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Team Biden: Diplomatic and Strategic Failure



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President Biden's national security team was on display last week and the picture was unimpressive. The president himself agreed with a television news personality that Russian President Putin was a "killer," instead of adroitly dodging the remark and providing a less direct response. Biden may or may not know that U.S. Ambassador George Kennan was made *persona non grata* in 1952 for comparing Stalin's Moscow to Hitler's Berlin, and the source of Putin's animus toward Hillary Clinton stemmed from her comparison of Putin's policy toward Ukraine to Hitler's policies toward Poland and Czechoslovakia. President Obama also was guilty of making personal and public taunts of the Russian president, which Putin never returned in kind. The Kremlin's sensitivity to such personal attacks is well established.

Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, mismanaged the first days of important talks with his Chinese counterpart in Alaska last week. After getting Beijing's agreement to hold the talks in the United States, the Department of State on the eve of the talks announced economic sanctions against two dozen Chinese officials. Poor form to say the least. And in the run-up to the talks, U.S. national security officials downplayed the significance and outcome of the talks, even questioning the need for face-to-face discussions. To start the meeting, Blinken went overboard publicly, reciting a long list of U.S. grievances with Chinese domestic policies, which Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi felt compelled to counter.

The poor diplomatic performance of our top national security officials, however, takes second place to the strategic blunder regarding U.S. relations with both Russia and China, effectively driving Moscow and Beijing toward their closest bilateral relationship since the 1950s. Until now, it has been a fixed notion in U.S. strategic thinking that close relations between Russia and China would be an anathema for U.S. interests. Post-war U.S. administrations were so obsessed with Sino-Soviet collusion that they failed to recognize the serious split between the two communist states in the early sixties, and were guided into the Vietnam War by false assumptions regarding their collaborative policy in Southeast Asia. In fact, Sino-Soviet differences on a series of issues, including Vietnam, drove the two communist states into warfare in 1969. The Central Intelligence Agency had no success in the 1960s trying to convince the Johnson administration of Sino-Soviet discord.

President Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, not only understood the opportunity created by the Sino-Soviet split, but devised a policy of triangular diplomacy to take advantage of it. Nixon and Kissinger successfully created better bilateral relations with both the Soviet Union and China than Moscow and Beijing had with each other. The rewards of this triangular policy were one-sided: Washington gained stable relations with Beijing that led the Carter administration to grant full diplomatic recognition to China in 1979. With regard to Russia, Washington gained the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT); the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; and the Treaty of Berlin that removed from the table the most threatening possibility for Soviet-American confrontation in Europe. I was part of the U.S. SALT delegation in 1971-1972 and can testify that the Soviets took disarmament talks with the United States much more seriously after Washington's opening to China.

Enter Biden. If personnel is policy then it appears that the Biden administration is committed to a pursuit of a hard-line (and counterproductive) policy with both Russia and China. Biden has staffed his national security team with individuals who are known for hard-line views. The number three person at the Department of State is Victoria Nuland, well known to the Kremlin as a Cold War ideologue, particularly anti-Russian. Her involvement in the Ukraine situation in the Obama administration when she was assistant secretary for Europe helped to convince the Russians that the United States was meddling on the Russian border. Putin is definitely lobbying for a resumption of arms control talks, so he is probably aware of the lack of a serious arms control specialist on the Biden national security team, a definite oversight.

At the same time, there are serious anti-Chinese players in the Biden administration, particularly Kurt Campbell, the so-called China tsar on the National Security Council. It was during the Obama administration that Campbell—then assistant secretary of state for Asia—came up with the “pivot” toward Asia, in part a cover for our humiliating defeat and withdrawal of forces from Iraq. Supporters of the “pivot” include National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and the “Asian tsar” at the Pentagon, Eli Ratner. Biden also has created an China task force at the Pentagon when it would make far more sense to place such a group in the Department of State.

The Chinese correctly read the “pivot” as “containment,” the strategy that the United States applied against the Soviet Union, which U.S. officials fulsomely cite at every opportunity. “Containing” the Soviet Union—if we did—was not a difficult task in view of the relative irrelevance of Moscow in international diplomacy and economics. “Containing” China is a fool’s errand in view of the emergence of China as the leading geopolitical development of the 21st century.

Maybe Biden is displaying a tough line toward both Russia and China in order to signal Moscow and Beijing that the amateurs of the Trump administration are no longer on the scene, and to convince right-wing critics at home that he is tough enough to handle both states. My concern, however, is that Biden has sanctioned a round of dueling accusations that will get out of control and kill any opportunity to find common ground with key players in the geopolitical community. Another important concern is the danger of further inciting anti-Chinese sentiment in this country, albeit unintentionally, when Asian-Americans are being assaulted in record numbers.

Ironically, there are numerous opportunities for mutual agreement and understanding between and among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing on strategic matters, non-

proliferation, international terrorism, and climate change that could lead to an improvement of bilateral and multilateral relations as well as a more stable international environment overall. Instead, Biden is spinning his diplomatic wheels in a fashion that will allow for bipartisan demands for increased (and unnecessary) defense spending. With the exception of the Pentagon, there will be only losers in this scenario.

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