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## Biden Believes He Doesn't Have to Talk to Putin



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“I don't need to speak to Putin.”

– President Joe Biden, August 1, 2024

In the understandable joy and triumph of the announcement of the multi-faceted hostage release last week, there was one brief question press corps that drew an unfortunate answer from President Joe Biden. The question dealt with the possibility that the hostage release could lead to talks between Biden and President Vladimir Putin; Biden's answer dismissed any possibility of talks, let alone negotiations.

The difficult negotiations over the hostage release didn't take place in a vacuum. The worsening of relations between Russia and the United States has reached Cold War levels. The war between Ukraine and Russia, which Ukraine cannot win and Russia refuses to lose,

is eventually going to need the intervention of the United States, the only country that can provide security guarantees to the protagonists.

The conventional wisdom is that Russia doesn't need any security guarantees, but there will be no movement toward resolving the conflict as long as the Kremlin has no idea of Western plans for tactical and strategic deployments on its sensitive western border over the next five to ten years. Putin, indeed no Russian leader, can willingly accept a permanently expanding role for the United States and the European NATO countries on a border that has witnessed costly invasions from Sweden, France, and Germany over the past three centuries. What would be the U.S. reaction to Russian military alliances with Canada and Mexico...or Cuba? Russian-American discussions are not only an essential requirement for dealing with Ukraine, but for dealing with sensitive arms control and disarmament negotiations that have been disrupted by dangerous decisions by Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump. Such discussions are required for dealing with the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, which Russia (and China) have supported in the past. The overall problem of nonproliferation, which the Soviets raised more than 50 years ago also require a certain level of Russian-American cooperation. There are additional problems related to climate control and international terrorism that require cooperation. The West Europeans understand the need for engaging Russia, but the East Europeans oppose such a policy, and the United States has sided with the latter unfortunately.

It's important to keep in mind that the United States has mishandled its "Russian problem" ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. President George H.W. Bush had an opportunity to "anchor" Russia to the Western security architecture, but the president and his hard-line national security adviser, General Brent Scowcroft, were opposed. Bush and Scowcroft believed that it was premature to buy into any notion of a "strategic partnership" with a Russia that had "maintained its imperial impulses." A major opportunity was lost to build on the arms control agreements of the 1970s and 1980s, and to engage in conflict resolution in the Third World, particularly in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf where the United States wanted to maintain a superior position.

President Bill Clinton worsened the possibilities for Russian-American relations by expanding NATO in order to gain support from East European immigrant populations in such key states as Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Illinois, which resonates with regard to this year's election. President George W. Bush dealt significant damage to Russian-American bilateral by bringing the three Baltic states, former republics of the Soviet Union, into NATO. He wanted to reach out to Ukraine and Georgia as well, but former chancellor

Angela Merkel wisely talked him back. In his first year in office, Bush abolished the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had been the cornerstone of strategic deterrence and the arms control regime since 1972. The fact that Bush withdrew from the ABM Treaty in order to return to deployment of a national missile defense made the strategic environment even worse.

And the deployment of a regional missile defense in East Europe (Romania and Poland) only created another perceived threat to Moscow. The Czech Republic wisely avoided participation. The West European members of NATO were highly critical of Bush's moves in public and private. Meanwhile, Russia and China took advantage of aggressive U.S. moves to forge their best bilateral relationship in history.

President Barack Obama promised a "reset" in relations with Russia, but did very little to institutionalize bilateral relations. His personal criticism of Putin didn't help matters, and unfortunately President Biden has continued to engage in personal criticism. On a visit to Poland in 2011, Obama announced additional cooperative measures on regional missile defense in East Europe as well as a policy to base U.S. fighter jets in Poland. Obama increased naval deployments in the Black Sea as part of annual joint military exercises with Ukraine, which Russia found gratuitous. The deployment of the USS Monterey was particularly objectionable to Russia because its capabilities represented the first part of a plan to create a European missile shield. We described this as a move to guard against an Iranian threat to East Europe; the Russians found that risible for good reason. Trump was actually supporting the idea of a U.S. military base in Poland, which would be called Camp Trump. Conversely, think about Russia conducting naval exercises in the Gulf of Mexico.

There is no reason to believe that the unprecedentedly complex hostage release will lead to a detente between the United States and Russia. But it is not unreasonable to hope that some level of communications could be restored between the White House and the Kremlin. If Donald Trump is in the White House next year, there is no reason to believe that he could conduct serious and protracted negotiations on any level. He demonstrated his lack of competence in his first term. But if Kamala Harris is in the White House, perhaps CIA director William Burns could be named secretary of state. Burns, the best director in the history of the CIA, would certainly know how to conduct diplomacy at the highest level. He's been doing just that for the Biden administration for the past three years.

Founding Fathers such as James Madison and presidents such as Dwight D. Eisenhower warned about the dangers of permanent war. It's time to warn about the dangers of permanent cold war as well.

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