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Biden's Possible Strategic Blunder



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Donald Trump's wretched national security inheritance for President Joe Biden included some low-hanging fruit that is being addressed. Biden's speech to the Munich Security Conference last week reasserted the importance of the transatlantic alliance, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the U.S. commitment to mutual security. Biden's delayed discussions with Israel's Bibi Netanyahu and his warning to Saudi Arabia indicate that the United States considers the renewal of the Iran nuclear treaty a top priority, and that Jerusalem and Riyadh must not get in the way.

There is no sign of new thinking on our most important foreign policy problems, however—our relations with Russia and China. Biden's unnecessarily harsh campaign messages to Moscow and Beijing were designed for a domestic audience, but it means that Biden's

national security team is on a “short leash,” not only for reengaging both capitals but, more importantly, for trying to prevent movement toward a Sino-Russian alliance.

There is no sign that Biden recognizes U.S. responsibility for the difficult relations with Moscow and Beijing. The expansion of NATO and the aggressive deployment of U.S. and NATO forces in East Europe and the Baltics in violation of a verbal understanding between then-president George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev is a key component of Russian-American friction. Trump’s trade and tariff war as well as gratuitously tough rhetoric toward Beijing is part and parcel of Xi Jinping’s annoyance with Washington.

Meanwhile, the Congress and the pundits of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* appear to be thirsting for a renewal of the Cold War. The military and intelligence communities are piling on with the recognition that their bloated budgets, which should be facing constraints, are at stake.

Although Russia and China have been steadily increasing contacts and cooperation on every level, including unprecedented joint military exercises in the Arctic and the Pacific, both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping want to renew dialogue with the United States.

Putin wants to reopen the arms control dialogue on both the strategic and conventional level. He also favors extending the discussion to the problem of cyberwar and cyber-espionage, the invisible weapons that many consider the “perfect weapon.” Russian military intelligence invaded a major internet software manufacturer nearly a year ago, and as a result roamed widely throughout government and private computer systems without U.S. awareness. The Russians were able to steal a great deal of information over a period of eight months, before a private company—and not the National Security Agency’s Cyber Command—were able to detect the cyber storm. In view of our vulnerability, it clearly is in our interest to pursue such negotiations.

Xi wants to resume economic cooperation, particularly to gain greater access to U.S. technology exports and to end U.S. sanctions on Chinese officials and companies. The Chinese challenge to U.S. interests is complex, but Sino-American discussions on climate and economic issues could pave the way for wider cooperation in the same way that arms control negotiations between the Soviets and Americans contributed to a strategic detente. The Chinese have never indicated an interest in challenging America’s global hegemony, and expect a continued U.S. military presence throughout the Pacific.

The United States, meanwhile, is displaying insufficient concern with Sino-Russian cooperation that is taking advantage of U.S. intransigence toward both nations. Biden’s personnel appointments, moreover, do not point to “new thinking” toward either nation, and point to a tougher stance that our European and Asian partners consider counter-productive. The European Union has ignored U.S. wishes and proceeded to conclude a huge investment

agreement with China. In the Pacific region, China has strengthened ties with both South Korea and New Zealand over the opposition of the Biden administration. It is noteworthy that China's neighbors have reconciled themselves to Beijing's presence in the South China Sea, while the Biden administration has gratuitously sent an aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt, into the region.

Biden's entire national security team appears to endorse the need for hard-edged statements toward both Moscow and Beijing. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's remarks have been unnecessarily harsh, and the appointment of Victoria Nuland, a Cold Warrior from the Obama administration, as the undersecretary of state for policy is a bad sign. The appointments for China policy have been worse. Kurt Campbell, the father of containment toward China from the Obama administration, is the National Security Council's chief of Asian affairs, and the national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has promised to take a tough line toward Beijing. Even Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellin took a hawkish line in her confirmation hearings, and the nominee for trade representative, Katherine Tai, will presumably do the same. Biden himself has taken credit for a tough line in his phone calls with Putin and Xi.

Both Russia and China have adopted abusive practices that can't be ignored; the Navalny case in Russia and the treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang must be addressed. But their actions for the most part have not confronted, let alone threatened, American national interest. Russia's involvement in Syria does not compromise the U.S. position in the Middle East; China's treatment of Hong Kong was predictable more than 20 years after Britain surrendered the colony. China's intellectual property theft must be addressed, and trade relations will always be difficult. Neither Moscow nor Beijing is looking for a fight with Washington, however, and both see their economic security as the key element in their national security. But both will protect their periphery if the United States continues to deploy sophisticated military weapons on the Russian border or lethal naval combatants around Taiwan and the South China Sea.

An arms control dialogue with Russia that includes reinstating the Intermediate-forces Nuclear Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty could be the key to unlocking the Russian-American stalemate before relations worsen. An improvement of relations with Moscow would enable the United States to concentrate on its number one foreign policy priority: stabilizing relations with China. Too many foreign policy mavens in the Biden administration believe that the containment that seemed to work against Russia should be applied to China. China is not Russia; it cannot be contained. It is time for diplomacy to resolve the differences that tactical military deployments would only worsen.

Lord Salisbury, the former prime minister and foreign minister of Britain, warned that the "commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcass of dead policies."

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