



THE IMPLICATIONS OF TRUMP'S DEFEAT IN THE 2020 US ELECTIONS ON RUSSIA

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Background

Under President Donald Trump, US foreign policy has changed dramatically in the past two years, including the United States' relations with Russia. As campaigns for the 2020 elections by Democratic candidates are already underway and the election of a US president other than Trump could have profound implications on US foreign policy, Wikistrat wanted to explore how US-Russia relations might change in the event that Trump is *not* reelected in 2020.

During October 2019, Wikistrat asked its Russia Experts' Community: **How will the relationship between Russia and the US look in the event that the next president of the US is not Donald Trump?** This special report presents the analysis of five of Wikistrat's top experts on this question. Two experts presented their answers in written form and three were interviewed.

Dr. Stephen J. Blank, Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council:

From today's standpoint, there is a strong institutional anti-Russian current in the Pentagon and State Departments (I cannot speak about the NSC which is being revamped). Similarly, the same holds true for the US Congress. So, whatever the outcome of the 2020 elections, those outlooks are likely to hold. And if Trump is defeated (which I believe can and will, as well as should, happen) I think the initial instincts will be very anti-Russian. Depending on who beats him, there will be a strong push from the arms control lobby for a treaty, but it is by no means clear that they will be successful.

Mr. Daivis Petraitis, Deputy Director of the International Relations and Operations Department of the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense:

In case President Trump isn't reelected, my thoughts are following:

1. So far, I still see Trump winning the election. I would make a 90 to 10 percent bet in favor of Trump's victory. The problem is an absence of any real leadership and potential candidates among Democrats at first, and the way they behave in 'washing dirty underwear' inside the country and internationally at second, and no ideas of what to propose as 'a new way' if they win at third.
2. If Democrats win, then most probably they will continue with what Putin named 'left-winged liberalism' which, according him, is rejected – at least in Russia. Russia, by using concepts adopted from Chinese 'three warfare' in what we call 'hybrid war,' has already been able to discredit those ideas at home, in Europa, and in the US itself. If, after a victory, Democrats continue the same way, and most probably they will, Russian and US relations will remain similar to how they are today with the US little by little losing the grounds domestically and in international arenas. Stalemate in diplomatic relations will remain with a tendency to worsen as well.

An interview with Dr. Mark Katz, Professor of Government and Politics, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University:

Mark: Well, it is hard to tell. Certainly, traditionally, the Russians have preferred the Republicans to Democrats. They see the Republicans as more people whom they can do business with. They have this image of President Nixon and President Ford, in particular, whereas they see the Democrats as more ideological, and more interested in at least talking about human rights and making them uncomfortable. This was true in the Cold War, certainly true of Vladimir Putin who was very fearful. He's obsessed with hostility toward Hillary Clinton.

But on the other hand, I don't think Trump has worked out as well as they had hoped. He's not the traditional Republican. I think that they would prefer to have a more predictable person as president, basically. It seems that it won't be another Republican. It is going to be a Democrat if Trump is not reelected.

So, the question now is whom? Now, I think that Putin has demonstrated a degree of discomfort, dislike for female leaders, with Angela Merkel. We've seen this with regard to Hillary Clinton. I think that if Elizabeth Warren is elected, this will bring out all his fears. She certainly stands for all kinds of principles, high minded things. In other words, she would not be someone who would necessarily think of cutting a deal. A real polity deal with Vladimir Putin I don't think would be the top of her agenda.

So, the other alternatives... Joe Biden would be the most comfortable, I think, for Moscow. They know him. They didn't like Obama. Biden had a lot of experience in the Senate. But at least he knows the issues. I think they would be more comfortable with that.

Bernie Sanders, I don't think he has a chance. I think his health now is going to preclude him. But I think he would just be a wild card altogether. So, probably, they don't like change. On the other hand, some relief from Trump, I think for everyone, would be welcomed. But the way the Russians look at everything, they always look for the negative.

So, I think what we also see is that Putin, and other leaders, they tend to test the new president. And so, there's likely to be something unpleasant happening right at the outset of

the new presidency. And I think that their idea has always been that if they make trouble then the other side has to come and talk to them.

And the Americans never quite get that lucky. If someone's making trouble, they distance themselves. Well, if we can't successfully stop them then you can isolate them. You can put in sanctions, or what have you.

So, I think that on the other hand, Putin... Maybe he can live with sanctions. He seems to be able to do so at the moment. But I would anticipate that there will be some Russian testing of the new president.

On the other hand, the new president might be something that he's really happy about. I remember looking this up once. I think the START II treaty is due to expire in early February 2021. So, if the new president, unlike Trump, would just agree to extend the START II treaty, that would put relations on a good footing to start with.

And I'm sure from Putin's point of view this was simply incomprehensible. This is something that both sides benefit from. This has always been the logic, always been the Republican logic that arms control benefits both sides, so we just pragmatically proceed with it, even when we have differences over their issues. And, of course, that came apart after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I think that from Putin's point of view this would be pragmatic.

I think if the new president would agree to renew START, Putin will, of course, act like, well, maybe he's not interested. But I think that he wants this very much. And so, I think that that would lead to somewhat better relations. And I can't help but think that any Democrat would probably, in fact, probably anyone else besides Trump, would be willing to extend this treaty.

Wikistrat: No matter who the candidate is?

Mark: Yeah, no matter who is the candidate. Yes. There is no Democrat that is opposed to the START II treaty, that I know of.

Wikistrat: Okay. Are there any other treaties, agreements, trade areas, or any other topics that you think no matter who's going to be elected, Republican or Democrat, that you think are going to dramatically or drastically change post-2020 if Trump is not the president?

Mark: I would imagine that, if possible, a lot of the things that Trump pulled out of right at the start, probably most Democrats would get back into, if that's still possible. The Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement would be, that was like the most drastic thing to pull out of. And I would think that most Democrats would rejoin the joint, that is, the Iranian Nuclear Accord is something that most Democrats will immediately move back into.

Wikistrat: Are there any other topics you'd like to mention or is that the main area?

Mark: You know, I think we'll see, obviously, the situation in Ukraine which just seems to be nothing but trouble for all of us. In other words, that can be a wild card. If something happens in Ukraine that [leads to] each side pulling the other forward, that could broil relations. I think that what we'll see is what's happening in Syria... One of the things I think that Russia and the US sort of quietly agree on is that it's really great that the Israelis are dealing with the Iranians in Syria, that everyone's happy with that.

The question of Turkey, I think that Turkey has ruined its relations with everyone. I think Turkey is a problem for everyone. And in a certain way, Trump's withdrawal from Syria, this horrifying abandoning of a US ally. On the other hand, he's creating a problem more for Russia than anyone else, it seems to me.

But this is something the US and Russia have to deal with. And maybe that's in the back of Trump's mind. It's not clear. But I think that, in other words, the new Democratic president is going to be very unhappy with Turkey. And so, I think for Putin it's a question of does he join everyone else in isolating Turkey? Which the Turks can't really complain about. I mean they can't really hurt relations.

Or does he somehow decide that this is an opportunity to side with Turkey? But then, this is going to really... Putin's constantly balancing between opposing forces. Eventually, the balls are going to fall, or he's going to lose one or two of them. And I think that this is one thing.

Now one of the things I think Trump has done that's so damaging is that for any US ally, if Trump can abandon the Syrian Kurds, well, who else can he abandon? And what are they going to do? And I think that, for many, the logic of the situation is that you have to at least have good, have decent relations with Vladimir Putin. You can't afford to not have good relations.

Is a new Democratic president going to revert to traditional US policy? And how do you reassure allies? Certainly, if it's Elizabeth Warren, she's going to emphasize human rights and democratization. So, it's possible there.

What Trump is doing is not so much an aberration but, kind of, the beginning of a period, not when the US is absent from the Middle East, but is just one other player, along with others. And I think that we'd have a moment when Russia has the chance to be the main external player before China in particular. It's coming eventually, but it's not there yet. And so, I think that Putin sees this as Russia's chance. And he's the kind of guy who will take that chance. And, of course, that will lead to the problems. So, it's very complicated.

And I think, obviously, the relationship with Israel; I think Israel has no choice but to have good relations with Vladimir Putin. In a certain sense, if US-Russian relations deteriorate, I think that there will be people in the US who will not understand that, who will be resentful. 'Why are we paying all this money and they're just dealing with our opponent?' So, I think that hopefully won't happen, but there's a possibility that it could.

An interview with Dr. Richard Weitz, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at the Hudson Institute:

Richard: There are some conditions. The most important being if it's not Trump who is the president. If it's Pence, let's just say something happened to President Trump that he's no longer president and Pence has replaced him. Then I don't think we'll see much continuity. Mike Pence is a lot less favorable toward Russia and Putin compared with what President Trump says. So, in terms of actual policy, I think it's going to stay the same. Lots of sanctions, military buildup, limited cooperation.

With the Democrats, it's harder to figure this one out. I would think that if Biden wins, that brings into power all the old Clinton people who blame Russia for losing them the election. They think that it was Russian intervention that prevented her from defeating Trump. So they will be very negatively disposed toward President Putin's government for that reason. But they may be more interested in cooperation in some areas, in particular arms control. On the other hand, they'll probably push harder on human rights and so on. So, it would probably be similar to what you saw toward the end of the Obama administration.

The one big mystery I have, because I don't know them that well, is that if Warren ran. I don't know her people that well. They may be open to broader cooperation. They seem to think that the loss was not because of Russian intervention but because of her [Hillary Clinton's] poor campaigning. And Warren has a very progressive agenda that would involve cooperating on climate change, which to Russia is important, but also less on military and issues more favorable toward arms control and so on. But it's not a priority for her. She doesn't seem to focus a lot on Russia and foreign policy compared to the others.

And then there's, of course, the outlier which isn't going to happen, but the woman from Hawaii that Clinton just attacked. Gabbard, I think her name is. Because she's being groomed according... She's got the most pro-Russian views of anybody, but she won't win. And so that's at the top, but then it also depends on the composition of Congress. And so now, even if you had, say, a presidential candidate like Warren in charge, who wants to pursue cooperation with Russia on some security issues, there'd be a lot of opposition in Congress doing that as, still, among the Democrats and probably among the Republicans now, they don't need to support Trump's views.

And so that's, I mean the one area I know best is the military and security areas. Maybe economics, there might be some opportunities in some areas and so on. But I don't think it's going to be a priority for anyone else who's running. And I think President Trump is unique in how he really wants to improve Russian relations, though not enough to challenge the consensus view in his party and in the allies in Congress. Whereas the Democrats, their views on Russia differ somewhat among the most prominent, but for none of them really is this a priority.

Wikistrat: Some experts mentioned the troubled relationship of President Trump with NATO, for example, as a very important player that defines the relationship with Russia. Do you think we're going to see a change in the relationship of the next president?

Richard: I would think that that's a good point, that whoever is president is going to be, probably, more concerned with alliances and will want to do a lot to restore the help of NATO and other alliances. But how that affects the cause toward Russia is a bit unclear. NATO itself is divided on Russia. You've got some countries that want to, like France or Hungary or Greece, that would like to build relations with Russia. Then you've got others that are very hard-lined and so they wouldn't want to. So, I don't know how that will actually affect Russia in that angle.

An interview with Taras Kuzio, Senior Research Associate at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University:

Taras: Much will change, because of a number of factors, but particularly because I have the impression that the overall atmosphere in Washington vis-à-vis, for example, Russia, in many ways resembles that what we had in the 1980s even. This is obviously a product of many factors but in particular Russia's interference in the 2016 elections. I think that there's a unanimity, a similarity of positions on the Democrats and Republicans on this question. If anything, if Trump is no longer around, whether it's a Democratic president or a non-Trump Republican, that what will change will be less willingness to accommodate Russia's stances and policies. For example, as we now see in Syria, where Trump's decision to withdraw US forces has led to strategic gains for Russia. So, I think that kind of thing will no longer be around if Trump is no longer here. Then there would be more likelihood of confrontations and difficulties in the relationship.

The plus would be that without Trump there would be, I think, an improved relationship or return to normality in relations between the US and Europe, EU, and NATO. So there, I think, would be a big plus, a big benefit, because at the moment I think one of the driving forces for Europe to try to maybe mend fences with Moscow is because it doesn't really see much of an alliance being maintained at the moment, or much interest in the alliance being maintained between Washington and Europe. This is particularly because of Trump's, for example, support for Brexit, hostility to the EU, and various economic protectionist measures.

There are, I think, three constants here, which I think are worth highlighting. That's, in particular, the case because we have, I think, a lot of wishful thinking in Europe about how relations can be improved with Russia. Firstly, I don't think it will go away, the fact that the Russian leaders are very angry people. They're going to be angry with whoever's in power, I think, in Washington, and even more so if they're not Trump, because they'll be less willing to accommodate Russia's wishes. That degree of anger is a product of all sorts of things, including Russia as a declining great power, and unwillingness by the US in particular, but not only the US, to treat Russia as an equal. This is one of the staples of Russian identity-problems – that they want to be seen as an equal power to the US like the USSR was.

Also, what they hoped was that Trump would give them in 2016, which still has not happened and will not happen now... Is where the West recognizes Russia's right to an exclusive sphere of influence in Eurasia. And again, Russia feels that it has a right to that, and it kind of wants to demand that this be recognized. They hoped and believed that Trump in 2016, with his election rhetoric and with people like Paul Manafort around Trump, that that would happen. I always joke that when Trump was elected, they were uncorking champagne in Moscow and crying in Kiev. Now it's the other way around. Now it's the other way around. It's one of the ironies that, under Trump, Ukraine's received military aid, and under Obama it did not. So, it completely changed.

There are two other constants. Firstly, let's not forget that Putin is president for life. Again, people tend to not want to hear this. They know that he's in power until 2024, but the idea that Putin will leave office, leave the presidency or somehow be no longer in power is, I think, fanciful. I don't think that is possible in today's Russia. If you leave power in today's Russia, you are not safe. You lose your money, you can be killed, you can be put in jail, whatever. So, I think that in 2024, they will find some mechanism, some musical chairs, as they did in 2008 for Trump, oh, sorry, for Putin to remain in power. Maybe the Kazak scenario for Putin would be best. So that means that if we have some hopes that things will change after Putin, I think those are misplaced hopes. And anyway, Putin will be in power for four years... Well, for the duration of the next US presidency.

So if we have a mixture of a Russian anger and a feeling that it's not treated well by the US, by the West, coupled with Putin as president for life, but also there are many other Putins in Moscow to replace him, plus that the Ukrainian-Russian conflict will continue, I really don't see that much changing if Trump is no longer around. Except that, whether it's a Republican who's not Trump or a Democrat, then that will probably lead to maybe a more brutal relationship because there will be nobody like Trump who will be willing to give Russia the various abilities to gain like it has today in Syria. So, I think there are probably very many constants there that prevent really much change.

And in the case of 2016, I think Russia wanted a particularly personal revenge against Hillary Clinton and other factors. In the end, this completely rebounded back against Russia, just like Skripal in England. Therefore, I think that Russia's willingness to go down these paths will always end up with it leading to its having egg on its face. Again, I don't think that will change either.

So, those would be the kind of areas that I would be thinking that... You know, not that much, I think, will change. In particular, because the next US president comes into power in 2020, Putin is around till 2024. So, for the duration of the next US president, Putin is still president of Russia. Will he really change vis-à-vis the new US president? I don't think that that will be the... And I don't think the Democrats, if they get elected next year, are going to be somehow softer toward or more moderate toward Russia. If anything, they'll be tougher.

