

## **Russia, China and Iran are not the beacon that the rest of the world can follow**

**Dennis Sammut**

It has not been so long ago that the world was divided in two as the cold war raged on in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Flaunting their new nuclear arsenals the United States and the Soviet Union built military alliances, invaded countries, fought proxy wars and on one or two occasions brought the world to the edge – threatening the Armageddon of nuclear destruction. The world sighed a sigh of relief when the cold war was over, and looked forward to an era of global co-operation, or as some preferred to call it, an era when a rules based international system allows the opportunity for multilateral co-operation for the benefit of all humanity. As we all know it hasn't happened quite like that. Western countries – especially the US and EU considered themselves the guardians of liberal values, human rights and global order. Thus whenever any country went out of line they felt a duty to respond and react. The list of countries now being sanctioned for this or that continues to pile up – and those on the receiving end are not amused.

Quite unintentionally the result is that the international community is coalescing in two adversarial blocs – the so called “liberal democracies” led by the US and the EU, and authoritarian states, spearheaded by Russia, China and Iran.

The Russia-China relationship has been expanding for three decades. It now covers all aspects, including military matters, though a formal military alliance, we are told, is not being considered. It is a complex relationship of convenience in which Russia appears increasingly as the junior partner.

Even stranger is the relationship between atheist communist China and the clerical religious establishment in Iran. The two have just announced that they are going to sign a 25 – year friendship treaty, covering a range of issue from culture to transport. It looks innocuous at first, but it appears to set the stage for what the Chinese Foreign Minister Li Wang said was “the continuous upgrading of the China-Iran comprehensive strategic partnership so as to better benefit the two peoples.”

Despite the absence of a formal military alliance one can see that the three countries have an interest in developing one, as they become more assertive in standing up to western pressures. At a speech during the signing ceremony of the Iran-China agreement on 27 March Wang “urged the United States to lift its illegitimate sanctions against Iran, cancel its measures of long-arm jurisdiction over third parties, and resume the implementation of the JCPOA comprehensively and unconditionally.”

Thousands of miles away in New York, another initiative is taking shape as Russia and China push for a special UN Security Council summit over what they term heightened “global political turbulence”, which has seen Western powers impose fresh sanctions on the them and other countries over alleged human rights violations. The call came following talks in the Chinese city of Guilin on 23 March between Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi.

“We noted the destructive nature of U.S. intentions, relying on the military-political alliances of the Cold War era and creating new closed alliances in the same spirit, to undermine the UN-centered international legal architecture,” said Lavrov. “We emphasised that against the background of active attempts by the West to promote its concept of a ‘rules-based world

order', the joint efforts of Russia and China...to preserve the modern system of international law are becoming more and more relevant.”

Of course western countries are not simply watching this. The incoming Biden administration has been very busy fixing problems inherited from the Trump administration, although it may in the process have created a few of its own. It has gone out of its way to re-assure its European allies of its intentions, and of its willingness to maintain an alliance based on values. It has also sought to put fresh energy in the Quad framework with Japan, Australian and India, and it has sent tough messages to Russia, China and Iran.

Some in recent weeks have speculated that we are about to enter a new cold war. This is unlikely. The world is much more interconnected today than was the case even fifty years ago. On all sides there is an understanding that a cold-war scenario needs to be avoided. But there is one big fundamental question that remains at the centre of this debate, namely the extent to which countries stick to the rules of the international system. In the case of China and Russia this is even more important since they have more often than not been part of the process of compiling these rules, and as permanent members of the UN Security Council they are also often responsible for their ensuring their compliance.

Small and medium sized countries should not be fooled by the Russian, Chinese and Iranian rhetoric that they are standing up to western bullying. It is they who are the bullies as could be seen by Vladimir Putin's brazen annexation of Crimea, and his destabilisation of neighbouring Georgia and Ukraine. They can ask any of China's neighbours about the hostile measures of the Chinese leadership in the South China Sea and beyond, which infringes on the sovereignty of several of China's neighbours, or ask India about its experience of dealing with China in the Himalayas. Iran's destabilisation of various Middle East countries cannot be ignored either.

It is however important that criticism of human rights records should not be a prerogative of the west. There should be a more vocal condemnation by third countries of what the Chinese are doing with the Uighurs, or of the fate of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Is it really acceptable for any decent country that whilst dozens of people were being massacred in the streets of Myanmar, the Russian Deputy Defence Minister was celebrating with the country's generals?

We don't need a new cold war, but this can be prevented only if more countries stand up for what is right and wrong and don't leave this to western countries to do this on their own. Russia, China and Iran cannot be the beacon that the rest of the world can follow, for their actions are far from exemplary. The sanctions imposed on them were justified because their actions violated agreed international rules and norms.

The more countries send this message to them the more likely they are to seek to adjust rather than confront. Survival, after all, is the most important endgame of authoritarian regimes.

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