

Trump or Harris: No Difference for Moscow

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The approaching U.S. presidential election has once again spurred discussions about who is best for Russia. The temptation immediately arises to view Republican candidate Donald Trump as the more acceptable politician. Trump says that he does not rule out a “deal” with Russia. But his thinking is transactional: he stands for promoting the national interests of his country, but actually he is ready to make deals: we do something for you, and you do something for us. That the Republican speaks from a position of strength bothers few in Russia, which has long been accustomed to such rhetoric and is itself ready to

act from positions of strength. But those counting on “deals” with the U.S. under Trump, or on a constructive Realpolitik relationship with it, are mistaken. In fact, the U.S. president is unlikely to much affect Russia-U.S. relations, and Moscow should not care who exactly the U.S. elects as president. 0

Trump’s 2016 election was greeted with applause in Moscow. At that time, Russia-U.S. relations had already been undermined by various disagreements, foremost regarding Ukraine, but the situation still seemed reversible. The Minsk agreements had been signed a year and a half earlier, and much of the arms control regime was still in effect. Trump threatened to “drain the swamp” to evict the ‘Deep State’ bureaucrats, solving foreign and domestic problems simultaneously. Trump’s core electorate seemed close to Russia in spirit: workers from the flyover states with traditional family values, opposed to the cosmopolitan and atomized urban coasts based on the virtual and service sectors (Hartig et al., 2022).

But Trump’s campaign rhetoric could not reverse the trend of deepening confrontation, primarily over European security and Ukraine. Moscow’s dissatisfaction with the post-Cold-War status quo was voiced increasingly loudly, and although it was also increasingly accompanied by force since Ukraine’s 2014 regime change (perceived as interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring country and as Euro-Atlantic expansion into it), there was still hope that this voice would be heard, and the accumulated problems would be solved through compromise. Trump looked like a politician capable of such compromise. Reality proved to be different.

Trump’s presidency was challenged by accusations that Russia had interfered in the 2016 election in his favor (Mueller 2019). While Trump managed to avoid impeachment over the scandal, the U.S.’s Russia policy was further constrained. With the PL 115-44 (CAATSA) bill, Congress incorporated President Obama’s executive orders on Ukraine and digital security into federal legislation, denying the president the ability to rescind them, or to remove individuals from sanctions lists, without

congressional approval. CAATSA also authorized the president to use a fairly broad range of restrictive measures (U.S. Congress 2017). The administration responded pragmatically. Trump signed CAATSA and implemented it with Executive Order 13849 (U.S. President 2018a). Executive Order 13848 showed Trump's determination to respond to election interference (U.S. President 2018b), and Executive Order 13883 (U.S. President 2019) imposed sanctions in response to the Skripal affair.

However, the Trump administration applied sanctions sparingly, wary of harming U.S. investors in Russia. State Department lawyers strongly criticized radical congressional proposals of "draconian sanctions" and the DASKA bill (Timofeev 2019). Yet Trump did support sanctions against Russian gas pipelines, especially Nord Stream 2. In a bid to oust Russia from the European gas market, he signed the 2019 PEESA law and its 2020 amendments (U.S. Department of State 2020, 2021). European supply companies, especially the Swiss Allseas (which leases pipe-laying vessels), were intimidated by the threat of sanctions. Russia eventually adapted its own vessels for the project, but Nord Stream 2's construction was delayed. Overall, Trump was ready to impose sanctions when he considered it appropriate and necessary.

In general, announced steps towards dialogue with Russia did not yield any tangible results. In addition, Trump proved to be an opponent of arms control.

As Aaron Wildavsky wittingly noted back in 1966, there are two presidents in the U.S.: one in foreign policy and one in domestic, and the "foreign president" will not necessarily be affected by the deep rifts in U.S. society. Moreover, the foreign policy differences between Democrats and Republicans are not so significant. And a bipartisan consensus has long existed regarding Russia specifically.

After Trump, President Biden did not adopt a much more hawkish policy towards Moscow until the end of 2021. To accommodate Germany and the EU, he avoided any new sanctions against pipeline projects. He gave a last-minute green light to New START's extension. In 2021, he signed Executive Order 14024, which subsequently became the key legal

mechanism for anti-Russian sanctions (U.S. President 2021). But he used it to only a limited extent before Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine. The situation began to change due to deteriorating relations over European security and Ukraine; it was determined structurally, not by the U.S. president. If Trump had been in Biden's place at the end of 2021, his policy would have been similar. After the start of the SMO, any occupant of the Oval Office would have unleashed the tsunami of sanctions.

Trump's possible victory in the 2024 election will change little for Russia. Trump is known as an opponent of arms control agreements, but they continued to erode under Biden and could be eliminated by Kamala Harris just as easily as by Trump. Trump will actively lobby for American energy supplies to the European market, helped by the EU's own sanctions against Russia. Trump's threat to force European allies to pay for their security will not break NATO solidarity; they did not undermine it even during his first term, and are even less likely to do so now, given the crisis in relations with Russia. Indeed, NATO's European members are now increasing military expenditures on their own initiative. Trump will not be able to untie the Ukrainian knot absent the necessary conditions, such as the exhaustion of Western resources or Russia's decisive victory. Finally, Trump's return to power is unlikely to destabilize the American political system, and even if internal divisions deepen, they will not affect foreign policy. The U.S. presidential election is of secondary or even tertiary importance for Russia.

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