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US miscalculations are now legion — but what to do now?

Adaptation — to a multipolar world in which Washington doesn't always call the shots — is the first step.

Ted Galen Carpenter

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The Biden administration continues to misconstrue international realities with respect to U.S. policy toward Russia.

One common feature linking those multiple miscalculations is arrogance. U.S. officials cling to the assumptions of a bygone era when U.S. power and influence vastly eclipsed that of any other nation — or combination of nations. Washington enjoyed that status in the initial decades after World War II, when it faced only one credible adversary, the USSR. Moscow's seemingly aggressive ambitions caused small and midsize powers outside the Soviet orbit to take cover behind Washington's security shield and (with rare exceptions) defer to Washington's wishes.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the United States enjoyed another period of diplomatic and strategic dominance — despite the world becoming increasingly multipolar economically. Indeed, in some respects, U.S. political and military dominance during the following decade was even greater than it had been during the immediate post-World War II period, since the United States didn't have even the Soviet Union as a challenger.

The 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century epitomized what Charles Krauthammer called America's "unipolar moment." President George H. W. Bush's comment that "what we [the United States] say goes," reflected the attitude that policymakers adopted. Subsequent U.S. administrations, though, failed to understand that it was a unipolar "moment," not a permanent new era.

Unfortunately, Biden administration officials operate as though the unipolar moment still exists. In the process, they have greatly overestimated Washington's ability to impose its will on other countries. Administration leaders dismissed the Kremlin's repeated warnings that trying to make Ukraine a NATO military asset would cross a red line with respect to Russia's security. They discovered belatedly that Vladimir Putin was not about to cower and accept U.S. diktats simply because the United States insisted that Ukraine had a "right" to join NATO. Nor did he accept the proposition that Washington had a right to make Ukraine a de facto U.S. military ally perched on Russia's border.

Administration policies since the war began have been equally inept. Biden and his foreign policy team's naïve expectation that other important international actors would obediently join Washington's crusade to coerce Moscow has not materialized. Biden initially insisted that the

world stood united against Russia's aggression. Administration officials touted a vote by the UN General Assembly a few days after the invasion began that supposedly confirmed such unity, noting that only five members voted against a resolution criticizing the invasion.

In reality, the vote was an early warning signal that the United States could expect little support outside its own bloc for substantive actions against Russia. Although the resolution was a purely symbolic, toothless measure that didn't commit a country to do anything, 35 UN members abstained, refusing to placate Washington.

Matters have grown worse since then. The coalition that the U.S. was able to assemble consisted almost entirely of NATO and America's longtime military allies in East Asia. The rest of the global map confirms that virtually no countries in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, Africa, or even Latin America have responded favorably to Washington's pressure and imposed economic sanctions. It is especially significant that such key powers as China, India, South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil and Mexico remain on the sidelines.

Although Washington insists that repelling Russia's aggression against Ukraine is essential to preserve the "rules based, liberal international order," governments and populations in the "Global South" see matters differently. To them, the war looks more like a mundane power struggle between Russia and a Western client state. As one African scholar put it: "many in Africa and the rest of the Global South do not regard — and never have regarded — the liberal international order as particularly liberal or international."

Even warnings and implied threats from the Biden administration have not dislodged such countries from refusing to join the U.S.-led effort to isolate Russia. Such a response graphically illustrates the rapidly growing limits to Washington's influence — and the continuing refusal of U.S. leaders to face that reality.

Administration policymakers also have overestimated the adverse impact of the economic sanctions from the smaller coalition the United States was able to lead. There is little question that the Russian economy has suffered, but the effect on the Kremlin's Ukraine policy appears to be nil. Initially, the Ruble plunged in value, and President Biden referred to it derisively as "the Rubble." However, even that strategy has produced mixed results. The Ruble has rebounded impressively, and Russia's economy has cushioned the other shocks by increasing its links to China, Iran, and other countries.

Moreover, Putin's government has demonstrated that it has significant leverage of its own. By limiting its energy exports to the global market — especially natural gas to European countries — Moscow has helped drive up energy prices dramatically. The economic strain that those and other countries are now facing has led to growing criticism of the policies that NATO and the EU are pursuing. Indeed, one could make the case that the Western countries are suffering at least as much as Russia from the sanctions regime. At a minimum, U.S.-NATO sanctions have been far from cost-free to their initiators.

Fissures regarding that policy are beginning to emerge even within the NATO bloc. Turkey is behaving more like a would-be mediator to end the Russia-Ukraine war than as a loyal member

of the Alliance's campaign to isolate Putin. Hungary's Viktor Orban recently contended that that the European Union had not merely shot itself in the foot by embracing Washington's sanctions strategy, but shot itself in the lungs. Such discontent is surfacing months before Russian manipulation of natural gas supplies could lead to a cold, very uncomfortable winter throughout Europe.

Washington needs to make some major policy adjustments, and perhaps even more important, learn some broader lessons needed to prevent a repetition of the current failures.

Crucially, U.S. leaders must understand that major powers such as Russia cannot and will not be intimidated. The Biden administration has acted as though pressuring Russia and ignoring that country's security concerns is akin to the same strategy the United States has used against second or third-tier powers, such as Serbia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and North Korea.

Washington's capitulation diplomacy has not worked well even in those settings; it has failed utterly with respect to a major power. Instead of becoming more realistic and flexible, though, administration policymakers have reacted with petulance. Only now has there been an announced meeting between Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov — the first since the start of the Ukraine war. This is not a healthy approach to dealing with a country that possesses several thousand nuclear weapons.

Finally, U.S. leaders must finally come to the realization that the world is multipolar politically, diplomatically, and strategically, as well as economically. The unipolar moment is long over, and the United States must re-learn how to operate in such a system. Washington no longer calls all the shots on important matters. The Biden administration must stop acting as though it does and adapt accordingly.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.