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The Threat Business: Russia or China?

Dual Enemies

For those in charge of US national security, the central challenge is identifying threats and determining how to counter them. The Biden administration has cast China and Russia, in that order, as the major threats to US security.

China is a “pacing challenger,” whereas Russia is an “acute” challenger. Those rather odd designations mean, in plain English, that the administration considers China, once called a “peer competitor,” an all-encompassing threat, not just military but also political, economic, and technological. Russia has been downgraded from the Trump years. It is a military threat, not on par with China.

Here’s how the Biden-Harris “National Security Strategy” paper (October 2022) puts it:

The People’s Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly. Russia’s brutal and unprovoked war on its neighbor Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and impacted stability everywhere, and its reckless nuclear threats endanger the global non-proliferation regime.

At first glance, the Biden-Harris paper seems to say that the Russian threat is actually far more serious than the threat from China.

Russia, not China, is carrying out a war of aggression, condemned as such by the United Nations.

China requires managed competition, whereas Russia is a belligerent that has “impacted stability everywhere” and poses a global nuclear threat.

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China, the paper says, seeks to “become the world’s leading power” and has both the intent and the capability to “reshape the international order.”

Russia is said to be pursuing “an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order.” Is that a distinction without a difference?

At War with Russia

Despite all the contentious issues between the US and China, they are not at war, whereas to all intents and purposes the US is at war with Russia, which not only “has shattered peace in Europe” but has shown that destroying Ukraine is just part of its mission to undermine the Western alliance. Those are the reasons the US is heavily invested in defending Ukraine: tens of billions of dollars in military aid, military training of Ukrainians, supply of advanced weapons capable of hitting targets in Russia, and sanctions on Russian officials and trade.

In the Asia-Pacific, the US strategy does not rest on war-fighting scenarios but on deterrence of China, marked by strengthening security partnerships, particularly with Taiwan, Japan, and Australia. Engaging either adversary, whether through negotiations or transactions, is not a priority.

We worry that Russia will use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. We don’t worry, according to the President, that China will invade Taiwan, much less deploy a nuclear weapon.

The US has brought NATO into the Ukraine war, with allies supplying arms, advisers, intelligence sharing, and financial and political support. But Russia’s supposed strategic partner, China, has not provided Russia with military assistance for the war.

As the war moves closer to its first anniversary, US and NATO involvement gets deeper—more military assistance of all kinds, such as a reported doubling of Ukraine soldiers trained, Patriot missiles, and HIMARS rocket launchers—and prospects for a negotiated settlement with Putin become more remote. In fact, the more successful the Ukrainians are in prosecuting the war, the greater the outside aid to Ukraine—but also, the greater the risk of expansion of the war.

If Ukraine’s forces succeed at ousting Russia from more of its territory, Putin might react by escalating the use of force, such as use of a nuclear weapon. An unidentified Biden administration official recently made just such a suggestion. That prospect would present the US and NATO with an entirely new challenge, one that might make them full-fledged combatants.

In Congress

In the US Congress, one finds declining enthusiasm for supporting Ukraine, but plenty of enthusiasm for confronting China. With Republicans about to control the House of Representatives, its far-right members are anxious to reduce aid to Ukraine. Their line of argument closely follows Moscow's narrative on the war.

But when it comes to dealing with China, a Cold War-style consensus has formed among House members across the political spectrum. Republicans are forming a Select Committee on China that will assuredly take a very hard line, going beyond what the Biden administration has already decided—such as banning TikTok.

Republicans want Democrats' support, the committee's chair (Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin) saying: "We want the Democrats to nominate serious, sober people to participate, because defending America from Chinese Communist Party aggression should not be a partisan thing." You can bet plenty of Democrats will apply.

After all, isn't TikTok a greater threat to national security than Russian aggression and election interference?

Money Talks

And let's not forget the bread and butter of the threat business: the weapons and money for the Pentagon and military contractors. The New York Times reports: "Military spending next year is on track to reach its highest level in inflation-adjusted terms since the peaks in the costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars between 2008 and 2011"

In a spirit of bipartisanship that national security always prompts, Congress has voted for a record \$858 billion in military spending. That's \$45 billion more than the President requested.

The war in Ukraine has been a boon to the permanent war economy. One specialist finds that US military contractors will receive about 40 percent of the latest round of military aid to Ukraine (about \$47 billion). Please note: All these spending decisions have been made with virtually no debate.

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