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Biden's "Putin Killer" Remark: Moscow's Calculated Response

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The atmospherics in Russia-US relations soured following President Biden's "killer" remark about President Putin, and Moscow's subsequent recall of its ambassador to the US. Putin himself, meanwhile, strikes a calculated posture. What now?

COMMENTARY

IN A US television interview aired on 17 March 2021, President Joe Biden was asked whether he thought Russia's President Vladimir Putin was a killer. In reply, the new American leader said: "I do".

From Moscow, Putin responded by wishing Biden good health. He added: "I am saying this without irony or tongue in cheek ... when we evaluate other people, or even other states and nations, we are always facing a mirror, we always see ourselves in the reflection, because we project our inner selves onto the other person."

Putin's Image of Reasonableness: Posturing?

Describing the American people as "mostly honest, decent and sincere" and "who want to live in peace and friendship with us, something we are aware of and appreciate, and we will rely on them in the future," Putin criticised US domestic and foreign policy, placing the blame on the US ruling class.

He said that Russia would work with the US but only in areas it is interested in, and on terms beneficial to Russia. Seeking to project an image of reasonableness and signal that Russia is still willing to continue a dialogue, Putin proposed having a "live, online" conversation with the US president.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, subsequently explained to reporters that the proposal implied open dialogue and not debate, noting that Biden's remarks "are quite unprecedented, so in order not to let these statements harm bilateral Russian-American relations, which are already in a deplorable state, President Putin suggested discussing the situation but doing so openly".

Other Russian officials however took a stronger line. The Foreign Ministry in Moscow recalled the Russian ambassador in Washington DC for consultations. Vyacheslav Volodin, Speaker of the Duma, described Biden's comments as "unacceptable," adding that "they offend the citizens of Russia".

Federation Council (Upper House) Deputy Speaker Konstantin Kosachev, also described Biden's remark as "unacceptable," warning that they "inevitably lead to a sharp exacerbation of our bilateral ties".

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on 22 March that the US was anticipating "tough days" in relations with Russia. In reaction, Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev stressed that the US would be responsible for that.

Reflecting Russia's wish not to worsen the relationship, Patrushev stressed that Russia was "committed to constructive cooperation", adding that "we haven't taken any hostile steps against the United States, we are not taking any now, nor are we planning to take any in the future". Patrushev's words carry weight, as he is a member of Putin's inner circle.

Sword of Damocles over Ties

Without directly judging Biden's remark, Nabila Massrali, spokesperson for the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, commented as well.

She was quoted as saying on 18 March that there was "a long list of failed – in some cases, and successful in other cases – assassinations carried out against critical, independent figures in Russia, including politicians and journalists". She added that Putin "ultimately holds the responsibility for the Russian authorities, Russian policy and actions".

According to a European Council press statement of 22 March, European Council president, Charles Michel, said that EU relations with Russia are at a "low point".

Yet, the EU must exercise caution vis-à-vis Russia, since the latter is a major energy and raw material source, and trade partner with the largest consumer market on the continent. Moreover, Germany and other EU states would like to purchase Russia's Sputnik V vaccine.

The standpoint of Germany is noteworthy. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas expressed no surprise at the "clear language" from the Biden administration on Russia. Nevertheless, he noted that the US had renewed the New START arms control treaty, showing that the US was ready for dialogue and coming to an agreement with Russia on global challenges.

The US' continued opposition to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project (the 1,230 km pipeline that will double Russian gas exports to the EU) and Germany's continued commitment to it, however, will hang like a sword of Damocles over Russo-US as well as US-German relations.

Russian Motivations

Putin's "softer" line towards Biden's "killer" remark shows Russia's interest in ensuring that the bilateral relationship does not deteriorate irreversibly. It also reflects Putin's efforts to appear reasonable to his own people as well as the American people, in cognisance of the dissonance of views within the body politic of the US (and Europe).

It was not a coincidence that Russian state TV, Rossia 24, reported on 20 March that the Russian ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov had expressed his thanks to American citizens for their support of good relations between the two countries.

Nevertheless, the "harder" approach of top legislators Volodin and Kosachev signals that as a great power, Russia cannot simply react with sangfroid at Biden's remark.

Seeking not to burn Moscow's bridges with the EU, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during a visit to China on 23 March, pointed out that Russia was ready to build its relations with the EU should it eliminate an "anomaly in contacts" (i.e., its unilateral decisions to impose sanctions).

He noted that there were "only a few European partner countries that have a desire to act based on their national interests". (He must have had in mind Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and France; they account for over half of trade between Russia and the EU, Russia's leading partner).

Delinking from Western-controlled SWIFT?

Lavrov said that Russia seeks to work with China to reduce the impact of any further sanctions. In that regard, Lavrov proposed the reduction of his country's "exposure to sanctions by strengthening our technological independence and switching to settlements in national and international currencies other than the dollar" as well as moving "away from using Western-controlled international payment systems".

Lavrov's statement is not new; in 2018, the then deputy prime minister Arkady Dvorkovich stated that Russian financial institutions and firms were ready to work without SWIFT's services. As early as 2015, the then prime minister Dmitry Medvedev called attention to perceived Western countries' threats to restrict Russia's operations through SWIFT, warning that Russia's reaction to such a move "will be without limits".

In the light of Biden's remark and the announcement of planned US sanctions, Russia does not want more comprehensive US/EU sanctions that might further hurt its economy. Russia also has other common issues to resolve with the US such as climate change, the Middle East, Ukraine, Afghanistan, arms control regime and cyberspace governance.

For all intents and purposes, Russia's reaction to the US leader's remark is

deliberately calibrated but it is unlikely to weaken US or European resolve to impose further sanctions.

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