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Biden's Nord Stream 2 Concessions Are Part of his Broader Geopolitical Strategy

The Biden administration has recently decided to remove sanctions that had shut down construction of the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany. Nord Stream 2 allows Russian gas to reach Europe without passing through Ukraine, a huge blow to the Eastern European country and US ally, and a major change from past US policy. The decision has set off a bipartisan political firestorm, with Senator Ted Cruz putting a complete hold on all of Biden's senior State Department nominees until sanctions are reinstated.

Rather than purely geopolitical factors, the move should be taken as further evidence for Biden's heavy focus on his domestic agenda. A concession on Russo-European fuel sourcing is an attempt to peel them away from Beijing, and Biden views US rivalry with China as key to selling his domestic spending bills. His willingness to casually embrace another environmentally devastating pipeline raises questions about how seriously Biden is taking climate change.

The shift does mark a large change in US policy. After all, the massive buildup of America's domestic fossil fuel production under Obama was partly intended to reduce European reliance on Russian fuel. The most basic interpretation of the move is as a form of rapprochement with Russia and Putin, which broadly speaking is true. It is also an effort to ease tensions between America and its European allies. US-Atlantic ties were strained under Trump, and Europe and Germany are often much less willing than the United States to pursue an aggressive policy towards Russia due to their energy dependency. However, the change should be viewed from an even broader perspective.

In the *National Interest* Vuk Vuksanovic correctly identifies the move as an effort to reorient America's hostility from Russia to China. While Vuksanovic considers this an inevitable result of the US and China's clashing geopolitical

ambitions, analyzing the change in terms of Biden's domestic policy may be more instructive.

Foreign policy has never been one of Biden's interests. The primary—arguably even exclusive—focus of his administration is on his domestic spending bills. He believes in the use of large-scale government investment to boost American “competitiveness” and ensure America remains on top of the world for a century to come. He regularly invokes the specter of China as America's greatest enemy and competitor. It is dangerous brinksmanship, but it is likely continued aggression against China is only a tool to sell the public on and unite Congress behind his domestic agenda, a part of which is a commitment to fight climate change.

Most of Biden's foreign policy moves can be read in this context. He aims to restore America's Atlantic ties, tarnished under Trump, as well as strengthening its standing in Southeast Asia, while leaving in place Trump's aggressive steps towards Cuba and Iran. The predominant underlying concern cited is his goal of unifying “democracies” against Chinese “authoritarianism”. However, again, his antagonism with China is primarily aimed at strengthening his domestic agenda.

Biden's foreign policy team is staffed with Obama alumni who believe this type of realpolitik triangulation is precisely the way to keep peace in the world. Even if Biden is largely leaving foreign policy to them, his willingness to make a major political and economic concession to Russia reinforces the impression that he views his primary foreign policy goal as isolating China. His apparent disregard for Nord Stream 2's environmental impact shows that, regardless of public statements on the topic, his goal of intensified competition with China will largely disregard the need for action on climate change. This, in turn, does not inspire confidence in his commitment to domestic climate policy.