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## **THE US-RUSSIA RAPPROCHEMENT: THE (IM) POSSIBLE DIRECTION FOR A US FOREIGN POLICY\*\***

### **Abstract**

The authors of this paper examine the possible change of course in the United States foreign policy and strategic adjustment towards Russia in international relations. Although the United States were the sole super-power in the world after the end of the Cold War, the contemporary international system is marked by growing multipolarity. This change in the international arena is caused by the rise of two revisionist great powers – China and Russia. Although China represents the US' main geopolitical rival, Russia does not lack the ambition to influence current world affairs. Possible relative gain in Sino-American rivalry for the United States could be achieved through closer cooperation with Russia. Although this hypothetical appeasement could be beneficial for the US, the authors of this paper take the stance that rapprochement between the two countries is currently unlikely. Using neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, the paper examines the possible US-Russian strategic cooperation, including both external and internal factors that influence state foreign policy and strategic adjustment. The paper also examines the US opening to China during the Cold War under the administration of President Richard Nixon and compares it to the contemporary state of world affairs.

***Keywords:*** *US-Russia relations, US foreign policy, rapprochement, neoclassical realism, great power rivalry*

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## INTRODUCTION

After the absolute dominance of the United States of America in the post-Cold War period, the growing challenges for its hegemony are appearing more and more. The unipolar moment in international relations is over, and the main challenger for the US dominant position is the People's Republic of China. However, China is not the only actor on the international scene that could be described as a revisionist power. Russian Federation is another country that disputes the US dominance and confronts the vision of the modern world advocated by and promoted from Washington.

The rise of China as a major power and the United States' main rival is followed by Chinese ambition for its influence in the international system to be reflective of its growing economic, technological and military capacities. This makes it the natural and logical ally of Russia, whose decision making in the foreign policy sphere is primarily led by the goal of keeping its status as a great power and an indispensable player in the solving of key issues on the international level. However, Russia and China were natural allies against the US once before in the previous century, but it was temporary and fell apart because of the conflicted interests between Moscow and Beijing. Namely, the first decade of the Cold War on the Asian continent was marked by the Sino-Soviet alliance based on the shared communist ideology and convergent geopolitical interests. Nevertheless, the battle for the status of the leading country in the communist world, overlapping spheres of influence, and differing visions of leaders Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Mao Zedong contributed to the split between these two powers in the late 50s and early 60s. This development enabled the rapprochement of Beijing and Washington during president Richard Nixon's administration. The culmination of the process was the acceptance of the Peoples' Republic of China as a United Nations country and the permanent member of the Security Council in 1971 and Nixon's visit to China the following year.

Today, when China is the main challenger of the United States, one of the possible strategies available to the decision-makers in Washington is to work on the weakening of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. This approach would rely on building better relations with Russia, as the weaker of the two powers. The benefits stemming from the improved relations with the US would possibly drive Russia to distance itself from China. The foreign policy of President Donald Trump, particularly in the first couple of months of his administration contained some elements of this strategy, but they faded away later. The new Biden administration has at first not shown any signs it would

pursue this policy. However, presidents Biden and Putin met for a summit in June 2021 which could be interpreted as a possible first step in this direction.

The article will offer an answer to what the opening to Russia as a distinct direction of the US foreign policy for the Biden administration would mean for contemporary international relations, taking President Nixon's opening to China in the 70s as a blueprint. It will map various aspects in which a change of policy towards Russia would entice Moscow to explore a different course and distance itself from Beijing. Using neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, the article will identify two main sets of challenges for the successful implementation of this approach. The first set stems from a hierarchy of interests of the US, Russia and China. Moscow's and Beijing's striving for a more multipolar world in which their international status is embodying the change in the balance of power that was happening in the last decade makes the two countries partnership sturdy. The second set comes from the influence of domestic factors. On the Russian side, anti-Americanism is an important part of Putin's domestic policy while his feeling of betrayed trust on account of previous American actions could additionally limit the effectiveness of such an approach. In the US, a continuation of a hard-line policy towards Russia has significant bipartisan support, as well as that of the general population, deriving from Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections.

The article will consist of three parts and a conclusion. The structure is as follows. In the first part, the theoretical framework will be developed, relying on the key concepts of neoclassical realism. The second part will cover the case of the US opening to China, as the previous successful use of the rapprochement in order to weaken the main rival power. The third part will explain what the opening to Russia would contain and map key challenges for the efficiency of this strategy. In the end, a conclusion will be given.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM**

The article relies on neoclassical realism as a theoretical approach to analyse hypothetical American-Russian rapprochement as a response to the rise of China. The use of main concepts of this school of thought offers a way to take into account both external factors, stemming from the structure of the international system, as well as key internal variables that influence the potential effects of the opening to Russia.

Like structural realism or neorealism, neoclassical realism sees

the structure of the international system as the main factor shaping relations between states and their foreign policy behaviour or strategic adjustment. In the conditions of anarchy, without the supreme authority that can guarantee adherence to a common set of rules, the security of each country is jeopardized. Those circumstances force countries to rely on themselves to ensure their own survival. Although cooperation is possible if certain prerequisite conditions are fulfilled, states generally see each other as rivals and potential threats (Meascheimer 2001, 30-31). As Waltz (1979, 106) claims, “structures encourage certain behaviors and penalize those who do not respond to the encouragement”. However, differing from neorealists, neoclassical realists argue that the structure of the international system, although most influential, is not the only and sufficient determinant that explains the behaviour of states in international arena. Their foreign policies and choice of different strategies in relation to other actors in the international system are shaped by numerous factors.

For neoclassical realists, the unit- and sub-unit-level intervening variables are acting as a “transmission belt” through which the signals from the international system are processed. Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell offer a systematisation of the diverse domestic variables used by various neoclassical realist authors in their research. They divide these variables in four groups: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, 59). The first group consists of beliefs, images, interests and available information of foreign policy decision-makers, defined by the authors as the foreign policy executive (FPE) – encompassing the president, prime minister, dictator, key cabinet members, ministers, and foreign policy advisors (61). The second concerns the characteristics of “the organizational culture, such as that of the military as a bureaucratic organization, and a broader notion of strategic culture such as entrenched beliefs, worldviews, and shared expectations of a society as a whole” (66). The third set of variables are the state-society relations, understood as the level of trust between the official decision-makers and various social and interest groups, political and social cohesion and public support for foreign policy moves (71). Finally, the fourth group of intervening variables includes the structure of political, economic and social institutions, their rules, routines and procedures, and presence of oversight and control. These elements determine the main creators of foreign policy and potential veto players (75).

Randall Schweller gives an explanation of how states select their strategies, primarily focusing on the choice between bandwagoning and balancing. Building on the works of neorealist Stephen Walt, he gives

a neoclassical update to Walt's theory of balancing of threats (see Walt 1985, 1987). Schweller talks about the balance of interests, arguing that "the most important determinant of alignment decisions is compatibility of political goals, not imbalances of power or threat" (Schweller 1994, 88). The state will choose to align with a certain power, notwithstanding whether it is more powerful or not, if their interests are compatible and the state assesses it will profit from that alliance. Security and survival are not primary goals of all countries. Revisionist states aim to acquire that which they do not possess and to improve their position in the system. Schweller differentiates between four groups of states, whether they prize more the things they have or the things they wish to gain: lions (status quo states that will pay high cost to protect what they possess but only a small price to increase what they value), lambs (states that would pay only low costs to defend or extend their values, on account of them possessing very few capabilities), wolves (predatory states that value what they covet far more than what they possess), and jackals (also revisionist states that will pay high cost to defend their possessions but even greater costs to extend their values) (Schweller 1994, 101-103).

## **THE US-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT DURING THE COLD WAR**

In the implementation of the rapprochement strategy in its relations with the Russian Federation, the White House could as a blueprint use the opening to China that occurred during the first term of President Richard Nixon. In order to better understand the prospects and potentials of the US-Russia détente, a brief outline of the US-China rapprochement will be offered in this section.<sup>3</sup>

The United States' relations with the People's Republic of China at the end of the 60s were formally non-existent. The American support of the Kuomintang-led Republic of China and its leader Chiang Kai-shek during the Chinese Civil War and recognition of Taiwan (Republic of China) as the legitimate representative of Chinese people at the international level, the US aid for and military protection of Taiwan, the ramifications of the conflict between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the United Nations (UN) troops which principally consisted of American military personnel during the Korean War, and the position of US as the leading capitalist state in the world made this country the principal enemy for the Chinese communist regime. On the other hand, American policymakers saw China, together with the

3) For better understanding of using analogies in specific state foreign policy decision making or strategic adjustment see Дашић, Недељковић и Живојиновић, 2018.

USSR, as the key communist country committed to the revolutionary change of the international order. The USSR was the main challenger for the US. Still, the containment strategy used to hold back the spread of communist ideology and regime change in the US-backed countries, directed and promoted against Moscow, was in Asia also aimed against and useful in dealing with China. The alliance systems of SEATO, whose members included Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, United Kingdom, and the United States, and CENTO, whose members were Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and United Kingdom, fulfilled this role.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Sino-Soviet split of the late 50s – early 60s fundamentally altered the dynamics among the major world powers. The relationship between the USSR and China was long that of domination and subordination. The Communist Party of China relied on Soviet support during the Chinese Civil War and afterwards, mainly through extensive loans, transfers of military technology, and the assistance of Soviet advisors. Stalin was the undisputed leader of communism at the world stage and he made sure to remind Mao of that during the Chinese leader's visit to Moscow in late 1949 – early 1950 that resulted in the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance (Westad 1998, 12). After Stalin died in 1953, and Nikita Khrushchev emerged as his successor and victor of the ensuing power struggle for the leadership role in the USSR, the cooperation continued. Khrushchev, although reluctantly, agreed to aid China in nuclear program development. However, the relations between the two largest communist countries and their leaders gradually worsened and became openly antagonistic by the early 60s as a result of several interconnected factors.

Firstly, the destalinization process initiated by Khrushchev at the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led to ideological disagreements. Although Mao was not a particular admirer of Stalin, he saw the possibility for the criticism of a cult of personality to be applied in his case as well. Furthermore, Mao now saw himself as the senior figure among the communist leaders and expected due respect. He was thus personally offended he was not consulted or notified of Khrushchev's plans regarding destalinization (Lüthi 2016, 136). The responding Maoist critique of ideological leanings in the USSR was published in the 1960 article titled "Long live Leninism", which further contributed to the dissent (Westad 1998, 24). Secondly, Moscow, as a result of its weaker nuclear capabilities *vis*

4) In the case of CENTO, the US was not a member even if it participated in negotiations leading to its formation. However, the alliance had American support.

*a vis* Washington, worked on a détente with the US while building its nuclear arsenal. Soviet attempts to appease the US were not compatible with an aggressive Chinese policy against Taiwan, manifested in two Taiwan strait crises, and the development of Beijing's nuclear program (Athwal 2004, 283-284). This led to the cancellation of Soviet help for the Chinese nuclear program in 1959 and the withdrawal of Soviet advisors in 1960. Thirdly, their geopolitical interests on the Indian subcontinent were incompatible, as was demonstrated in the case of the Sino-Indian War in 1962, which was the final straw in the Sino-Soviet split. The USSR took a neutral stance in the conflict over the border territory between the Indian and Chinese armies. Additionally, it was increasing the economic and military cooperation with India, which was seen in Beijing as a direct move against its interests (Athwal 2004, 288-289). Consequently, when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 in accordance with the Brezhnev doctrine, the fear of a similar attack on China was present among the Chinese leaders. The border conflict with the Red Army troops on the Ussuri River in 1969 further cemented the position of the USSR as the primary threat to China.

Meanwhile, across the Pacific, the new president Richard Nixon found a like-minded ally and collaborator in Henry Kissinger, who was appointed as the National Security Advisor. They shared a disdain for established institutions such as the State Department and bureaucracy and a preference for direct and centralized decision making (Gaddis 2005, 299). Also, both men were proponents of a *Realpolitik* approach to international affairs, eschewing ideology and regime types as factors in building relations with other countries. They tried to move from a normative view and a battle against communism based on principle, rather opting to be led by the idea of the national interests of the US and building relations with countries in order to protect and promote those interests. As Kissinger said, "we will judge other countries, including Communist countries, and specifically countries like Communist China on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology" (Kissinger 1979, 192). Furthermore, Nixon was supportive of developing relations with China and pulling this country from international isolation even before he became the President of the United States. In his famous Foreign Affairs article published in 1967, he said that "we cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbours" (Nixon 1967, 121).

He started sending signals of his willingness to rekindle the relations between the two countries to Chinese leadership through several channels. There was an initiative to continue the Warsaw talks

between the US and Chinese ambassadors and the administration issued National Security Decision Memorandum 17 whose subject was the relaxation of economic controls against China. It enabled more balanced trade with China, export of agricultural equipment, food and pharmaceuticals, as well as an import into the US of Chinese goods purchased abroad for non-commercial use (National Security Council, 1969). However, the strongest contact was achieved through the Pakistani president Yahya Khan. He acted as the intermediary and was instrumental in the organization of Kissinger's secret visit to China in July 1971. This clandestine operation, unknown to most members of the Cabinet including the Secretary of State William Rogers, enabled the National Security Advisor to meet and negotiate in detail with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. They spoke about Taiwan, Vietnam, USSR and agreed on Nixon's visit to China the following year (Tudda 2012, 90-92).

Nixon's trip was preceded by another made by Kissinger in October of 1971 whose purpose was to elaborate details about the President's visit. Kissinger's trip coincided with the vote in the UN on the Albanian resolution proposing the expulsion of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and its replacement with the People's Republic of China. Previously, the Secretary of State Rogers and the US Ambassador to the UN George H. W. Bush, with the President's support, put forward a two Chinas resolution which included the seat for China in the Security Council and a seat for Taiwan in the General Assembly, but it was defeated with a 59-55 vote and 15 abstentions (Tudda 2012, 140). This resolution was the maximum effort the Nixon administration was prepared to put in order to keep the Republic of China in the UN. Prior to the vote the president expressed his willingness to accept the People's Republic of China in the UN. He did not insist on stopping this process at all costs, seeing it, in a realist fashion, as a reflection of the existing state of affairs. However, through careful negotiations and skilled political manoeuvring, the made efforts was enough to pacify the wrath of the conservatives supporting Taiwan, such as the California governor Ronald Reagan (140-141).

The President's week-long visit to China in late February 1972, which Nixon dubbed "the week that changed the world", was a resounding success for both sides. The President met with Chairman Mao, visited historical sites, and discussed with premier Enlai at length about main issues, such as the stance of the USSR, the question of status of Taiwan, and American presence in Vietnam. Empowered by their membership in the UN, the Chinese saw the arrival of the American leader to their country as the next step in their emergence



from international isolation, and a way to make the USSR further second-guess Chinese abilities, options and ramifications of a potential conflict between the Red Army and the PLA. They gained assurances about the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the US commitment to a non-militaristic Japan, and acknowledgment of the administration's one China policy (Tudda 2012, 186, 189-190, 195). On the other hand, the pros of opening to China for the White House were numerous. It strengthened the security in East Asia from the American perspective, put pressure on North Vietnam from another angle, and they obtained guarantees from China for a peaceful solution to the Taiwan situation.

But primarily, this strategy was supposed to unsettle the Soviet decision-makers and make them more prone to compromises and concessions to the US (Gaddis 2005, 292-293; Lüthi 2016, 142-143). Washington felt threatened because the Soviets achieved strategic parity and the advantage Americans had in nuclear weapons disappeared. Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) were meant to address this grave concern. The resulting agreements restrained the competition in nuclear armaments and imposed the limit on the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems. Through the rapprochement with China, the US put pressure on Moscow, since this unexpected and for the Soviets unwelcome turn of events could lead to a potential joint Sino-American balancing of the USSR. Thus, Soviet leaders had an incentive to commit to SALT I and accept the restrictions imposed on both sides, but from which at the time the US had more to gain than the USSR. In this way, the American decision to improve the relations with China proved beneficial, since the political will for the rapprochement existed on the Chinese side as well, and the alignment of interests was appropriately discerned. The centralization of all decision making in the White House, inclination towards secrecy and covert diplomacy, and the appropriate handling of key domestic policy players were additional factors that enabled the triumph of this endeavour, although precisely some of these tendencies led to Nixon's downfall in the Watergate scandal soon after. Nevertheless, the successful opening to a lesser threat and rival in the international system (China) contributed to relative gains in relations with the main adversary (the USSR).

## **THE OPENING TO RUSSIA – A POSSIBLE BIDEN STRATEGY?**

The structure of contemporary international system is significantly different compared to the situation of the early 70s. The United States are despite growing multipolarity of international

relations still the most powerful country in the world. Its dominance is being contested by a number of revisionist states, of which the main threat comes from China. Chinese share in the world economy rose from 3,6% in 2000 to 16,1% in 2018, while the US' share fell from 30,4% in 2000 to 23,3% in 2018 (Tabachnik and Miller 2021, 283). Additionally, since Xi Jinping came to power, China is more assertive in its relations with its neighbours regarding the control of the South China Sea, while expanding its influence globally, primarily in the Middle East and Africa. The Biden administration has defined the rise of China as the principal challenge to the US and its main focus will be to address this issue adequately. President Biden said that "we'll also take on directly the challenges posed by our prosperity, security, and democratic values by our most serious competitor, China" (Biden 2021a). His focus on China is one of the few instances where the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the US is following the course set by his predecessor Donald Trump. On the other hand, although it possesses only a fraction of the military and economic power of the USSR, Russia is still a major power and actor whose actions have the capacity to shape and influence the state of affairs on the world stage, especially in its neighbouring regions, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, the US-Russian relations are worst since the end of the Cold War, with the watershed moment being the Ukraine crisis. In 2014, the ousting of the Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych in the mass protests after his refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement prompted Russia to react decisively (Mearsheimer 2014, 80-81). The subsequent annexation of the Crimea peninsula and support for the rebels in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk provoked strong criticism from the West. The sanctions introduced by the US and the EU targeted at first only assets of selected individuals close to President Putin and held accountable for the Russian actions in Ukraine. Over time they evolved to sectoral sanctions aimed against the defence, energy and finance sectors (Dytrich 2014, 83-85).

This decline in relations with the West led Moscow to turn eastward to compensate for the losses inflicted by American and European sanctions. The resulting strengthening of the Sino-Russian partnership presents a serious problem for the United States, since the cooperation between the two countries is growing and they so far appear able to overcome the existing differences and focus on common interests. In order to decouple Moscow and Beijing, an opening to Russia, in the vein of Nixon's opening to China, is a potential direction. Many commentators and analysts warned that the US policy towards Russia is pushing it to further embrace its alliance

with China. For example, Joseph S. Nye (2019) warns that the two countries “have cooperated closely in the UN Security Council, taken similar positions on international control of the Internet, and have used various diplomatic frameworks such as the BRICS grouping and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to coordinate positions”. Charles A. Kupchan (2021) suggests Washington should demonstrate to Moscow “that more cooperation with the West can help Russia redress the mounting vulnerabilities arising from its close partnership with China”. Thomas Graham (2019) argues that “U.S. policymakers should help multiply Russia’s alternatives to China, thereby improving the Kremlin’s bargaining position”. Still, it is not clear of what a potential opening to Russia would consist.

This strategy would require Washington to offer to Moscow concessions significant enough for it to reconsider its partnership with Beijing. If Putin had different options available in order to realize some of his goals, than he would have greater leverage to distance Russia from China and pursue a foreign policy on a number of issues less aligned with that of its south-eastern neighbour. If some of the main grievances Russia has with the West would be addressed, the Kremlin’s turn to the east could be slowed down and it would be incited to reconsider its strategic alignment. From the Russian perspective, the two main factors that harm the relations with the US are NATO eastward enlargement, particularly the idea of Ukraine’s and Georgia’s membership in the alliance, and Washington’s insistence on democracy and human rights promotion in Russia (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019, 1). The first is perceived as a geopolitical and security threat driven by the elimination of Russia’s buffer zones to the West, on which it has historically relied to provide safety, and the removal of the neighbouring countries from its traditional sphere of influence. This leads to another problem – the refusal to acknowledge a particular Russian sphere of influence, which affects Russian standing and self-perception as a great power. This status and its recognition by other great powers is inherently tied to the stability and security of Russia, since the time of Peter the Great in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (Graham 2019). The second factor is seen as a continuation of a policy of support for the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, in 2003 and 2004 respectively, and a deliberate intervention in the internal affairs of Russia in order to destabilize and weaken it from within.

To expect full accommodation of Russian interests and wishes for these issues by the Biden administration would be unreasonable. Looking at Nixon’s opening to China, through their actions the President and Kissinger enabled the incorporation of China in the international

community, which made the USSR, whom China saw as the greatest threat at the time, reluctant to escalate tensions with Beijing on the account of the new Sino-American rapprochement. They were also willing to make a compromise regarding Taiwan, whose status was and is still of primary concern to China. Today, regarding Russia, readiness to acknowledge Moscow's positions and the logic behind its actions would be a needed first step. This could lead to compromise on some of these matters which would signal Putin a willingness to improve relations. Although this policy would be hard to defend and looking in the short term, it could be understood as unnecessary appeasement of a comparably weaker power and its autocratic leader, in the long term it would be justified as the US could focus more on China, its main strategic challenger.

Regarding NATO enlargement, the prospects of Georgia or Ukraine becoming members are rather unrealistic. Thus, the Biden administration would have to openly accept that. The bilateral cooperation with the two countries could continue and should be promoted, as Russia was ready to tolerate this kind of arrangement before. But their membership is a red line for Putin (Graham 2019). To concede to that would be a major breakthrough in US-Russian relations. This leads to the topic of Ukraine. The White House cannot ever recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea and accept the illegal seizure of the peninsula. It could nevertheless engage Russia in new negotiations over the status of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as the Minsk protocols proved ineffective (McFaul 2021). Additionally, gradual softening and removal of sanctions implemented in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis would be an important development. The direct contact and talks with the Russian side and inclusion of the Kremlin in attempts to resolve major international issues, such as the Iran nuclear program or Syrian civil war, would curb Russian parallel solo efforts and play to Moscow's cravings for the great power status recognition. The isolation of the Kremlin is counterproductive if the goal is to encourage it to distance itself from Beijing. Accordingly, the US could consider the initiative to welcome Russia back in the G8. Finally, the promotion of fundamental values of democracy and human rights cannot be removed from the US foreign policy agenda entirely. But it also does not have to be its first priority. The criticism of Putin's treatment of political opposition, civil rights activists and critical media will surely remain on the table. But if it is less severe and less frequent, while at the same time constrained to verbal condemnation not followed by economic sanctions, it could become peripheral in the wider picture. Washington was more than willing to cooperate with autocratic regimes

throughout history, and its friendly relations with Saudi Arabia today are proof that has not changed. Consequently, dropping the framing of US relations with Russia as a battle of the democratic free world versus the authoritarian one would also be a significant gesture of goodwill.

Implementing some combination of previously mentioned actions could lead to a détente between Washington and Moscow, and would open an alternative path for Russian foreign policy course in the future that would not result in the strengthening of the Sino-Russian axis. The Biden administration would not concede to Russia on all the points and should rightfully expect a willingness for compromise from the other side. Presidents Biden and Putin met for a summit in a meeting on June 16, 2021 (The New York Times 2021). Preparedness to directly engage with the Russian side on the highest level and discuss differences and obstacles in their relationship face to face shows that the policy of the current president towards Russia will not be limited only to confrontation with the traditional adversary. The decision to renew the New START treaty on nuclear arms reduction, signed between the two countries during Obama's presidency and expiring in 2021, was negotiated successfully prior to the summit (Reif and Bugos 2021). President Biden lifted sanctions that affected the completion of Nord Stream 2, the pipeline transporting gas from Russia to Germany (BBC 2021). At the press conference after the meeting between the two leaders, Biden addressed Russia as a great power, which has an important symbolical weight, especially considering Obama's dismissive remark about Russia as a regional power in 2014 (Biden 2021b; Rumer and Sokolsky 25). It seems that the space for the opening to Russia policy exists and this direction is not unimaginable. However, if the current administration opts to pursue it, it will have to overcome two major set of challenges that affect its possible effectiveness.

The first set of challenges relates to the structure of the international system, positions and most importantly, interests of the major powers in question, namely the US, Russia, and China. In the early 70s, Nixon had the opportunity to capitalize on the existing rift between the USSR and China. Moscow and Beijing had conflicting interests. Their ideological clash over the dominance in the communist world and differing geopolitical aims in Asia world led them to the verge of direct military engagement. But Washington had the interest to promote a more tripolar configuration on the world stage, to check soviet power and to decrease China's unpredictability stemming from its isolationism (Caldwell 2009, 635). On the other hand, today the situation regarding Russia and China is rather different. Ideology as a main driver for foreign policy actions is not present anymore. Although

USA is regarded as a liberal and democratic state and on the other hand Russia and China are considered to be autocracies the ideological clash between these three powers is only subsidiary to their geopolitical rivalry. In the words of Hal Brands (2018, 62) “ideological competition is fuelling geopolitical competition”. Their interests in international arena are far more important than their ideological worldview. In Schweller’s terms, they are two wolves allied against the American lion. Both countries aim for a more multipolar world and insist on the understanding of international relations in which sovereignty, spheres of influence and non-intervention in internal affairs present a basis respected by all actors. To achieve this, Putin, for the time being, seems willing to put up with Russian increasing dependence on China’s imports of oil and gas, its rising influence in Central Asia, and the uncertainty over the Russian Far East, the underpopulated region bordering China.

The second set is based on the domestic variables that affect foreign policy decisions. Leader perceptions have an influence both on the American and the Russian side. President Biden served as Obama’s vice president for eight years and was an important decision-maker both in the period of the reset in the countries relations at the start of the Obama administration and the decline in the wake of Arab Spring and Ukraine crisis (Kuchins 2015; McFaul 2018). This previous experience impacts his stance towards Kremlin. Still, the silver lining could be his willingness to learn from that experience and shape the policy on Russia accordingly. On the other hand, Putin has deep reservations about the prospects for an improvement in relations with the White House. In his eyes, Russia’s cooperation with the Bush administration in the fight against terrorism after the 9/11 attacks was rewarded with NATO membership for Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states. Agreement for the UN sanctions imposed on Iran on account of its nuclear program did not stop the US intervention in Libya despite clear Russian opposition to it (Goldgeier 2021). Furthermore, state-society relations in Russia play a role too. Putin’s foreign policy decisions are tied to dependence on anti-Americanism and perception of constant conflict with the West which functions as a rally round the flag moment in the area of domestic politics (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019, 2).

Another affecting variable is the resurgence of the Cold War outlooks and perception of Russia as the crucial adversary deriving from the allegations of its interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, subsequent investigation and the resulting Mueller report. In 2021, American attitude towards Russia is the worst since the final years of the Cold War, the joint survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center shows (Smeltz et al. 2021). The

domestic institutions in the US, namely the influence of the Congress in the foreign policy creation, will also present a great impediment for the opening to Russia. President Trump's rhetoric during his 2016 election campaign and first months of his presidency included plans for an improvement in relations with Putin (Rutland 2017, 41). But Trump faced major opposition from Congress, which was bipartisan in its hard-line stance on Russia, and imposed additional sanctions despite the President's reluctance (Stent 2020). While the Democrats acted to stop what they saw as unwelcomed closeness and sympathy for Putin, the Republicans wanted to put an end to ideas of any collusion between the President from their party and Kremlin by being strict and uncompromising (Trenin 2019). With the fragile majority Democrats have in the Senate, Biden will have to be very careful and tactical for such an atypical and uncommon strategy as the opening to Russia to have a chance.

## CONCLUSION

The leading foreign policy creators in Washington are aware that China presents a major threat to the US dominance and have stated their plans to treat it accordingly. However, Russia cannot be disregarded, especially considering its growing partnership with China. Relying on the successful examples from history, President Biden and his team could opt to try an opening to Russia, in the vein of the move President Nixon made towards China during the Cold War. This approach would aim to present Kremlin with additional options and stimulate its distancing from Beijing. The 46<sup>th</sup> president of the US has not committed to such policy, although the administration's actions towards Russia contain some telling signs that such a policy is not off the table, despite the very critical rhetoric. Still, compared to the Nixon era, the state of affairs in international relations differs greatly. The interests of Moscow and Beijing align in the most important aspects. Furthermore, many domestic variables, on the Russian, but especially on the American side, make additional obstacles to the successful implementation of this strategy. Consequently, if Biden decides to pursue it, he would have to deal with a number of factors that threaten to hinder its progress, some of which are beyond his capacity to influence. Because of this, although opening to Russia is a possible foreign policy direction for the US, the eventual favourable results seem very questionable.

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## **АМЕРИЧКО-РУСКО ПРИБЛИЖАВАЊЕ: (НЕ) МОГУЋ ПРАВАЦ ЗА АМЕРИЧКУ СПОЉНУ ПОЛИТИКУ**

### **Резиме**

Аутори овог рада испитују могућу промену курса у спољној политици Сједињених Америчких Држава и њено стратешко прилагођавање у односима са Русијом. Сједињене Америчке Државе биле су једина суперсила у свету након завршетка Хладног рата, али савремени међународни систем обележава растућа мултиполарност. Ова промена на међународној сцени узрокована је успоном две велике силе са ревизионистичким тенденцијама – Кине и Русије. Иако Кина представља главног геополитичког супарника САД, Русији не недостаје амбиција да утиче на актуелна светска дешавања. Могући релативни добитак у кинеско-америчком ривалству за САД могао би се постићи ближом сарадњом са Русијом. Иако би ово хипотетичко побољшање односа могло бити од користи за САД, аутори овог рада заузимају став да је приближавање између две земље тренутно мало вероватно. Користећи неокласични реализам као теоријски оквир, рад испитује могућу америчко-руску стратешку сарадњу, укључујући у анализу спољне и унутрашње факторе који утичу на државну спољну политику и стратешко прилагођавање. Рад такође испитује отварање САД према Кини током Хладног рата за време председничке администрације Ричарда Никсона и упоређује га са савременим стањем у свету.

**Кључне речи:** *Односи САД и Русије, спољна политика САД, рапрошман, неокласични реализам, ривалство великих сила*

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