

As China Embraces Russia, the Western Narrative Needs a Rethink

Growing ties between Beijing and Moscow are fuelled by US policies that are putting both countries in a corner

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Last week, the Economist dedicated its [cover and leading article](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping's worldview. The timing was perfect: Xi had just completed a controversial three-day [visit to Russia](#), where the two countries signed important [agreements](#) expanding their cooperation. Xi and [Russian](#) President Vladimir Putin both issued hubristic and highly confident statements about the future.

Putin invited Russia's main partners in Latin America, Africa and Asia to use the yuan for [foreign trade](#) settlements. Xi [said](#):

"There are changes that haven't happened in 100 years. When we are together, we drive these changes," Xi told Putin in his departing words.

The first is a further boost to de-dollarisation in the Global South; as for the second, the changes Xi is referencing are surely the perceived decline of the [US](#) and of western liberalism. The Economist article perfectly illustrates what is wrong with western thinking about foreign policy, and the dangerous groupthink that could bring western democracies to the brink.

After months of spin by western governments and media about alleged tensions between [China](#) and [Russia](#) over the [Ukraine war](#), Xi's visit to Russia came as a badly concealed shock. Wishful thinking rarely turns into reality, and yet, no reappraisal of the western narrative was triggered.

Predictably, the Economist emphasised that Xi's visit coincided with the [arrest warrant](#) for Putin issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). But the article noted that the Chinese leader was "untroubled by trivial inconsistencies".

Considering what is happening in Ukraine, the ICC's decision was a necessary act. Unfortunately, the Economist did not provide the necessary broader context for its comment. Neither Russia, nor China, nor even the US, are [signatories](#) to the ICC's Rome Statute. When the ICC launched an investigation against the US for [alleged war crimes](#) in Afghanistan, the US administration threatened the court's staff and [revoked](#) their visas.

The Economist article also [noted](#) that Xi believes in "the inexorable decline of the American-led world order, with its professed concern for rules and human rights". But what the Chinese leader believes or doesn't believe is irrelevant; it is a matter as complex and esoteric as Kremlinology was during the Cold War. What is relevant, instead, is the story that the Economist appears to have missed.

The American-led world order is [in decline](#) because its professed concern for rules and human rights is tarnished by double standards. Countries in the Global South are incessantly conveying this message to the US and its allies, to no avail.

Reshaping the world order?

The Economist also [attributes to China](#) a ruthless and well-played hand in Ukraine; that is, to ensure Moscow's subordination to Beijing. To believe this implies that Putin is stupid, or naive, to say the least. While the Russian president can be accused of many things – ruthlessness, cynicism, unscrupulousness – stupidity is a stretch too far.

The Economist does not appear to have contemplated the notion that the growing Russian-Chinese cooperation is fuelled not by Putin's alleged naivety, but by US policies that are putting both countries in a corner – practically throwing one into the other's arms.

Russia's deplorable invasion of Ukraine is the latest step in an escalating dispute between Moscow and [Nato](#), mainly centred on the latter's eastward expansion in Europe. US-China tensions largely stem from Washington's de facto reneging on its "[One China](#)" policy vis-a-vis Taiwan, and from its inability to see the global standing of the US threatened by Beijing's economic and technological successes.

China is a victim of its own success; the US is a victim of the self-harming policies it has adopted in recent decades.

The Economist notes that Xi "wants to reshape the post-1945 world order". This assertion struggles with facts and reality. China has thrived in the US-led post-1945 world order. Since 1979, this order has allowed [800 million](#) Chinese to be brought out of poverty; in the same period, the country has become not only the world's factory, but its second-largest economy.

In early 2017, as the US began nurturing [second thoughts](#) about its own rules-based world order, the leader who went to Davos to [defend](#) it was none other than Xi. Why should China reshape a system that has served it so well?

According to the Economist, Xi's use of the word "multilateralism" has become "code for a world that ditches universal values and is run by balancing great-power interests".

Sometimes it is worth wondering which world the Economist has been watching in recent decades. Both before and after the Cold War, super, great and ordinary powers have been

ignoring or twisting so-called universal values, as required by their vested interests and power plays.

There are hundreds of examples where universal values have been trampled by realpolitik. Universal rights are encoded in the UN Charter and conventions. There is an inherent problem with regards to respecting them, but there are also increasingly conflicting visions about who should have the last word in ascertaining the violations of such rights – and above all, how such rules should be enforced.

Many countries around the world, a lot of them not autocratic, believe western democracies have often weaponised [human rights](#) for selfish political purposes.

In a widely touted rules-based world order, to make such a system work, the rules should apply to all – primarily to those countries that drafted, and pretend to enforce, them. In such a context, the US and its allies have largely failed.

Susceptible to outrage

The Economist article [reserves](#) its most astonishing discovery for the end of the article, noting that “the real point of Mr Xi’s foreign policy is to make the world safer for the Chinese Communist Party”. No effort is made to explain why the Chinese leadership should behave differently than all other world governments.

China is blamed for not believing “in democracy, human rights or constraining great powers”. This is fair. Western democracies, however, do not appear more healthy. Low turnouts at the ballot boxes in recent years are warning signals. French President Emmanuel Macron, confronted this month with huge protests against his policies, was re-elected last year by a low turnout. Of 48 millions eligible French voters, only [18 million](#) voters elected him.

These same democracies have selectively protected human rights, and as for constraining great powers, there is a lot of work to do with regards to the US.

The Economist blames China for always backing ruling elites, and it considers such an approach susceptible to outrage from ordinary people around the world. Yet, as the story went to press, the real outraged ordinary people were mainly visible in the streets of [Paris](#) and [Tel Aviv](#), not to mention the wave of strikes affecting [the UK](#).

In its last sentences, the Economist admits that western democracies aim in the long run “to rebut the charge that global rules serve only Western interests”. For the record, this is not a charge, but a sad reality. The sooner the Economist and its like-minded peers get it, the better.

Ultimately, the article criticises China for its alleged main belief: “that real democracy entails economic development, but does not depend on political liberty”. This is a crucial point. China’s two millennia of hard historical lessons probably brought its leadership to such unacceptable conclusions. After all, ruling the largest population on earth must never have been easy.

The hope is that this approach may soon change. Nevertheless, to count on western pressure to make it happen implies a crass misreading of the tea leaves related to the Chinese establishment.

Western democracies should move on to real reform, rather than merely pretending to support it. They could start by putting aside lectures and bombastic claims of moral superiority; likewise, their focus on civil rights should not continue to come at the expense of social rights.

As the last couple of weeks have shown, the outrage of ordinary people does not know political boundaries.

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Featured image: With President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping. Photo: Sergei Karpukhin, TASS

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