

## **Russia's East-West dilemmas -Japan Times 30.01.18**

LONDON - For those who like to split the world between East and West, Europe and Asia, and to identify clear dividing lines between the two, there was always a major problem. Which side of the line did Russia fall? Was it an Asian power or a European power? Was its culture basically Western or did it adhere to an alternative, and more Asian, model, with different viewpoints and different philosophies?

If anything, the puzzle is now growing greater. While China seeks more and more links, physical and economic, with "The West," and especially with the European continent, and while Japan has long been committed to many, if not all, Western patterns, Russia seems to hang awkwardly half in and half out of Europe, governing itself on principles that fit neither the Chinese model, nor Western democratic values, and leaving those trying to deal with this huge country puzzled and uneasy.

It is often forgotten that Russia, although with the biggest landmass of all and many highly talented people, is nowadays in global terms a dwarf economy. The Russian economy is two-thirds the size of Italy's, less than half the size of Britain's, a ninth the size of China's and 14 times smaller than that of the United States. Moreover, its per capita income is a seventh of America's, about to be overtaken by China and, of course, is far beneath Japan's.

The amazing thing is how such a small economy, with a shrinking population and so poorly run, manages to have such an impact on the world.

For example, the U.S. seems to be in a permanent frenzy about Russia. People in Washington talk as if there was a new Cold War. Meanwhile Russia is conducting a vicious war in Syria, although to what end is not all that clear. It has caused violent mayhem in Ukraine, grabbed back the Crimea Peninsula — as well as chunks of Georgia — is busy doing its best to destabilize Central Europe and the Balkans, and is developing new forms of hybrid and maskirovka warfare, or military deception.

It has forced the whole of NATO onto alert, threatened Europe's energy links and, of course, allowed, or maybe encouraged, a wild west botnet of

cyberhacking and false and fake news, through a maze of criminal syndicates.

This Russia of President Vladimir Putin Mark Two will not, of course, last forever, even with arranged elections. The oil and gas revenues on which it floats will steadily drain away — like the Aral Sea — and leave a lot of Russia high and dry, regardless of any temporary oil production deals with the Saudis.

Gas sales to Western Europe will fall, and so will oil and gas prices, as American shale exports compete and renewables replace hydrocarbons. The danger in all this for a weakened Russia is that in the longer run, as the future Eurasia merges together, it will simply be shunned and bypassed.

In a way the Russian dilemma attracts sympathy, although Putin is hardly a sympathetic figure. The British people certainly feel a real warmth for the Russian people, for their heroism and their endurance. The country is rottenly led but its people are seen as friends. That distinction has always been clear.

But for the moment that is not how Putin and his ruling clique appear to see things. So there is little choice for the West and the democracies but to approach this once great country, still heavily armed with nuclear weapons, with caution and uncertainty about which way it is going to jump next, who it will try to bite next and what it really wants to be.

Responding to Russia becomes not just a question of adopting firm NATO military postures on the ground in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states (which feel especially threatened). The battle has to be just as much in the narrative as on the physical front line. And here the West is much better placed than it was during the Cold War. There is no coherent ideology uniting the Russians, as in communist times.

The way to break down this wall of surly hostility is to do the opposite of what some Cold War warriors recommend. Far from trying to isolate Russia or throw up new barriers, the best course is to expand trade and dialogue in every possible way. Trade and commerce are great pipelines of truth and awareness.

The aim should also be to strengthen already good cultural relations through all possible channels. Russian exchange scholars and Russian students should be welcome, suitably checked of course. There is also

already excellent scientific and space cooperation with Russia, which should be further built on.

At the same time there must be zero tolerance for Russian criminality, wherever it occurs.

The whole international community should also keep pressing Russia all the time for full adherence to the disarmament treaties and processes.

As for sanctions, let these be focused on identified miscreants, fraudsters and rogues, such as the notorious murderers of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in 2008 while in police custody. More general sanctions make less sense and never work well. Often they just halt trade and have the reverse effects.

It is in nobody's interest that Russia should continue to be the odd one out. The contemporary world is changing shape and has to be managed in new ways. If Russia wants to play a strong part in the rise of Eurasia and the connectivity of the globe, it will have to change its direction and decide how to become a good ally, not a spoiler, of both the East and West.