

Guest comment: Autocracy vs Democracy: The chess game of history

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By Mark Dixon

Russia is dead set on breaking a democratic nation and democracy itself. It is approaching our king, so our next move is critical.

Autocracy is playing a game of chess against democracy, but it's not a fair game.

Autocracy has a queen, fearless and dangerous, but no king. So, it has nothing to protect except its own evil and ego. The entire Free World, by contrast, doesn't have a queen. It has an ailing king called democracy that needs to be protected but doesn't have many teeth left in its face. The king has a bunch of knights, bishops and castles running around the board that are no match for the queen of autocracy unless they wake up, synchronise perfectly, and face what they are up against. And fast.

Democracy has been failing itself in recent decades, going so far as to elect undemocratic and autocratic leaders, and is suffering from a severe case of self-doubt. If the Free World operated in a vacuum, these things might self-correct over time, but sadly we live in a world with evil actors, and in real time.

Democracy has shown itself to be weaker than autocracy despite having the economic and moral advantage, and plenty of military strength. The problem is that democracy doesn't really care if it survives. It has lost its mojo.

Dictators, by contrast, actually really, really care about beating the Free World, for popularity or their *raison d'être* – or for their very survival, with the will of a cornered rat. These sources of determination give dictators the mojo edge.

Meanwhile, the dictators' downside is often so extreme that they can make risky moves we can't. There are not many scenarios worse than being tried for genocide and locked up. A dictator can hardly go into retirement and ride home on a bicycle. This ability to stomach risk is key in any battle of bluff, and for stomaching the consequences if the bluff is called.

On top of that, not being required to win votes, or listen to dissent, means they have the advantage of what they are – of dictating. The irrelevance of elections lets them play a 20-year game to pick the right moment to invade a country, while the stop-go nature of democratic governments interrupts our attempts to play the long game.

Autocracies have specific anti-democratic goals on the other side of the chessboard. Putin has coveted Ukraine for ego and satisfaction, ignoring the will of the Ukrainians; while China is waiting for the right moment to pounce on Taiwan, without regard for the Taiwanese.

The result of this drive, risk tolerance and time horizon is that the queen of autocracy can make a lot of moves we can't. We shouldn't think that a power we theoretically wield is greater than a lesser power a dictator is less afraid to wield.

Add to the equation that we have let the other side keep playing while we weren't watching the board. Autocracy has been arming itself militarily and economically. China, the other grand queen of autocracy, has been quietly building up its strength for decades while trying not to show its real teeth and agenda.

So, while time has been spinning away, the devil has grown in strength and made us more and more its economic partner. This is the main argument against sanctioning China, yet with each decade our dependence has only grown. Inaction is self-fulfilling, which should have been obvious from the start.

Our sanctions should not be used to bargain or set an example – because it is naive to dream dictators can be reformed – nor about punishment, but about destroying autocracy economically and permanently to change the balance of power between nothing less than good and evil. The West needs to think as long-term as the Chinese queen. Specifically, that means being bold enough to cut off the Russian and Chinese economies from ours at the root, and not reconnect them if they back down to 'evil -1'. Because a dictator is a dictator.

The invasion of Ukraine is a wake-up call that the Free World is losing the battle in freedom chess and that it will eventually lose the freedom war itself if we don't face up to the risk of not playing the game for real.

If we are unwilling to make significant economic sacrifices, we will lose a future we wrongly counted on, just like from global warming. We are facing a parallel crisis of global freedom evaporation which, likewise, has its point of no return.

Therefore, we must suffer to avoid more suffering. This is the only way to change the way the game is pointing.

In practice, this means that we must be ready, and even very willing, for the chessboard to divide in two – the Free World and the Unfree World – each with its own economic system and each behind its nuclear lines. The world is already divided in essence, even if we can't see it. Putin and Xi rejoice in their clarity and count their lucky stars for every day we remain in the fog.

We must unplug the wealth that fuels the trajectory of autocracy, because the economic damage to us is still thankfully vastly less than to it. These are the pawns we must sacrifice in the game.

Conversely, if we nourish autocracy with a single drop of trade or a mere crumb of investment, we are only feeding its queen to become stronger.

The invasion of Ukraine is not just a wake-up call for action to help Ukrainians. If we fail to prove our resolve to Putin, and to Xi who will be the next queen to show her real teeth, history will show this was when democracy didn't show up for the chess game of its life.

The only way our knights, bishops and castles can defend our king of freedom against a heartless and soulless enemy is to eliminate their queen from the board. If the Free World doesn't play to win, it doesn't really want to be a free world.

Mark Dixon founded and runs the mergers & acquisitions firms ThinkingLinking.com and the1.com. He is a co-founder of the online financial commentator BreakingViews.com, which is today part of Thomson Reuters, and the founder of the Fair Market Economy Institute based on his socio-economic theory, the 'Fair Market Economy'. Page Break

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