Russia in the global balance

Better ties with Russia help the US with its China challenge. It would also make it easier for the US to parlay its leverage in Japan and India to intensify ties with Moscow.

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For The Straits Times

Way back in July 1991, Dr Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to US president Richard Nixon, travelled on a secret mission to Beijing after being diagnose with existing cancer. Nixon's decision to play the so-called "China card" during the Cold War with the Soviet Union set the stage for transforming the US-China relationship, integrating China into the global economy, restructuring great power relations, and redrawing the Asian regional order.

Could a potential interlude between the United States and Russia bring about something similar in world politics today?

The idea has little traction within last month's presidential summit between Mr Joe Biden and Mr Vladimir Putin in Geneva. Although the nuclear threat remains a key concern, the US and Russia have not announced any new sanctions on Moscow.

The Biden Shift

President Biden has surprised America and the world by bringing to bear the thesis that Washington must begin to engage Russia if it wants to solve the Chinese challenge. If Mr Putin's personal and character conduct prevented Washington's reassessment of relations with Beijing and Moscow, Mr Biden appeared well-armed.

He has promised "extreme competition" with China and has ordered the door to Russia. Mr Biden's decision to have an early summit with Russian President Putin certainly went against the grain of entrenched distrust of Russia and extended personal demonization of Putin in the US and Western capitals.

The June summit in Geneva did not produce any dramatic breakthroughs, but the two sides agreed to restore frayed diplomatic relations, initiate talks on strategic stability and arms control, and explore the prospects for cooperation in cyber security. More important than the outcome was Mr Biden's willingness to offer a measure of respect that Mr Putin seeks.

If President Bайдen has dismissed Russia as a "regional power", Mr Biden called Russia a "great power". Mr Putin was equally ready to reciprocate the pragmatism of Mr Biden and both sides had drawn their respective red lines. Both sides are now ready to explore ways and means to better manage their troubled ties.

The Chinese question was not far from Mr Putin's mind in Geneva. When asked by the press after the summit if Mr Putin was trying to disrupt the US and the West and push for a new Cold War, Mr Putin responded by downplaying the Russian thesis.

Explaining Mr Putin's difficulties, Mr Biden said the "last thing he wants now is a Cold War". He pointed to Russia's "multi-thousand-mile border with China" and Beijing's rapidly growing economic and military power. He also pointed to Mr Putin's concerns about being "encircled by the West" and about America trying to "take him down".

This argument is indeed different from the dominant perspective on Russia in Washington. The US-Russia relations can change under Mr Biden: the US-Russia relations could change under Mr Putin did not return the attention to Beijing, which is so actively sensitive to shifting power balances. The United States called the new American effort to separate Russia from China a "real opportunity" and pointed to the extraordinary depth of Beijing's strategic partnership with Moscow.

It is indeed true that the Sino-Russian relationship has never been as vigorous as it is today. In fact, barely days after the US-Russia summit, China welcomed Russia along with the US to join the East Asia Summit in 2020. Moscow also cooperated with China to parlay its leverage in Japan and India in order to intensify ties with Moscow. India's longstanding defence partnership with Russia has come under the shadow of US sanctions in recent years. And Tokyo's outreach to Moscow in recent years has been constrained by Russia's worsening ties with the West.

As an Asian country, China was in a weak, at a time when its power was waning behind that of the US. In the Sino-American entente, dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape in Asia. It helped China to recover its relative position with both Washington and Moscow. A reappraisal between Russia and China could have similar consequences in both the Sino-American and Russia's alliance for the Sino-American alliance with the West. As a hard-headed realist, Mr Putin would not want to miss the fragile opening to the West offered by Mr Biden. His next moves should be of great interest around the world.

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