



Will Biden Jettison the Anti-Russia Hysteria?

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Joe Biden's administration will face the daunting challenge of repairing the badly frayed U.S. relationship with Russia. Unfortunately, the president-elect is not well-positioned to undertake that task, and he should blame himself and his political associates for that situation. For four years, the Democratic Party and its media allies relentlessly pushed the narrative that Donald Trump was nothing more than a puppet of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Even though lengthy, sequential investigations by the FBI and the Mueller Commission failed to unearth credible evidence that Trump or his campaign organization had "colluded" with the Russian government to interfere with the 2016 election, prominent Democratic leaders persisted in conducting the inflammatory verbal barrage.

In addition to the ugly innuendoes about Trump's supposedly treasonous behavior, the underlying message was that Russia poses a ruthless, existential threat to America. It will not be easy for Biden to dial-back the hostility to Moscow that he and his party have fomented, even if he decides that the anti-Russia campaign has exhausted its partisan political utility.

No anti-Russia accusation has seemed too far-fetched to circulate. Several congressional Democrats even equated Moscow's alleged election interference measures with Pearl Harbor and the 9-11 attacks. The worst offenders throughout the multi-year campaign to vilify both Trump and Russia were House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, but a good many others chimed-in as well. Rep. Eric Swalwell, (D-CA), a member of Schiff's committee and (briefly) a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020, typified the behavior. When Trump spoke by telephone with Vladimir Putin in May 2019, primarily to see if they could reach some common ground regarding Venezuela and North Korea, Swalwell denounced the call. He erupted: "Remember that time Pearl Harbor was bombed and FDR called the Emperor of Japan? Or the time the Twin Towers were struck and Bush ringed Osama Bin Laden? No? I don't either."

He then asked rhetorically why Trump called Putin, as though that situation and his two examples were even remotely comparable. As Hunter DeRensis, a senior reporter with the *National Interest*, noted acidly: "The attacks on Pearl Harbor and on 9/11 killed 2,403 and 2,996 Americans, respectively. There are currently no casualties connected to the leak of the DNC [Democratic National Committee] emails."

Allegations in the summer of 2020 that the Kremlin had placed bounties on the lives of American military personnel serving in Afghanistan confirmed that the campaign of neo-McCarthyism has not faded with time. That leaked report was so lacking in credibility that even the National Security Agency (NSA) publicly distanced itself from it. Yet Pelosi, Schiff and others immediately seized on it as new evidence of Russian treachery and Trump's indifference to the "threat." During one interview regarding the bounties story, Pelosi stated that "I don't know what the Russians have on the president, politically, personally, or financially," but that with respect to Trump, "all roads lead to Putin."

Biden himself has been far from innocent in resorting to anti-Russia smears directed against Trump. During the first presidential debate, he sneeringly called Trump "Putin's puppy." That is not an encouraging indicator of greater restraint on the Russia issue once he takes office.

Trump has been the most prominent target of the Democratic Party's anti-Russia offensive, but he is hardly the only one. Party activists applied the label "Moscow Mitch" to Republican Senate Leader Mitch McConnell because of his support for Trump. It was an especially absurd accusation, given McConnell's decades-long record of hawkishness toward both the Soviet Union and noncommunist Russia. Nevertheless, key Democrats, including Nancy Pelosi, did not hesitate to invoke it.

Indeed, hawkish Democrats even smeared Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, a prominent member of their own party. During her campaign for the presidential nomination, Gabbard staked-out a position critical both of Washington's disastrous regime-change wars in the Middle East and the confrontational stance against Russia. Hillary Clinton then implicitly accused her of being a "Russian asset" for adopting such positions.

As with the first bout of McCarthyism in the 1950s, the latest version poisons public debate and makes the reconsideration of flawed foreign policy measures far more difficult. McCarthy and his colleagues stated or implied that anyone who questioned the policy orthodoxy of unrelenting hostility toward both the Soviet Union and newly communist China was not only misguided but treasonous. Such intimidation precluded meaningful debate on virtually any aspect of East-West relations for the next two decades. The resulting robotic foreign policy led to the futile effort to isolate China, the ill-advised and totally unnecessary Vietnam War, and a relationship with the USSR that had the nuclear forces of both countries on hair-trigger alert.

The evidence of similar intimidation already is apparent in our era. When the intelligence agencies leaked new allegations to the press in February 2020 that Russia was trying to interfere in US elections on behalf of both Trump and Sen. Bernie Sanders because of perceptions that they were "friendly" to Russia, Sanders' reaction was revealing and depressing. "Unlike Donald Trump, I do not consider Vladimir Putin a good friend. He is an autocratic thug who is attempting to destroy democracy and crush dissent in Russia," Sanders responded. "Let's be clear, the Russians want to undermine American democracy by dividing us up and, unlike the current president, I stand firmly against their efforts." His bid to be "more Catholic than the Pope," impelled Sanders to join the campaign of anti-Russia vitriol.

There is a possibility that, once ensconced in the White House, Joe Biden will abandon such tactics and adopt a sober, pragmatic approach that recognizes the necessity for a rapprochement with Moscow. The ultimate irony of the ongoing drive for a tougher policy against Russia is that, contrary to the carefully crafted myth that Democrats have pushed, President Trump's actual policies have been even more confrontational than those Barack Obama's administration pursued. Washington needs to adopt a less hostile, not a more hostile, approach.

Jettisoning both the neo-cold war rhetoric and the resulting punitive policies would begin to improve the currently toxic U.S.-Russia relationship. The crucial question is whether Biden himself has sufficient fortitude and vision to repudiate the political opportunists and zealots in his own party who have fanned Russophobia. For the sake of America's best interests and world peace, it's imperative that he take the necessary reparative steps, however unpopular they might be with his own partisan backers.

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