

## Cold climate

As relations with Europe and America freeze over, Vladimir Putin looks to China



When Vladimir Putin plays host to Barack Obama and other world leaders at the G20 summit in St Petersburg next week, mutual resentment and dislike will be ill-concealed. The American president recently likened the Russian leader's body language to that of a "bored kid in the back of the classroom". Mr Obama has cancelled a planned bilateral meeting in Moscow, choosing to visit Sweden instead.

The last straw was Russia's sheltering of Edward Snowden, a fugitive American spook. But the spat over that only crystallised something apparent since Mr Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012: that the "reset", launched with much fanfare in 2009, is not just dying, but dead.

Dmitry Trenin of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, a think-tank, says the aborted summit marks the end of a 25-year cycle which started in Mikhail Gorbachev's glory days. Now the assumption of shared goals and values is over. Russia does not pretend to be moving towards the West. Rather than responding to Western criticism with irritated pleas for patience and understanding of national specifics, it simply ignores it.

An earlier crisis came with the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. But Mr Obama revived the relationship, taking seriously Dmitry Medvedev, who stood in for Mr Putin for four years. People still argue about whether Mr Medvedev's affability was sincere, or a stunt.

The frost started biting over Libya. Russia backed a UN resolution to protect civilian lives, but felt duped when this resulted in the military overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi. The image of Gaddafi's "revolting slaughter—not just medieval but primeval", stayed with Mr Putin. "No one should be allowed to employ the Libyan scenario in Syria," he wrote in 2012.

Having convinced himself that the West was behind revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, Mr Putin also blamed America for a wave of protests in Moscow in December 2011: proof positive that enemies were at the Kremlin's gate. Mr Putin responded by attacking charities and campaign groups who have funding from abroad, branding them "foreign agents".

To shore up his core support, Mr Putin has filled Russia's ideological vacuum with nationalism and anti-Americanism. The main thesis is of two conflicting civilisations, with the West exemplifying economic decline, international recklessness and moral depravity. Russia must shield itself from this harmful influence and preserve its own traditional values, based on

Orthodoxy and past glory. This was behind a recent law against gay “propaganda”, and a ban on officials from having bank accounts and property abroad.

With business, it is a different story. Even vehement anti-Westerners embrace big foreign companies as partners and investors (they also use them as lobbyists for their political interests in the West). This double-track approach is not new. Joseph Stalin said in 1934: “Those who seek a business relationship with us will always find our support. And those who try to attack our country will be dealt a deadly blow, to deter them from sticking their snouts into our Soviet backyard.”

As an alternative to the West, Mr Putin points to the East, hailing China’s rise as a colossal chance to catch its “wind in the sails of our economy”. China and Russia, he has argued, each need the other to be strong and prosperous. Neither lectures the other on human rights. China sees Russia as a safe resource-base which would be strategically important in case of escalating tension between China and America. To prove the point, Xi Jinping, China’s new leader, made Moscow his first port of call.

On Syria, Russia has repeatedly wielded its UN security-council veto against sanctions and blocked international oversight of Syrian chemical weapons. But it does not seek a confrontation. Perhaps thanks to tough talk from Israel and other countries, it seems not to have delivered advanced air-defence systems to the regime there, or provided personnel to train Syrians. Igor Malashenko, a veteran observer of Russia-American relations, says that unlike the Soviet Union, Russia does not participate in big international affairs largely because it is not prepared to take responsibility for big decisions.

But Russia has drawn a “red line” on the issue of Ukraine’s association agreement with the European Union. It has launched a fusillade of trade sanctions to press the case for its rival outfit, the Eurasian Economic Union. Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor of Russia in Global Affairs, a periodical, says the main point is anchoring former Soviet republics in Russia’s sphere of influence rather than promoting trade. (And having Ukraine in the customs union would be “a guaranteed headache”, like Britain in the EU, he adds.)

But bullying Ukraine is likely to alienate it further and will stoke tension with the EU, which like America has been appalled by Russia’s anti-gay law. Germany, once Russia’s cheerleader, is now its most vocal critic. That will be bad for business (the EU is by far Russia’s biggest trading partner). It may also doom the regime’s aim, stoked by self-interest, of persuading the EU to offer visa-free entry for holders of official passports.

Whatever the Kremlin says, members of Russia’s educated and affluent middle class continue to look West. Russia’s rulers’ greatest weakness is the lack of anything positive that could attract their own people or outsiders. For all his talk of outfitting Russia for a changing world, Mr Putin chiefly conveys a deep fear of disturbing the fragile status quo. That is pushing the country backwards.

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