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What do we do about Russia? – Part 2



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“Putin’s demonisation is not a policy but an alibi for the absence of one”
Henry Kissinger

Summary

Relations between Russia and the West are in their worst state since the height of the Cold War. A paranoid, resentful Russia faces a West whose assertion of global authority is tainted and slipping. We are in a dangerously escalating cycle of (ineffective) Western sanctions and (increasingly egregious) Russian provocations. Western hopes that the fall of Putin will turn things round are unlikely to be fulfilled. Our problem is not just with Putin, it is with Russia. And, as confrontation with China becomes the central issue in global politics, Russia is being pushed to the Chinese side.

Russia in the World

Western outrage at Russian breaches of the “Rules Based International Order” (otherwise known as the “Liberal World Order”, or, by some, “US unipolarity”) enjoys very incomplete support in the international community. Even in 2014, when Western normative and political power were still close to their peak and Russia committed its most blatant assault on the international order – the annexation of Crimea - the West was only able to assemble 100 (out of a possible 193) UN General Assembly votes for condemnation. Such key international players as China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Israel did not join the Western camp. And while the West had no problem throwing Russia out of the (Western dominated) G8, it did not even try in the much more significant G20, where the key non-Western powers would simply not have let it happen.

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Since then the rules based order has visibly eroded. Protectionism has been on the rise, democracy and human rights in retreat, nationalist “strong man” regimes (with which Putin has an obvious affinity) have proliferated, and international law and institutions have been increasingly at a discount. The global spate of beggar my neighbour nationalism prompted by the virus is further evidence of the way things seem to be going. Above all, the erstwhile key prop and enforcer of the rules based order, the United States, has found itself for the first time since the Cold War facing a serious geopolitical challenger, China. The US has accordingly not only abandoned its role as “Global Sheriff” but increasingly turned into just another state pursuing national advantage whatever the international rules may say (and it is worth noting that this trend, while given a big boost by Trump, both preceded him and is likely to succeed him, whoever wins the Presidential election).

In these circumstances the West’s efforts at isolating and sanctioning Russia look less and less like the application of universally accepted rules and more and more like the use of naked power against a geopolitical opponent. For states bruised by the behaviour of the “rogue superpower” and looking around for other influential players with whom they can do business Russia is a natural port of call. Indeed this is already happening. In the Middle East, where Western exceptionalism has been particularly on display, Russia has emerged after a decades long absence as a key broker with whom all local powers are keen to stay in touch.

But far more significant, and pregnant with consequence for the future, has been the evolution of the Russia/China relationship. The rise of China is in any case a key challenge to the existing world order. The past few months have seen already deep tensions between China and the West sharply intensified by a series of clashes; over coronavirus, over technology, over Taiwan, over Hong Kong and over the South China Sea. It is now very clear that, whether you call it a “New Cold War” or not, the key global confrontation in the period to come will be between China and the US led West.

Where does this leave Russia? Despite its vast Asian hinterland, Russia has throughout its history seen itself as a European state. The huge majority of its population and economy lie to the west of the Urals. Its economic links, social bonds, key historical memories, and cultural reference points have all pointed west. Meanwhile, its relations with China since the 1960s have been frankly confrontational with disagreed borders, ideological conflicts and serious military tensions, occasionally verging on war.

Nevertheless since the end of the Cold War as Russia’s relations with the West have deteriorated those with China have prospered. The border disputes have been settled. A natural economic complementarity – Russian raw materials for Chinese manufactured goods – has asserted itself. The new gas and oil pipelines go east, not west. China is now Russia’s largest trading partner. The two current leaders are each others’ most frequent interlocutors. Their militaries exercise together. They vote together in the UN. The language they use about their relationship avoids the word “alliance”, but only just.

Western commentators have watched this love affair with some scepticism. They point out that there are inhibitions on both sides. China's economic links with the West vastly exceed those with Russia. The Russians are nervous about becoming a mere economic satellite to their booming southern neighbour. They fear that China might reabsorb their huge, empty, far east (seized during China's "century of humiliation"). And there is also a clear Chinese threat to Russia's dominance in its Central Asian backyard. Why have these concerns not impeded the thirty year growth of the relationship?

The answer to this question pretty clearly lies in the fact that both Russia and China increasingly see the antagonistic West as the core threat to their domestic political arrangements and overseas interests. Each provides the other with a strategically significant, economically useful, quasi-ally as they face that threat. Given current Western attitudes this bond seems bound to grow stronger. Or, to put it another way, in the upcoming global competition between China and the West the Russians, however European they may feel, will very probably fall on China's side.

One other point on China. President Trump, invited recently to criticise the poisoning of Navalny, responded that it is China, not Russia, that is the real challenge. The US defence and economic establishments (and probably Biden as well) all agree. US geopolitical attention, whoever wins the Presidential election, is fast moving to Asia. This leaves Europe (including the UK) uncomfortably placed; confrontational relations with the local military superpower, and diminishing assurance of support when needed from across the Atlantic.

Where do we go from here?

Relations between Russia and the West are at a dangerous impasse. The West's view is that Russia's repeated breaches of the international order require punishment in the form of isolation and sanctions. Russia's view is that we are predatory hypocrites; we regularly breach the international rules we are so keen to impose on them, and our real aim is to bring Putin down. The upshot is that the Russian people (as they always do in times of stress) unite behind their President; communication with a nuclear armed Russia, even as our armed forces are engaged in rival missions in Syria and elsewhere, are virtually at a standstill; the sanctions don't work; and Russia is increasingly tied to our fast upcoming key geopolitical competitor – China.

This makes no sense, and a growing number of people are beginning to understand this. An open letter appeared in August signed by many of the good and the great of the US foreign policy establishment entitled "It's time to rethink our Russia policy". More practically, both France and Germany have seriously engaged with the Russians on managing the Minsk process in Ukraine and the demonstrations in Belarus (the UK being conspicuously absent on both issues). And even the Trump administration seems to have woken up to the need to talk to the Russians to prevent the collapse of the world's regime for the control of strategic nuclear weapons.

Nothing very much is now going to move until the US Presidential election is out of the way in November. But here are a few suggested principles as the UK plans for its own approach thereafter.

- Firstly, we should do everything we can to bolster the unity and robustness of NATO. While assertions of the “revanchism” of Russia are plainly exaggerated (their actions in both Ukraine and Georgia were responses to what they saw as external interventions) Russia is only too ready to exploit weakness. NATO faces two serious problems – the unwillingness of most European allies to devote the resources they have promised for their own defence, and a US whose attention will be increasingly on China, not Russia. The UK, with its strong links both in Europe and across the Atlantic has a lot to contribute to keeping the show on the road. At the same time the more we can do to overcome the absurd self-imposed constraints which prevent NATO itself getting into a dialogue with Russia, and to demonstrate that NATO is not a threat to them or their interests, the better.
- We need to get real about the extent to which we can influence Russia’s human rights and democratic performance. I say this with regret as Russia’s human rights campaigners are among the bravest people I have met. But Western interventions on these matters are received with acute suspicion, expose us to charges of hypocrisy (what about our friend Saudi Arabia?) and have often proved totally counterproductive – Putin’s relationship with Clinton was reportedly poisoned at the start by Clinton demanding humane treatment for Chechen terrorists. The occasional very precise intervention can work, as with the Germans taking in the poisoned Navalny. But, finally, Russia’s performance on this front will evolve according to Russian rhythms, not in response to Western pressure.
- We should do all we can to foster civil society, including business links, in Russia. There is a disturbing undertone to the ISC report implying that anyone who does business with Russia or the Russians is an “enabler”, facilitating deep criminality. This is absurd. Plainly where there is criminality we should deal firmly with it. But it is by building up honest and open links between businesses, students, academic institutions, professions and so on that we open the way for Russians to understand and appreciate our values and way of life. They like coming here and dealing with us, and should be encouraged, not given the cold shoulder.
- We should look for a way of getting off the sanctions treadmill. As noted above, they don’t work (other than allowing Ministers to claim they are “doing something”) and once imposed are politically very difficult to lift. An obvious first step is to swear off imposing any new ones (which would have an impact as the UK is seen both by Russia and in the West as a leading sanctions hawk) and then, if a thaw ever does come, trade off existing sanctions against improvements in Russian behaviour (essentially the approach used with Iran until the US blew up the whole process).
- We should look for a positive agenda with Russia. There is plenty that we should, and could, be talking about; our shared problems with Islamic fundamentalism, some “rules of the road” for cyber, better military communications to damp down potential crises, and so on. The point here is that once you establish a dialogue you open the possibility of extending it over time to more difficult issues like Syria or Ukraine.

Engaging in all this would be a useful step towards unwinding our currently almost unrelievedly negative relationship with Russia. It would also have some impact on our Western partners, who see us as hardliners on the Russia dossier. I have no illusions. I have negotiated too long with

Russia to imagine that turning things round will in any way be easy or certain. But the prize of reducing the dangerous tensions in the present relationship, opening up channels which may enable us to forestall future crises rather than plunge into them, and maybe show the Russians that they have geopolitical possibilities other than tying themselves to China's apron strings, has to be worth the effort.

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