

The Late-Deceased Paradigm on Russia/China

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The sooner the geniuses of the Washington Swamp get it through their ivy-mantled brains that driving a wedge between Russia and China is not going to happen, the better the chances the world can survive the fallout (figurative and literal) from the war in Ukraine.

Today’s Swamp geniuses read their textbooks about how Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were adroit in taking advantage of the seething hostility between Russia and China a half-century ago. They leveraged that mutual loathing, and the fear that their rival might draw the U.S. onto its side, into a triangular paradigm that brought tangible benefits to the world. It was a balance of terror. But it was an insurable (“trust but verify”), strategic balance.

One benefit facilitated by the Nixon/Kissinger policies toward China and Russia was the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic-Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, which remained the cornerstone of strategic stability for three decades until Bush junior quit the treaty. Amb. Chas Freeman (from the Chinese side) and I (from the Soviet side) [were deeply involved in all this](#).

When less ideological, more enlightened leaders emerged in Beijing and Moscow, they began to recognize how mutually debilitating their rivalry was, and the hostility started to wane. Nevertheless, little did we imagine that as soon as October 2004 Russian President Putin would visit Beijing to finalize an agreement on border issues. Putin also signed an agreement to jointly develop Russian energy reserves and crowed that relations had reached “unparalleled heights.”

That’s right; 2004. Putin’s strong initiative to cultivate close ties with China is hardly new. Years later, it has paid off handsomely, and has been facilitated by the inept “diplomacy” of the rising Juniors that President Biden has working for him. The Antony Blinkens and Jake Sullivans of this world – out off a mix of arrogance and ignorance – have greased the skids for the Russia-Chinese united front the US now faces on the explosive situation in Ukraine. Wet-behind-the-ears though they were, I was still amazed to see this dynamic duo talk down to their Chinese counterparts a year ago in Anchorage, and then brief Biden on how Russia had a huge problem with China.

After the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva on June 16, Biden's team could not hustle him onto the plane before he gave the media these *bon mots*:

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

At Putin's post-summit presser he was asked if he had reached “a new level of trust with the US president”. Putin quoted Leo Tolstoy in response:

“Tolstoy once said, there is no happiness in life, only lightening flashes (зарницы) of it – cherish them. I believe that in this situation some kind of family trust is not possible. However, it seems to me we have seen “lightening flashes” (“зарницы” промелькнули) of it.”

Putin and Xi Try Giving Biden a Tutorial

In the wake of the June summit, the presidents of Russia and China spared no effort to demonstrate that their strategic relationship “in its closeness and effectiveness, exceeds an alliance.” See, for example, the video they released of the first minute of their [virtual summit on Dec. 15](#)) They were at pains to demonstrate that the triangular relationship has become isoscolese, with the US on the short end – in effect, two-against-one. As if to make things even clearer, Dec. 15 was also the day Moscow chose to give the US a draft treaty embracing Moscow's far-reaching proposals for European security.

In the weeks that followed, the Biden administration reacted more positively than I had expected – both in its alacrity in moving so rapidly to begin negotiations (as Moscow had pretty much demanded) and in its willingness to discuss reinstating key provisions of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty abandoned by President Trump in 2019. Taking into account Putin's many warnings that the deployment of missile-sites in Romania and Poland could threaten Russia's ICBM force, I thought he might take “[half a loaf](#),” especially since it had become clear that Ukraine was not destined for NATO membership anytime soon). In short, I thought Putin would see some of Tolstoy's “flashes of light” toward resolving at least some of his security concerns.

‘Misunderestimating’

By invading Ukraine, Putin proved that reasoning wrong; he went for the whole nine yards, so to speak. In retrospect, I can identify three factors to which I failed to give sufficient weight:

1. The bulk of Ukrainian forces were deployed in positions from which they could attack Donetsk and Luhansk with little or no warning. There were unconfirmed reports that they planned to attack in March, and Putin has mentioned this as a factor.
2. I underestimated the reaction of top Russian officials at watching for eight years their compatriots – thousands of them also Russian citizens – being shelled by Ukrainians led by the likes of the Neo-Nazi Azov battalion. There is an understandable emotional element here. Every sentient Russian knows that the

Nazi's killed 26 million Soviet citizens during WWII, and that the Stepan Bandura-led Ukrainian Nazis did Hitler's dirty work in Ukraine.

3. But I believe most important was my reluctance to give full credibility to Chinese-Russian claims that their strategic relationship "exceeds in closeness and effectiveness" a traditional alliance; that, indeed, it has "no limits". It was a mistake to see this as primarily rhetoric - and to avoid giving weight to how things looked from Beijing - as in, "after Russia, we're next."

The [Chinese government-controlled Global Times](#) took strong umbrage at Biden's *gran gaffe* in Poland, which seemed to invite the Russian people to overthrow Putin, and accused Washington of trying to similarly overthrow the Chinese Communist Party.

"Just as the US has tried to separate Russians from Putin, it has also tried to separate the Chinese people from the Chinese leader of the Communist Party of China, and has always failed because Washington's decision-makers just don't understand that their hegemonic ambitions and hostile moves toward Russia and China threaten the peoples of Russia and China, not just any specific individual or political group, said experts."

Certainly not lost on the Chinese was the recent release of the Pentagon's [updated National Defense Strategy](#), which identifies China as Enemy No. 1, not Russia. And Chinese officials have certainly been briefed on this remarkable article by the deputy director of The Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Matthew Kroenig: [Washington Must Prepare for War With Both Russia and China: Pivoting to Asia and forgetting about Europe isn't an option](#).

What Did Xi Know and When Did He Know It?

Given the critical importance of how united Russia and China really are when push comes to shove, this question seems of transcendent importance - not least for any assessment of President Putin's frame of mind. Is he still cool, calculating? Or does the invasion of Ukraine suggest the opposite; that he has lost it? Among the Chinese specialists from whom I seek counsel, there is resistance to the thought that Putin forewarned Xi (perhaps during his Feb. 4 visit to Beijing) of his plan to invade Ukraine shortly after the Beijing Olympics. Many experts on China are reluctant to conclude that Xi was told in advance, and that he gave Putin a waiver from Westphalia, so to speak.

Clearly, the implications are serious. In my view, were Putin not to have been assured of Xi's support, he would have been unhinged to attack Ukraine on Feb. 24. In other words, were Putin to have blindsided Xi, that would bespeak dangerous recklessness.

A Waiver on Westphalia: We Now Do 'On the Merits'

I think it has become clear that Xi did give Putin a waiver on Westphalia, despite China's bedrock "principled stand" on non-interference in the affairs of other countries per the Treaty of Westphalia. I know a lot less about China than about Russia, but I find it hard to believe that China's recent support - so far, at least - for what Putin has done would be as strong and unwavering, were Xi to have been blindsided.

One straw in the wind flew into a [Global Times report](#) on Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Wednesday meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi last Wednesday. Not surprisingly, both sides used the in-person meeting to "highlight the continuing efforts to

strengthen the strategic partnership, amid the Ukraine crisis and other ongoing crises such as Afghanistan". What caught my eye was the sentence that followed:

There have been frequent meetings and communications between the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers in 2022. The two held a phone conversation on February 24 when they exchanged views on the Ukraine issue.

February 24, of course, was invasion day. There is no sign that Wang took Lavrov to the woodshed for Putin's invasion, or complained at having been kept in the dark. The *Global Times* continued:

On April 1, President Xi told EU leaders that "China's position on the Ukraine issue is consistent and clear-cut. China always stands on the side of peace and **draws its conclusion independently based on the merits of each matter**. China calls for upholding international law and universally recognized norms governing international relations, acts in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and advocates the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security."

I added the **bold** above for emphasis. One might have expected a reference to Westphalia rather than "the merits of each matter."

Bottom line: Rapprochement between Russia and China has grown to entente. Someone needs to tell Biden. Proceeding on the assumption that the "world correlation of forces" has not undergone a sea change tips the balance still more in Washington's disfavor.

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