Does Vladimir Putin Hold The Key To Containing China After The Coronavirus?

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During all of Donald Trump's presidency, he has been accused of maintaining secret ties to Russia. That charge only increased following recent reports that Russia had offered the Taliban cash to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan. Ironically, in the face of shortsighted energy moves by American politicians like New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, and world leaders like Germany's Angela Merkel, increasingly assertive international political actions by Communist China, and domestic missteps and international over-extension by Russian President Vladimir Putin, the relationship between the United States and Russia could be a key to the post coronavirus international order.

There is increasing suspicion that China has not been totally truthful about Covid-19. Regardless of whether or not stories about possible Chinese obfuscation are accurate, Beijing has moved aggressively to take full advantage of the international dislocation.

Since the start of the pandemic, China has attempted to wrest full control over much of the natural resources in the South China Sea, regardless of the claims of other countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. China has threatened European and other nations about the future role of Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei in the international 5G buildout. Two weeks ago, the Chinese military fought a pitched battle with India over disputed border territory in the Himalayas, resulting in death on both sides. Now China again is threatening Hong Kong with a new security law that effectively would end Hong Kong's autonomy, potentially contravening China's treaty with Great Britain that guarantees Hong Kong's autonomy until at least the year 2047.

As China has grown in strength and influence, Russia has shrunk. Recent miscalculations by Vladimir Putin have sent both his popularity and his country's welfare plummeting.

Putin's attempt to bully Saudi Arabia over oil production backfired completely. The Saudis initiated a full price war that cut Russian revenue from its major export to unsustainable levels. Putin's military involvement in Syria and the Middle East looks more and more like a potential quagmire. The Middle East involvement continues to be a drain on Russian economic and military resources, from which there is no easy escape. Now, wracked by the coronavirus to the extent that Russia has the third largest amount of reported cases in the world (China's figures, of course, generally being considered unreliable), Putin's future looks murkier still.

For many years, Putin reflexively sided with China on most internationally contentious issues involving the

United States. This was one way for the Russian leader to oppose the West. Earlier in June he mocked the United States for its own civil rights record during the George Floyd protests – mimicking the stance taken by China and Iran. Last week, of course, the Afghanistan story broke. Despite these actions, Putin often looks like he is becoming little more than Chinese President Xi's junior partner.

In this country, the United States faces issues about how to confront Xi with the coronavirus still raging. Our manufacturing base has shrunk to the point that much of the essential pharmaceuticals and other products needed to fight the virus are produced in China. Meanwhile, the pipeline energy politics that have been played in the northeast have made New York and New England continually vulnerable to potential energy supply shortages. That could mean that, as in the winter of 2018, New York and Massachusetts again will become dependent on natural gas from the Russian arctic.

Given the state of the world in early summer 2020, Donald Trump's biggest opportunity to reset the new world order might lie with Moscow. Further aggressive Chinese moves, such as in Hong Kong, India or in the South China Sea, would best be countered by a coordinated international response, both economically and politically.

The United States has a variety of gambits that it could play to induce Russia to join such a coalition. For example, the US could increase needed assistance to Russia in fighting the coronavirus. President Trump also could seek a possible multilateral front on which to move forward with Russia in Syria, Libya and against ISIS.

Another avenue the President might explore would to be to consider revising the American stance regarding the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the Baltic Sea that would bypass Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States while providing gas directly from Russia to Germany. Despite the constant partisanship in Congress, the Nord Stream 2 issue seems to be attracting bipartisan opposition. In return, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is considering responding against the United States. Creative diplomacy might turn what could be an internationally divisive issue for the West into something that is mutually beneficial internationally.

All of this clearly will be much more difficult should it be proven that President Putin indeed was involved in seeking to pay the Taliban to kill Americans. However, the events of the last two months have crystalized the fact that as we move further into the 21st Century, the balance of power between the United States and China will be a major factor in the future of international development and human rights.

Neither Russia nor Vladimir Putin shares our basic Western social, political, and economic values. Ironically however, detaching Putin from Chinese President Xi's orbit may hold the key to shaping the future in a way more consistent with those same Western values.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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