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The Biden Presidency

A Divided, Chaotic US: In Russia's Interest?

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Given the tense relationship between Russia and the US in the last few years, it is tempting to assume that a divided, chaotic and increasingly inward-looking US, would be in Russia's interest. However, this is a flawed assumption. The election of Joseph Biden as president is unlikely to change Russia's perception.

COMMENTARY

THE DEPTH of long-standing socio-political divisions and instability in the United States saw its zenith on 6 January 2021, with the storming of the US Capitol. These domestic divisions could lead to a distracted and unstable US; the conclusion one could reach would be that Russia would see this development as conducive to Moscow's security and strategic interests.

The following factors belie this assumption. The election of Joseph Biden as president is not going to change Russia's perspective of the US.

Domestic Factors

In Russian eyes, the long-proclaimed status of the US as an exemplar of democracy has been questioned, especially since scenes of civil unrest in a number of US cities in 2020 became world news, including the then president Donald Trump's questioning of the outcome of the presidential election, and the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.

They have only strengthened the critical stance of Russian officials towards the US as seen by the comments of Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova; she was quoted as saying that “The electoral system in the United States is archaic, it does not meet modern democratic standards”.

The head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma, Leonid Slutsky, was quoted as saying that the US “cannot now impose electoral standards on other countries and claim to be the world’s ‘beacon of democracy’.”

In the last decade or more, the US has been perceived and portrayed as the greatest threat to Russia’s stability and to some extent, even its existence as a sovereign and independent state.

Should the US’ current domestic challenges prove insurmountable and lead it to devote less attention and energy towards the outside world, the US would effectively cease to be Russia’s “main opponent”. Moreover, Russia’s leaders would no longer be able to focus their people’s attention on a powerful foreign adversary, which has helped to act as a unifying rallying force.

Foreign Policy Factors

In the current geopolitical constellation, the US and China are key to Russia’s self-confidence and notions of a great power with global ambitions. Russia can relate only to these two world powers as equals while other countries, in the absence of strong military and/or economic power, are not seen in a similar fashion.

Anti-Russian sentiments expected to rise in the US:

The political unrest in the US and assumption to power of President Biden might lead to more intense anti-Russian sentiments, as the country seeks a foreign adversary to apportion blame for its internal problems. This assessment has been echoed by many Russian observers.

President Vladimir Putin has been emphasising all these years that Russia is a conservative power, dedicated to preserving and maintaining stability, domestically and abroad. Hence, Russia has criticised US or Western efforts to pursue policies which it perceives as destabilising and which had led or could lead to regime change, including and especially in the former Soviet space and in Russia itself.

China’s rapid rise might be of concern:

Now that stability in the US is seen as questionable, Russian leaders must be concerned about its long-term impact on Russia’s foreign policy, especially with respect to China.

It cannot be in Russia’s interest to have struggled so long against perceived US plans to dominate it only to be possibly and indirectly dominated by China, whose geographical proximity and fast growth rates represent a more visceral and palpable challenge to Russia’s notions of sovereignty and independence.

Russia's ties with China today are stronger than with the US or other Western powers. Not only is China its largest trade partner, but major Chinese investments in Russia are focused not only on energy but increasingly in the tech sector.

A recent report by scholars, Anastasia Muravyeva and Vasily Lemutov published in the Carnegie Moscow Centre presciently points out that "Chinese tech giants like Huawei and Alibaba, guided exclusively by market principles, are quietly incorporating Russia into a technological Pax Sinica, and Western sanctions are only speeding up that process."

The report cites as examples the fact that Chinese smart phones have been the market leaders in Russia since 2015, and now account for nearly 60% of market share, and that Lenovo dominates the Russian computer market, with over 23% of the laptop market in the first quarter of 2020.

The report concludes that in the face of US-China tensions, private Chinese tech companies would play an important role in ensuring that Russia remains firmly on the Chinese side of the digital fence.

Time Not on Russia's Side

In the face of a distracted and unstable US, the window for Russia to remain relatively free of China's growing strength and influence, appears to be closing rapidly.

China is expected to become the world's largest economy before the end of the decade, a Deutsche Welle report in late December 2020 quoted a new report by a UK think tank as saying.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research said in its annual report that it expected "the US' share of global GDP to decline from 2021 onwards, and for the country to eventually be overtaken by China as the world's largest economy". This would take place in 2028, "five years sooner than in the previous edition of the WELT," referring to the think tank's World Economic League Table, which measures countries' economic performance.

Despite consistently optimistic declaratory statements about the state of its relations with China, Russia cannot but be concerned should the US domestic situation take a turn for the worse and America sinks into chaos and becomes more inward-looking; Russia's concern would be mitigated should President Biden's policies lead to a completely different trajectory.

The "loss" of the US as its "main opponent" could mean that in the long-term, China might come to occupy this position should the current stable relationship between the two countries undergo a sea change.

Hence, Russia ironically requires a stable and powerful US to remain in the triangular geopolitical contest for global dominance and to balance China's inevitable and rapid rise to number one in the world. Russia would not want to face Chinese power on its own. Will the US under President Biden play ball?

Christopher Cheang is a Senior Fellow in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore whose expertise and research focus is on Russia.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg