

Russia, China to Resist US but Engagement Is Preferred Option

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The US President Joe Biden’s “killer” [remark](#) about his “soulless” Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin was outrageous by any yardstick — even by his own long history of diplomatic gaffes. But Moscow won’t accept it as a sign of dementia.

Moscow is certain that Biden was in full possession of his faculties and was speaking in the immediate context of two US intelligence reports — regarding foreign election interference in 2020 and Donald Trump and his supporters’ bid to exploit the ensuing discord to propagate that the election was “stolen”.

In short, Moscow sees Biden’s remark as driven more by the exigencies of domestic politics where the Democrats are yet to consolidate their election success and demonising Russia continues to be useful. Moscow paid more attention to Biden’s subsequent remark that he could “walk and chew gum at the same time” — i.e., interact with Putin whichever way he likes.

It reflects supreme self-confidence that the US needn’t fear the consequences of its behaviour, as the Kremlin bends over backward to prevent it from spiralling into open hostility. The condescending attitude is nothing new. Former secretary of state Madeline Albright, the “godmother” of some key figures in Biden’s foreign policy team, once described the US as “the indispensable nation.”

Hence Putin’s decision to call Biden’s bluff and invite him to come for a [livestream discussion](#) with him on the future of the US-Russia relationship. The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said,

“Certain comments were made by Mr. Biden, and these remarks are quite unprecedented, so in order not to let these statements harm bilateral Russian-American relations, which are already in a deplorable state, President Putin suggested discussing the situation but doing so openly.”

He added with a straight face,

“Since Biden’s remarks themselves were quite unprecedented, then it’s not

possible to rule out unprecedented modes of communication.”

Indeed, for a couple of days, Biden seemed pondering over Putin’s proposition, even hinting Friday that “I’m sure we’ll talk at some point.” But the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed on Monday that the White House finally decided to turn down Putin’s taunting invite.

“One more opportunity has been missed to find a way out of the deadlock in Russian-US relations created through the fault of Washington. Responsibility for this lies entirely with the United States,” [it said](#).

To be sure, the Russian-American relations are entering a new phase, thanks to Biden’s intemperate remark. Washington may not enjoy in future the latitude to “walk and chew gum” same time.

The point is, Biden’s behaviour highlighted that in comparison with the highly-structured Soviet-American confrontation where both sides took each other most seriously, the US attitude in the recent years acquired an air of flippancy, lacking interest to take responsibility for words or actions, leave alone in producing any new constructive bilateral agenda for the relationship — and even not to jeopardise the global strategic stability.

By a curious coincidence, Beijing has also shifted to a somewhat similar frame of mind lately. In fact, Putin spoke on the same day that Yang Jiechi, Politburo member and director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office of the Chinese Communist Party, also emphasised at the talks in Alaska with top American diplomats that Beijing will do no matter what it takes to resist US bullying and interference in China’s internal affairs and safeguard its core interests. (See my blog [Talks in Alaska can be transformative for US-China ties](#))

It is entirely conceivable that Moscow and Beijing have been exchanging notes before concluding that the Biden Administration is setting a trajectory for its Russia-China diplomacy principally with an eye on the domestic audience. From a foreign policy perspective, Biden’s team is holding a weak hand. The US’ political economy is in serious disarray and disrepair and Trump left America adrift like a beached whale. On the other hand, the burning desire to pitch for global hegemony — matched, equally, by the seething fury and despair that China is set to overtake it shortly — has gotten the better of rational thinking.

The talks in Alaska signalled a historic shift in Chinese attitudes, summed up neatly in those three resounding sentences from Yang —

“So let me say here that, in front of the Chinese side, the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength. The U.S. side was not even qualified to say such things even 20 years or 30 years back, because this is not the way to deal with the Chinese people. If the United States wants to deal properly with the Chinese side, then let’s follow the necessary protocols and do things the right way.”

To be sure, the meeting between China’s State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Guilin City on March 22-23 underscored beyond doubt that the Biden administration’s dual containment strategy has

boomeranged. The [Chinese press release \(here\)](#) signals that joint resistance to the US' pressure tactic and countermeasures will henceforth be the leitmotif of the Sino-Russian strategic coordination. This marks a qualitatively shift toward overt strategic coordination to “firmly fight back” against perceived US attempts to threaten the “the security of their own governments and systems..., their legitimate rights and common interests... (and) stability in the areas around the two countries.”

Lavrov's trip aimed to [boost strategic coordination](#) with China, but Moscow does not aim to turn the US into a permanent enemy. Moscow and Beijing share the perspective that Biden's policies are tougher than Trump's. China, in particular, had hopes that Biden will act more reasonably but these hopes have been dashed, so China is trying to find other ways to strengthen its position — the strategic coordination with Russia forms part of it. As for Russia, it tried to turn Biden's “killer” remark around to create a setting for engagement between Putin and Biden.

Biden's domestic compulsions are real. Thus, even as Secretary of State Antony Blinken left for the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels (March 23-24), he got a [written reminder](#) from two powerful Democratic senators — Sen. Bob Menendez, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, Subcommittee Chairman for the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation — to “accelerate the process of building new sanctions packages” apropos the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project between Russia and Germany. The senators urged Blinken “to use all the tools available to stop the pipeline's construction.”

On the contrary, both Russia and China would prefer that the US returns to the path of mutual respect and diplomacy. Indeed, the setting up of a US-China working group on climate change heralds the arrival of John Kerry on the scene. As for the Kremlin, it is quietly pleased that amidst all the sound and fury over the “killer” remark, the US-Russia consultations on space security went through as planned on Tuesday. [Peskov reiterated](#) that the Kremlin valued the cooperation with the US in outer space and hoped for its continuation.

In some ways, arguably, the theatrical developments also work fine for the Kremlin. Interestingly, Russia's State Duma (parliament) [passed legislation](#) today allowing Putin to run for president for two more 6-year terms after the present term ends in 2024 — effectively until 2036. No doubt, the Russian public will accept the need of continuity in Kremlin leadership in such times of trouble.

Beijing cannot but be aware of the Russian paradigm. The red line for Russia and China is that the US seeks regime change through colour revolutions. Hence their determination to pool efforts and work together to counter US hegemony and reshape the international political system based on the principle of equality. Trust Biden to respond.

Certainly, it was no coincidence that the White House decision carrying the imprimatur of Biden to restore the Minsk embassy to ambassadorial level — signifying the summary denouement to an attempted colour revolution that Moscow countered with extraordinary grit and doggedness — was [transmitted to the Belarus foreign minister](#) on March 22 soon after Blinken's return from Alaska. Clearly, Biden's diplomatic experience is not to be doubted.

Both Russia and China estimate that the US plan to encircle them by deploying an alliance

system is doomed to fail and realism will dawn sooner or later. They are convinced that they are on the right side of history.

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Featured image: State Councilor & Foreign Minister Wang Yi (second from right) and Russian FM Sergey Lavrov (L) held talks in Guilin, March 23, 2021 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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