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## If you thought Russia was bad, just try China

**Beijing's wealth and ambitions make it a far more complex adversary than Putin's Kremlin**

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If you think confrontation with Vladimir Putin's Russia is alarming, consider how much worse it could be. Imagine our academic, media, political and showbiz elites were all deeply in hock to Moscow, based on decades of assiduous schmoozing, and that its propaganda, far from being splenetic and contradictory, was subtle, patient and effective. Suppose our supply chains, export markets and critical infrastructure were crucially dependent on Russia, which, far from being sideswiped by sanctions, had spent years preparing to foil them.

Those are just some of the problems we face with China: a far more potent and serious adversary than the flailing, ramshackle and stagnant system run by Putin.

Start with economic clout. Apart from vodka, you are unlikely to have anything Russian-made in your home. Chinese-manufactured products are ubiquitous. China is ten times larger in population terms and gets 20 times more foreign direct investment than Russia. Its fast-growing economy is bigger, measured by purchasing power, than that of the United States.

The ambitions are different too. Russia wants to obliterate Ukraine, dominate its neighbourhood and end the American nuclear presence to Europe. But Xi Jinping believes that China should be the world's most powerful country and plans to achieve this by 2049, the centenary of the Communist Party's takeover.

China's efforts are far more serious than Russia's. It ruthlessly exploits the openness of western societies. *America Second: How America's Elites Are Making China Stronger*, a new book by the China-watcher Isaac Stone Fish, outlines Beijing's influence in American life. Henry Kissinger, the guru of US foreign policy, is one target: a lobbyist for Beijing, Fish contends. Chinese pressure has defanged critics such as Bloomberg, which prioritises its financial-data business over investigative journalism. Publishers wanting access to the Chinese market fillet their catalogues. Hollywood blacklists pro-Tibet stars such as Richard Gere and tweaks plots to please Chinese censors.

Russia cannot match that. It offers gilded access to the annual Valdai pow-wow with Putin. Visa bans, harassment and libel suits curb some media criticism. But such efforts pale beside China's influence. In countries that expect their universities to act like businesses, Chinese students keep cash-strapped higher education afloat. Critics see their budgets shrivel. Campus debate is constrained, syllabuses are pruned of sensitive material. Attacking academia is China's most potent weapon: it corrodes our ability to understand what is going on.

Other assets include giant infrastructure projects — roads, railways, airports and ports — tailored to the needs of emerging economies, with no concerns about human rights or transparency. Last month a new segment of a China-financed railway opened between Hungary and Serbia, two bastions of Beijing's influence in Europe. Platforms such as TikTok and the technology sold by Huawei and other companies also create economic and political influence (in

some cases with hidden censorship capabilities built in). They also support a voracious data-collection programme that gathers and analyses the personal information of tens of millions of foreigners.

Russia has its weapons too. It offers a “repression in a box” mixture of mercenaries, cyber-attacks and weapons to African dictators in return for concessions on natural resources. It hires retired western politicians and subsidises current ones. Marine Le Pen, who could well win the French presidency, benefited from a Russian loan. Nato, the EU and Britain’s defence partnership with France would be undermined if she does win. But Russia’s weaknesses hobble these efforts. Even before the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin’s fanbase was limited: ethnic and religious bigots on the right, and America-bashers on the left. Two decades of Putin’s rule provides little to celebrate. For all the Chinese Communist Party’s abominable behaviour, China’s rise is impressive.

The threats from Russia and China differ, yet they exploit the same big western weaknesses: ignorance, arrogance, complacency, timidity and greed. We discounted warnings (abundant since the 1990s) about both Russian neo-imperialism and China’s long-term ambitions. We hurried to forget the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square and Putin’s blood-soaked rise to power. We overestimated the risks of action and underestimated the risk of inaction. Most of all, we put profit first. We rushed China into the World Trade Organization in 2001 on the flimsy grounds that prosperity would fuel political liberalisation. It did not. Similarly, our business elite feasted for three decades at the Russian trough. We in Britain laundered reputations and fortunes. Germany gobbled gas. Italy and France sold holidays and luxury goods.

Now, we are waking up. Sleepy Europeans are boosting defence spending, dropping their anti-Americanism and trying hastily to unwind commercial ties with Russia. The dilemmas seem hard: a possible recession in Germany, speed limits on motorways. Next winter we may have to turn down the thermostats. But these are hiccups compared with what awaits us in the real drama: the struggle with the Chinese behemoth.

China is already preparing for this confrontation, boosting its self-sufficiency in vital technologies such as aerospace and semiconductors. Our efforts to make our economy resilient have barely begun. Yet the stakes are far higher. Russia is targeting our allies. Whether we like it or not, China is targeting us.