing Washington's damaged relationship with Russia will require several initiatives, and realism must be the guiding principle. The U.S. is not going to advocate the memberships of nations added to NATO since the end of the Cold War be rescinded, however much of the enlargement process was foolishly provocative. But expecting Russian leaders to tolerate Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO, a step that both George W. Bush and Barack Obama sought, is equally unrealistic. Both of those countries are in what the Kremlin regards as Russia's core security zone. Moscow was too weak to prevent NATO from incorporating the Baltic republics in 2004, but Russia is much stronger now, and it is intent on preventing a repetition with Georgia and Ukraine.

Likewise, Washington's insistence Russia repeal its annexation of Crimea and return the peninsula to Ukraine is pointless. Maintaining sanctions on Russia until the Kremlin meets that unrealistic demand is doubly pointless. Among other factors, Moscow is determined to retain its crucial naval base at Sevastopol. Even if U.S. leaders are unwilling to give formal recognition to the territorial change, they need to begin lifting the sanctions that were imposed.

However, re-setting relations is not a one-way process. Moscow's escalating role in the Western Hemisphere constitutes a legitimate U.S. concern. The Kremlin has become a major financial prop for Nicolas Maduro's staunchly anti-U.S. government in Venezuela, and the Kremlin has provided tangible military backing as well. In March 2019, Russia sent some 200 military personnel to help Caracas refurbish its air defense system. Several hundred Russian mercenaries also appear to be operating in the country to train and assist Maduro's security forces.

Russia's policy in Venezuela represents a direct challenge to the Monroe Doctrine. So, too, do the growing economic and military ties between Moscow and Nicaragua's leftist government. Since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in the early 1820s, U.S. leaders have regarded patron-client economic and military relationships between foreign powers and Latin American nations as a potential security threat to the United States.

Cuba became a Soviet political and military client for decades, precisely the situation the Monroe Doctrine aimed to prevent, and the relationship has continued with Russia. A repetition of that development with other countries is unacceptable from the standpoint of U.S. interests, and Biden's administration must make that point emphatically clear. But just as the United States should insist that Moscow respect the Monroe Doctrine, U.S. leaders must accord the same respect to a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

If the Biden administration adopts such an approach, there is reasonable hope for an improvement in currently toxic U.S.-Russia relations. The crucial question is whether Biden himself has sufficient fortitude and vision to repudiate the Russophobia that has built up in

Washington over the last four years. For the sake of America's best interests, it's imperative that he take the necessary constructive steps, however unpopular they might be in the short term.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest, is the author of twelve books and more than eight hundred articles on international affairs. His latest book is *Gullible Superpower: U.S. Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements* (2019).*