

US risks confrontation with Russia

by M. K. Bhadrakumar*



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(Picture pma)

The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister *Sergei Ryabkov* remarked last week that Moscow expects nothing good in relations with a “deeply hostile” US under the incoming administration of *Joe Biden*. He

further said in an interview

with the *Interfax* published Thursday December 24, “We are heading from bad to worse. The next US president has been left with a bad legacy and it will take a long time for him to sort this out.”

Ryabkov disclosed that Moscow hasn’t had any contacts with Biden’s transition team “and we are not going to do this. In the end, it’s up to the Americans to decide what, when and how to make our bilateral relations.” He didn’t rule out a “selective dialogue” with the new administration, but estimated that “We definitely don’t expect anything good.”

For, Ryabkov concluded, it would be strange to expect better ties “from people who, many of them, have spent their careers engaging in Russophobia and throwing mud at my country.” Ryabkov oversees Russia-US relations in the Foreign Ministry and the plain-speaking was intended to convey to the incoming Biden administration that Moscow is in no mood to surrender and has the capability to take actions that adversely affected US security.

In fact, speaking in Moscow on the same day, Foreign Minister *Sergey Lavrov* asserted that Russia will retaliate against US sanctions and in ways that will touch “on the entire range of Russian-American relations,” without elaborating. As he put it, “The United States has long been pursuing a hostile policy towards our country. A response will certainly follow, not only in terms of reciprocation, but we will also draw additional

conclusions on the entire range of Russia-US relations.”

Lavrov was commenting on the latest US sanctions announced on Monday against a number of Russian companies that work with the armed forces. Lavrov said these sanctions were based on “a strategy” aimed at weakening Washington’s rivals on the global markets, “blatantly violating the rules of the *World Trade Organization*.”

To be sure, the Russian posturing has noticeably hardened in the recent weeks. Certain remarks by President *Vladimir Putin* at this annual press conference in Moscow on December 17 suggest that the Kremlin has had a rethink on the policy of “strategic patience” pursued so far and may allow the armed forces to act assertively in the face of US provocations.

Putin underscored emphatically that Russia not only outmatches the US with the hypersonic weapons it has developed, but “we are working, among other things, on the ‘antidote’ against future hypersonic weapons in other countries... I am confident we will do that and we are on the right path.”

Putin stressed that the very existence of Russia’s hypersonic missile systems influences the global situation and has changed it. He singled out the advanced *RS-28 Sarmat* silo-based system with a heavy liquid-propellant intercontinental ballistic missile with a throw weight of 10 tonnes, *Poseidon* unmanned underwater vehicle, the *Kinzhal* and the *Peresvet* laser weapons, the *Avangard* hypersonic missile system whose speed exceeds Mach 20 and the *Tsirkon* long-range hypersonic anti-ship cruise missile flying at over eight times the speed of sound.

Putin noted, “Moreover, it (*Tsirkon*) can be placed both on stationary carriers and on surface and subsurface ships. Where can it be placed? In neutral waters. So, you can calculate the range and the speed and everything will become clear. Does this change and influence the (global) situation somehow? Of course, it changes and influences it.”

Again, in an address on December 21 at the annual expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board in Moscow, Putin flagged the “high risks of escalation in the South Caucasus, the

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Middle East, Africa and other regions. NATO's military activity persists ... it is necessary to maintain our nuclear weapons in high combat readiness and develop all components of the nuclear triad. This is of fundamental importance to ensure our national security and preserve strategic parity in the world ...

Putin said, "we must be ready to respond in a timely manner to the Western countries' deployment of counterpart missiles near our borders. If we are forced to, we must take all response measures and do this in the shortest time possible ... I would like to emphasise that with respect to strategic forces, we have already done serious research and technology groundwork on pieces of equipment that have no counterparts in the world."

In the American policy debates, there is a dangerous assumption that the pursuit of US hegemony can continue unquestioned, as Russia's economy is not in the same league as the US' and Moscow is not seeking confrontation with the US and NATO. But the signals coming from Moscow is that Russia will not surrender to the American notion of world domination. Moscow has drawn the conclusion that given the pervasive anti-Russia narrative that is firmly rooted among the American elite, any concessions on Russia's part for the sake of a nominal improvement in relations with Washington no longer makes sense.

There is insufficient awareness on the American side that the danger of a nuclear confrontation is growing. An escalation of US-Russia military tensions is entirely conceivable. It could happen in Syria, Ukraine or in the high seas. The chief of General Staff of Russia's armed forces General *Valery Gerasimov* told a news briefing for foreign military attaches in Moscow on December 24 that the NATO's training activities – "with non-NATO countries getting increasingly involved" – have taken a pronounced anti-Russia direction and there are growing provocations near Russia's western borders.

Gerasimov said, "The major increase in the number of NATO ships' visits to the Black Sea, Baltic and Barents seas is alarming. Also, the

number of flights by US strategic aircraft has grown." He alleged that "there has been no reactions (from NATO) to this day" to Russian proposals to ease military activity along the line of Russia-NATO engagement on the basis of reciprocity and maximum transparency and for an effective mechanism to prevent dangerous military activity in the air and at sea – in the first place, in the Baltic and Black Sea regions.

Indeed, against this backdrop, Russia is not standing still, either. In a historical perspective, while the share of modern equipment in the Soviet Army was 54 percent, and in the strategic and nuclear forces 65 to 70 percent, which was a high level by world standards, today, the share of modern weapons and equipment is over 70 percent and stands at 86 percent for the nuclear forces. Reports keep appearing on induction of new weapons into the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the American strategists continue to turn a blind eye to the prospect of an alliance between Russia and China. They blithely assume that it is possible to successfully contain and gradually grind both countries through sanctions and restrictions on trade, investment, finance and technology and simultaneously undermining their internal stability by financing the domestic opposition to the regime, the indoctrination of "pro-Western" elements and information warfare, etc.

Equally, a range of issues – eg., the growing tensions over Taiwan and the key role of Ukraine in Biden's foreign policy drafting – have spurred Russia and China to seek to hedge risks and deepen their partnership networks. It is a historic error of judgment to underestimate the grit of Russia and China to push back.

At some point, Moscow and Beijing would see no option but to cut the Americans down to size through joint efforts. The possibility of a Russia-China tactical alliance is rapidly growing, fuelled by the common challenges they face from the US attempts to incessantly poke them and suppress them, interfere in their internal affairs and encircle them with hostile alliances.

Source: <https://indianpunchline.com/us-risks-confrontation-with-russia/>, 27/12/2020