

A Marriage of Convenience

A New Axis of Evil Arises to Fight Aimless Wars

If it's not Ukraine, it's Gaza or Lebanon. Thankfully, little rocket man is keeping quiet and China, at least for now, seems content to limit its threats to Taiwan to lowkey utterances of displeasure.

Every week or so, there is disconcerting news on major belligerence unfolding somewhere: Russia creeping up in the Donbas; Ukraine advancing into Kursk Oblast, or Israel preparing for a ground war against Hizbollah.

Poor secretary of state Antony Blinken. He shuttles all over to douse fires, cool down hotheads, warn foes, and manage recalcitrant allies - without much to show for it. The good man is nearing the end of his tether. Just a few days back, his exhaustion shone through when he snapped, rather undiplomatically, that China's "provision of support" for Russia's war effort sustains the defence industrial base of that aggressive country.

Though the People's Republic has stopped short of supplying military hardware to Russia, it happily ships everything else, including dual-use components, machine tools, and the many other bits that the Russians need to keep their military industrial complex going. Fully ninety percent of the microelectronic components Russia imports are sourced in China as are two-thirds of machine tools.

In fact, China has been profiting handsomely from the war in Ukraine. It also supplied an entire fleet of excavators and other heavy earth-moving equipment. This kit was used to erect the formidable battlefield defences that thwarted Ukraine's summer offensive.

War Profiteering

In short: China is not in Mr Blinken's good books. It is unlikely that anyone in Beijing loses sleep over that, but the country's war profiteering will sooner or later be leveraged as an excuse to further tighten restrictions on trade and technology. Just yesterday, the US administration announced plans to ban the use of Chinese electronic components in American-made vehicles.

Essentially, China has hitched its proverbial wagon to Russia in a snub of note to the United States and Europe. However, the country has neglected to hedge its bet. Should Russia lose the War in Ukraine, China will suffer an humiliating loss of face - apparently a great shame in the orient.

In the US, senior diplomats have now coined a new phrase to lump their worst enemies together: The Quartet of Chaos. The terminology contains echoes of Ronald Reagan's 'Evil Empire' but this time includes all of our foes: Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

These four chaos promoters seem to have entered into a marriage of convenience sealed under the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend adage. The two minor irritants of this quartet, Iran and North Korea, are the ones most eager to help president Putin fight his war. Iran has shipped countless drones to Russia in addition to home-grown short-range missiles which free up Russia's more advanced and longer range missiles for attacks deeper into Ukrainian territory.

Shell Shocked

North Korea too has helped the Russians with vast volumes of ammunition. Though its gear is rather obsolete by modern standards and often misfires, quantity seems to trump quality. South Korean news outlets recently reported that Russia has already received more than 10,000 shipping containers' worth of artillery shells from North Korea. These five million shells are having an impact with Ukrainian frontline commanders reporting an uptick in the enemy's rate of fire.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's western backers struggle to provide even the one million shells they promised to deliver this year. Fear of a further escalation of hostilities is also keeping the Biden Administration from authorising the firing of US-supplied rocket systems into Russia proper to hit supply dumps.

Though Kim Jong Un, the chubby and good-humoured tyrant of North Korea managed to elicit a mutual defence pact from Russia, it has been China that profited most from the Kremlin's increasingly frantic calls for help. In return for sending dual-use nuts and bolts to Russia, China has demanded, and was granted, access to military and satellite technology. It also is reported to have been gifted a nuclear submarine to study and reverse engineer at leisure.

Thanks, No Thanks

However, Beijing is none too happy with Pyongyang cosying up to Moscow. China considers North Korea part of its sphere of influence and does not appreciate encroachment. More disconcertingly, Kim Jong Un has become rather neglectful in praising his next door overlords.

This became almost blatantly apparent in a condensed thank you note sent by Pyongyang in response to Beijing's congratulations on the country's 'birthday'. North Korea was 'born' rather than emancipated via independence. The note lacked the flowery hyperbole usually employed to convey expressions of gratitude. The omission caused some concern in Beijing.

Recently humiliated at home by Israel, and unable or unwilling to respond with a counterattack (promised in shriek tones of indignation but never delivered), Iran prepares to hug the bear and sign its own mutual defence pact with Russia.

However impressive these treaties look, they are of little practical value, if any. Just as Moscow will not soon rush to the aid of Kim Jong Un, bypassing China, it is not about to become embroiled in a conflict as intractable as the one involving Israel, Iran, and a host of unruly non-state actors.

Troublesome though the Quartet of Chaos may be; it is not a trist - a 'ménage-a-quatre' - designed to last. Though Russia and China celebrate their newfound BFF intimacy with frequent public displays of affection, their relationship is one of unequals and plagued by mistrust bordering on paranoia.

Russia has long suspected China of casting a lustful eye on its eastern expanses and the vast mineral treasures it harbours. In turn, the Chinese are quite wary of overbearing know-it-all Russians bossing them around. This is a country where memories of historic sleights cast long shadows.

Holy War

Iran is the outlier of the group. It is not only a theocracy that derives state policy from a holy book, but also a puppet master that uses several proxies to fight a 'holy war' against a people and a state - Israel - that has successfully faced off all of its many enemies since 1948 - and invariably deals its foes crushing and humiliating defeats.

Iran's proxy Hizbollah in Lebanon, officially classified as a terrorist group, is being reminded that provoking Israel always end in tears. By choice, the boastful Hizbollah leadership became involved in the Gaza War in which it has no stake other than solidarity with a fellow Iranian proxy and terrorist group.

Last week, hundreds if not thousands Hizbollah fighters and leaders self-ignited as their pagers and walkie-talkies exploded whilst IDF fighter jets roared overhead, unopposed and sovereign, to drop precision bombs and missiles on the terrorists' hideouts, bases, and storage facilities.

Gone are the chants of martyrs and their imaginary victories and the photos showing grand concentrations of Hizbollah 'troops' and gear neatly lined up as if waiting for manna from heaven. Lebanon too discovered that harbouring a terrorist organisation and granting it a role in government is none too smart. The long-suffering and dysfunctional country is being dragged into a war it can neither afford nor win.

Meanwhile, Iran's bearded leaders are far too obsessed with religious tracts and the harassment of women and happy people in general, to note that they are merely being used as pawns - useful idiots at most - to be jettisoned at the first opportunity lest their oddball ideas jump the border into Russia.

Tehran's usefulness to Moscow is limited to the purveyance of weapons only. Other than annoying the Americans, the two countries share no interests or goals.

Dire Straits

A Spanish proverb says that 'tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are'. If that wisdom is applied to Russia, the country is in dire straits. When you need to appeal for help to a cartoon-like despot such as Kim Jong Un or robed zealots, you are in deep trouble.

What was supposed to have been a 'special military operation' of just a few days, crowned by a victory parade in Kyiv, has grown into a war of attrition that has already lasted 944 days.

At great expense, the Americans have learned that an exit strategy is just as important, if not more so, than a plan of attack. President Vladimir Putin of Russia has yet to discover that truth and keeps plugging away at, and wasting countless lives in, an endeavour that cannot end well.

For all its dithering, Europe will not allow one of its own to be gobbled up by a neighbour. The continent has been there, done that, and lost more than just a t-shirt. Whilst compromises are waiting in the wings, Ukraine's existence as a sovereign state is assured as are its membership of the European Union and NATO - or whichever alliance succeeds it should the Americans depart.

Lest doubt is entertained: even without the US - which in any case has a reputation to uphold for arriving late to conflicts of an existential nature - Europe has the economic and financial wherewithal, the technology, the arsenals, and the manpower to halt Russian adventurism should that get out of hand.

The political will may seem absent at present but that merely underestimates the unifying power provided by a common foe. There is nothing more effective in rallying and mobilising nations than the 'us versus them' narrative. And, no, nobody will deploy nuclear weapons if only because that would be in nobody's interest. We're not that mad.