

## **What do we do about Russia? By Tony Brenton**

“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. Some thoughts on UK policy.*

### The Problem

Things have gone badly wrong between Russia and the West over the past thirty years. The expectation when Communism fell was that Russia would become a normal European nation, a market economy, a democracy, and a constructive contributor to the international order. As Russia diverged from this path so Western hostility grew; initially through political coldness, then through several rounds of economic sanctions, and, most recently, a couple of proxy wars in Ukraine and Syria (the latter of which prompted Russia to remind the West that it has a nuclear option). As things stand there is zero trust and minimal communication between the two sides; and no real sign – at least between the principal players, the US and Russia – that anyone is looking for a way out. UK exasperation at the failure of the early hopes was rather superbly summed up in the operational conclusion of the recent House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) report on Russia – “The UK as a Western Democracy cannot allow Russia to flout the Rules Based International Order without commensurate consequences”.

### Two Narratives

How have we got here? The Western narrative is clear. Russia did indeed start hopefully as it emerged from the rubble of the USSR. But through a sort of historical recidivism it abandoned democracy in favour of increasingly oppressive autocracy; diverged from a market economy to a much more state dominated, hydrocarbon dependent, and corrupt model;

and turned into a serial bully of its neighbours and breaker of international norms. Important milestones have been the 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the 2008 Georgia war, the 2014 seizure of the Crimea and war in the Donbass, the intervention in 2015 to support the appalling Assad regime in Syria, and a growing wave of cyber intrusions and assaults – notably in the 2016 US Presidential election (whose unforgivable consequence in the eyes of many Americans was the election of Donald Trump). Most recently we have seen the poisoning this August of Russia's most effective opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, which, even if Putin didn't directly order it, certainly came out of the darker recesses of the Russian State.

The Russians of course see things differently. In their view Russia, largely as the result of Western economic advice, collapsed in the 1990s into penury, international humiliation and near anarchy. They needed, and found, a strong leader to pull them out of the mire and reestablish international respect. He, Putin, essentially succeeded in this task, however unpleasant his political techniques, and has enjoyed the gratitude of most Russians since. Meanwhile the West took full advantage of Russian weakness. The charge list is long: the illegal Kosovo war, the expansion of NATO (having promised not to), moral support for the brutal and violent Chechen insurrection, a further illegal war in Iraq, support for the Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers which provoked the 2008 war there, overt and explicit support for large popular demonstrations in 2011/12 demanding Putin's departure, support for the overthrow in 2014 of the democratically elected President of Ukraine (forcing the Russians to intervene to protect their interests in Crimea and the Donbass), and a series of inept and illegal interventions in the Middle East which simply boosted Islamism – notably in Syria where a fundamentalist outcome was only stopped by the Russian intervention to save Assad. All of this has left a massively outgunned and outdollared Russia (with GDP and defence spending about one twentieth of those in the West), convinced that the West's ostensible commitment to democracy and human rights is in fact cover for a determined effort to bring down Putin and weaken the Russian state. As they search for affordable means to show that there is still a cost to taking them on they have increasingly turned to cyberattacks, overseas murder and electoral interference.

The point about these rival narratives is not which one is true. Both in fact have glaring weaknesses. Russian paranoia about Western aims, and readiness to engage in almost nihilistic international hooliganism in order to be taken seriously, is one clear example. But, on the other side, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the West following its victory in the Cold War committed similar errors of indifference and humiliation towards Russia as it did towards Imperial Germany in 1918. Certainly the Western

habit of regularly breaching the international order while expecting lesser nations such as Russia to be firmly bound by it has not helped.

But the main point is that each narrative is seriously believed by its proponents. The result, as noted above, is that trust and indeed communication between the two sides is now at least as bad as at the worst moments of the Cold War. We have found our way to a quite dangerous escalatory spiral; accumulating Western sanctions on one side are met by a rising tide of Russian provocations on the other.

### Russia's Putin: Putin's Russia

Western policy towards Russia is obviously not improving Russian behaviour. When I ask friends in London and Washington what we are actually achieving I am regularly enjoined to "strategic patience". This seems to mean two things. Firstly, a realistic acceptance that it is now politically impossible for Putin and his regime, even if they wished to, to retreat under Western pressure. And secondly the confident expectation, implicit in virtually every Western political commentary on Russia I read, that Putin's style of government cannot last much longer, and will be replaced by something much easier for the West to live with.

There are some grounds for this expectation. The ordinary Russian has seen his living standards stagnate for a decade (partly because oil prices are low; but official rapacity, corruption and lack of rule of law all also play a part) and is about to take a big further hit from the pandemic. Putin's leap in popularity from seizing Crimea has faded. He has now been in charge for twenty years; young Russians know no other ruler, and have no memory of the chaos which preceded him. The young, the liberal and the urban are increasingly ready to demonstrate against the regime and have on a growing number of occasions forced official retreats on local acts of injustice or maladministration (long running demonstrations on behalf of the local governor in Khabarovsk, which the government can't contain and doesn't want to repress, are a good current example). Putin's political party has become unresponsive and corrupt (and has been enduringly dubbed the "Party of Thieves and Swindlers" by Navalny). It now faces sharp losses and maybe (despite the inevitable ballot fixing) even defeat in next year's elections. If, as at the time of writing looks possible, Belarus succumbs to democratic revolution that will add to pressures for the same in Russia. And finally Putin himself is visibly bored with most aspects of his job, seems increasingly disengaged (notably with regard to dealing with the virus) and has allowed an entirely uncharacteristic feeling of slackness to appear in some of the ways Russia is currently run.

But there are good reasons why regular bursts of Western optimism about Putin's political demise have so far not come to fruition. The evidence is that even with the depressed economy, the coronavirus, and the fading of the Crimea effect, a significant majority of Russians continue to back him. He after all is still the man who on coming to power stood Russia back on its feet, tamed the oligarchs, defeated the Chechens, brought order back to the streets and saw off humiliation by the West. The impression that even the most effective of his opponents lacks national resonance has been rather reinforced by the absence (so far) of any mass reaction to Navalny's poisoning. Putin's polled popularity rating has never fallen far below 60%. Two recent electoral tests - the 2018 Presidential election, and a constitutional plebiscite in July this year potentially extending his rule until 2036 - both gave him majorities of close to 80%. You have to aim off for the ballot rigging, but few believe the fraud can be so extensive as to invalidate these results entirely. And what the results point to is a Russian people, driven by restored national pride, memories of state collapse and fears of a hostile world, who support the President they have got.

The other key source of Putin's power is his domination over Russia's ruling elite. He is not a dictator (and sometimes loses policy arguments) but presides as umpire over a bunch of squabbling clans (security agencies, liberal economists, state enterprises etc). This is a crucial role and requires real political skill if the balance between rival forces is to be maintained. When it was thought in 2008 that Putin was leaving, the whole system nearly imploded. So, barring a sharp deterioration in political circumstances, the elite is solidly behind him - not because they all endorse everything he does but because they fear what would happen if he went.

Putin's long term survival is not guaranteed. All autocratic regimes are to some extent brittle. Some unexpected spark (Belarus? A fatal long term collapse in oil prices?) could provoke the outburst of mass protest which could bring him down. The regime is very aware of this possibility, is constantly on the lookout for foreign interference which might fan the flames (to which it views its own external electoral interference as a legitimate response), and has set up domestic forces to contest the streets on its behalf if needed. That's the emergency brake, but even without it the central realistic expectation has to be that, unless he decides to go voluntarily, Putin will be around for the duration, and will be able to pass on the succession to someone in his own image. We in the West may like to think we merely have a Putin problem. In fact what we have is a Russia problem. And it would be prudent to expect that problem to be with us for the foreseeable future.

## 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.

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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