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March 21, 2014

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Look to China for wisdom on dealing with Russia

Niall Ferguson is half-right. There has been a geopolitical taper but not of the kind he meant. Instead, there has been a tapering of western geopolitical wisdom.

Has anyone noticed the string of western geopolitical failures over a decade? Despite massive military and financial interventions, Iraq and Afghanistan are failing. Three years ago the US announced: “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” He remains in office. And now the west is on the verge of handing China a geopolitical gift by alienating Russia.

What explains these failures? It is surprisingly simple. After two centuries of success, the region’s leaders assume their role is to sustain the expansion of western power. Not one of them has wrapped their heads around the new undeniable reality: the real challenge of the west is to manage decline.

A simple statement by Barack Obama captures this flawed mindset. The US president announced that Russia was on “the wrong side of history”, implying that the west was on the right side of history. But is this so? Over the next few decades, some trends will prove irreversible. The western share of global population, economic weight and, inevitably, political and military power are going to decline. The recent setbacks in emerging markets have given rise to wishful thinking that the west is back. Yes, maybe for a year or two. But the logic of long-term trends of decline will continue after this blip.

So how should the west manage its decline? Three simple steps could make a big difference. First, end the ideological crusade of promoting democracy. Indeed, the Ukraine fiasco is a direct result of the west encouraging street protests instead of encouraging political compromise between the two camps. This reckless geopolitical behaviour was a direct result of the belief — to borrow the phrase used by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev — that “history is on our side”. Actually, as the realist American secretary of state Henry Kissinger wisely and subtly pointed out recently, it would be unwise to ignore vital Russian interests in Ukraine.

Will democracy stop expanding if the west stops pushing it? Of course not. It will emerge organically and, as a result, be naturally sustainable. Just look at Indonesia, the world’s most populous Islamic country. In 1999 it was almost a failed state. Fifteen years later it is on the verge of electing Joko Widodo, widely known as Jokowi, who is one of the most competent leaders in the world. How did this happen? Benign western neglect is one answer. Mr Obama let down Indonesia, his childhood home, by calling off his visit three times. Yet the country continued to move in a positive direction.

Second, embrace Russia and do so meaningfully. The western media have unleashed a cascade of abuse on President Vladimir Putin and Russia. Yet few have pointed out that the west painted Mr Putin into a corner and gave him no way out. Western leaders repeatedly assured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that Nato would not expand into the east. These assurances were violated. Today, can any Russian leader believe any western assurance that no Nato naval base will be set up in Crimea if Russia withdraws?

Unwise western expansion of Nato has not enhanced western security. It has only alienated Russia. Yet when the west finally wakes up to deal with a rising China, Russia would provide just the sort of geopolitical heft needed to balance Beijing's power. Today, in direct violation of its own long-term geopolitical interests, the west is driving Russia towards China. It cannot stop itself imposing sanctions on Russia. This compulsion to act against its own interests perfectly illustrates declining western geopolitical wisdom.

It is not too late to compromise. But the west will have to get off its moral high horse. One simple observation might help it do so. Has anyone in the region noticed that few back its crusade in Ukraine? Indeed, can anyone name a major non-western country that supports it? The world's largest democracy is India. The Indians, like many in the rest of the world, look to the west with incredulity and ask how it could be so destructive of its own interests.

Third, the west should study and learn from China. Beijing has pulled off a near geopolitical miracle by emerging as the number two power without shaking the world order. How did it achieve this? It practiced strategic restraint. Despite a few near mishaps in the South China Sea, East China Sea and at the Indian border, China has remained at peace. More miraculously, it has quietly defused one of the world's biggest flashpoints, the Taiwan Straits.

Ironically, it is declining powers, not expanding powers, that have a greater need to exercise strategic restraint. If the west could emulate China's strategic restraint, it might finally end its decade of geopolitical failures.

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