

# GOOD RIDDANCE 2021!

DAVID J. KRAMER

## HELLO 2022?



# **Good Riddance 2021! Hello 2022?**

**By David J. Kramer**

David J. Kramer is a Senior Fellow at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs.

© Economic Policy Research Center, All rights reserved, 2022

Economic Policy Research Center  
Paliashvili Street 85  
Tbilisi, 0162 Georgia  
+995 32 2 207 305  
[www.eprc.ge](http://www.eprc.ge)



**Economic Policy Research Center**  
ეკონომიკური პოლიტიკის კვლევის ცენტრი



The year 2020 was a difficult one, with the explosion of the Coronavirus pandemic, a declining global economy and, in the United States, a highly contested presidential election. The discovery of vaccines at the end of that year and the impending change of administrations in the United States gave many reason to think that better days were ahead.

In some respects, that turned out to be true. In 2021, the economic situation in many countries turned around and the availability of vaccines saved millions of lives. Less than one percent of the United States was vaccinated when Biden entered office; by the end of 2021, more than 60 percent of Americans were vaccinated. But for those hoping the discovery in record time of vaccines to protect against the virus would spell the end of the pandemic – and the Biden administration was among those hoping for this – the resurgence of the virus at the end of the year with the new Omicron variant spreading rapidly around the globe is a terrible blow.

The pandemic took far too many lives in 2021, many of which were avoidable had people taken or been given the opportunity to take the vaccines. The death toll in the United States alone exceeds 800,000; globally, the pandemic has taken more than 5.4 million. According to a Gallup poll released in late December, optimism on the COVID-19 situation has plummeted in the United States over the past several weeks.

Beyond the ongoing public health crisis, the political situation in the United States remains very fragile. While Joe Biden was sworn in as president on January 20, his inauguration came 14 days after the worst attack on the U.S. Capitol since the War of 1812. Days before Biden's inauguration, hundreds of insurrectionists stormed the seat of Congress to try to block the certification of the election results making Biden president. Five people died from the attack on the Capitol, and more than 140 police were injured that day. The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives launched a commission to investigate what happened, and its work will continue during 2022.

2021 was a challenging year, and 2022 does not look like it will be any easier.

# A Challenging American Domestic Agenda

Since assuming the presidency on January 20, President Biden has to deal with constant challenges to the legitimacy of his victory by Trump and his supporters. No previous candidate who lost a presidential election has challenged the integrity of the electoral process the way Trump has. Al Gore, who lost his bid in the very close 2000 presidential election, graciously conceded and called for the country to unite. Just the opposite happened in 2021. . Concern has risen to such a level that three retired generals in the U.S. Army penned an op-ed in the Washington Post in mid-December warning about the 2024 election. “We are chilled to our bones at the thought of a coup succeeding next time,” they cautioned.<sup>1</sup>

This deepening polarization in American politics has made the job of Biden, already difficult with the pandemic and the economic crisis, even more challenging. With a narrow majority in the House of Representatives and the slimmest of margins in the Senate (Vice President Harris must break any ties in the 50/50 chamber), Biden was able to secure passage of economic recovery and infrastructure legislation in 2021. His Build Back Better bill, however, stalled because of the opposition within his own party as well as that from Republicans, underscoring the fragile situation that exists. Still, the economy in the United States has experienced a remarkable recovery from its depths in 2020, with near record low unemployment, albeit with rising inflation concerns.

Predictions for the 2022 midterm elections – when all House members and one-third of the Senate are up for re-election – suggest the Republicans are poised to retake at least one

---

<sup>1</sup> Opinion: 3 retired generals: The military must prepare now for a 2024 insurrection, The Washington Post, 17.12.2022. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/17/eaton-taguba-anderson-generals-military/?tid=ss\\_tw](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/17/eaton-taguba-anderson-generals-military/?tid=ss_tw)

if not both chambers. Such an outcome would deliver a serious blow to Biden's hopes of getting anything done legislatively starting in 2023. A flip in the U.S. House of Representatives to Republican control would also spell the demise of the Committee investigating what happened on January 6, highlighting the urgency for that Committee to finish its work before November 2022.

Uncertainty about whether Trump will run for re-election against an incumbent who will be 82 years old in 2024 – Trump will be 78 then – has the American political landscape in turmoil. Most other potential Republican candidates are waiting to see what Trump will decide, but Trump does not want to disclose his plans any time soon. Democrats, meanwhile, are nervous about Biden's low poll ratings and his ability to continue on for another four years, if he is re-elected. This has sparked speculation that either Vice President Harris or possibly Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, among others, might run in his place if Biden opts to serve only one term. One positive of all this is that, unlike in some countries where elections are decided before people go to vote, nobody knows who will be president of the United States come 2025.

## A Challenging Foreign Policy Agenda

As if the domestic agenda were not difficult enough, Biden has also faced a difficult foreign policy landscape, with much repair work needed after four years of his predecessor. Biden and his national security team entered office with plans to make China the top foreign policy priority, with Iran, climate change, transatlantic relations and emphasis on democracy and human rights not far behind. He quickly returned the United States to the Paris climate accords as well as to the World Health Organization and announced his interest in resurrecting the Iran nuclear deal that Trump tore up. He convened a virtual Summit for Democracy in December to show that these issues are a central part of not only his domestic agenda but his foreign policy, too. He restored the Quad (U.S., Australia, Japan and India) to enhance diplomatic coordination in dealing with the China challenge and worked on repairing the transatlantic relationship that Trump left in tatters. Many in the international community were heartened to see Biden, a familiar face, enter office and Trump depart. Some exceptions to that were Russia's Vladimir Putin (about whom Trump never uttered a negative word), Hungary's Viktor Orban (who visited Trump in the White House in 2019), and Egypt's Mohamed el-Sisi (whom Trump described as his "favorite dictator") – all of whom were sorry to see Trump go.

The good will toward Biden, however, took a serious hit after his mismanaged withdrawal from Afghanistan in August. One can debate whether or not withdrawing from Afghanistan was the right thing to do – this author thinks it was not – but few can debate that the way it was handled was abysmal and damaging to America's standing. The seeming lack of coordination with allies, the many people left behind, and the sudden fall of Kabul to the Taliban triggered

major criticism of the administration's foreign policy decision-making and the intelligence community's understanding of the situation on the ground. The mad scramble to facilitate the departure of more 120,000 people from the war-torn country – a record evacuation – including more than 6,000 Americans, dredged up memories of the fall of Saigon. Many more were left behind and millions face starvation and misery with the return of the Taliban to power. To be sure, Afghanistan was a mess that Biden inherited, and the disastrous deal being negotiated with the Taliban was started under Trump, but Biden arguably made the situation there on the ground much worse, not better, with his withdrawal.

The Biden administration has tried to put the Afghan debacle in the rear view mirror, but authoritarian regimes have exploited the withdrawal to argue that United States is an unreliable ally. Kremlin-controlled media in particular had a field day with the withdrawal and devoted considerable coverage to it with an eye toward Ukraine, claiming that the U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan would be replicated in the case of Ukraine.

# The Perennial Putin Problem

The Biden administration may have entered office hoping to focus on China and other foreign policy priorities, but Vladimir Putin has forced the administration to spend considerable time and diplomatic effort on Russia. The administration started out rather hawkishly toward Putin, with two rounds of sanctions (albeit not as strong as many, including this author, would have hoped) in March and April and Biden's acknowledgement that Putin is a "killer". But in April, the administration seemed to soften its tone and approach, with Biden inviting Putin to a summit in Geneva as Russian forces threatened Ukraine and the life of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny seemed to hang in the balance. The administration waived sanctions in May on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite earlier promises it would work to block its completion. Following the Geneva summit in June, the two sides launched a series of meetings focused on strategic stability, climate, and the overall bilateral relationship. The White House talked about wanting a "predictable and stable relationship" with Moscow.

In fact, the relationship has been anything but predictable and stable. Russian hacking and ransomware attacks, a problem dating back to the Obama administration, in 2021 have affected a major American pipeline, medical centers, and meat-processing facility. Russian support for Belarus dictator Aleksander Lukashenka, including after he ordered the hijacking of a civilian airliner over Belarus airspace in May and weaponized migrants and refugees against EU and NATO member states in the summer and fall, has made it possible for Lukashenka to last this long. Similar Kremlin support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria has kept that murderous leader from falling from power, and Russian intervention in places

like Libya, the Central African Republic and Mali through use of the Wagner mercenary outfit has destabilized those places. Putin has once again weaponized energy through reductions in deliveries to Europe and through Ukraine as a way to pressure approval for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Russian disinformation continues in Western countries, including the United States, to tap into sensitive issues and sow divisions; this has included propaganda aimed to discredit the effectiveness and safety of Western-manufactured vaccines.

Even on the issue of climate change, on which special envoy John Kerry has spent considerable time with his Russian counterpart (a former prime minister of the Chechen republic with blood on his hands), the Russians vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution that for the first time would have defined climate change as a threat to peace. This triggered the American Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, to slam the Russian veto, saying that it had “stopped the world’s most important body for maintaining international peace and security from taking a small, practical and necessary step to combat the impacts of climate change.” So much for predictability and stability with the Putin regime.

The picture inside Russia is no better: the country is experiencing the worst crackdown on human rights since the break-up of the USSR, including efforts to close the leading human rights organization Memorial. Meanwhile, the pandemic is taking a huge toll on Russians, as many do not trust the Russian-made Sputnik vaccine. The economy remains stagnant. The prospect of Putin’s staying in power until 2036 is not very appealing to many Russians, but Putin and his henchmen seem intent on snuffing out any potential threats.

As if all of that were not enough, there is renewed concern of another major Russian military move against Ukraine, a country Putin invaded in 2014 and for which he bears responsibility for the deaths of more than 14,000 people, including 298 passengers and crew on board the Malaysian Airlines flight over Ukrainian territory shot down by Russian missiles. The first build-up of forces along the Ukrainian border in the spring of 2021 led Biden to invite Putin to the Geneva summit. The second build-up has raised even greater concern in Washington, triggering administration officials to coordinate with European allies on possible sanctions should Russian troops re-enter Ukraine. U.S. officials also fear a major Russian cyberattack against Ukraine’s power grid in the middle of winter, either as a precursor to an invasion or in place of one. That could cause real harm to Ukraine without risking lots of body bags being flown back to Russia in case of a renewed military conflict against a more formidable Ukrainian military compared to 2014.

As late as mid-December, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan offered that “the current assessment of the U.S. government is that he [Putin] has not yet made a decision [to invade]...”

But Russian rhetoric is growing more threatening, including Putin's absurd allegation that the Ukrainians are engaged in "genocide" against ethnic Russians living in the country, an allegation that was cited for Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Russia's defense minister made an equally ludicrous accusation that the United States was preparing a chemical weapons provocation in the Donbas region. Such talk makes it harder for Putin to back down.

On December 17, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly released draft proposals to the United States and to NATO in which Moscow demands no more enlargement of the Alliance to countries like Ukraine and Georgia and no placing of Western weapons systems in the region. Russia has insisted on acceptance of these texts as a whole; as one Russian official put it, they are not a menu from which to choose various options. Instead of rejecting these texts and their absurd demands outright, Sullivan stated that the United States is prepared for dialogue with Russia over its security demands and will present its own concerns. Secretary of State Antony Blinken offered a similar assessment in his year-end press conference December 21: "There are some very obvious nonstarters in things that the Russians have put on the table," Blinken said. "There may be other issues that are appropriate for discussion and conversation, just as there are things that we would put on the table that Russia needs to respond to."

Such comments are bound to make NATO allies close to Russia's borders, as well as Ukraine and Georgia, nervous. After his video conversation with Putin earlier in December, Biden indicated a readiness to convene several NATO countries and Russia together into a discussion about European security. So far, that has not materialized.

The administration deserves credit for coordinating with allies on possible sanctions measures. But amid conflicting media reports that it is withholding some military assistance from Ukraine out of fear that such support could scuttle diplomatic efforts, the administration risks being perceived in Moscow as being weak and too willing to accommodate Russian demands. Putin will keep pushing the envelope until he meets resistance. He thrives on being unpredictable and creating instability. The Biden administration should return to its initial approach to dealing with Putin, taking a hardline and pushing back against his threatening behavior. The stakes are incredibly high for Ukraine, Europe and the international community. China will be watching carefully and drawing lessons on what it might think it can get away with, too, toward Taiwan and elsewhere based on how the United States and its allies handle the Russia-Ukraine situation.

## Uncertainty Entering the New Year

As 2021 comes to an end, 2022 will begin with lots of uncertainty. As discussed above, the possibility of a renewed Russian push into Ukraine remains serious. Chinese threats against Taiwan are a growing concern. Afghanistan teeters on the brink. Barring a new agreement, Iran seems intent on pursuing nuclear weapons capability. The Omicron variant means the pandemic is not going away anytime soon. Authoritarianism continues to pose a major challenge to the democratic world.

Much of what is driving this uncertainty and concern is the political situation in the United States. According to a Public Religion Research Institute poll released in November, some 31 percent of those surveyed believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Trump; Biden, of course, won fairly and more than 60 courts around the country threw out lawsuits challenging the results. Three in 10 Republicans believe violence might be justified to “save our country.”

A United States in turmoil and disarray is bad first and foremost for the United States, but it will have major reverberations around the globe. The past two years, starting with the Coronavirus pandemic and ending with its resurgence with the Omicron variant, have been a difficult and trying period. Here’s hoping 2022 rings in a better, brighter future – while we simultaneously prepare for more challenging times ahead.

*December 2021*

---

Economic Policy Research Center  
Paliashvili Street 85  
Tbilisi, 0162 Georgia  
+995 32 2 207 305  
[www.eprc.ge](http://www.eprc.ge)



Economic Policy Research Center  
ეკონომიკური პოლიტიკის კვლევის ცენტრი

