

Joe Biden should break ranks and stop the new Cold War with Russia

His party might be hysterical about Putin but it's not too late for him to pursue collegiality and peace.

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It is oft said that former Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Joe Biden is well-qualified to handle international affairs as president. Indeed, he was chosen as the Democrats' vice presidential nominee by candidate Barack Obama because of his foreign policy experience.

However, knowledge is not the same as judgment. Unfortunately, Biden's mind seems to be locked in the Cold War that ended three decades ago. When interviewed by *60 Minutes* a few weeks ago, he opined: "Well, I think the biggest threat to America right now in terms of breaking up our—our security and our alliances is Russia."

This is a singularly stupid judgment. No wonder Russia has not commented on his victory. The only sensible response would be an insult.

Russia is a unpleasant, authoritarian actor. Vladimir Putin is nationalist strongman determined to advance his, his supporters', and his country's interests. Although Russians see themselves as part of Western and Christian civilization, many do not identify with the West's liberal consensus. Indeed, liberalism disappeared as an effective political force there years ago; opposition figure Alexei Navalny is lionized in the West but appears to be a determined nationalist who disagrees with Putin more over who should rule than how he should rule.

Moscow presents a practical rather than ideological challenge. Communism is dead and buried, and no one makes a pretense of a "Moscow consensus" like a "Beijing consensus" in competition with the "Washington consensus." Internally Putin plays rough with opponents, but this makes him just one of many ugly dictators, some of whom are welcomed with open arms in Washington.

For instance, the American and European governments that have sanctioned Russia arm the even more vile and murderous Saudi dictatorship, which kidnapped royal dissidents from abroad, turned a consulate into an abattoir in which to slice and dice a dissident, and visited death and destruction on neighboring Yemen, one of the poorest nations on earth. And until recently the same Western officials welcomed investment and trade with the People's Republic of China, which is reverting to suffocating totalitarianism at home, including placing hundreds of thousands of people into reeducation camps and committing cultural genocide. What were Washington and Brussels saying about Russia, again?

What of Moscow's foreign policy? Russia has returned to great power mode a la 1914, insisting that its interests be considered, its borders be secure, and its status be respected. Hence its great sensitivity to Western-sponsored regime change and alliance expansion along its border.

Although Russia has proved to be a disruptive power, it has evidenced little interest in geopolitical conquest. Despite the hysteria sometimes triggered by the mere mention of Putin's name, he is no Hitler or Stalin substitute. A renewed Russian empire remains a Russophobe nightmare, nothing more.

Moscow backed the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which had historic identities separate from Georgia; in doing so, Putin weakened a hostile neighboring state and offered payback for NATO's illegal dismemberment of Serbia. Indeed, he cleverly if cynically used American lawlessness as precedent: unilaterally supporting self-determination in the name of humanitarian operations without seeking United Nations sanction.

Crimea was historically part of Russia, transferred internally to Ukraine during the power struggle after Joseph Stalin's death. Its residents probably favored the shift, which was driven by the importance of securing the naval base at Sevastopol from the new U.S.-backed Ukrainian government. Stirring up trouble in Donbass—but not annexing the territory—was a measured if brutal step designed to prevent Ukraine's inclusion in the transatlantic alliance.

The usual hawks have repeatedly and hysterically claimed that these actions threaten the security of Europe, without explaining how. Moscow created unease elsewhere, mostly in the Baltic States, but demonstrated no interest in a full-blown confrontation, let alone war, with Europe and the U.S. And what would Putin gain? Control over three small ruined countries with hostile majority non-Russian populations. The fearmongering looks calculated and cynical, used to justify NATO's continued existence.

Worse, Western provocations have been conveniently consigned to the trash bin for inconvenient memories. Putin entered the presidency demonstrating no anti-U.S. or Western feelings. A career member of the KGB, he appeared to be a worldly and practical nationalist, not a communist. However, the West gave him good reason to be wary.

Declassified documents showed how American and European officials systematically misled Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin as to the prospect for NATO expansion. The Clinton administration treated Moscow of no account in taking the world's greatest military alliance to war against Yugoslavia, which had neither attacked nor threatened any NATO member. A historic part of Serbia with a substantial ethnic Serbian population was occupied and detached without the benefit of international law.

The U.S. and Europe subsequently supported "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, territories that had historically been part of the Russian Empire as well as Soviet Union. In 2008, NATO promised both governments membership in the alliance. Six years later, Europe sought to redirect Ukrainian commerce westward and both Brussels and Washington backed a street putsch against the democratically elected though corrupt president, who was generally friendly toward Moscow. This latter legerdemain triggered Russian intervention in Ukraine.

Russia's brutal assault on the Ukrainian people was unjustified, but allied officials were not innocent Vestal Virgins simply spreading the wonders of liberal democracy. Nor would the U.S. have calmly accepted similar Russian actions in the Western hemisphere. One can barely imagine the mass hysteria, collective psychosis, and war fever that would instantaneously fill Washington if Moscow engineered the overthrow of the Canadian and Mexican governments and invited them to ally with Russia.

Complaints about Russian support for Syria are risible. The two countries have been allies since the 1950s. As for Moscow's involvement in Cuba and Venezuela, it looks mostly like symbolic payback for America's effort to encircle Russia with allies, bases, and troops. Indeed, the U.S. dismisses the idea of spheres of influence because it has taken the Monroe Doctrine global: in Washington's view, the entire world is America's sphere of interest, where the U.S., and only the U.S., is entitled to intervene.

Moscow has been charged with more direct attacks on the U.S., of course. But claims that Russia was paying bounties for American scalps to the Taliban never seemed believable, since the Taliban was then negotiating with the Trump administration. Moreover, both Washington and Moscow have routinely aided deadly enemies of the other simply by providing cash and weapons. In this way, America was responsible for thousands of Soviet deaths in Afghanistan (remember Stinger missiles?). And the Javelin anti-tank missiles sent to Ukraine last year are intended to kill both Russians and Ukrainian separatists. How quickly Americans forget!

The most serious charge against Russia is interfering in America's election. That is a threat, but Washington has intervened in scores of elections around the world—including in Russia in 1996, when the Clinton administration did everything possible to ensure the reelection of Boris Yeltsin. America's culpability does not make Moscow right, but the U.S. could do with a lot less sanctimony and a lot more humility. Washington should offer to disarm as part of a deal, backed by punishments, for mutual forbearance of political interference.

Moscow's behavior neither puts it outside the international norm nor threatens fundamental American interests. Desperately needed is serious negotiation by Washington and Brussels that acknowledges Moscow's interests. The ongoing mini-Cold War benefits only China, to which Russia is leaning. Given Beijing's rise, the West would do far better with Russia at least neutral.

Imagine a broad agreement that accepts geopolitical differences over issues such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea, under which Moscow cuts aid to Cuba and Venezuela and the U.S. drops Abkhazia and South Ossetia as issues. Both governments agree to avoid political interference, including so-called "democracy" aid, which has been directed to foreign groups favored by the U.S. Washington and Moscow could agree to cooperate in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan as American forces steadily exit. Talks between NATO and Russia should move forward over transparency, regular communication, border activity, and confidence-building measures, to reduce opportunities for inadvertent conflict.

Finally, on Ukraine, the U.S. and Europe should drop NATO expansion plans and sanctions. Russia should end support for separatists. Kiev should approve greater regional autonomy, as promised in the Minsk Protocol. Crimea should be set aside, with the West refusing to recognize its annexation and banning economic activity with it, but ending sanctions on Russia over it. Washington should suggest an international referendum to settle the issue by allowing residents to decide which nation they want to live in.

A number of leading foreign policy practitioners recently called for just such a meaningful dialogue with Moscow. They urged "a balanced commitment to deterrence and détente. Thus, while maintaining our defense, we should also engage Russia in a serious and sustained strategic dialogue that addresses the deeper sources of mistrust and hostility and at the same time focuses on the large and urgent security challenges facing both countries."

Can Joe Biden break free of a Cold War mindset? Even that might not be enough. The bizarre bipartisan frenzy over Russia goes deeper. It has little to do with defending America and everything to do with engaging in social engineering around the globe. Russia is not a serious threat to the U.S. beyond its possession of nuclear weapons, which, ironically, are made more dangerous by the deteriorating bilateral relationship. Which provides another reason to improve bilateral relations.

It took anti-communist Richard Nixon to go to Beijing. Could Russophobe Joe Biden go to Moscow? His supporters advertise him as naturally pragmatic and centrist. He could be the president to recognize that Russia has legitimate interests and cannot be expected to subordinate its security to Washington's demand for global hegemony. Indeed, the best way to protect U.S. security would be to curb America's wildly overwrought geopolitical ambitions, which guarantee needless conflict with powers around the world, including Russia.

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