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The American Conservative

America's Two-Front Cold War

A course correction is urgently needed, and it should begin with a much less belligerent policy toward Russia.

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The United States is on increasingly wretched terms with both Russia and the People's Republic of China. Indeed, the 2021 Annual Threat Assessment by the intelligence community portrays those two countries as the main threats that the United States faces.

Adopting a confrontational policy toward two major powers simultaneously reflects serious foreign policy malpractice and creates a potentially perilous situation. Henry Kissinger once remarked that Washington should always seek to be on better terms with both Moscow and Beijing than they are with each other. Recent administrations have violated that sage advice, and the United States now is in the position of trying to wage a two-front cold war. Moreover, largely thanks to the clumsiness of U.S. foreign policy, both of those cold war theaters have serious potential to turn hot. Joe Biden's administration still has time to reverse those ominous trends, but doing so will require drastic changes to Washington's strategy.

Policymakers need to start with the basics. If they are determined to conduct even a single-front cold war (not necessarily a prudent policy in itself), it is necessary to take two important steps. One is to repair relations with the lesser adversary. The other is to "clear the decks" of as many secondary and peripheral commitments as possible. Unfortunately, the Biden administration shows few signs of taking either action.

Some analysts contend that the president's decision to end the seemingly interminable mission in Afghanistan indicated that officials are beginning to clear the decks to focus on the challenges that peer competitors, primarily Russia and China, pose. However, there is little evidence that the Afghanistan decision is part of a larger pattern. The Biden administration shows no inclination towards executing a similar withdrawal from Iraq or Syria. The pace of U.S. military activity in both countries remains high, and Washington appears to be injecting new energy into the effort to marginalize or oust Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Relations between the United States and the Saudi-led Gulf coalition may have cooled marginally, but the Biden administration still maintains America's longstanding patron-client relationship with Riyadh. Despite official

assurances that Washington was pulling back from its support for the Saudi coalition's war in Yemen, the United States still is providing intelligence and logistical support.

Even the highly touted withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan is less comprehensive than officials and the media portray. A significant number of intelligence personnel will apparently remain in that country. Moreover, the United States hopes to maintain or even strengthen a military and intelligence-gathering presence in neighboring Central Asian countries.

Closer to home, Washington continues trying to contain and even undermine the radical leftist regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Calls also are rising for Washington to launch a humanitarian intervention to dampen the mounting chaos and resolve the chronically incompetent governance in Haiti. If the administration will not or cannot resist the temptation to try to micromanage the affairs of such small, dysfunctional countries, the foreign policy decks will become exceedingly cluttered.

The administration seems even less capable of making the crucial decision about which country, Russia or China, is the primary adversary. Instead, it continues to antagonize both. Not only does this risk creating a very dangerous case of strategic overextension, it is driving Moscow and Beijing together. In essence, current U.S. policy is creating the opposite of Kissinger's model: a situation in which Moscow and Beijing develop closer ties to each other than either has to the United States. That is a wholly unsatisfactory situation from the standpoint of American interests.

The vast economic ties—especially the \$638.4 billion annual trade in goods and services in 2019, the last pre-COVID year—between the United States and the PRC may help prevent a breach in bilateral relations. There is no comparable buffer to ease the chill in Washington's relations with Russia. The annual bilateral trade in 2019 was a mere \$34.9 billion. Even with respect to China, economic factors alone do not appear to be sufficient to prevent the slide into cold war. The bitter trade disputes that developed during Donald Trump's administration, and continue during Biden's presidency, have contributed to the worsening relationship.

Economic considerations alone do not drive relations between states, especially great powers. Security calculations, the need to placate domestic constituencies, and matters of national pride can, and historically sometimes have, overridden even potent economic factors. It's worthwhile to recall that France and Germany were each other's principal trading partners in 1914, but that relationship, important as it was, did not prevent those two countries from marching into a continental bloodbath. One dare not assume that the economic links between the United States and the PRC will be sufficient to stave off a cold war—or even a hot one.

The mounting tensions over Taiwan and territorial disputes in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea in recent years suggest that strategic pressures are pointing toward an unpleasant outcome. Washington's naval and air presence in both bodies of water, as well as in the highly sensitive Taiwan Strait, is growing steadily, and Beijing's reaction is becoming increasingly angry. The Biden administration is pressing Japan to play a stronger role in an implicit policy to contain China's power. It also has emphasized the continuing U.S. commitment to protect Japan's possession and control of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, despite Beijing's rival claims.

The deterioration of Washington's relations with Russia is even more pronounced. In June and July 2021 alone, the United States adopted several new measures that produced vehement

Russian protests. Washington signed an agreement with Hungary, giving U.S. forces the right to utilize two air bases. That move was the latest manifestation of a rapidly growing U.S. military presence in Eastern Europe—directly contradicting assurances previous presidential administrations had given to Moscow. On July 12, the United States and 11 NATO allies launched a series of war games in the Black Sea. That set came on the heels of the 32-nation, two-week war games in the same body of water. Such military maneuvers are inherently menacing to Russia, since they take place in close proximity to its crucial naval base at Sevastopol. Farther north, U.S. forces conducted joint “military drills” with units from Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania.

War games are not the only recent manifestation of U.S. belligerence toward Russia. In mid-April, the Biden administration expelled Russian diplomats and imposed new sanctions on Moscow for its alleged interference in the 2020 U.S. elections and its supposed failure to take action against cyberattacks emanating from Russian soil. President Biden exacerbated the already frosty bilateral relationship when he referred to Russian President Vladimir Putin as “a killer with no soul.”

There are multiple signs of growing collaboration between Russia and the PRC in response to U.S. pressure on both countries. Some analysts even have begun to speculate about the emergence of a de facto alliance. Such a conclusion may be premature, but there is little doubt the bilateral relationship is becoming much closer and collaboration is occurring on diplomatic, economic, and military fronts.

The surge in Russia-PRC cooperation is largely the consequence of U.S. policies toward both countries, but especially toward Russia. Washington’s belligerent stance against Moscow has left Russian leaders with the impression that they have little choice but to strengthen ties with Beijing as a counterweight. Given the lengthy border between Russia and China and the inherent jockeying of the two countries for preeminence in Central Asia, Moscow and Beijing normally should have more to fear from each other than from the United States. It required exceptionally clumsy, abrasive behavior on Washington’s part to forfeit that advantage.

One might argue that the wisest course would be for the Biden administration to abandon the increasingly difficult and unrewarding quest to maintain U.S. global primacy and seek to improve relations with both Russia and China. At a minimum, Washington needs to make a choice, pursuing a rapprochement with Russia or China to focus on effectively waging a confrontational policy toward the other power. A sober assessment would indicate that China is definitely the more capable and determined challenger. Therefore, Washington should move to repair relations with Russia, the lesser threat. Russia’s \$1.4 trillion economy ranks eleventh in the world, behind South Korea and just ahead of Brazil. Conversely, China’s \$15.2 trillion makes that country the world’s second largest economic power. Those figures mean that Russia is a second-tier economic player, while China is a strong peer competitor that is closing fast on the United States. Moreover, Beijing is assiduously using its financial resources to cultivate substantial influence around the world. Russia cannot hope to match that capability.

From the standpoint of military power, Russia might seem to be the more dangerous foe, but Moscow’s clout is due almost entirely to its large nuclear arsenal. In terms of conventional weaponry, China’s military (especially its navy), is at least as potent as Russia’s conventional forces, given Beijing’s concentration over the past two decades on funding and developing highly sophisticated systems. Moreover, as John Mueller and other astute experts have noted,

while nuclear weapons may be useful for deterrence, they are not particularly effective for bullying other countries. And unless a country's leaders want it to commit national suicide, such weapons are not useful at all for warfighting.

If the Biden administration is determined to have the United States confront a potential rival and contain its power, China is by far the stronger challenger to America's position as the incumbent global hegemon. That means that the United States needs to pursue a rapprochement with Moscow as soon as possible. Attempting to conduct a two-front cold war is the worst possible option. Unfortunately, that appears to be Washington's de facto strategy. At best, the current approach will intensify an already alarming strategic overextension that is exhausting the country economically and otherwise. It also is likely to result eventually in a diplomatic and military showdown with a Russia-PRC alliance that will outmatch the United States and its ragged network of reluctant allies and clients. A course correction is urgently needed, and it should begin with a much less belligerent policy toward Russia.

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