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Blinken's Unwise, Unwarranted Trip to Central Asia



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In an effort to gain leverage against Russia and China, Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Kazakhstan last week to meet with foreign ministers of the five Central Asian nations. The United States has no vital national security interests in any of the five Islamic states that have had long-standing ties to Moscow and are heavily reliant on economic assistance from China. These nations—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—maintain close diplomatic and security ties to both Russia and China, and there is no chance that the United States has the leverage to weaken Central Asian relations with Moscow and Beijing. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* fatuously headlined that “Blinken Finds Some Leverage in Central Asia.”

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The resolution of problems in Central Asia is simply beyond the capabilities of the United States. Blinken's trip was a fool's errand that merely exposed the futility of U.S. efforts to practice dual containment against Russia and China as well as U.S. ignorance regarding its own policies that are driving Russia and China into a closer relationship.

The Sino-Russian/Sino-Soviet relationship has always presented a challenge to U.S. geostrategic thinking. When we overestimated the relationship and ignored the evidence of a Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, we justified our involvement in the Vietnam War as an opportunity to weaken Sino-Soviet relations. There were many facets to the tragedy of the Vietnam War, but the failure of the "best and brightest" of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to understand the Sino-Soviet split led to the terrible waste of U.S. blood and treasure in Southeast Asia.

Fortunately the Nixon administration had a better understanding of the Sino-Soviet split as well as a policy for dealing with it that was based on an improved relationship with Beijing to encourage the Soviets to improve their own relations with the United States. As a result of Henry Kissinger's secret diplomacy with Beijing, and Nixon's summitry with Mao, the United States gained two arms control agreements with Moscow (SALT and ABM Treaties) as well as the Treaty of Berlin in Europe. The Carter administration completed the recognition of China in 1978 after months of secret diplomacy, but national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski ultimately mishandled the inherited strategic triangle from Nixon and Kissinger, so there was no additional progress on either the Soviet or Chinese fronts.

The current juncture in the U.S./Russian/Chinese triangle is unique because never in history have the Russians and Chinese forged such close diplomatic and security relations. There are many analysts who underestimate the role and influence of personal relations in international affairs, but the fact that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have met 39 times in the past ten years is significant. When Putin and Xi met in Beijing before the start of the 2022 Olympics, they issued the declaration that there were "no limits" to their relations and openly discussed their shared grievances with the West, particularly with the United States.

Putin and Xi are trying to create an international order that doesn't revolve around the interests of the United States; they favor alternative financial institutions that will weaken U.S. economic dominance. But there is one difference between Moscow and Beijing that could be exploited, which is the importance of global stability to the Chinese. The key to China's remarkable economic success has been the stability that exists in the Indo-Pacific

region. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the threat of the use of nuclear weapons, has challenged global stability and has discomfited China's leadership. That is why Xi thus far has not challenged the severe economic sanctions against Russia and has thus far refused to provide sophisticated military weaponry to Russia for use in Ukraine. This could change, however, because of Washington's increasingly public warnings regarding a "red line" if China provided such weaponry. Public warnings against China at this juncture are counterproductive; this is a time and place for secret diplomacy.

Blinken's visit to Astana, Kazakhstan will not weaken Central Asian ties to either Russia or China, and will merely convince the two powers that the United States is prepared to challenge their spheres of influence on their sensitive frontiers. All five Central Asian countries refused to support the United States in last month's UN resolution calling for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and to recognize Ukraine's full sovereignty over its territory. All five Central Asian countries will need support from Russia or China if faced with internal opposition in their own countries.

There are two steps that the Biden administration needs to consider before it goes further on the path of challenging the Sino-Russian nexus. First of all, we need to ignore Central Asia where there is nothing to be gained. In fact, as China continues its economic investment in the region, the Russians will ultimately become concerned and this could become a serious point of friction between Moscow and Beijing. Second, Biden himself needs to take advice from national security columnist David Ignatius, who argued in last week's *Washington Post* that the president should simply "use his best tool for halting the slide in U.S.-China relations," which is picking up the phone and calling Xi Jinping.

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#). and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent books are "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing, 2019) and "Containing the National Security State" (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for counterpunch.org.

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