

By Invitation

Russia in the global balance

Better ties with Russia help the US with its China challenge. It would also make it easier for some Asian powers like Japan and India to intensify ties with Moscow.



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For *The Straits Times*

Way back in July 1971, Dr Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to US president Richard Nixon, travelled on a secret mission to Beijing after feigning illness during a visit to Pakistan. America'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 communist China into the global economy, restructuring great power relations, and reshaping the Asian regional order.

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

The idea had little traction until last month's presidential summit between Mr Joe Biden and Mr Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

Although entrenched scepticism about a reset between US and Russia has not ebbed, the idea of rejigging the triangular dynamic between Washington, Moscow and Beijing no longer appears outlandish.

Ever since the US relationship with China started going downhill in the late 2000s, there has been chatter in Washington on playing the "Russia card" to balance China. But the intensity of the Sino-US interdependence and Washington's strategic condescension towards Moscow meant there were few takers for the "Russia card" in the US foreign policy establishment.

The growing number of irritants in the US-Russia relationship during the 2010s made it even less likely that Washington would

attach some weight to a Russian role in rebalancing the world in America's favour.

It was Mr Biden's predecessor, Mr Donald Trump, who sought to alter the US debate on Russia, as on so many other issues, including China, economic globalisation, and the Middle East.

Through his campaign for the presidency in 2016 and in the early part of his tenure at the White House, Mr Trump publicly called for improved relations with Russia; but his enthusiasm for Russia, ironically, turned out to be the biggest obstacle to realising that objective.

The Democratic Party has convinced itself that it was Russian interference that helped Mr Trump "steal" the presidential election in 2016. It wasted no time in launching a campaign to discredit president Trump as a "Russian stooge". As the divide over Russia became the principal political fault line in America, Mr Trump had little room to reset US-Russia ties.

In fact, Mr Trump had to constantly prove himself as being "tougher" on Russia by imposing ever newer sanctions on Moscow.

THE BIDEN SHIFT

President Biden has surprised America and the world by buying the thesis that Washington must begin to engage Russia if it wants to meet the Chinese challenge. If Mr Trump's persona and chaotic conduct prevented Washington's reassessment of relations with Beijing and Moscow, Mr Biden appears well on course.

He has promised "extreme competition" with China and has opened 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 demonisation of Mr Putin in the US and the West.

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 accommodation on cyber security. More important than the outcome was Mr Biden's willingness to offer a measure of respect that Mr Putin seeks.

If president Barack Obama had 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 China question was not far from Mr Biden'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 pushing for a new Cold War, Mr Biden responded by downplaying the Russian threat.

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 possibility that US-Russia relations could change under Mr Biden did not escape the attention of Beijing, which is so acutely sensitive to shifting power equations. The *Global Times* called the new American effort to separate Russia from China a "stupid idea" 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 expansive as it is today. In fact, barely days after his

summit with Mr Biden, Mr Putin joined Chinese President Xi Jinping to renew the friendship treaty signed two decades ago.

On the face of it, there is no reason for Mr Putin to exchange this solid relationship with China for the uncertain promise of a better relationship with the US. Mr Putin is extremely conscious of the obstacles to an improved relationship with the Americans. Yet, at the same time, he is also aware of the growing power imbalance with China.

PLUSES FOR RUSSIA

The Chinese economy, now at nearly US\$15 trillion (S\$20.3 trillion), is 10 times bigger than that of Russia. And the gap is only likely to increase as China continues to gallop ahead. China is also gaining strategic ground in areas like Central Asia and Eastern Europe that Russia considers its backyard.

Even a limited improvement in the relationship with the US will

increase Russia's geopolitical space vis-a-vis China. It also creates some openings for Russia in Europe. Soon after the Biden-Putin summit, France's President Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel proposed that the European Union should have a summit of its own with Russian leader.

The proposal met with stiff resistance from some countries on Russia's European periphery, including Poland and the Baltic republics that see acute threats from Russia. But the French and German case for reordering the strained relationship between Europe and Russia is unlikely to disappear.

A reduction of tensions between Russia and the US would also make it easier for some Asian powers like Japan and India 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.

Asean welcomed Russia along with the US to join the East Asia Summit in 2010. But Moscow seemed too preoccupied with managing its turbulent ties with Europe in the last decade to pay sustained attention to East Asia. And when Moscow turned to Asia, it necessarily became a "China First" policy thanks to the shared interest with Beijing in building a common front against the West.

Could Russia turn the current fluid geopolitical moment to enhance its position in great-power politics? Critics say Russia does not have the heft to make a difference to the balance between the West and China.

But in 1971, Mao Zedong's China was weak, at war with itself, and its power was way behind that of Soviet Russia. Yet the Sino-American entente dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape in Asia. It also helped China improve its relative position with both Washington and Moscow.

A rapprochement between Russia and the US could have similar consequences in both Europe and Asia. It will increase Russia's salience for China and other Asian powers as well as 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.

Conventional wisdom would dismiss the proposition that Russia can reposition itself, given its current difficulties with US and Europe. To be sure, the obstacles to such a transformation are real.

But strange things do happen in the world. And none stranger and more consequential than the entente between communist China and America that began 50 years ago this month.

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