

Terry Su

Why won't the US break up the China-Russia friendship? The answer is Europe

- Taking a leaf out of Nixon's book, Biden could drive a wedge between the US' rivals using conciliation – only this time, with Russia, not China
- The problem is that such an approach risks creating an integrated Europe, which may then seek autonomy from the US

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/united-states/article/3206745/why-wont-us-break-china-russia-friendship-answer-europe>



The new year has begun with America looking to have it all. Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer of an Orthodox Christmas ceasefire was rebuffed by Ukraine, and US President Joe Biden scorned Putin for "trying to find some oxygen" with the proposal.

More recently, some heavyweight German lawmakers turned up in Taiwan, defying Beijing, while Japan has just agreed for British troops to be stationed in its territory, inviting expressions of displeasure from the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

All this begets a simple question: isn't it presumptuous of Washington to assume that it can play hard ball with Beijing and Moscow simultaneously and get its own way, while taking for granted the support of the European Union and Japan along the way?

Half a century ago, US president Richard Nixon took a U-turn on America's China policy, breaking up the Washington-Moscow-Beijing geopolitical triangle. In the name of bringing China out of its "angry isolation", his administration made a de facto ally out of the stalwart communist state which had fought a bloody war with the United States in Korea and was engaging in a proxy war with it in Vietnam – thus laying the foundation of the eventual collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Today, Washington faces a similar situation, with Russia and China having swapped their hierarchical positions. Beijing is now seen as the higher-up and Moscow as the one fighting a proxy war for it in Ukraine, according to some commentators applying history to analyses of current affairs.

Beijing is playing an awkward No. 1, though, still dizzy from the speed with which it has shot to the top position, while Moscow remains steeped in self-regarding nostalgia for what it used to be not that long ago.

Still, a simple calculation on the back of an envelope would tell Washington of the merit of a reversed version of the Nixon moment: convinced that China possesses both the intent and the power to challenge America, Washington must win over Russia to succeed in its contest against China.

To say all this now is irrelevant, however, given that Putin's "special military operation" against Ukraine has raged for almost a year and Russia has been locked up as America's "immediate threat".

As a matter of fact, conciliatory positioning towards Russia has never been easy in Washington, largely thanks to "the blob". This is an evocative term used by critics to denote the foreign policy establishment in Washington, a group of elites who partner on a hawkish foreign policy and champion the Judeo-Christian faith in American supremacy on the world stage, opposing the realism and non-interventionism which tend to emphasise the importance of prudence and the perils of military adventurism.

The blob harbours an innate suspicion of and even outright hostility towards Russia, which hardly needs arousing. It was reinvigorated instantly after February 24 last year – hence President Biden rediscovering in himself a Cold Warrior, his branding of Putin as a "pariah" and his appeal that the Russian leader "cannot remain in power".

All is not lost, however, as Washington seems to be facing up to the *fait accompli* and trying to make the most of it, notably in Europe.

That Europe is a pivotal asset America as an empire cannot do without has been crystal clear since World War II, in particular since the start of the Cold War. The European drive for integration, now epitomised by the European Union, started to worry America around the time of then German chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* in late 1960s.

Washington has managed to restrain this tendency through the mechanism of Nato and the alien existence of the Soviet Union and, for that matter, Russia. If Russia were to be made an ally comparable to China 50 years ago, Europe would certainly not accept being another Japan. That is, it would be irrepressibly vocal in the demand for total autonomy, with the Russia piece falling into the "common European home" jigsaw.

In a December issue of *National Interest*, a contributing essayist drew attention to "the virtual glee" with which France and Germany reacted to Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. "Make no mistake," he pointed out, "Berlin and Paris saw this as an *opportunity*, not an affront to the international system."

"It was an unmistakable chance to shake free of the United States and demonstrate to Russia that the Euro-Atlantic need not be shackled to the Americo-Atlantic," he wrote, adding: "The Russo-Ukrainian War has presented no cause for optimism that France and Germany have shed their delusional quest for strategic autonomy".

One would recall that Nixon in 1972 was convinced that the Europeans were prepared to “cut their own throats economically to take us on politically”, an observation which, incidentally, is echoed by the pertinent points made in my previous column.

Washington may, therefore, be preparing for the contingency that containment, let alone defeat, of China proves untenable, resulting in a bipolar world which the two superpowers co-dominate, as Australian former prime minister Paul Keating suggested three months ago.

Either way, a truly independent Europe seems to be out of the question in Washington’s cold calculation, even though that means pushing Moscow into Beijing’s arms. Thus America allows itself much leeway, for now.

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