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BIDEN’S APPROACH TOWARDS RUSSIA: A “RESET LIGHT”?*

Abstract

The topic of this paper is foreign policy course towards Russia employed by the incumbent United States president, Joseph Biden, during his first year in office. Motivated by the recent Biden-Putin bilateral summit and Biden’s remark on the U.S. and Russia as “two great powers”, the author presents a research question whether this event could be observed as the beginning of a “reset light” approach in Washington’s Russia policy. Unlike the previous “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations this time the goal would not be rapprochement, but structured confrontation between the two countries (such as the one which prevented escalation during the Cold War), with cooperation in areas where it is possible. Having considered Obama/Trump legacy, put Biden’s rhetoric and actions in current international and domestic context, and analyzed different issues over which Russia and the U.S. are in conflict/can cooperate, the author concludes that Biden’s approach can be considered a “reset light”, but that its success in the longer run is uncertain.

Keywords: *Joseph Biden, the United States, Russia, Vladimir Putin, foreign policy, “reset”*

INTRODUCTION

On June 16, 2021 at the picturesque Villa La Grange on the shore of Lake Geneva, U.S. President Joseph Biden met his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for their first bilateral meeting since Biden was inaugurated back in January. At the opening of the talks, before

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media was forced out due to inappropriate behaviour of some of them, Biden said "...it's always better to meet face to face. We will try to determine where we have mutual interests and we can cooperate. And where we don't, establish a predictable and rational way in which we disagree. Two great powers" (Russia Insight 2021). It was not the first time Biden used this expression. Already in April, while summarizing a phone conversation with Putin in which he proposed a bilateral summit in the middle of the crisis caused by Russia's military build-up on Ukrainian border, Biden said that the U.S. and Russia are "two great powers with significant responsibility for global stability" (The White House [TWH] 2021c). That calling Russia a great power on these occasions was not just an expression of courtesy, Biden proved at the airport, prior to his departure from Geneva. Answering journalists' questions, he said "Russia is in a very difficult spot. They are being squeezed by China. They desperately want to remain a major power... Biden already gave Putin what he wants, legitimacy, standing on the worlds' stage with the President of the United States... They don't want to be known as Upper Volta with nuclear weapons... It matters to them" (ABC News 2021). This was the first time in decades Russia was acknowledged to be a great power by the president of the most powerful country in the international system. One of the former presidents, Barack Obama – who had Biden serving as vice president – even needed to emphasize that Russia was only a "regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbours not out of strength but out of weakness" (Wilson 2014, cited in Tsygankov 2019, 13). After Biden's remark, influential U.S. media did not miss to point to this "great power" moment as a departure from usual U.S. view of Russia (see Dixon 2021; Troianovski 2021).

Biden was surely right about one thing – the great power status really matters to Russia. An idea of "greatpowerness" – which means viewing itself as an independent center of power capable of influencing international relations on equal basis with other great powers, while also being recognized by them as such – is at the heart of Russian national identity (Smith 2014, 1, 45; Trapara 2020, 33-48). Persistent denial of this status to Russia by Washington is probably the most important common cause behind all three failed attempts of rapprochement between the two states since the end of the Cold War. The last such attempt – a so called "reset" in Obama-Medvedev period (2009-2012) was officially announced by Biden himself at the Munich security conference in February 2009: "it's time to press the reset button and to revisit many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia" (TWH 2009). A new constructive spirit of U.S.-Russia relations

followed, together with some concrete results, such as cooperation over Afghanistan, joint approach to Iranian nuclear issue, and of course the New START Treaty on strategic nuclear arms reduction (Trapara 2017a). However, this “honeymoon” was short-lived – two years later it started to crumble with the “Arab spring” and Libyan and Syrian civil wars, impasse over missile defense agreement, Putin’s return to presidency, Snowden affair, culminating with Ukraine crisis and Russia’s Crimea annexation, after which Moscow-Washington relations reached the lowest point since the Cold War. During Trump administration, in spite of his benign rhetoric towards Russia and Putin, a new point of contention – Russia’s interference with U.S. elections – was added, further souring these relations. Biden inherited this situation and – as someone who was (alongside with his closest foreign policy associates) a part of administration in whose time U.S.-Russian relations hit the bottom, and a staunch critic of Trump’s rhetorical benevolence towards Russia and Putin – was hardly the one expected to change it for better by pressing a “reset” button once again.

Yet, did Biden’s recognition of Russia as a great power actually mark the beginning of something that could be termed a “reset light” – this time not a comprehensive attempt of Moscow-Washington rapprochement, but at least introducing some degree of order into their confrontation so to avoid escalation, while cooperating in the areas where it is possible? This is a central research question examined in this paper. To answer it, it won’t be enough only to run through important events in U.S.-Russian relations during the first several months of Biden’s administration. There is a rich legacy to be also considered, from the two Obama’s terms (which are also Biden’s terms as vice president), and of course from the Trump years. Objective factors – such as a changing international context in which U.S.-Russian relations develop – should be also taken into account. Finally, “the analysis” in science means breaking the whole which one wants to examine into its smaller elements – and those elements in Moscow-Washington relations are the issues over which the two countries are currently in conflict, or can cooperate. Biden’s approach towards Russia is the result of a delicate mixture of factors belonging to international politics, foreign policy and domestic politics.

OBAMA/TRUMP LEGACY

It would be a mistake to consider Biden’s foreign policy – including his Russian approach – a complete reversal of Trump’s course and return to Obama-era ways of engagement with outer world.

Although he and his closest foreign policy associates (Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan) were parts of Obama administration, the world today is different from the one four years ago when Obama left the White House. It is also important to be precise which period of Obama's foreign policy we talk about, for during his second term, influenced by changes in international and domestic environment, it was much different from the one it lead during his first one – especially towards Russia. On the other hand, when talking about reversing Trump's foreign policy, it is important to take into account that it cannot be reduced only to words and deeds of the former U.S. president himself – again, especially when it comes to Russian approach. Angela Stent (2019, 330) is right when she claims that during Trump administration there were three separate Russia policies: “that of the White House, that of the rest of the executive branch, and that of the Congress”. Analysis of Biden's approach towards Russia therefore requires careful examination of the elements of Obama and Trump legacy which have significance for current relations, but put into context of the moment when these elements developed.

When Obama took presidency, international and domestic circumstances were not favourable to United States. It had been fighting two unwinnable and expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for years, unsuccessfully engaging in “state building”. It was shaken by economic crisis which started on its soil and during 2008 spread to the whole world economy. On the other hand, Russia had several years of significant economic growth, mainly fuelled by the increase in world market oil and gas prices. Although also hit hard by crisis, in Georgia it successfully played its traditionally stronger card compared to the economy – the use of military force. Although (like his predecessors) an adherent to liberal hegemony – a grand strategy which aims to establish and defend a U.S.-lead global order in the name of liberal values (open economy, democracy and human rights) – Obama chose tactical pragmatism in foreign policy, realizing that neoconservatives' unilateralism and over-reliance on the use of force were counterproductive (Posen 2014, 5-7; Trapara 2017a, 136-138). He saw an increasingly assertive Russia as an actor with whom the United States can ease tensions, cooperating on issues of common interest which at that moment were Washington's priorities – such as stabilizing situation in Afghanistan, curbing Iranian nuclear program, and renewing strategic stability after START (U.S.-Russia treaty from 1991 on strategic nuclear armament reduction) would have expired. As a partner in Kremlin Obama had Dmitry Medvedev, who had just taken presidency from Vladimir Putin, and was seen as more liberal and suitable for cooperation compared to his predecessor.

When in 2012/13 it became obvious that the “reset” was crumbling in all areas, international situation was seen by Obama’s team as significantly more favourable. The U.S. recovered from economic crisis and relieved itself from a great burden by withdrawing its military from Iraq. In Libya, another regime change supported by American weapons was successful. Afghanistan campaign started to lose its importance after killing Bin Laden, firm sanctions against Iran gave effect with improved cooperative approach of its government, and the New START was set as a cornerstone of strategic stability for another 10 years. Rapprochement with Russia was not so high on the list of Washington’s priorities anymore, especially after Putin returned to presidency. After Snowden affair and resolution of the crisis over Syrian chemical weapons in the summer of 2013, it seemed that what Leon Aron (2013) called a “strategic pause” – stagnation in relations, without significant movement either to their improvement or to deterioration – was to commence between the two powers. Only a few months later, events in Ukraine interrupted this pause with a new cycle of confrontation not seen since the end of the Cold War.

Obama insisted on keeping adversarial approach towards Moscow for the rest of his second term, among else by unleashing the war of words which elevated Russia to one of three greatest threats against humanity, alongside with the infamous Islamic State and Ebola virus (TWH 2014). Pro-Russian insurgents’ failure to secure more territory save for a half of the Donbas region, as well as crippling effect of Western sanctions and drop in oil prices upon Russia’s economy in 2014/15 made him self-reliant that the United States would prevail in a struggle against this “regional power”, which was expected to be extended into the term of his preferred successor in the White House, Hilary Clinton. However, things did not develop the way Obama and his administration planned. Russia started military intervention in Syria in September 2015, preventing the fall of Assad regime and – by the end of 2016 – liberated strategically crucial city Aleppo, securing future victory in this war (Trapara 2020, 260-261). In 2016 Russia’s economy started to recover. On the other hand, deep disappointment in traditional establishment by significant parts of American society remained under the radar of U.S. administration, Clinton campaign team and public surveys. Russia did not miss an opportunity to exploit this U.S. vulnerability by its own newly acquired strength.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that Donald Trump was elected to the White House by the Russians, as he would most probably have won even if the hacking of Democratic National Committee members e-mails and bombing social media with pro-Trump ads – done

by Internet Research Agency owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin (also the owner of military contracting organization Wagner) had not occurred (Stent 2019, 320-324). What is paradoxical is that Russians did not actually believe Trump would win even with their help, as the most probable goal of their interference with U.S. election campaign was to demonstrate power ahead of expected tough negotiations with Clinton as the new president (Tsygankov 2019, 9). Trump's election was then both a blessing and a curse for Moscow: it got into White House a candidate it preferred to Clinton, but this candidate's hands were tied from the very start in making any improvement in relations with Russia, because of its alleged role in his election and his close associates' ties with it (Stent 2019, 324-330; Tsygankov 2019, 4-5). A "sword of Damocles" in the form of "Russiagate" – a constant threat of impeachment if Trump dared to make any concrete step towards rapprochement with Russia – followed him to the end of his term.

This "unprecedented attack on American democracy" as Angela Stent (2019, 321-322) called it, made Russia become a part of U.S. domestic political debate more than ever, which brought Russian-American confrontation to a new stage. During Trump administration, Russia was designated as an enemy even more than it was the case in the Obama era. For example, in Trump's National Security Strategy from 2017, Russia was mentioned 24 times with various negative connotations, compared to 14 negative portrayals in Obama's second NSS (2015) (TWH 2015, 2017). Further sanctions against Russian individuals and companies were introduced in several rounds, mostly related to the election interference, but also to the alleged poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal. Even if Trump had not been forced by the rest of establishment (pejoratively called a "deep state") to act tough against Russia, it is not probable he would have succeeded in rapprochement with it. Trump's foreign policy choices were often inconsistent and in many areas contradicted his declared desire to improve relations with Moscow. He did not have some coherent grand strategy which would replace liberal hegemony, such as the one of "restraint" as a defensive approach that would be more acceptable to Russia (Posen 2014, 69-71; Trapara 2017b). His belief in negotiating from the position of strength was certainly not something Russians could take benevolently (Tsygankov 2019, 43-44). His unilateralism and despise of international treaties concluded by his predecessors brought into question strategic stability between the two powers, which culminated with U.S. withdrawal from the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty from 1987) and the lack of enthusiasm for renewal of the New START, which was set to expire in February 2021.

His hatred against Iran and his Syrian protégé Assad (partly fuelled by Trump's family ties with Israeli lobby) led him to dismantle nuclear agreement with Tehran, so valued by Russia, and to get to the brink of direct military conflict with Russian forces in Syria when he twice (in 2017 and 2018) bombed Syrian forces because of their alleged chemical attacks against civilian population. His threats of military intervention against Russia's important Western Hemisphere ally Venezuela became another hot spot in relations with Russia during 2019.

In the end, Trump could not politically survive the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. But his mixed legacy of occasional positive rhetorical treatment of Russia and actual sharpened confrontation with it would. How these contradictory legacies influence Biden's foreign policy in general and his approach towards Russia in particular, in the context of international and domestic circumstances present at the moment of his arrival into the White House – is the question I now turn to.

REALITY VS. RHETORIC

Today's international situation is in some important ways alike to the one from 12 years ago when Obama (and Biden as vice president) first took office. There is an exhaustion of the United States due to some foreign policy choices of previous administrations (in Trump's case inconsistent foreign policy), as well as the economic setbacks (this time it is because of the pandemic). An additional negative factor is a deep divide in the American society unveiled by Trump's ascent and left after his departure. On the other hand, Russia looks consolidated once again, with an assertive stance and foreign policy successes. This context is quite different from the one during Obama's second term, which made the administration self-reliant enough to pursue a bitter confrontational stance against Russia that survived into Trump era. Thus, as far as objective factors are concerned, it would be natural to expect Washington's renewed wish to somehow improve relations with Russia in order to make a break from overstretch, such as the one demonstrated with "reset", but also rhetorically announced, though – for mentioned domestic limitations – never implemented by Trump.

In this context, it is an important observation that compared to his post-Cold War predecessors, Biden shows significantly greater consistency between the ideas about foreign policy he delivered through the election campaign and afterwards, as well as between his words and deeds – at least in his first year in office. When it comes to words, I shall focus on three documents. Ahead of the elections, Biden (2020) presented his foreign policy views in the article "Why

America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump”, published in *Foreign Affairs* in March 2020. In March 2021 he released “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” to serve as a temporary document until the work on National Security Strategy is finished, with an obvious goal of making an urgent departure from Trump’s NSS which guided U.S. foreign policy since 2017 (TWH 2021a). And in September he gave a speech in front of the UN General Assembly (TWH 2021e). His main foreign policy ideas are consistently repeated and further developed throughout these documents.

Biden (2020) slams Trump for diminishing U.S. credibility and influence in international arena by abandoning allies and partners, launching “ill-advised trade wars”, abdicating American leadership and turning away from democratic values. According to Biden, Trump did it at the point when global challenges U.S. was facing – from climate change (Biden promised return to the Paris climate agreement) and infectious diseases (Biden’s article was published at the beginning of the pandemic), to the advance of authoritarianism and illiberalism – became “more complex and urgent”. Biden’s core idea is that “our world is at an inflection point in history”, “in the midst of a fundamental debate” about its future direction, which is centred on the question whether “democracy can still deliver for our people and for people around the world”, or “autocracy is the best way forward” in the times of “accelerating global challenges” (TWH 2021a, 3, 23). To “meet today’s challenges from a position of strength”, the United States must renew its “enduring advantages”, among which democracy and alliances and partnerships with like-minded states are central (6). Democracies all over the world (including the United States) are “increasingly under siege” both from within (by corruption, inequality, populism, etc.) and outside (by “antagonistic authoritarian powers”) (7). So, even before he was elected, Biden (2020) promised to “renew U.S. democracy and alliances, protect the United States’ economic future, and once more have America lead again”, for if the U.S. does not lead, either someone else would take its place, “but not in the way that advances our interests and values, or no one will and chaos will ensue”. “Repairing” democracy, which is globally “under more pressure than at any time since 1930s”, should start at home, because “democracy is not just the foundation of American society”, but also “the wellspring of our power”, and “the heart of who we are and how we see the world – and how the world sees us”. In Biden’s words, democracy “is stamped into our DNA as a nation” and “remains the best tool we have to unleash our full human potential” (TWH 2021e).

Biden’s (2020) foreign policy would be a “foreign policy for

the middle class”, because “economic security is national security”, and therefore he would have the United States lead again in research, development and innovations, and “make sure the rules of the international economy are not rigged against the United States”. Of course, China is here “a special challenge”, which is to be met by building “a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China’s abusive behaviours and human rights violations”, while it does not prevent cooperation in the areas of converging interests, “such as climate change, non-proliferation, and global health security”. The use of force “should be the last resort, not the first” in U.S. foreign policy and it should be used only “when the objective is clear and achievable, and with the informed consent of the American people”, and, “whenever possible, in partnership with our allies” (TWH 2021a, 14; TWH 2021e). This means “it is past time to end the forever wars, which have cost the United States untold blood and treasure”, so Biden promised bringing the majority of troops home from Afghanistan and the Middle East (TWH 2021a, 15). From now on, “diplomacy should be the first instrument of American power”, which means “building and tending relationships and working to identify areas of common interest while managing points of conflict” (Biden 2020). Biden promised to renew U.S. commitment to arms control, among else to rejoin nuclear agreement with Iran – if Tehran returned to “strict compliance with the deal”.

Regarding Russia, Biden (2020) named “Russian aggression” as a threat against which it is necessary to keep military capabilities of NATO – which is “the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal” and “an alliance of values”, “the most effective political-military alliance in modern history” – and to expand them against non-traditional threats, such as “weaponized corruption, disinformation, and cybertheft”. “Real costs” should be imposed on Russia for its “violations of international norms” and ties should be strengthened with “Russian civil society” which opposes “Vladimir Putin’s kleptocratic authoritarian system. However, Biden also vowed to extend the New START, as “an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia” and a foundation for new arms control agreements. It is obvious who (among others) Biden thinks of when he says that “we are facing adversaries, both externally and internally, hoping to exploit the fissures in our society, undermine our democracy, break up our alliances, and bring about the return of an international system where might determines right”, claiming that Putin thinks liberal idea is “obsolete” because “he is afraid of its power”. Unlike Trump’s and Obama’s second National Security Strategy, in Biden’s interim document Russia is mentioned

only three times in negative context (TWH 2021a). While China is the main threat, “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”, Russia “remains determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage” (7-8). On another place China is called “increasingly assertive” and Russia “only” “destabilizing” (14).

When it comes to his foreign policy deeds, Biden mostly delivered as promised. He rejoined the Paris climate agreement and the New START, while opening new indirect negotiations with Iran on renewing nuclear deal. He invested in renewal of good spirit with transatlantic allies, strongly supporting NATO at the Brussels summit in June, and removing sanctions against German companies which worked on gas pipeline Nord Stream 2. He pulled troops out from Afghanistan in the summer, not thinking about reversing his decision even after the Taliban victory became inevitable. Subsequently, in his UNGA speech, Biden said: “I stand here today, for the first time in 20 years, with the United States not at war. We’ve turned the page” (TWH 2021e).

The conclusion about Biden’s foreign policy in general is that he is obviously an adherent to liberal hegemony grand strategy, although with deep understanding of huge challenges it faces in contemporary world, which gives him a note of tactical pragmatism, similar to Obama’s from his first term. However, his view that the rebirth of American international role should start at home, with empowerment of the middle class, makes him somewhat closer to Trump – the message that America should “lead again” sounds like some kind of amalgam between Obama’s “renewing American leadership” and Trump’s “making America great again”. Democracy as a central value and an antipode to authoritarianism is more pronounced than in both Trump and Obama’s vocabulary. This could be interpreted as the reflection on the observed anti-democratic international and domestic trends, but also as a new effort to justify the continuation of liberal hegemony grand strategy. In this Biden’s Manichean divide between democracy and authoritarianism, Russia is of course on the other side. However, apart from calling it an autocracy whose aggressive hybrid actions undermine democracy in other states, colourful qualifications such as the one that would put Russia as on par with COVID-19 (similar to how Obama’s ebola remarks), or crowding foreign policy documents by various threats from Russia (as in Trump’s NSS), are for now absent (in his UNGA speech, he did not even mention Russia by name). What is present, on the other hand, is emphasising the need for cooperation in areas of mutual interest, from arms control to climate change and

cybersecurity. Having in mind current international and domestic context – unfavourable to the U.S. – this is where the idea of “reset light” becomes possible.

THE RECORD

Biden had his first telephone conversation with Putin already a few days after the inauguration. The result was immediate – at the end of January, at the very last moment before its expiration, the New START was renewed for another 5 years (until 2026). However, this “sweet” start between the two leaders was soon soured because of the Navalny case. Alexei Navalny is Russian “anti-systemic” opposition leader who was allegedly poisoned last summer with a Novichok nerve agent, accusing personally Putin for this. In January, he was back to Russia from medical treatments in Germany, only to be immediately arrested and sentenced to two and a half years of prison due to breaching terms of parole. Soon after his arrest, the United States announced new sanctions against individuals suspected of involvement in his poisoning. Yet, the most unpleasant incident between the two countries happened in March. In the ABC interview, when asked by an anchor if he considered Putin a “killer”, Biden answered “Mmm-hmm, I do”, adding that he would pay the price for alleged interference in 2020 elections (Gittleston 2021). Of course, this remark was not received well in Moscow. Putin himself reacted by wishing Biden “a good health” and interpreting his remark as “mirror image” – what Americans say about Russians, actually speaks about them (Tickle 2021a). Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov concluded that U.S.-Russian relations reached the bottom (RT 2021b). Russia’s ambassador in Washington was recalled to Moscow, while his counterpart John Sullivan was “suggested” to return to Washington for “consultations”. Notable Russian international relations scholar, Fyodor Lukyanov (2021a) – similarly to Aron after Snowden affair back in 2013 – called for a “pause” in relations, for it is pointless to have them (apart from necessary technical minimum) if other side does not pay attention to its words. Putin’s press secretary Dmitry Peskov said that it is impossible to talk to Russia from a position of strength (RT 2021a). Yet, the events that followed showed Russia’s readiness to talk to Americans from similar position.

At the end of March, fighting escalated between Ukrainian army and the forces of self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics. In one of the heaviest artillery exchange over the line of contact, which lasted whole day, four Ukrainian soldiers were killed. Simultaneously, Russia started its biggest military build-up in years –

justified as an exercise – near Ukrainian border. For some time, there was confusion in Washington whether Putin was just sabre rattling, or was about to start a full-scale military offensive against Ukraine (Kramer 2021). The U.S. closely followed the situation and dispatched military vessels to the Black sea. In the midst of the crisis, Biden called Putin to a bilateral summit, where the two presidents would discuss wide range of issues, with an aim to establish “stable and predictable relations” (TWH 2021b). Only a week later, the Kremlin announced the withdrawal of troops from Ukrainian border and confirmed that there were talks about the summit, which could take place sometime during summer (Tickle 2021b). Did Putin’s gambit against Ukraine influence Biden’s decision to call for the summit so early in his term (Trump met Putin bilaterally only after a year and a half in office)? Had Putin really wanted to intervene in Ukraine, his military build-up would not have been so visible; absence of demands to Ukraine excluded possibility that he wanted to extort concessions from it by only threatening to use force. Thus, it was more likely that this build-up was a message addressed towards new U.S. administration that Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine is a real option if Washington continued with open anti-Russian moves. Biden’s call for the summit was an additional benefit which Putin opportunistically accepted (Lee 2021, 32).

Russians at first were not so enthusiastic about the summit, especially after Washington expelled dozen of Russian diplomats and introduced new sanctions because of the alleged interference in 2020 elections and recent cyber (ransomware) attack which they thought could be connected to Russia. Lukyanov (2021b) wrote that the summit would not change much, in an atmosphere where Biden divided countries to “democracies” and “tyrannies”. Anyway, after Lavrov-Blinken meeting in Reykjavik in May, the Biden-Putin summit was soon announced, and it was sooner than expected – Geneva was chosen as the place, and the date was set to June 16, just after the NATO summit in Brussels. After this, Russia pulled back more troops from the Ukrainian border, although retaining combat power sufficient for any possible escalation – at least until Zapad military exercise in September, when it expected Biden’s intentions towards Moscow would get clearer (Lee 2021, 34).

Ahead of the summit, Putin gave an interesting interview for the NBC – his first interview for American media after three years. He described Biden as an experienced, career politician, who was in politics for his whole adulthood, unlike Trump, who was more “colourful and impulsive”. He “justified” Biden’s “killer” remark as a “Hollywood machismo”. Putin commented on American officials’ wish to establish stable and predictable relations with Russia, agreeing that stability and

predictability are most important values in international relations, but adding that these values were undermined for years by U.S. unilateralism and interventionism, dismissing accusation that Russia's actions cause instability. At one moment, he lashed at the anchor after being repeatedly interrupted: "Is that a free expression American way?" (NBC News 2021). Russians were cautious in expectations from the summit. Peskov warned another "reset" should not be expected (RT 2021c). Lavrov said human rights issue could be the one to be discussed, but "starting with the right of those who broke into Capitol" last autumn (RT 2021d). Once a pessimist about overall U.S.-Russian relations and the summit itself, Lukyanov (2021c) looked forward to the summit with some positive expectations: for him, the summit could be a step towards peace and stability, more precisely to a "structured confrontation", but only if Washington left domestic politics aside. On the American side, Biden was a bit secretive: "I'll tell him what I want him to know" (Liptak 2021). Blinken repeated the need for stable and predictable relations. Having a bad experience with Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, Biden's team decided not to hold joint press conference with Putin.

Although a major part of the talks was held behind closed doors, and we can only trust what the presidents said on their separate press conferences, it is beyond doubt that many issues were addressed, and progress achieved over some of them. Putin once again praised Biden as an experienced professional who "does not miss anything", saying that they had a long and constructive conversation (Reuters 2021). Two most important results were: a joint declaration on strategic stability, in which Biden and Putin agreed that nuclear war should never be fought; and the agreement that the ambassadors of both countries should return to their posts soon. It seemed as if most contentious issues were put aside. Putin did not comment on Biden's concern over Belarus, while pointing that there could be no discussion on Ukraine's NATO membership. Biden said he had to mention Navalny and the human rights issue, because "it's about who we are. How could I be the President of the United States of America and not speak out against the violation of human rights?" (U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva 2021). According to Peskov, the summit was good, but improving relations would require months (Tickle 2021c). This time Lukyanov (2021d) had only positive conclusions – yes, he said, the U.S. and Russia are back in Cold War-like confrontation, but this could paradoxically be good news, with the introduction of clear rules of this confrontation, such as those which existed during the Cold War. And in the months that followed, the talks were continued on topics such as cybersecurity and climate change, but also on Iranian nuclear deal.

THE ANALYSIS

Having in mind the reality of U.S.-Russian relations in the first year of Biden's administration, how can we assess a new dynamic regarding the most important issues over which the two states are in conflict? Besides the interference of both countries in each other's domestic political process, two of the most pressing ones got closely connected in the recent months – Ukraine and Nord Stream 2. The second gas pipeline which would directly connect Russia with its customer Germany has been causing controversies for many years. It was seen by the U.S. and some other Western countries as Russia's tool for political subduing of Germany and Europe. Trump's administration even imposed sanctions against German companies which worked on the pipeline constructions. Yet, this did not stop the project, but only slowed it down – Russia has sent its own ships to finish the construction. For Ukraine, the pipeline was a direct threat, for its intention was to bypass its territory and deprive it of transition fees. Thus, it was not a surprise that Ukrainian President Zelensky got furious when in May – only a month after military tensions with Russia were relieved – Biden decided to remove sanctions against German companies, after he concluded that there was no point in retaining them and punishing U.S. ally when Nord Stream 2 was about to get finished anyway. The following two months brought a series of disagreements between Washington and Kiev. Zelensky criticized Biden for not meeting him before Putin, and wrongly interpreted that Ukraine was promised MAP (Membership Action Plan) at the NATO Brussels summit – which personally Biden had to deny, saying that Ukraine had to fulfil “criteria” first (RT 2021f). The crisis was partly handled in July, when Biden reached a deal with German Chancellor Angela Merkel that the U.S. would not prevent Nord Stream 2 construction, but that Germany would invest in Ukraine's energy sector and support it if Russia decided to abort gas transit through its territory (RT 2021g). Nord Stream 2 was finished in September, but this German-American deal, alongside with Biden's promise to Zelensky when they finally met that further sanctions would follow if Ukraine's energy security got undermined, is surely not something that could be welcomed in Russia and facilitate another “reset”, even in its “light” variant (Tickle 2021d).

Regarding domestic political process in both countries, on the American side Biden is certainly better positioned than Trump to offer Putin some kind of rapprochement. His anti-Russian credentials are big enough to give him room for this, unlike his predecessor who was under constant “surveillance” by the rest of foreign policy establishment,

which prevented him from making any step forward in relations with Moscow. Yet, his invoking of democracy as an essence of “who we are” in a perpetual struggle against autocracies like Russia puts a limit to any closer rapprochement in advance. On the Russian side, democracy is not even a topic for discussion after Putin removed constitutional obstacles for staying in power indefinitely. Rivalry with the Americans is one of the main sources of his domestic legitimacy, as is every Russia’s success and U.S. failure in it – and recently there were many.

When it comes to the issues over which U.S.-Russian cooperation is possible, let us recall that the three most important results of U.S.-Russian cooperation during Obama’s “reset” were achieved in the fields of strategic arms control (the New START), nuclear non-proliferation (sanctions against Iran and its later compliance), and conflict in Afghanistan (establishing the Northern Distribution Network). These results were not sufficient for the “reset” to succeed. If repeated by Biden administration, can they be enough at least for a “reset light”?

Unlike difficult and complicated process of its negotiation and conclusion back in 2009-2011, it proved quite easier to renew the New START in January 2021 – political will on both sides (which would have been uncertain had Trump won the elections) was sufficient. Joint Presidential Statement on Strategic Stability from June was a step further, with the two presidents strongly committing to nuclear arms control and avoiding nuclear war, and announcing future bilateral strategic stability dialogue which would serve as “the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures” (TWH 2021d). This could mean that the two powers could conclude new arms control agreements in the future, that way strengthening the arms control regime which was put in jeopardy when Trump decided to withdraw from the INF Treaty. And given that strategic nuclear arms issue is one of the rare ones (if not the only one) in which Washington has been traditionally treating Moscow as equal, it should not be a surprise that they could reach a common language over it so soon.

Iranian nuclear issue is a bit more complicated, for it has a third party. Therefore, U.S.-Russian understanding that the deal should be renewed is not sufficient – Tehran should also be asked, after it was already betrayed once by Washington, when Trump decided to bury the deal. It is natural that Iranian leadership also chose not to obey the deal and restarted additional uranium enrichment. Biden’s offer is clear – return into compliance with the deal, and Washington will also return to it. But also is Iran’s – remove sanctions imposed by Trump administration, and reversing the enrichment could be possible. During the summer, Russian negotiator concluded that 90 percent of the work

in negotiations with Iran was concluded (RT 2021e). However, the issue of sanctions still remains an obstacle. Unlike during Obama's "reset", it is now quite improbable that Moscow would put additional pressure on its important regional partner and ally in Syrian civil war. And it is also not likely to try to influence Biden to accept Iran's demands, so this issue can hardly serve as a firm foundation of another U.S.-Russian rapprochement attempt.

So is with Afghanistan. For years since 2009 Washington used the Northern Distribution Network over Russia's territory to move and supply its troops in Afghanistan. This route won't be necessary anymore after Biden pulled out all the troops in July/August, finishing twenty-year-long war. An immediate consequence was the Taliban – who were once removed from power by Americans twenty years ago – offensive and seizure of the whole country. Russia, of course, does not have any reason to be happy for the victory of the Taliban, whom it still considers a terrorist organization, although it accepted the reality and legitimized them by hosting negotiations between them and former Afghanistan government in Moscow this year. Yet, it has all reasons to be satisfied with U.S. defeat, for there is a deeper meaning of it. For the first two post-Cold War decades, one of the most important feature of U.S. liberal hegemony grand strategy was a regime change policy, which was mostly successful – whenever Washington decided to remove some "rogue" leader from power, his destiny was most often sealed. However, recent three attempts of U.S.-supported regime change, which at first looked promising – in Syria, Venezuela and Belarus – failed, and all three times it was Russia who played an important role in regime salvation. On the other hand, when it was U.S. puppet regime in Kabul in the need of saving, it crumbled like a house of cards even before the last American soldier left the country.

In addition to strategic nuclear arms control, are there some other issues over which U.S.-Russian cooperation can lead to their more essential rapprochement? Climate change, or struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic are too "alternative" and "multilateral" issues to make such an effect. The realm of cybersecurity could possibly be the one, but is at the moment burdened by the accusations of the two powers' interfering in each other's political processes. If some agreements over this "virtual arms control" are to be concluded in the future and make some kind of international regime, it can hardly have deeper impact than the one that already exists in "real arms control". There are opinions that cybersecurity has even a potential of leading to military escalation in the U.S.-Russian relations (Sharikov 2021).

All this said, Biden's recognition of Russia as the great power is

a unique feature in his Russian approach, which breaks familiar pattern of Moscow-Washington rapprochement failures due to repeating disagreements over one the same issues and others being sufficient only for a “technical” cooperation. On one hand, it is too symbolic to be answered with real concessions from Russian side. But on the other, this symbolism is important enough to Russia so that it takes care not to waste it by crossing some “red lines”, such as direct military intervention in Ukraine would represent. And, as we have seen, it has all reasons to interpret this recognition as a concession from the U.S. won by military build-up on Ukrainian border back in March/April. We can almost imagine Biden telling Putin behind closed doors in Geneva: “Ok, you are a great power, I admitted it in front of everyone, but please don’t even think of escalating against Ukraine”. What is even more important is that this American recognition of Russia’s international status can really introduce some degree of structure and order into U.S.-Russian confrontation, resembling of the ones from during the Cold War, when the rivals did not deny each other as then superpowers. This is the very essence of this “spirit of Geneva”.

CONCLUSION

The answer to my research question – whether President Biden’s approach towards Russia could be called a “reset light” – is certainly positive. Its main difference from Obama’s “reset” was in that this time its goal is not rapprochement between the two powers, but introducing stable and predictable confrontation between them, while cooperating in areas where it is possible. Two contradictory factors contribute to such approach. The first one is an unfavourable international and domestic context for the United States, similar to the one which existed when Obama came to the office, which makes reducing tensions with Russia an imperative. The second one is Biden’s insisting on democracy/autocracy divide as a justification for the continuation of liberal hegemony grand strategy, as well as the reflection on both international and domestic anti-democratic trends – which makes any closer rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia hardly possible. However, this more modest goal compared to the previous “reset” (and two earlier attempts of rapprochement) does not guarantee the long-term success of “reset light”. For now, it rests on three main pillars, only one of which is more or less stable – strategic nuclear arms control. The second one is a rough balance of power over Ukraine, while the third one is Biden’s recognition of Russia as a great power. It should not be a surprise if in some future chain of events the second pillar gets shaken

by a new escalation of conflict between Kiev and Donbas, or in case of a new energy crisis between Ukraine and Russia. Or, if the third pillar crumbles in case those circles in the U.S. which put “great power” into quotation marks (with an intention to undermine it) deny support to Biden for recognition of Russia’s status. After all, the previous “spirit of Geneva” between Eisenhower and Khrushchev back in 1955, instead of détente, lead to the construction of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban missile crisis (see Kissinger 1994, 493-593).

For the end, confirming that the future is always hard to guess, let us not fall into traps such as was an expectation of a “strategic pause” in U.S.-Russian relations ahead of the Ukraine crisis, or of Trump’s rapprochement with Moscow based on his pre-election rhetoric. Instead, we can always do some painless counterfactual thinking about how these relations would look like now if some important things played out differently. Imagine there was no COVID-19 pandemic, and Trump won his second term in the elections. Would he at least partly relieve himself from “deep state” pressure and try to pursue some real rapprochement with Russia? Would Moscow accept it, knowing that this would be Trump’s last term, after which some new liberal president could reverse the course again? Or, if Trump lost the elections anyway – yet not to Biden, but Pete Buttigieg or Bernie Sanders? How would Putin get along with the first openly gay president in U.S. history, or – maybe even more non-traditional option – the first radical leftist in the White House? After all, maybe Biden’s “reset light” is the most realistic of all U.S.-Russian worlds.

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БАЈДЕНОВ ПРИСТУП РУСИЈИ: „ЛАКО РЕСЕТОВАЊЕ“?

Резиме

Тема овог рада јесте политика према Русији актуелног председника САД, Џозефа Бајдена, у току прве године његовог мандата. Аутора је на бављење овом темом мотивисао билатерални самит Бајдена и руског председника Владимира Путина од 16. јуна 2021. године, када је Бајден за Русију и САД употребио израз „две велике силе“. Ово је било прво признање Русије за велику силу од стране неког постхладноратовског америчког председника. Имајући у виду колико је Русији стало до статуса независне велике силе која равноправно са другим моћним играчима на светској сцени уређује међународне односе и призната је као таква, аутор поставља истраживачко питање: означава ли овај Бајденов поступак почетак „лаког ресетовања“ руско-америчких односа? За разлику од претходног „ресетовања“ – трећег неуспелог постхладноратовског покушаја приближавања Русије и САД, које је 2009. Бајден најавио а председник Обама спроводио – овога пута приближавање не би ни било циљ. Уместо тога, тежило би се „структурисаној конфронтацији“, односно уношењу правила и поретка у актуелну конфронтацију Русије и САД, како би она постала стабилнија и предвидљивија, односно садржала мању опасност од ескалације ка отвореном оружаном сукобу. Структурисана конфронтација постојала је и за време Хладног рата, када ни САД ни Совјетски Савез нису једно другом доводили у питање статус суперсиле. Паралелно са струк-

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турисаном конфронтацијом, две силе би сарађивале у областима где је то могуће. Аутор позитивно одговара на постављено питање – Бајденов приступ Русији заиста се може назвати „лаким ресетовањем“, али је његов успех неизвештан због лабавих темеља на којима почива. Једина област од суштинског значаја у којој Русија и САД могу стабилно да сарађују јесте контрола стратешког нуклеарног наоружања. Иако мотивисан да смањи тензије у односима с Русијом неповољним међународним и домаћим околностима по САД, Бајден уједно инсистира и на идеологизованом наративу о борби између сила демократије и аутократије, којим настоји да поништи Трампово недемократско наслеђе и ојача аргументацију у прилог наставка спровођења велике стратегије либералне хегемоније. Његов релативно рани позив Путину на билатерални самит и признање Русије за велику силу аутор види као резултат притиска који је Русија у априлу месецу извршила гомилањем трупа на украјинској граници, након чега су САД одустале и од супротстављања изградњи гасовода Северни ток 2. Лабаву равнотежу у Украјини, уз евентуални отпор делова америчке спољнополитичке елите третирању Русије као велике силе, аутор види као највећу претњу успеху „лаког ресетовања“ и извор потенцијалне ескалације руско-америчке конфронтације.

Кључне речи: *Дозеф Бајден, Сједињене Државе, Русија, Владимир Путин, спољна политика, „ресетовање“*