

Putin's conjuring trick: Russia, Britain and the Commonwealth

By David Howell – published in The Article – 21.02.23

The conjurer's great trick is to keep the audience's eyes focussed on what he or she seems to be doing, while something quite different is going on elsewhere. We may be sure that there are plenty of conjurers in both Moscow and Beijing and that they are hard at it.

While all eyes are understandably on the Ukraine battlefield — on whether Zelensky can hold the line, or even drive the Russians and their auxiliaries right out of Ukraine, Crimea included, and on what extra weapons he needs to do that — far away from the main scene, other major strategic plans are unfolding. All eyes are fixed on Ukraine, but what is the other hand doing?

Start with Russia in Africa. The announcement of a new Russian strategic naval base on the Sudan coast, dead in the middle of the Red Sea region, is only the latest in a series of determined Russian moves to dominate the Middle East and African scene. The Wagner Group of semi-mercenary irregulars are all over north and central Africa, from the Sahel to the Horn. Russian operators are working hard as well further south and west, ensuring that as many countries as possible, prominent among them South Africa, remain “Russia-facing”: resolutely anti-American and anti-Western on Ukraine and much else.

In general trade and investment with Africa Russia comes far below China — which, after all, now has an economy nine times bigger than Russia's. But in two key areas — oil and arms — Russia is predominant. Its crude oil exports in December 2022, running at just under quarter of a million barrels a day, were three times higher than a year earlier in December 2021. Russian arms exports are way ahead of all other suppliers, three times the size of China's and far above Western levels. Moscow's arms go all over Africa.

The long-lasting Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, ever by Putin's side, has been “covering” Africa at a remarkable rate. Last year — the year of the Ukrainian invasion— he made visits to Egypt, Republic of Congo, and Uganda as well as meeting African Union leaders in Addis Ababa. Earlier, he was in Mali, South Africa and Angola, always of course with a large back-up team.

Very recently Lavrov has been in Sudan and the Horn. All this is to prepare and fertilise the ground politically and make sure his hosts in each case understand what is in their best interest (to keep in with Russia). This, without question, is

the so-called Great Game Part Three (Europe 1910-14, Eastern Europe 1945-47 being Parts One and Two). The prize is to secure the global majority solidly against Western versions of liberal values and instead keep them tucked firmly into the authoritarians' sphere of influence and hegemonic zone.

Nothing new, of course, about Russian activism in Africa and the Middle East. One need only go back to Nasser and the Aswan Dam to see how, with lapses immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian interest in disrupting and undermining Western linkages has been very long standing.

But from Putin's second presidency onwards in 2012 there has been a new momentum, unchecked, indeed accelerated, alongside the "special military operation" in Ukraine. No ideology these days, no "isms", just good old unvarnished realpolitik, yet in many ways far more dangerous than in the past. Putin's realpolitik comes in a wrapper with resurgent China, so far Russia's firm ("unlimited friendship") ally, and with the new techniques of digital colonisation inherent in China's pattern of Belt and Road initiatives snaking across Eurasia and into the Americas.

Whatever happens on the Ukraine-Russian border, uncertainty will persist, entailing a permanent and large NATO commitment — with security guarantees including a strong British element — for the indefinite future. Whatever Putin's current aim or hope - whether to try winning at any price, or just live with frozen deadlock, or actually temporarily withdraw Russian troops from the "annexed" Donbas, pausing to draw breath and of course then carrying on, a deeper Russian strategy is unfolding elsewhere. Russia and China, albeit in somewhat different ways, are now spreading their influence at gathering pace across Africa, South Asia and Latin America (notably non-contributors to Ukraine's defence). This process is described by Sam Olsen, the notable China watcher and analyst, as "hoovering up the developing world".

The question is: what part, if any, could or should a country in the UK's position play in this unfolding geopolitical process, while attention lies elsewhere?

The "pat" answer is: very little on the security and defence side. Surely, goes the weary response, we have enough on our hands with NATO and Ukraine, with the search for a post-Brexit accommodation with our European neighbours, with the US special relationship feeling distinctly less special, with energy security and climate dilemmas, with inflation and strikes, with wobbly internal democracy, with preventing break-up of the UK itself (now, at least for the moment, looking mercifully less likely).

So “yes” goes the mantra: yes to humanitarian and emergency aid, to Africa, and all the developing world, and yes to a steady stream of lecturettes about human rights, values and good governance, always faintly patronising and especially, though not only, from the left of centre in the UK. But security is fastidiously left aside, with the subjects of arms supplies, training and all things military strongly disapproved of and not to be mentioned, let alone promoted.

This is the stance and it is wrong, wrong, short-sighted and detached from the realities of a substantially changed threat pattern in a changed world. Twenty-one of fifty-three states on the African continent are members of the Commonwealth network, all signed up to the Commonwealth Charter and supposedly on the side of, or aspiring to, liberal values. Six more are considering candidacy.

Deviations and lapses there are a-plenty but also layer upon layer of common ground to which the communications revolution is giving new strength and purpose.

This should be the UK’s moment to stabilise, reinforce and ensure that all these nations have the resources they need to protect their independence. While not the richest Commonwealth country per capita, and while Covid has forced cutbacks, the UK does still have the largest overseas development budget in the network. Within this budget, while there must always be readiness to help with global-scale disasters anywhere (like recently in Turkey/Syria), the strong priority should be Commonwealth fellow member states.

But even if this were so (and it is not), that still leaves a yawning gap — which no Commonwealth policy fills, because there *is* no properly constructed Commonwealth policy. The 2021 Integrated Review of British foreign policy, security and defence, ordered up by Boris Johnson, barely mentioned the Commonwealth. It is no surprise that while it was meant to be long-lasting, within months a new one has been called for — which, one hopes, will address the omission.

The missing element is in the area of security and resilience. Freddie Woolland, Director of the Commonwealth Security Forum, puts it this way:

Commonwealth partnerships to boost security and resilience - anti-terror, food and energy resilience, border security, security sector capacity development, digital security, and more, are not a distraction from the need to stare down revanchist threats, but a smart and vital aspect of the future front of this challenge. They need adequate resourcing - and as proven by Putin, they can be done with relatively little cost.

Adequate resourcing for this vital “security and resilience” has not been forthcoming. Of course, there has been some scattered military support. And in the past there was successful and strong British support in Sierra Leone. There is a joint training agreement with Kenya and Status of Forces Agreements (covering

possible troop deployment needs) with fourteen of the African Commonwealth members (weak versions of the far more intimate and welcome Reciprocal Access Agreement in the latest UK-Japan Defence Treaty).

But there has been nothing on the scale warranted, as listed by Woolland. And that list can be added to. For example, while Sandhurst has done its duty over the years in training officers from several African forces, both Moscow and Beijing are offering training places on at least double the Sandhurst scale (said to be 2000 places), and with much more favourable financial support.

This pan-continental Russian and Chinese take-over pattern also has other direct consequences for the UK's future. The bulk of the strategic materials required for the hoped-or sustainable energy transition comes from the states now being wooed by Russia. No question there of the promised national energy security which a post-fossil fuel age is supposed to bring. All that now falls under threat.

But above all there has been a failure of narrative in buttressing African states, along with both Caribbean and South Pacific islands, against dangerous Russian and Chinese predations. This is happening against the grim background of Russia's war in Ukraine and its utter contempt for the international rule of law, human rights and for any decent restraint on war crimes.

An initial overwhelming UN vote of disapproval of Russian actions (by 141 countries) may have raised hopes that the world was with the West, but that is about as far as it went. Repeated Western claims that "the world is with us against Russia" have come to sound increasingly hollow.

This could now be changing, as world leaders belatedly reformulate their poorly presented case. But the impression given earlier that the Ukraine conflict was an extension of the East-West Cold War and a clash of the superpowers, which was very much the tone of Washington's rhetoric, had zero appeal to dozens of nations, many of them young, who wanted stay non-aligned from the great power hegemonies.

The better story was, and is, that Russia's assault is an attack on every sovereign state, (forget "West" or "East") and a danger to the very roots of every independent society and nation in the world. The latest comments from the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, have begun to pick up this wiser argumentation. But it should have started much earlier and should have led straight to the understanding that a helpful and knitted-together, evolving Commonwealth of like-minded states was increasingly becoming a good haven in the storm. It is a club of which it pays to be a member in dangerous times.

It should also have led policy-thinkers and makers in London to the realisation that the non-treaty, non-trading, voluntary network of the Commonwealth had an important place in the UK's new foreign policy in revolutionised world conditions. But that message has never come across clearly, and the strategy and policy leadership, which the UK in particular, because of its unique position and past, should have been providing, has not been there.

It is surely time to revisit the words of the late Queen. Today's Commonwealth, she said, is an "*entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of humankind: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace.*" It is not too late to relearn the lesson from Elizabeth II's superb prescience — but the learning must come quickly.

Eyes may be on Ukraine, and Putin's immediate plan, to subjugate Ukraine in short order, has failed — at any rate for the time being. But his other plan, to keep our attention diverted while he fulfils his strategic ambitions across Africa and the whole developing world, hand in hand with China, is going ahead with chilling speed and success.

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