

Biden-Putin Talk Tuesday with Xi in the Wings

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On May 25, 2021, [when the date of June 16 was announced](#) for the summit between Presidents Biden and Putin, it seemed a good idea to waste no time in warning Biden and his neophyte advisers that a major shift in the “world correlation of forces” (to borrow an old Soviet term) was bound to heavily influence the June talks. China, of course, would not be taking part in the bilateral talks, but it would be very much present.

In other words, a half-year ago, we worried:

“Whether or not Official Washington fully appreciates the gradual – but profound – change in America’s triangular relationship with Russia and China over recent decades, what is clear is that the US has made itself into the big loser. The triangle may still be equilateral, but it is now, in effect, two sides against one. ...

“There is little sign that today’s US policymakers have enough experience and intelligence to recognize this new reality and understand the important implications for US freedom of action. Still less are they likely to appreciate how this new nexus may play out on the ground, on the sea or in the air.”

It was clear that the new phenomenon of Russia-China entente would dwarf the significance of less important issues; and we could not be sure Biden would be appropriately informed.

The Chinese “Squeeze”

Clearly, President Biden did not get the word – or maybe forgot. Here is the bizarre way Biden described, at his post-summit presser, his decades-behind-the-times approach to Putin on China:

“Without quoting him [Putin] – which I don’t think is appropriate – let me ask a

rhetorical question: You got a multi-thousand-mile border with China. China is seeking to be the most powerful economy in the world and the largest and the most powerful military in the world.”

At the airport, Biden’s co-travelers did their best to whisk him onto the plane, but failed to stop him from sharing more of his views on China – this time on China’s strategic “squeezing” of Russia:

“Let me choose my words. Russia is in a very, very difficult spot right now. They are being squeezed by China.”

Is President Biden still out to lunch on this key issue? Have his rising-junior advisers sought out new textbooks, updated from the ones they may have read in the 70s and 80s, and learned that Russia and China have never been closer – that, indeed, they have what amounts to a virtual military alliance?

This would seem to be an important thing to make sure Biden learns – and remembers. It would be particularly good if someone alerted him shortly before his virtual meeting with Putin tomorrow (Tuesday). [Here is my attempt to do so shortly after the June summit.](#)

“Old Chinese Hand and Old Russian One”

Having long since reached “alumni” status, Ambassador Chas Freeman and I have had the benefit of watching Sino/Russian relations for decades. Indeed, Amb. Freeman, as most readers are well aware, was a main practitioner, having interpreted for President Richard Nixon on his historic visit to Beijing in February 1972, and having played a key role in formulating the one-China policy that has kept the peace – at least until now. I headed CIA’s Soviet Foreign Policy Branch in the early 70s; our analysts played an important role in concluding the SALT agreements in May 1972 (together with highly technical specialists who gave Nixon the crucial: Yes, we can verify if you trust).

Much more recently, in July 2020, when ex-Secretary of State Pompeo played court jester enunciating a new U.S. policy toward China and critiquing the old, [Chas and I collaborated on this.](#)

In an email exchange over the weekend, I asked for any additional views Amb. Freeman might have, as Biden prepares for his virtual summit with Putin on Tuesday. With Chas’s permission I offer them below:

“... It is clear that the Sino-Russian entente is expanding under the pressure of US threats to both. Nothing will happen on either Taiwan or Ukraine without coordination between Beijing and Moscow. But our fantasy authoritarian plot to counter the US ideology of democracy is being made real by the “democracy summit.” This has sought to weaponize Taiwan ideologically against China and led to the unprecedented [joint Sino-Russian statement](#) that attempts to puncture our pretensions and oppose our messianism about democracy.

“My guess is that there will now be a much larger permanent Russian military presence on the Ukraine border but that, barring provocations by nutcases in Ukraine, there will be no invasion. Instead, Russia will settle for having achieved a firm basis for a strategic surprise, when and if that becomes necessary. Just so, China has probably made no

decision about Taiwan but is preparing the battlespace for the moment it may have to do so. Both China and Russia are acting in parallel to develop military options they had not previously sought. ... regarding Russia's [Mach 9] Zircon missile: it is paralleled by China's effort to develop a much more credible nuclear strike capability against the US"

Why Not Try a Little Diplomacy?

Always the diplomat, Chas may harbor hope that President Biden's promise to end "relentless war" and start "relentless diplomacy" may yet take on flesh and not remain relentless rhetoric. Freeman offered these further thoughts on what the latest Chinese and Russian moves could lead to, given a willing partner:

"These moves are a classic diplomatic use of a military threat to compel a negotiated reduction of tensions. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov paralleled China's to diplomat Wang Yi at Rome, when Lavrov later met Blinken in Stockholm. Wang Yi demanded that the US side commit to 'a genuine one-China policy, not a fake one, that the US fulfill its commitments to China, and that the US truly implement the one-China policy, instead of saying one thing but doing another.'

"Lavrov paralleled Putin in demanding 'reliable and long-term security guarantees,' incorporating 'specific agreements that would exclude any further NATO moves eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close vicinity to Russian territory,' adding that Moscow would need not just verbal assurances, but 'legal guarantees.'"

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