This past week saw the electronic meeting of Russia’s president Vladimir Putin and United States president Joe Biden. It was billed as a head to head meeting of two of the world’s most powerful political figures. In fact, Biden was supported by four of his top aides in foreign affairs. Their precise role was unclear. One suspects that, given Biden’s propensity for unfortunate remarks, their presence was to ensure that their man did not go too far “off script” in his meeting with Putin.

Expectations of the meeting were quite high, given that it had been sought by Biden. The question was always whether Biden was genuine in seeking a reduction of tensions with Russia or whether it was in fact mere grandstanding by him, with the main target being a domestic audience among whom his approval ratings had fallen to disastrous levels.

Discussion on the outcome has been widely divergent. On the one hand the British commentator Alexander Mercouris regarded the meeting as an unqualified success for Putin, with the role of Ukraine reduced to secondary status and its mooted membership of NATO put on the back burner for at least 10 years.

That was not the impression gained by Indian commentator M.K Bhadrakumar who handed Biden the victory from the encounter. He pointed to the range of sanctions the Americans have threatened Russia with if it goes so far as to directly intervene in Ukraine. In fact, Ukraine is doing a good job of self-destruction without any direct intervention by Russia. The two breakaway republics of the Donbass have successfully withheld a full-scale Ukrainian onslaught for the seven years since the United States sponsored coup in Ukraine led to their declaration of quasi-independence from Ukrainian government control.
In the intervening years there has been effectively a military stalemate, with 100,000 Ukrainian troops bogged down on the dividing line with the two breakaway regions and Ukraine proper. Despite constant shelling of the Donbass positions, they have failed to make any military advance. If they looked like doing so, there is little doubt in this viewer’s mind that the Russian army would intervene to protect the position of the two breakaway regions.

The Ukrainian economy, let alone its military, are in no position to fight an actual war with Russia, the preposterous claims of the military and political leadership notwithstanding. In fact, there is good evidence to show that the two regions are increasingly being integrated with Russia’s economy. It should not be overlooked that a large proportion of the Donbass peoples already hold Russian passports, and speak Russian as their first language. Frankly, I would rate their prospects of ever being reinstated with Ukraine proper as zero.

What about the dire United States threats to Russia in the event of an actual war between Russia and Ukraine? Again, there is nothing new in these threats: they have been threatened for all of the time since the Ukrainian coup in 2014. Russia has in any case taken steps to protect itself against the consequences of a decision such as being cut off from the European payment system.

They have already set up their own payment system in the event of that cut off from the European payment system. One aspect of Russia’s defence is the growing strength of the multiple trading systems that have been established in recent years with their Eurasian partners. These feature in particular Russia’s Asian neighbours and remain relatively impervious to financial sanctions imposed by the West.

One should never lose sight of a major factor behind this blatant economic warfare, and that is the role of Russian gas. Nord Stream 2 has always been bitterly opposed by the Americans. They have dressed up their objections with allegations of Europe being held hostage to Russian energy supplies. They of course have ambitions to replace the Russian supply with their own, much more expensive, system of gas.

This argument, apart from its obvious self-serving nature, is flawed on a number of points. First, the United States alternative is much more expensive than the Russian supply. Secondly, it is doubtful if the Americans could in fact meet the European demand for gas, which is the main system of heating and cooking in Europe. It is extremely doubtful if the European public would be willing to allow themselves to freeze this winter in the name of teaching Russia some geo-political point beloved of anti-Russian politicians who are highly unlikely to join their compatriots in freezing this winter.

Russia is already supplying gas to a number of East and South European countries who are less interested in trying to score political points against the Russians. They place a higher priority in being able to keep themselves warm and fed in the coming winter.

To return to the Putin – Biden summit, the United States position afterwards was filled with dire threats against Russia if they should do anything drastic against Ukraine. As noted above, there is no evidence of any such Russian intention. On the contrary, the present situation, with the Donbass being progressively separated from Ukraine, suits them very well. Unless the Ukrainians do something stupid (which should never be discounted), the status quo actually suits the Russians quite well.

That could of course all change if the Ukrainians, emboldened by thoughts of United States/NATO help, were stupid enough to actually try to forcefully regain the Dombass into their territory. That would provoke a major Russian reaction. Notwithstanding the dire words of Bhadrakumar, that would be a very uneven fight. I agree with the assessment of the Russian commentator (and United States resident) Andrei Martyanov who predicts that any such war between Russia and Ukraine would be unfortunate to last even one week, with the crushing defeat of the latter.

The United States would huff and puff and impose more sanctions upon Russia, but their potential for doing real harm to Russia is decidedly limited. Russia has the invaluable support of China and the United States would be extremely foolish to try and take on both nations as part of its retaliation for Ukraine’s defeat.

There would undoubtably be much posturing on the United States side. A measure of the latter’s hubris was fully on show this week with its pretentious gathering of 100+ nations in support of its version of “democracy”. The world has had enough, and the major moves being made by Russia and his Chinese partner are part of the growing evidence for a new world order.

James O’Neill, an Australian-based former Barrister at Law, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
