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Bidding for political immortality

Historic decisions by authoritarian leaders today will leave a legacy nigh impossible to reverse in the future

Four recent political decisions by four important world leaders — already taken or imminently to be so — are attempts to tie the hands of their successors by making the decisions irreversible, thus ensuring their own political immortality.

I have in mind the decision by the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, to annex Crimea; the abrogation by his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, of Hong Kong's autonomy; the decision by the Israeli premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, and the move by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to convert Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque. All these men are of the age when they have to think about their political legacies: Erdoğan (17 years in power), Putin (20 years), and Xi (seven) are 66-67 years of age; Netanyahu (14 years in power) is three years older.

Dismantling legacy

Let's begin with the latest one — the transformation of a museum (and before that the world's largest Christian church for 900 years) into a mosque. Erdoğan's desire, rubber-stamped by Turkey's Supreme Court, reverses an almost 90-years-old decision by Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's secular one-party leader, to sidestep the religious fight around the church/mosque by making it a museum.

Erdoğan, since he came to power in 2003, has been methodically dismantling the Kemalist legacy. At first, he did it with the support of the West, claiming that his disciplining of the army and subjecting it to political control was just following democratic practice. Having however been rebuffed several times by the European Union *vis-à-vis* Turkey's eventual membership, Erdoğan switched focus, not unreasonably, to assuming the role of middle-east power-broker. Outside Turkey, he played on the Ottoman heritage and Turkey's soft power; inside the country, he emphasised ever more strongly the Islamic roots and credentials of his Justice and Development (AK) Party.

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There is no doubt that the 'recapturing' of Hagia Sophia will boost his standing among rank-and-file Islamic voters, after the recent embarrassment of AK's loss of the Istanbul mayoralty. It will be perceived as Turkey regaining her former world-power status and pride. Whoever replaces Erdoğan, were it the most non-denominational and secular party, will find it exceedingly hard to undo the mosque decision. If and when such a party comes to power, it will have a number of other more pressing issues to tackle. Trying to go back on Erdoğan's latest decision would open an unnecessary front, with likely losses hugely disproportionate to any potential gains. Erdoğan will have won — and it might take another century to overturn the mosque decision.

Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea in Ukraine was motivated by similar considerations — even if, being obviously of much greater import, geopolitical and historical arguments played an even more important role. But no successor, however liberal, will be able to go back on that decision — not only because it would be unpopular and opposed within Crimea itself (and obviously so in Russia) but because Russia is haunted by two historical traumas that will not allow its leaders to trade in national territory. Those traumas are the imperial dissolutions of 1917 and 1991. In both, but especially the second, Russia played its diplomatic cards disastrously badly.

The fear that haunts the national elite of any stripe is that, were Russia to yield one inch of what it considers to be its own territory, the country might begin to unravel as the Soviet Union did in 1991-92. And where would such unravelling end? Thus, unless Russia undergoes another revolution and a break-up of the country, the return of Crimea can be written off. Putin, like Erdoğan, has tied the hands of his successors.

Same logic

Netanyahu's bid for annexation follows the same logic. Once the West Bank of the Jordan, nominally under the control of the Palestinian Authority since the Oslo accords of the 1990s, is annexed, it will never be de-annexed. The settler population will be against it. Israeli political parties, even those opposed in principle to Netanyahu and the annexation, will have other, more important political battles to fight.

Moreover, as during the entire period of occupation since the 1967 war with Israel's Arab neighbours, time will work in favour of making annexation permanent.

As an increasing number of settlers (a term which itself will become obsolete) move there, the costs of driving them out — were another Israeli government to try to do it — will be prohibitive. No one will dare to undertake it. Only if Israel were to suffer a huge military defeat, currently an unimaginable prospect, might the Israeli/Jewish nature of the new territories be put in peril. So here too, a forceful leader will have ensured that his *oeuvre* cannot be undone — absent a national calamity.

The decisions that to many today seem to be the product of power-hungry autocrats, reversible by more 'reasonable' political leaders, are however here to stay for a long time.

Xi's revocation of Hong Kong's autonomy, guaranteed under the 1997 agreement with the UK, belongs there too. Because of China's superpower status it is even more irrevocable than the other three decisions. A superpower cannot be seen to yield to what other, lesser powers want done. Nobody thinks that China will do *marche-arrière*: as with Russia, it is haunted by unpleasant recent history. Yielding on an issue with a colonial pedigree would undoubtedly be perceived as a humiliation.

China is unlikely to relent on independence for Tibet or human rights for the Uighurs, but neither of these two causes comes close in terms of potential humiliation — evoking the darkest days of the 'opium wars' — to what a U-turn on Hong Kong would do. Here again, we can expect Hong Kong to become autonomous (or even independent) only if China breaks up, or becomes a democracy, or a vassal state as it was in the 19th century. Neither of these is on the horizon. An autocratic leader has pre-empted any possibility of change after the end of his reign.

Wind of history

Are there any lessons to draw? Yes, following Otto von Bismarck's famous quip, if you feel rightly the wind of history, a forceful move in the same direction will ensure the irreversibility of your policies and your political immortality. The decisions that to many today seem to be the product of power-hungry autocrats, reversible by more 'reasonable' political leaders, are however here to stay for a long time.

The best guarantee that a policy will stick is to make it such that it is reversible only if there is an utter national defeat, which holds in three out of the four instances here. This not only makes policy more durable

— total defeats are rare — but ensures for it a posterity *even* in the eventuality of a defeat. The post-defeat generations would look back with admiration to the era when their country's leaders were able to make bold decisions, whether liked or not by the rest of the world. Those leaders' place in the pantheon would thus be ensured — even in the unlikely event of catastrophe for their country.

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