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US continues to push China and Russia together at its own peril

It's called institutionalizing hubris, and it's taking U.S. global foreign policy nowhere fast.

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September 24th, 2021

President Joe Biden recently called Chinese President Xi Jinping, apparently hoping to salvage a bilateral relationship both competitive and cooperative. But Xi apparently rejected Biden's proposal for a summit. Such is the price for turning the bilateral relationship into a political football.

While planning America's exit from Afghanistan, the Biden administration went looking for air bases nearby from which to launch counter terrorism strikes, if necessary. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin told Washington that he objected to a U.S. military presence elsewhere in Central Asia. Putin's opinion carries significant weight in the five former Soviet republics. Such is the cost of launching a new cold war against Moscow.

Overall, the Biden administration is paying a substantial price for deteriorating ties with both China and Russia. That decline is not only Washington's fault, of course. They are authoritarian states destined to have substantive disagreements with the U.S. in the best of times. However, successive presidents have heedlessly poisoned relations with both countries, sometimes seeming ready to abandon civil contact altogether.

Afghanistan is the latest example of America harming its own interests by its confrontational approach to its major rivals. Russia obviously has no love for radical Islam. Putin was the first world leader to offer his support after 9/11 and initially supported American military operations. However, the U.S. spent years treating Moscow as an enemy, recklessly expanding NATO and later sanctioning Moscow over Ukraine. Russia eventually forged a relationship with the Taliban, possibly even providing military aid.

The People's Republic of China shares America's interest in a stable Afghanistan—open for resource development, host to safe transit routes, and free of violent threats. Beijing played little role there when the U.S. was in charge, but as the Kabul government tottered a Taliban delegation visited China. Counter terrorism and economic development were discussed. As Washington withdrew the PRC sharply criticized American policy and began forging a relationship with the new Kabul government.

The U.S. would benefit from cooperation with both Russia and China, but neither is likely to work with Washington. The two have managed competing interests elsewhere in Central Asia and likely will do the same in Afghanistan. They have little reason to aid America after its botched withdrawal.

Moscow and Beijing are playing a bigger role in the Middle East. Last week Syria's Bashar al-Assad, who survived a decade-long civil war only through military assistance from the Putin government, made an unannounced visit to Moscow. Also last week, Assad's forces took control of sections of Daraa controlled by opposition forces through an agreement brokered by Russia. Moscow is active elsewhere in the Middle East, signing a military cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia last month after Washington pulled its missile defense systems out of the Kingdom. Russia earlier intervened in Libya's civil war, though it was outplayed by Turkey, and plans to build a naval base in Sudan.

The PRC has been increasing oil purchases from Iran, defying U.S. threats to crack down to enforce U.S. sanctions. Potentially even more significant, China inked an agreement to invest \$400 billion in Tehran's oil, gas, and petrochemical industries over the next 25 years. Whether the specific program is more aspirational than operational remains to be seen, but Beijing appears ready to go big in Iran's energy industry.

Neither China nor Russia is going to replace the U.S. in the Middle East anytime soon, especially militarily. Nevertheless, they can frustrate or aid specific Washington geopolitical objectives. Particularly important has been their role in helping Syria and Iran survive American economic pressure. The Gulf states also use Moscow and Beijing as bargaining chips to get arms and other concessions from Washington.

Russia and the PRC also greatly influence Washington's campaign against North Korea. In contrast to when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was first formed, Moscow today plays a secondary role. Nevertheless, it has some influence in and provides some economic benefits to Pyongyang, and could be helpful to the Biden administration. So could China, which looms much larger in the North's calculations. Despite a rocky relationship with the DPRK during Kim's early tenure, Beijing today is helping keep North Korea afloat amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Russia and China do not want a nuclear North, which threatens regional stability, but neither will impose measures that risk causing North Korea's economic and social collapse. Beijing also fears Korean unification, leading to even more American military bases and troops stationed near China's border. These issues are ripe for negotiation and compromise, but mutual accommodation appears beyond reach as the bilateral relationships continue their rapid descent.

Consider sanctions enforcement. Of late Pyongyang's northern neighbors have actively hindered U.S. policy. A recent example is protecting North Korea from the United Nations expert panel monitoring sanctions enforcement. Russia's expert was unhelpful. China's representative actively undermined the panel's work.

Reported the Wall Street Journal: "The Chinese government gave perfunctory responses to the panel's questions, hindering investigation into a range of issues including ships suspected of engaging in sanctions-busting while operating in Chinese waters, the people said. China's expert on the panel also filled the report with dissenting footnotes, questioning his colleagues' findings and raising objections to issues unrelated to North Korea." Only a few years ago both nations supported Washington's tough sanctions policy. No longer.

Yet the possibility of amicable cooperation at the U.N. was evident when Washington and Beijing worked together on a deal which temporarily keeps an opponent of the Burmese military junta as his nation's recognized U.N. representative. Which means the brutal regime, responsible for killing more than 1,000 protestors and other opponents, will not be able to speak during the upcoming General Assembly session.

The dispute is complicated because the rules for recognition are more practical than moral. However, contra conventional wisdom, the PRC had nothing to do with the coup, which overthrew a government with which Beijing had good relations. China therefore is seeking a balanced response. The U.N. arrangement was a compromise and demonstrates that the U.S. can find common ground even with its most important rival.

U.S. policymakers act as if America was still the unipower, the hyperpower, the essential nation as was oft said. However, treating both China and Russia, which mix increasing economic and military strength, as enemies pushed them together. This careless arrogance encourages both rivals to act against American priorities around the world.

Washington needs a policy reset. There always will be important issues dividing the U.S. from China and Russia. However, Americans should look for opportunities to cooperate when possible. Institutionalizing hubris as part of American grand strategy is unnecessarily sacrificing important American interests.

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