



## Biden's Inauguration and Prospects for U.S.-Russia Relations

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On January 20, 2021, Joseph R. Biden Jr. (78), a Democrat who served as vice president of the Obama administration for 8 years, became the 46th U.S. president to serve for the next 4 years.

The new administration faces rather tough domestic challenges, as U.S. politics became extremely divided during the Trump administration's 4 years and as there are aftermaths of presidential election complaints and having the world's highest number of COVID-19 confirmed patients. As Biden's inaugural speech suggests, the new administration is expected to struggle with "internal issues" such as integration with U.S. democracy, COVID-19 elimination, and economic revitalization. Nevertheless, the world is paying close attention to the "foreign policy direction" of the new U.S. administration. This is because of former President Donald Trump's America First; hegemonic powers have a great influence on the international order. There are concerns that the era of competition among the U.S., China, and Russia has come as the international leadership of the U.S. has weakened over the past four years of the Trump administration. Meanwhile, President Biden has insisted on reuniting the Democratic Alliance and restoring the international leadership of the U.S. since his presidential campaign.

This article aims to predict the relationship between the U.S. and Russia that will be built by the new Biden government. Vice president Biden had experienced crossing the Cold War politically and diplomatically; he witnessed how the Obama administration's "reset" trend for U.S.-Russia relations turned into a "new cold war" by Obama's second term. The gap of distrust must be deep. The U.S. perspective of Russia will be different from that of the former, fledgling U.S. politician--Trump. The U.S. perspective of Vladimir Putin (68), the Russian president, will also differ. Russian President Vladimir Putin, a former member of the KGB, is currently serving his fourth

term (2018-24). President Biden must manage U.S.-Russia relations with Putin for the first three years until 2024. According to the results of the referendum on the constitutional revision of Russia (78% in favor), which was held during the COVID-19 pandemic--in the middle of last year (2020.6.25.-7.1)--Putin may see another U.S. president as a president. In 2024, when Putin's fourth term ends, Putin may immediately enter his fifth and even his sixth term of presidency (2024-2036). Putin--at least in the beginning of his presidency--was reasonable when dealing with the West. During his third term, in particular, his annexation of Crimea and support for Ukrainian insurgents brought disgrace to Russia--getting expelled from G8 and receiving economic sanctions as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (energy, defense, finance). In 2016, President Obama imposed sanctions (9 cases) on Russian individuals and organizations when Russia intervened and undermined the presidential election, and even expelled 35 diplomats.

On January 26, six days after his inauguration, Biden had his first telephone conversation with Putin. The call was made without much mutual trust. According to the Kremlin, it was a simple procedure of "business." Meanwhile, the first call seems to indicate the beginning of the Biden era, which emphasizes procedural values, norms, and solidarity of democracy.

According to media reports, the call was made by Russia and answered by Biden with his U.S. officials. Biden also called European allies such as Britain, France and Germany, and the NATO Secretary-General. Biden and Putin, above all, agreed to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) by five years just before it expires on February 5. Russia, which has been waiting for this for a year or two, is relieved to defend its last stronghold, which has contributed to the stability of the Washington-Moscow strategy during the Cold War. The Kremlin publicly emphasized this. The treaty, which was signed by President Obama and Medvedev in 2010, established a ceiling of 1550 strategic warheads, 700 strategic missiles, and 100 non-deployed strategic missiles. President Trump withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 2019; then, he has been delaying his response, indicating that the New START cannot be maintained without China's participation and full disclosure of its strategic weapons. The Biden administration is expected to extend the treaty for now and gradually seek a multilateral framework, in which China and others participate.

Meanwhile, according to the White House, Biden pointed out a number of controversial elements regarding U.S.-Russia relations to Putin and said that "the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies". The elements included the U.S. willingness to support Ukrainian sovereignty and Russia's alleged involvement in the events, such as SolarWinds hacking (2020-21), U.S. presidential intervention (2016-2020), U.S. mili-

tary prize money to Taliban in Afghanistan (2019), and poison attacks and detention of Alexei Navalny (2020). The Kremlin did not specify these, yet reported that international issues such as the pandemic, Iranian nuclear pact, Ukraine, trade, and others were discussed. Biden's call must have been a lot of pressure to Putin. During the Biden era, the U.S. policy toward Russia will no longer deviate from the stance of the administration and European allies, unlike it has been the case in the past 4 years, in which the U.S. president had prioritized personal friendship with Putin.

The new Biden administration is closely monitoring large-scale demonstrations in Russia and their fate in the new year of 2021. Anti-Putin demonstrations took place in 100 cities across Russia on January 23 (Saturday) and on January 31 (Sunday); 3,000 and 5,000 people were arrested, respectively. The demonstration protested the detention of Alexei Navalny (45) (1.17), who had investigated corruption of the ruling class as an activist in the field, but showed anti-Putin sentiment. After Biden expressed concern, after his call with Putin on January 26, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a media interview on February 1 that the demonstration showed "the frustration that the Russian people have with corruption, with autocracy". Furthermore, despite the Russian government's denial, the Navalny event has become another major issue--since the announcement of the German medical team in September last year--that brought up the problem of the use of chemical weapons (the Novichok nerve agent) against civilians in the international community.

The Biden administration is just starting, and various variables of U.S.-Russia relations will emerge. Still, the Biden administration is expected to think more than the Trump administration that Russia's power against the U.S. and the West under Putin's leadership is more than just some physical strength. In other words, President Biden and his new administration will not let go of the differences between Russia and other countries in their economic power. Meanwhile, responses to cyber security and human rights diplomacy will be strengthened. The unity of the NATO alliance remains essential. Two points are expected to be kept in mind. Shortly, one is to prevent the strategic relationship between China and Russia, which could arise as the tension between the U.S. and China increases and the tension between the U.S. and Russia increases. Another is to leave some room within the framework of U.S.-Russia and multi-lateral, non-traditional security cooperation. The South Korean government's diplomacy with major powers should also note that the relationship between the U.S. and Russia in the Biden era is different from that of the U.S. and Russia in the Trump era. ♣

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*