

Tensions rise with Russia and China

Washington's approach to Moscow and Beijing must get more focus in the presidential race.

On Thursday, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada alleged that hackers tied to Russian intelligence agencies are targeting Western entities working on a coronavirus vaccine.

A day before, in just the latest sign of Sino-American tension, it was reported that the Trump administration was mulling a travel ban for members of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as their families.

These events are just the most recent episodes in a series of intensifying divisions between the U.S. and its two major geopolitical rivals, Russia and China. There are other, equally fraught fractures factoring into the divides.

With China, this includes several trade-related disputes, as well as Beijing's bellicose approach to its own citizens in Western China and Hong Kong. Abroad, Chinese troops recently had deadly clashes with Indian forces along a disputed border, and the nation continues its historic hostility to Taiwan, as well as more recent aggression in the South China Sea, where China's maritime claims were officially declared unlawful by the State Department last week. Adding to the martial tensions are technological fissures, reflected in the U.K.'s joining the U.S. in banning China's Huawei from use in the developing 5G wireless network.

Ongoing U.S.-Russian divisions can be seen in several issues, including enduring election interference. Meanwhile, lethal militarism in Ukraine, Crimea, Syria, and elsewhere, as well as allegations of Russian bounties on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, strain Washington-Moscow ties.

Add to that arms control, which has been spinning out of control in recent years. "The framework we inherited from U.S.-Soviet competition is practically gone," Eugene Rumer, a former national intelligence officer who is now the director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said during a webinar last week. If so, the U.S. and Russia

“will be in an unrestrained, unrestricted arms race with a host of new technologies entering the strategic stability equation. That will be likely be highly destabilizing.”

Stabilization on this or other issues with Russia and China might not be able to rely on formerly reliable Cold War constructs. The three nations are “not part of a dynamic triangle, where the U.S. can play one off the other,” said Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at Carnegie. “The Sino-Russian partnership is a good deal more than an access of convenience, and one of — if not the — principle adhesives in that relationship is an effort to check U.S. influence regionally and globally.”

This adhesive is based on two factors, said Susan Thornton, a former diplomat who is now a senior fellow at Yale Law School. Economics, with the Chinese the “unbalanced driver of the train, which may be a bit uncomfortable for Russia,” as well as “the convergence of attitudes of the two governments about what the West and the U.S. is doing.” In this component, the Kremlin is more the driver, Thornton said.

The pandemic may be global, but the U.S. political debate about it is mostly domestic, especially because of President Donald Trump’s reckless response to the crisis. Other vital stateside issues — including one literally originating here at home with the death of George Floyd — like social justice are appropriately paramount to voters.

But foreign policy should not get eclipsed in the campaign, and the debate must go beyond who’s “soft” on China and Russia to who’s smart about them.

That means recognizing reality. The U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship is “the worst since the Cold War,” said Rumer. Likewise, the U.S.-China bilateral relationship has devolved to “managed enmity,” said Evan Feigenbaum, vice president for studies at Carnegie. “The two sides are not only not working together, they are actively obstructing each other and doing it without some guardrails.”

Fortunately, the U.S. has some longstanding alliances to better respond to the Russian and Chinese challenges. Unfortunately, many of these relationships are severely strained because Trump has either not tended to them, or tended to alienate these allies through unproductive provocations.

The U.S., said Feigenbaum, has “an attitude but not a strategy.” Now, more than ever, voters should consider both the president’s and presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden’s strategy, and not just attitude, on responding to Russia and China.

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