

Shouldn't Biden be Talking Directly to Putin?

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No sooner than Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov returned to Moscow after the SCO ministerial in Tashkent, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s pending request for a conversation was scheduled late Friday evening. This has been their first conversation since the war began in Ukraine in February.

The [Russian readout](#) touches on Russia’s special military operations. Lavrov emphasised the inevitability that the “goals and tasks will be fully achieved.” Second, Lavrov told Blinken that the US’ continued arming of Ukraine with weapons “is only prolonging the agony of the Kiev regime by dragging out the conflict and increasing the number of victims.”

Lavrov also said Russia will continue its “consistent efforts to restore peaceful life on the territories that it is liberating.” It implies that the integration of Kherson, Zaporozhia, Kharkiv, etc. is an inexorable process.

Fourth, Lavrov focused on global food security issues and the grain deal and regretted that US is yet to deliver on “promises to make exemptions for Russian food shipments,” and the West is “exploiting the problem to advance its geopolitical interests, which is unacceptable.”

Finally, on prisoner exchange, Lavrov “strongly advised” Blinken that this is not an amateurish issue and “dubious media leaks” should be avoided.

For a conversation after several months, it was icy. Blinken is taking his time to issue a readout. But he was evasive on the issue of prisoner exchange, adding, “I’m not going to characterise his (Lavrov’s) response, and I can’t give you an assessment of whether I think things are any more or less likely.”

Equally, on the grain deal, Blinken made no reference to the reciprocal lifting of restrictions on Russia’s export of grains and fertiliser. His interest was only on Russia making good on loosening its naval blockade and allowing grain shipments to leave Ukraine’s Black Sea ports.

There is a hump appearing here, for sure. Zelensky's trip to the Black Sea port of Chernomorsk near Odessa accompanied by G7 ambassadors suggests that Washington is switching back to the propaganda mode that Russia is impeding Ukraine's exports.

The New York Times has noted, "Even if grain ships do get underway, danger, uncertainty and deep mistrust will hang over the effort, and major obstacles to carrying out the agreement remain."

Such conversations as yesterday's suffer from being totally opaque. Blinken can't even articulate the substantive issues bothering Biden —the cracks in the western unity.

Curiously, the Biden faces two crisis situations with explosive potential at the moment — in Ukraine and over Taiwan. Indeed, it is crystal clear that both have been precipitated by Washington. Yet, the manner in which Biden is handling them couldn't be anymore dissimilar.

In the case of Taiwan, Biden [didn't hesitate to call up](#) Chinese President Xi Jinping to calm the tensions. But he has chosen a different path to communicate with President Vladimir Putin.

For sure, into the six month of the conflict in Ukraine, Biden has finally decided to bite the bullet and resume high-level contact with Moscow. But he opted to get through to Putin through his state secretary!

The problem here is, although US-China relations are tense, Biden never took it to a personal level. He never used derogatory language to spite Xi Jinping, as he did to Putin repeatedly.

But Blinken too faces a similar predicament. On July 7-8, he [avoided shaking hands with Lavrov](#) at the G20 ministerial at Bali and skipped the official banquet because Lavrov was there. But after such churlish behaviour, here he was yesterday seeking out Lavrov!

The State Department reportedly sent out a circular recently to American embassies directing diplomats to dissuade foreign leaders from being photographed with Lavrov, so that Washington's project to "isolate" Russia gained traction! Lavrov apparently learnt about it from his hosts!

Unsurprisingly, Blinken had to first call a press conference to rationalise publicly his need to talk with someone whom he treated as a "pariah" only 3 weeks ago. Blinken is an intelligent man and senses that Biden is desperate to open a communication channel to the Kremlin. (Whether a Biden-Putin conversation figured in yesterday's discussion we do not know.)

The point is, after five months of conflict in Ukraine, Russian economy has not collapsed but is adjusting to a "new normal" in the geopolitical conditions. Russian currency is doing splendidly well. And there has been no insurrection in Russia. Above all, Russia is winning the war in Ukraine and is gearing up to dictate the terms of peace.

Lavrov must be well aware of the real reasons behind Blinken's call. First, there is a catastrophic situation that may crack western unity, as the spectre of cutoff in Russian gas supplies threatens European countries. Four European governments have fallen so far.

Everyone understands that it is much more than an energy crisis. As economies start crashing, social and political unrest will follow. There is pervasive disquiet in European capitals. The blame game has begun.

Washington may not be able to salvage the job of European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen much longer. The European leaders realise that Ursula played them with her personal crusade to punish Russia.

There is a lot of pent-up resentment about Germany, too. Europeans don't shed tears over Germany's plight. Berlin's imposition of harsh austerity programme on its southern neighbours is still painful memory.

Therefore, Ursula's latest hare-brained scheme to impose a 15% reduction in gas consumption on all EU countries (to bail out Berlin) faces resistance. Truly, there is no alternative to Russian gas and Washington has forgotten its promise to find replacement.

Biden only brought this calamity down on the Europeans. Barack Obama's private doubt is now public wisdom for Europeans — "Don't underestimate Joe's ability to f... things up."

Lavrov also knows the second reason why Blinken wants to re-engage. The Russian special military operations are making good progress and all indications are that the Zelensky regime is crumbling. Thus, preparations have begun for holding referendums in Kherson and Zaporozhia regions to ascertain the wishes of the people.

Russia has invited applications for citizenship from the residents of Kharkov as well, and ruble currency is being introduced. Putin just approved a 3-year master plan to rebuild Mariupol. The ancient city will soon have bridges, roads and schools that put Washington to shame.

Most important, Biden must be worrying that even if he multiplies by a hundred times Washington's carve-up of Kosovo as a nation state in 2008, it still wouldn't match what is steadily unfolding in Ukraine. And Europeans are watching all this — speechless, in disbelief — as territorial boundaries get redrawn in their manicured continent.

There are new facts on the ground since March when Russia and Kiev reached an agreement in Istanbul (which the hawkish Biden team promptly torpedoed by promising the moon to Zelensky.) So much water has flown down the Dnieper since then. Watch the video, below, of Biden's landmark April 28 war speech.

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