

# China's elites gag on 'Vlad the Toxic'

by **Geoff Raby**

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*China's top people see a successful country standing tall in the world. Now their leader is tarring it all by association with the wrecker and war criminal in Moscow.*

In politics a catchy phrase can be used to devastating effect, such as John Howard's assertion that his Labor opponent, Kim Beazley, "had no ticker". With this, the Liberals could focus on Labor's perceived weakness on national security and border protection. It may well have cost Beazley the 2001 election.

In international relations, such glib catchphrases can frame serious policy choices, divide countries and lead to countervailing reactions. In 2002, president George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" linking North Korea, Iran and Iraq led to the creation by Iran of the "Axis of Resistance" – and concern among key US allies not to be seen standing too close to Washington.

With the outrageous Russian invasion of Ukraine, our Prime Minister's speech-writers have come up with "[Arc of Autocracy](#)", linking Russia and China in an alliance of autocratic states that stand opposed to democracies. Without nuance or subtlety, it presupposes a neat alignment of interests, divides the world order into two hostile groups, and implies undifferentiated policy responses towards the autocracies.

It is worth recalling that after the Sino-Soviet split in 1961, it took a decade for Western governments to look beyond the "communism" tag to understand that China and the Soviet Union had indeed fallen out.

The world is much more complex than a simple slogan can capture.

Far from alignment among the autocracies, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a [foreign policy nightmare for China](#) that may carry serious political consequences within China, and for President Xi Jinping in particular.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a moment of moral clarity. One can oppose or support but cannot be neutral. Neutrality is complicity and therefore support for Putin's atrocities. No amount of weasel wording can obscure that simple choice.

This, of course, also applies to India and others who have sought to fudge their culpability by not unequivocally condemning the invasion. As some predicted long ago, groupings such as the Quad, purportedly based on shared values, would turn to water as soon as real interests came into play. [The Quad has fallen at the first hurdle](#). Does Australia want India to remain a member when it can't even criticise Putin's invasion?

### **Foreign policy blunder**

In China's case we harbour no such naive illusions. The US and the West do, however, look to hold China to a higher standard. Rightly, we call on China to condemn unequivocally the invasion of Ukraine.

By not condemning the invasion at the outset, Xi has made a major foreign policy blunder that he may long rue. He has missed a historic opportunity to reset relations with the US and the West more generally.

While the uninformed look at China as a political monolith with Xi at the centre and all bowing before him, the reality is far from this. Elite politics in China are dynamic. As in democratic systems, rival factions compete for influence and even power.

Many of China's elites would be extremely unhappy to find China aligned in this way with Russia. While most buy into the narrative of a rising China, righting historical wrongs visited on the country by a hostile West, they also have a vision of a China that stands tall in the world, respected by all, especially by its benchmark the US.

Dangerously for Xi, he has made the elites, and China more broadly, lose face. They would be horrified to find themselves lumped together with rogue states such as Russia and North Korea. [This is not the China that 40 years of reform](#), opening to the world and integrating into the international system was intended to create.

Of course, like Russia's oligarchs, China's elites have their children at the best Western universities and much of their wealth safely invested in Western assets. They are also patriotic, proud of China's considerable achievements, and by and large comfortable with China's one-party political system and Communist Party rule.

But their image of themselves and for China is modern, sophisticated and as part of the international system, not one of war criminals and wreckers of generally agreed norms of behaviour between states.

[China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy](#) did not play well with such people. It is noteworthy that over the past six months this seems to have been wound back, notwithstanding continuing provocations from Australia and the US.

These people also did not like Xi removing the fixed term on the president. It was not so much whether they liked or did not like Xi, but rather that by removing the agreed institutional mechanism for transferring power – and limiting it – they felt it made China's political system look backward. Xi had made them lose face by reverting to a hick autocracy.

It is true that not all of China's elites share the same view, but many would. These concerns and humiliations would play into domestic political dynamics. Faced with the potential threat of Western economic coercion and international isolation, these could become powerful voices in opposition to Xi. Everyone in China from President Xi down would be amazed by the [unity, decisiveness, and effectiveness of the West's response to the invasion](#).

The COVID-19 omicron variant when it came along was always going to make this year a particularly hazardous one for Xi to navigate as he heads towards the 20th Party Congress in October, and his possible third term. As this column has pointed out, a third term was not in the bag, though could be regarded as highly likely.

Xi has staked a great deal of political capital on [his handling of COVID-19 but omicron](#), as experienced outside China, was always going to challenge his core claim of competency in managing the pandemic. Zero COVID-19 is not an option.

China's economy was already weakening under the pressures of adjusting balance sheets in the property sector and anaemic consumer demand. Xi is heading towards his moment with destiny, with COVID-19 becoming rampant, major cities locked down, and the economy faltering. Putin's invasion has made Xi's big year a most dangerous one.

The best thing for the Prime Minister and Defence Minister to do is to give up on the empty mindless slogans, put the megaphone away, and start to listen to diplomats who understand the complex forces at work, not only in China but elsewhere, and then try to work out how to influence those currents. The megaphone and the one liner will serve only to harden opposition against what we hope to achieve.

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