

29.09.20

THE FOREIGN POLICY DIMENSION OF THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



The US election campaign in 2020 is taking place amid a national crisis. Accusations of external interference in the internal affairs of the United States are heard on both sides. Democrats, backed by the FBI, accuse Russia of meddling. Allegedly, Russian hackers have posted the data of registered voters in a number of states online. In widely-used Democratic advertising banners that have attracted viral popularity online, voters are offered a choice: to either go vote, or learn Russian, implying that if Trump wins, Russian could become the state language in the United States. During one of his speeches, Biden, in response to the host's question, said that Russia is an enemy for the United States, whereas China is only a competitor, albeit a serious one.

In response, Republicans and Donald Trump's team have noted Chinese attempts to influence the US presidential election. However, Trump is trying to place a key focus of his campaign on foreign policy successes. A few weeks before the elections, a ceremony was held in the White House to sign protocols on the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. Trump has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and is now encouraging his allies to move their embassies to that city. In the White House, a memorandum was signed to resolve some of the disagreements between Serbia and Kosovo. Trump is not shy about heralding a new political era in the Middle East. While this sounds like a significant exaggeration, he actually became the first American president in nearly 30 years not to start a new war in the region. At the same time, Trump is increasing pressure on China, which increasingly resembles a frontal confrontation. Through a series of provocations and assassination attempts on military and political leaders, he has increased pressure on Iran. The combination of military-political pressure and local missile strikes against targets in the Middle East, and dodging a campaign to invade the region, has been a hallmark of the Trump administration's

foreign policy.

In relations with Russia, not everything is rosy. America's top politicians are lobbying to end the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. In response to successes in the Russian missile programme, the United States is intensifying its own developments in this area.

The Democrats' foreign policy platform on the eve of the elections is not so obvious, especially on issues of relations with Russia. Calls are heard to extend the New START Treaty, but at the same time they talk about the need to restrain Russian influence in Europe. Biden is signalling a willingness to move away from an extremely tough line towards China and Iran, but his team is unlikely to seek to reverse Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA.

What does the victory of each of the candidates mean for the interests of Russia?

In the event of a Trump victory, most likely we will see the preservation of the current constants. In the US National Security Strategy, adopted under President Trump, Russia is identified as one of the key rivals of the United States. Personal chemistry and good relations between the leaders of our countries do not play a decisive role in this matter. The rest will depend on the persuasiveness of Trump's victory. If it turns out to be half-hearted, as in 2016, the stalemate will continue. Democrats in Congress will torpedo any initiative launched by President Trump. In the event of a convincing Trump victory, his goal in relations with Russia will remain the same – to soften tensions in order to tear Russia away from China through tactical concessions, such as the extension of the New START and the lifting of some sanctions and trade restrictions. However, the main process that Trump will be engaged in is the revision of the treaties and obligations that are constraining the United States, while maintaining a privileged position with allies. The United States will not allow the EU, primarily France and Germany, to revise the constants of transatlantic relations, even while continuing to pressure them to increase defence spending. At the same time, the bureaucratic inertia of the United States to "spread democracy" and "contain Russia" in Eurasia, especially in Eastern Europe, will continue. The CIA's inventive operations, in coordination with the State Department (headed by former CIA Director Mike Pompeo), will continue. Stories about "Russian mercenaries" in Belarus or the "poisoning" of Alexei Navalny are some of the latest examples of the ongoing "carnival of provocations".

If Biden wins, there will be noticeable changes in this picture. The Washington bureaucracy will calm down and stop looking for enemies and traitors inside the country. Symptomatic in this regard is the appearance of an open letter from American experts, whose signers include many former officials of the US presidential administration. The letter's authors call for a sober reassessment of American interests in Russia, above all, a better understanding of what the United States wants from Moscow. It follows from this letter that the Russian policy of the United States has been more driven by emotion than sober calculation. It can be concluded that if Biden wins, the Trump period will be perceived as a temporary failure of the American political system. This could probably return a calmer atmosphere to Russian-American relations, while preserving the competition.

Democrats will begin to repair the damage they believe Trump has inflicted on US-



European allies. This may be accompanied by rhetorical pressure on Russia, but there are not many reserves for pressure, if one does not cross the line and does not lead matters to a final break in relations. The human rights and environmental agenda will receive a new impetus. The Biden administration will focus on the issue of Crimea and the Ukrainian conflict in general. At the same time, most likely, the Biden administration will decide to extend the New START Treaty, but will not rush to end the Trump administration's sanctions legacy, which will be used as a resource for possible trade deals.

However, the structural constraints that affect US foreign policy behaviour will remain. The relative lack of resources will prevent the new administration from pursuing a vigorous expansionist campaign far from American borders. China will remain a key rival, relations with which will be complex and contradictory. The disunity among the European allies cannot be neutralised by a new political tone from Washington. Ultimately, the new US administration will face an increasingly diverse and decentralised world in which rival powers vie for power and influence.

Original publication valdaiclub.com

Source: **The Foreign Policy Dimension of the US Presidential Election**



AUTHOR



Andrey Sushentsov

President

Location: Moscow, Russia

Competence: United States, Global Trends

Field of expertise: Andrey is a leading Russian international relations scholar with a focus on American foreign policy. His research concentrates on American foreign policy in international conflicts, on South Caucasus, Ukraine, and the Middle East. He performed analytical tasks for the Presidential Administration of Russia, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Russian National Security Council, Russian Federal Space Agency, as well as other governmental bodies. In his studies, he examines the spheres of conflicting interests of Russia and the United States in Europe, the Middle East and the post-Soviet space. His key publications include monographs "America's Small Wars", "Essays on US Policy in the Regional Conflicts of the 2000s", and the collective monograph "Russia and the World in 2020". He is also an editor of the annual forecast "International Threats".

Work experience: Andrey is a director of the Laboratory of International Trends Analysis at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He also is a Program Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, and editor-in-chief of the "Vneshnyaya Politika" (Foreign Policy) journal. He was a Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, Guido Carli Free University of International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Harvard University and Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey. He is a member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and a member of the Working Group on the Future of Russian-American Relations.

