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What ‘action’ can Biden take against Putin or other repressive regimes?

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Americans watch with growing disgust as Vladimir Putin’s government conducts a crackdown on peaceful demonstrators protesting the regime’s many abuses. The latest demonstrations erupted in multiple cities when opposition leader Alexei Navalny returned to Russia after undergoing lengthy medical treatments in Germany for a near-fatal poisoning attack apparently carried out by Putin’s security agents. Authorities immediately jailed Navalny upon his arrival, but pro-democracy demonstrators poured into the streets to demand his release. Putin’s administration shows no signs of compromising, and it already has jailed more than 3,000 protesters — a number that is certain to rise.

Outrage in the United States and other Western countries is pervasive. President Biden’s nominee for national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, issued a statement even before Biden was inaugurated calling on the Russian government to release Navalny “immediately” and insisting that “the perpetrators of the outrageous attack on his life must be held accountable.” European Union leaders likewise condemned Navalny’s arrest and the crackdown on protests, but the EU backed away from initial threats to impose additional sanctions on Russia for the latest incident.

Pressure is building on European governments and the Biden administration to take action, however. Atlantic Council analysts argued that “the U.S. response (or lack of response) will show how much Russian President Vladimir Putin’s internal repression — including assassinations — will factor into the Biden team’s overall Russia policy. The trick for the Biden administration will be to respond with sufficient firmness and cross-Atlantic coordination to puncture Putin’s apparent sense of impunity while leaving space for cooperation with Russia where that makes sense.”

That is the dilemma U.S. policymakers confront not just with regard to the Russian government’s repressive domestic behavior, but also when dealing with similar conduct by brutal autocracies such as China and North Korea. The sobering reality is that there are major constraints on what Washington should — or even can — do in response to their internal repression, no matter how repulsive we might find it. Other, ultimately more important, interests will be jeopardized if U.S. officials act imprudently.

In Russia’s case, the Biden administration wisely has given a high priority to extending New START and other arms control agreements that President Trump had undermined. Imposing economic sanctions, even measures carefully targeted to impact only Putin’s inner circle, will not

be helpful to that process. Nor will adopting a punitive approach facilitate needed overall improvements in a badly strained, but extremely crucial, bilateral relationship.

A similar problem exists with Washington's policy toward North Korea. Opponents of President Trump's summits with Kim Jong-un contended that the United States was conferring "legitimacy" on a monstrous regime even by meeting with Kim. Others continue to insist that if negotiations take place, not only must North Korea roll back its nuclear arsenal, but the regime's dreadful human rights record has to be put on the agenda.

The latter demand, though, is a poison pill that would make negotiations impossible. It will be difficult enough to get Pyongyang to make concessions on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Attempting to interfere in North Korea's internal affairs would doom any chances for progress on those more crucial matters of war and peace. If the United States had insisted that the Soviet Union take steps to end domestic repression before we could conclude agreements on other issues, such as arms control, that posture would have sabotaged important breakthroughs such as the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty. Sometimes, leaders of democratic countries must exercise great restraint on moral issues to reach limited, but important, areas of agreement with odious governments. Creating a more normal relationship with North Korea to help reduce the dangerous tensions on the Korean Peninsula falls into that category, despite the repulsive nature of Kim's regime.

So does preserving and repairing the bilateral relationship with the People's Republic of China. Americans and others are understandably distressed at the mounting authoritarianism under President Xi Jinping's rule. China has gone from a moderately authoritarian state with a collective leadership under a term-limited president to a rigid, personal dictatorship not seen since the days of Mao Zedong. The wide range of personal lifestyles and the tolerance of at least limited debate on social and economic issues has morphed into an ever-more stifling ideological conformity.

It has been hard enough to watch that authoritarian regression occur within the PRC itself, but it's been even harder to watch the communist regime extinguish Hong Kong's political autonomy with the imposition of a new national security law last year. Authorities already have begun to round up and jail pro-democracy advocates by the dozens. If that were not enough to generate anger in the United States and other democratic countries, the regime's continuing, systemic human-rights abuses against the Uighur minority should be more than sufficient.

But U.S. leaders must put on a diplomatic smile and deal with Xi's government on a wide range of important issues. Dampening the worrisome tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are absolutely critical to preventing a military collision with the PRC that would be catastrophic for regional and world peace. Preserving the \$600 billion annual trade with the PRC also is important for both the U.S. and global economies. As much as we might want to impose rigorous economic sanctions and other countermeasures in response to Beijing's subjugation of Hong Kong, its harsh treatment of the Uighurs, and the growth of overall authoritarianism in the PRC, the cost in terms of damage to other U.S. objectives simply is too great.

Even the imposition of targeted economic sanctions on regime leaders in autocratic countries usually proves provocative and counterproductive. Diplomatic statements and protests are little more than symbolic gestures, and that point understandably frustrates human rights and

democracy activists. U.S. policymakers, however, must hold their noses and prioritize interests and objectives when dealing with nasty, repressive governments. The Biden administration needs to accept that reality and carefully temper its response to Putin's latest crackdown on political opponents.

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