

# This house believes Russia is a distraction - proposition

Virinchi Rallabhandi

It's best to start the speech with a clarifying comment. While I'm going to argue that Russia is a distraction, that's to not to belittle the pain inflicted by Russia or to say those suffering can be ignored or that Russia is a distraction we don't have to deal with. We do. However, I wish to argue the present war in Ukraine is only a symptom of more fundamental issues. In particular, Russia is a distraction from the global welfare of liberal democracy and the rule of law because we - as in the West and others who care about democracy - need to rethink our international relations with all dictatorships - not just Russia - and we must better protect the health of democracy domestically.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the West seemed to wake up to the fact this war may have been avoided if many of the oil and gas policy changes and broader sanctions we're seeing now were enforced in 2014 upon the annexation of Crimea. It was my hope this realisation would grow and lead to a change in our dealings with all dictatorships. Sadly, I don't think this has happened. Focusing on the current reaction to Russia is a distraction from the fact that the West has long tolerated despots and dictators in the pursuit of economic and ideological outcomes. I'll name just a few examples. Mao killed millions in the Cultural revolution of the 60s, and yet Kissinger and Nixon opened up to China in the 70s. Elsewhere, the two were at it again propping up the Pinochet regime. Later, Deng Xiaoping massacred his own citizens in Tiananmen Square and yet in about 10 years the Clinton administration granted China permanent normal trading relations. In 2012, Obama called the use of chemical weapons in Syria a red line - a threat that turned out to be largely empty soon after Assad and Putin did exactly that. In 2021, the Americans finished a report implicating Prince Salman in Jamal Khashoggi's murder, to which Biden responded by doing nothing despite claiming on the campaign trail he would turn Saudi Arabia into a "pariah" state if that was the report's conclusion.

I think these examples also illustrate that framing the discussion around Russia is a distraction from the deep, structural nature of this issue of how we deal with dictatorships. As long as we don't change our approach more broadly, we risk seeing another Ukraine in the near future.

Indeed, nowhere is the threat greater - and our foreign policy more twisted - than in our relationship with China. Volodymyr Zelensky recently accused those buying Russian oil and gas of "earning their money in other people's blood." If so, then how much blood has been spilt by our trade with China? Whether it be judicial independence, civil liberties, the South China Sea, Hong Kong or - most egregious of all - the million Uighurs locked up in the largest concentration camps since the Holocaust, it's clear that the Communist Party of China enforces a brutal regime we cannot support. Yet, the political class seems less concerned with passing sanctions and more concerned about repairing relations. Unlike Russia, where our trade relationship is largely defined by oil and gas, our dependence and complicity are far deeper with China. Russia is merely a distraction from the significantly greater long-term challenge of weaning ourselves off China.

Framing the discussion around Russia also fails to realise that it's China, not Russia, that effectively leads the challenge to liberal democracy. In recent years, we've seen increasingly close cooperation between authoritarian countries - what the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, described as the "arc of autocracy." As the engine of global economic growth and the only country that comes close to America for military strength, it can only be China, not Russia, that challenges America's status as the global hegemon. Thus, Russia is ultimately a distraction from the defining contest of our generation.

But I'd also like to discuss the other side in this contest. I framed this as a debate about the global welfare of liberal democracy and the rule of law. If so, then Russia - and even China for that matter - is a distraction from the fact that while democracy is certainly under attack from without, it's also under attack from within. In Biden's words, "we've got to prove democracy works." Yet, there are few places where democracy is in poorer health than in America, the self proclaimed leader of the free world. This is a country with rampant gerrymandering,

voter purging and frankly backward election laws. This is a country where black protestors are beaten by police while a white mob can almost freely desecrate the Capitol. This is a country where so many basic institutions of government and society have been toxically polarised. Is this really the shining city on a hill promised by liberal democracy?

And America is not alone when it comes to democratic backsliding or the erosion of civil liberties. Consider Hungary, India, the Philippines, Poland and France as other examples. Even the UK has flirted with this craze, when the government so openly sought to “break international law in a specific and limited way” through the internal market bill. It makes one wonder - do we really need Russia to tear us apart? It seems we’re quite capable all by ourselves.

To really prove democracy works, we have to lead with the power of our example - and that begins domestically. We have to build a more equitable, cohesive society at home and then match it with a foreign policy that puts morality ahead of economics.

Finally, I’ll admit I haven’t offered many solutions to the problems I’ve raised. While that’s valid criticism, I’d also add that’s perhaps not the main point of this debate. Instead, I would argue the questions I’ve raised are better questions than those fixated on Russia. Of course Russia is a major challenge and of course the war in Ukraine will require major attention over the next few years. But, in the long term, we cannot let Russia distract us from the bigger structural issues I’ve sought to discuss. The future of liberal democracy is at stake.

Thank you for your attention.