
RUSSIA CANNOT LIVE WITH THE WEST - OR WITHOUT IT

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Technological backwardness increases its dependence on liberal democracies

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With diminishing resources, the Kremlin has increasingly resorted to intimidating the worlds liberal democracies into accepting Russias grand ambitions.

At the same time, the country has to wrestle with the following dilemma: how to preserve its role as a global power without simultaneously undermining its ability to exploit liberal civilisation for its own ends.

Russia has a long history of using the western world for its purposes. Two successive eras of Russian modernisation, led by Peter the Great and Stalin, were achieved with western technological and intellectual input. America helped us a lot, Stalin said in 1933. Since the end of the cold war, the irony is that the liberal democracies have succeeded not in helping Russia to transform itself but in preserving a construct that is alien to western values.

Among the European nations that have been important in sustaining the Russian system, Germany stands out. For example, East German reparations after the second world war helped to restore the Soviet economy. Later, German Ostpolitik and improved Soviet relations with West Germany not only prolonged the life of a dysfunctional regime, but also provided a basis for the post-communist engagement between Moscow and the west.

Today, Germany remains the leading buyer of Russian energy, propping up the latters public finances.

Several other western states have been helping the Russian system to limp along. The UK is its entrée into the western financial world, while France continues to be the European state pushing hardest for a softer line on Russia.

Russian technological backwardness is, according to former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, a serious threat to sovereignty. Indeed, it increases Moscows dependence on the liberal democracies, undermining in the process not only its great power pretensions, but also its independence.

Paradoxically, engagement with the west guarantees the survival of the countrys system. At the same time, by seeking to co-opt elements in the western establishment, Russia has been undermining the west from within.

Now, the Kremlin has to resolve the tension generated between preserving Russias great power status on the one hand, and its policy of exploiting -western resources on the other. This conflict was demonstrated in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, in an effort to defend its right to have a galaxy of satellites, hoping that the western powers would simply stomach it. But Moscow was surprised by the response of the west.

The Kremlin now has a dual agenda: to mobilise anti-western sentiment in Russian society, while at the same time engaging with the west and persuading the liberal democracies to co-operate with it. Meanwhile, Russia will have to find new ways of keeping its smaller neighbours in its sphere of influence. The countrys annual budget of \$250bn means that annual subsidies of \$10bn-\$15bn to Belarus, for instance, are unsustainable.

Engagement is the only way the Kremlin can solve its dilemma. But it needs the west to confirm its victory. The irony is that the bombastic nationalism of Trumpism (in its American and European variants) could create problems for Russias use of western resources.

If the west resists Russias policy of being with the west and against the west, Moscow will up the ante. True, any assertiveness on the Kremlins part would have the aim not of provoking confrontation, but of persuading the west to engage on its terms and to decide that it is safer to play along with the grumpy nuclear powers game of lets pretend. After all, this is what the west has been doing for decades.

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