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## Russo-US Ties Under the Biden Presidency

By Chris Cheang

### SYNOPSIS

*President Putin congratulated US President-elect Joseph Biden on 15 December 2020, after the Electoral College confirmed his victory. Putin was the last world power leader to convey his good wishes. It signalled that Russia does not expect ties with the US under the Biden administration to deteriorate any further.*

### COMMENTARY

AS EXPECTED, President Vladimir Putin did not immediately extend his congratulations to President-elect Joe Biden after the US presidential election in late November. Putin was quoted as saying that he was ready to work with any US leader, "who has the confidence of the American people". He added "that confidence can only be given to a candidate whose victory has been recognised by the opposing party, or after the results are confirmed in a legitimate, legal way". In response to a media question, Putin replied bluntly that the move would not damage relations as "they're already ruined".

By taking a different approach from other world powers, President Putin appears convinced that Russia's relationship with the US is unlikely to worsen any further under the Biden presidency, despite the latter's well-known and long-standing negative perception of Russia under his leadership.

### Biden's View of Putin and Russia

During his visit to Moscow in March 2011, then Vice President Biden reportedly told then Prime Minister Putin that he did not have a soul; Biden also reportedly conveyed to Russian opposition leaders his view that it would be better for Russia if Putin did not run for re-election in 2012 (President Putin had stepped down from the presidency

in 2008 in accordance with a two-term constitutional limit, making way for Dmitry Medvedev to be elected as president).

President-elect Biden's negative view of Russia was reiterated in an interview with CBS News' 60 Minutes on 26 October when he reportedly said that he considered Russia "the biggest threat to America right now in terms of breaking up our security and our alliances".

President Putin therefore has good reasons to distrust the US president-elect, unlike President Donald Trump, for whom he has had words of praise, which Trump reciprocated. Yet under the Trump administration, Russia's purported initial hopes of a normalisation of relations not only proved groundless but became worse, for the following reasons:

*US Sanctions on Russia:*

President Putin has repeatedly condemned US sanctions on Russia; in late October at a business conference, he noted that "the current administration has imposed sanctions on Russia 46 times on our companies and economic operators, which is the highest number ever". It is questionable whether the Biden administration would lift these sanctions.

*US Pressure on NATO Allies:*

President Trump's unrelenting pressure on the US' NATO allies to increase their defence budgets was certainly neither in Russia's economic nor security interests. According to a Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) April 2020 study, "Russia's military burden in 2019 was much higher than that of China and the other large European spenders and slightly higher than that of the USA".

Since NATO is considered its principal military threat, any increase in NATO countries' defence budgets is not in Russia's security (or economic) interest. Moreover, President Trump's consistent calls for increased US defence spending can only have been seen in Russia as another threat to its own defence and security posture. The Biden presidency is unlikely to reverse course on this matter as it strengthens the NATO alliance.

*Arms Control Treaties and Confidence-Building Measures:*

The US' withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty, as well as its lukewarm response to repeated Russian suggestions to renew the New START Treaty which expires in February 2021, have not been met with Russian approval. Moscow sees these actions as threatening to Russian security and defence interests in Europe and its nuclear security posture.

While the Biden presidency might renew the New START Treaty, that remains to be seen.

*Sale of Javelin Anti-tank Missiles to Ukraine:*

The Obama administration had reportedly refused this step which the Trump administration approved in March 2018. This weapon is considered a deterrent to any Russian military action against Ukraine directly or in support of the Ukrainian separatists. The Biden presidency is unlikely to change course as it would not want to relieve any military pressure on or weaken deterrence measures against Russia.

#### *US Opposition to Nord Stream II Gas Pipeline:*

President Trump's criticism of Germany's continued support of this project, and US sanctions on the project, touch on Russia's gas industry, which is a key part of its economy. President Trump has consistently stated that while the US "protected" Germany from Russia, Germany continued to pay Russia "billions of dollars for energy coming from a pipeline".

Russia believes the US wants to eliminate competition to its gas exports to Europe; a Bloomberg report dated 16 July 2020 quoted President Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying that US sanctions were "an attempt to force Europeans to buy more expensive gas under less attractive conditions".

The Biden presidency is unlikely to reverse this policy which has wide support among Republicans as well as Democrats.

#### *US Sanctions on Iran:*

President Trump's hardline policy towards Iran has also been met with criticism by Moscow.

Geographically close, Russia desires a stable Iran without access to nuclear weapons technology. Russia also has economic, energy and security interests with respect to Iran. President Trump's policy jeopardised these interests.

The possibility of the US rejoining the nuclear deal on Iran under the Biden presidency cannot be ruled out but US hostility towards Iran would still remain strong.

### **Russia Unlikely to Worsen Ties**

President Putin will want to ascertain how the Biden presidency approaches all these issues, especially the Democratic Party's perception that Russia interfered on Trump's behalf in the 2016 election, and principally whether the Biden presidency would introduce punitive actions against Russia on this score.

Putin can therefore be expected not to undertake any move that might make an already bad relationship worse. An indication of his instinct for the need to change course can be seen in his reported remarks on President-elect Biden's son's apparent business dealings in Ukraine.

According to media reports in late October, he was quoted as saying that: "I don't see anything criminal about this, at least we don't know anything about this (being criminal)," referring to the younger Biden's apparent business dealings in Ukraine. His position stands in direct contrast to President Trump's.

Equally significant is the role and pressure of domestic politics. Currently, the COVID-19 situation has already claimed over 48,000 lives while infections stand at over 2.7 million with over two million recovered cases.

Putin's energy and time will continue to be focussed on dealing with the pandemic's socio-political, health as well as economic consequences. He can ill-afford to leave it entirely to the cabinet and governors. He also would not want to end his current term of office in 2024 still grappling with the pandemic's consequences.

Putin would be cognisant that a further deterioration in relations with the US would force Russia further into the arms of China. No Russian leader can afford to lead his country to further dependence on Chinese goodwill and economic largesse. Moreover, Russia's position as a balancer between the US and China would be weakened, if its already bad relationship with the US were to worsen under the Biden presidency.

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