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Opinion **Vladimir Putin**

Putin's rupture with the west turns Russia towards China

Beijing is emerging as the chief winner from the unfolding confrontation between Moscow and the democratic world

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Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine is an attempt to ensure the most comprehensive, long-term break possible between Russia and the west © Mikhail Metzel/Sputnik/EPA

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Fifty-three years ago, the ruling Politburo in Moscow approved a “gas for pipes” deal that marked a breakthrough in economic relations between the Soviet Union and western Europe. It provided for the delivery of large-diameter pipes from West Germany to the USSR to be used for pipeline construction. So began an era of energy co-operation between Europeans and Russians that is now ending before our eyes.

Rising Soviet-Chinese tensions in the 1960s had led the Politburo to conclude that they needed detente with the capitalist world. At that time China, despite sharing Moscow's communist ideology, seemed more of a threat than the western democracies. The [pipeline deal](#) symbolised the Kremlin's bridge-building to the west. Today, these perceptions have turned completely round. Moscow now sees the west as a source of existential threats and China as a more reliable partner. The pipe of friendship with the west has become a pipe of war.

The [triangular relationship](#) between Russia, the west and China presents certain

paradoxes. Half a century ago, the rivalry between communism and capitalism was the central storyline of modern human history, pitting the Soviet Union against the west. This confrontation now belongs to the distant past. A new rivalry is unfolding — between liberal and illiberal versions of capitalism. But this time the antagonists are the west and China.

It is becoming ever more clear that this new confrontation will be the dominant theme of human history in future decades. However, just as during the Soviet-western stand-off of the 20th century, so in our times an important element of the western-Chinese rivalry will be a struggle over countries situated between the two adversaries. So, setting aside for a moment the terrible war in Ukraine and the retaliatory cannonade of sanctions, one may ask where, in principle, could or should [Russia position itself](#) in this competition?

If one looks at Russia from London or Berlin, it can appear to be distinctly non-western and non-European. Its political and cultural qualities and its history set it apart from the west in numerous ways. But if one looks at Russia from an Asian angle, one sees a different picture: a Russia that, for about three centuries, has been partly European — never wholly, but always more European than anything else.

The seven decades of communism from 1917 to 1991 were the most radical attempt to turn Russia into a non-Europe, an alternative to Europe. But once it felt its lack of self-sufficiency, the communist regime, too, turned to the west in search of economic and political models for improved material wellbeing and institutional reform.

From this perspective, one can view [Vladimir Putin](#)'s war on Ukraine — at first glance, an irrational gambit — as an attempt to ensure the most comprehensive, long-term break possible between Russia and the west. It is a radical effort to undo the generally western-leaning evolution of Russia since the mid-1980s. The war is intended to reverse that process irrevocably. Its purpose is to present Russia to the world as a pillar of a coalition of non-western, illiberal powers.

Regardless of what Putin achieves or fails to achieve in [Ukraine](#), it is on the domestic front that he is winning his war. He is turning Russia into a kind of “Orthodox Iran” separated from Europe as if by some fathomless moat.

War is such a powerful tool that it is enabling Putin to cut at one stroke thousands of threads, spun over decades, that connect Russia with the west. By causing westerners to think of Russia as a warmongering autocracy, the attack on Ukraine is also turning the democracies into willing accomplices of Putin's campaign to de-westernise Russia.

Atrocities in Bucha, carpet bombing of Ukrainian cities, plundering of captured land — all this shows Russia in such a brutal light that it can seem as if there is no other side to the country. That is exactly how Putin wants it. But if we take a longer historical perspective, we can see that both in the past and in the future Russia's natural place is in a somewhat different location. It is not in the west, but in the semi-west.

To recall the Soviet-West German “gas for pipes” deal is to remember that the conflict between communist China and the USSR was, for the west, a geopolitical windfall — one of the most important gains the US and its European allies made during the cold war. The Kremlin's confrontation with the west today is turning the tables. As the new rivalries of the 21st century take shape, it represents the most valuable strategic gain that has yet come China's way.

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