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Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View

The furor surrounding the November 2006 death of ex-spy Aleksandr Litvinenko from radiation poisoning hearkened back uncomfortably to the days of the Cold War. Although it remains to be seen exactly who ordered Litvinenko's death, the assassination of prominent Kremlin opponents has reinforced a growing Western perception that President Vladimir Putin's Russia is abandoning the West and, as in the days of the Cold War, is setting itself up as a serious rival to the agenda of spreading freedom and democracy around the globe.

This view of Russia as a rival reemerged with a vengeance in early 2006 following the crisis over Russian gas deliveries to Ukraine, when it appeared Moscow was using its control of natural resources to pressure Kyiv into abandoning its pro-Western foreign policy. The Kremlin's decision to challenge Western participation in several major oil and gas exploration projects, notably Sakhalin-2, and its prominent support for separatist rebels in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Moldova (Transdnistria) had exacerbated tension with the West even before the shocking deaths of Litvinenko and investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in late 2006. An independent task force commissioned by the Council on Foreign Relations warned as early as March 2006 that "cooperation [between Russia and the West] is becoming the exception, not the norm."[1]

Although relations with Russia are in a difficult phase at the moment, it is important to avoid overreacting and concluding that the Kremlin is newly intent on challenging the West. This all too common view ignores the trajectory of Russian foreign policy over the longer term, which suggests that Moscow

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has little desire for confrontation. In foreign policy terms, Russian behavior in 2006 has been quite consistent with the strategy pursued by the Kremlin for the past decade, whose fundamental component is not challenging Western influence but proving that Moscow still matters internationally.

Russian foreign policy's fundamental feature remains the assertion of Russia's right to act as a fully independent great power within a global system dominated by a handful of major states rather than by multinational institutions or norms. The substance of Russian foreign policy has not changed fundamentally, but the environment in which it is conducted has. In particular, higher global prices for oil and gas, Russia's main exports, and diminished U.S. power as a result of the war in Iraq have given the Kremlin greater autonomy to pursue policy choices that Russia's elite has long favored.

Russia Leaves the West … Again

Before the death of Litvinenko, Western observers were sounding the alarm about Russia's supposedly growing appetite for confrontation, even if they could not agree on when Russia had decided to part ways with the Western world. Some focused on the Ukrainian gas crisis; others on the contested Color Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan; and others on the rise of the *siloviki* in Putin's presidential administration. It bears remembering, however, that criticism of Russia's drift away from the West has hardly been limited to the years of Putin's rule, although Putin's KGB background and distaste for the trappings of democracy have made him an inviting target.

After a brief flirtation with Western integration in the early 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin's Russia was also subjected to harsh criticism both for its turn away from democracy and its resistance to Western initiatives, such as NATO expansion and the bombing of Serbia. During the very first years of Yeltsin's presidency, it seemed that Russia had made a strategic decision to pursue integration with Western institutions on the basis of a commitment to shared democratic values. Unfortunately for the optimistic view that the end of the Cold War also signaled the "end of history,"[2] the process of integrating Russia into Western institutions encountered unexpected roadblocks. The success of the anti-Western Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party in parliamentary elections indicated substantial opposition to the policy of integration with the West that was pursued in the early 1990s.

Even worse, Russia had difficulty articulating a convincing justification for deferring to Western leadership, as the United States and Europe had not yet developed a coherent vision of their own interests in the post–Cold War world. To many observers inside Russia, the pursuit of integration with

the West was less a strategic decision than an indication that Russia lacked a strategy entirely. In one now infamous and symptomatic exchange in the early 1990s, then–Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev asked of former president Richard Nixon, "If you … can advise us on how to define our national interests, I will be very grateful to you."[3]

Nevertheless, some Western observers noted as early as 1995 that, for the foreseeable future, Russia's foreign policy would be driven by "the championship, above all, of Russia's own national interests" and its self-perception as one of the world's great powers rather than by a partnership with the West.[4] These earlier warnings should be kept in mind when interpreting the nature of Russia's more recent interactions with the West. The general framework for Putin's foreign policy goes back at least to the middle of the Yeltsin years, when the intellectual consensus underpinning it first emerged. Because this framework has been fairly stable over time and enjoys the support of most of the Russian political class, it is reasonable to assume that it will continue to inform Russian foreign policy for the foreseeable future.

Russian foreign policy has not changed, but the environment in which it is conducted has.

As the first Chechen war from 1994 to 1996 and NATO's expansion into eastern Europe beginning with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999 exposed the chasm still separating Russian and Western strategic priorities, Russia began adopting a more independent line in foreign policy. This trend became more pronounced when the ex-spymaster Yevgeny Primakov took over the Foreign Ministry in 1996. Primakov was a key figure in setting Russian foreign policy on its present course of seeking independent great-power status, but in the West his role has often been overlooked or misunderstood. Primakov declared that under his watch Russia would reject both the strident anti-Westernism of the Soviet Union and the naïve romanticism of the early 1990s in favor of an approach that would emphasize Russia's "status as a great power" and an "equal, mutually beneficial partnership" with the United States and Europe.[5] He explicitly rejected the analogy comparing post-Communist Russia to post–World War II Germany and Japan, countries that traded international sovereignty for integration as well as prosperity inside the Western security architecture. As Primakov urged after leaving office,

> Russia can and should seek equal relations of partnership with all countries, [and] look for and find areas of coinciding interests. Where interests do not coincide … we should try to find solutions that, on the one hand, protect Russia's vital interests and, on the other, do not lead to slipping back to confrontation.[6]

A substantial degree of continuity both in aims and rhetoric exists between this vision, which Primakov pursued during his tenure as foreign minister (1996–1999) as well as prime minister (1999), and the one animating Putin's own diplomacy over the past several years. Not surprisingly, Primakov, now head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has been a strong supporter of Putin's foreign policy course.

Putin has consolidated Primakov's foreign policy without changing its basic orientation.

Unlike Primakov, Putin has been agile enough to come across as either a liberal (many of the Kremlin's key economic advisers, including German Gref, Andrei Ilarionov, Aleksei Kudrin, and Mikhail Kasyanov, have held liberal views), a statist, or a Russian nationalist as the situation demands. This political slipperiness has at times made Putin difficult to pin down. He has also dominated the foreign policy agenda in a way that none of his post-Communist predecessors could. By centralizing foreign policy decisionmaking as a key element of what he terms "strengthening the power vertical," Putin has effectively removed discussions about the principles underpinning foreign policy from the pressures of politics. The centralization of foreign policymaking in the Kremlin has allowed Putin to impose a fairly coherent vision of the national interest in a way that was not consistently possible during the Yeltsin-Primakov years, when regional and sectoral interests often predominated and when debates about foreign policy could be particularly vicious. Putin, in other words, has refined and consolidated Primakov's approach to foreign policy without changing its basic orientation.

Russian Power, Not Policy, Shifts

Looking at government documents, official statements by government figures, and discussions among Russian intellectuals, the set of ideas underlying Russian foreign policy has remained fairly constant, at least since the mid-1990s. The Russian consensus emphasizes the existence of a multipolar world order in which Russia is one of the principal poles, alongside at least the United States, Europe, and China, and the existence of an essentially anarchic world system in which power and states matter more than norms and institutions. During 2006 and 2007, Russia has found itself more powerful both in relative and absolute terms than in recent years. This change in relative power is more responsible for the increased tension between Russia and the West in 2006 than any newfound aggressive impulse in the Kremlin.

High oil and gas prices and a modicum of fiscal common sense, which have freed Russia from economic dependence on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have given Moscow economic leverage over its neighbors that it did not possess 10 years ago. Moscow has not hesitated to use this leverage to exert influence, especially within the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. At the same time, the decline of Russia's military is being reversed, albeit slowly. In addition, despite predictions to the contrary, Russia's strategy in Chechnya appears to have been more or less successful at putting down the rebellion and keeping Chechnya within the Russian Federation, although at an appalling cost. For all of these reasons, talk about Russia as a contemporary great power, which sounded like braggadocio and bluff during the Yeltsin years, has real geopolitical significance today.

The need for domestic consolidation does much to explain the seeming ease with which Putin previously accepted U.S. decisions, such as the 2004 inclusion of the Baltic states in NATO and the 2002 withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, that a weakened Russia had little leverage to prevent. Putin's annual declarations to the Federal Assembly, in which he lays out the country's strategic priorities for the coming year, confirmed the centrality of domestic concerns, especially during the first several years of his presidency.[7] Whereas Putin had sullenly accepted Western initiatives when he had little choice, today he is taking a hard line on questions such as Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO precisely because he finds himself in a stronger position relative to the United States and Europe.

A Putin Doctrine? Sovereignty and Multipolarity

Putin's goal is to make Russia an independent actor in international affairs by strengthening the state and maintaining a world order in which traditional notions of power continue to matter. Putin's emphasis on strength and unity is designed precisely to counter Russians' lingering sense of insecurity (a psychological trait with deep roots in Russian history) occasioned by the financial collapse of the 1990s, NATO expansion, the rise of terrorism inside Russia, and aggressive U.S. unilateralism.

Putin's desire to make Russia an indispensable world power is underpinned by the concept of *mnogopolyarnost'* (multipolarity), a term frequently employed by Primakov that has been less prominent in official pronouncements under Putin but is nonetheless at the heart of Moscow's vision of the global order. In essence, multipolarity implies a world of states that are more or less equal, if not in their inherent power capabilities—few Russian officials are rash enough to claim that Russian hard power will match that of the United States any time soon—then at least in their responsibility for upholding global order.

For Primakov, a multipolar order was largely something Russia should aspire to create. For leading officials today, it is increasingly an existing phenomenon produced mainly by Washington's reduced global influence as result of the war in Iraq, the rise of China, and the weakening of U.S.-EU relations because of the divergence of priorities in the war on terrorism. Even Kozyrev argued back in 1994 that "the international order of the [twenty-first] century will not be a Pax Americana or any other version of unipolar or bipolar dominance. The United States does not have the capability to rule alone."[8]

Talk about Russia as a contemporary great power has real geopolitical significance today.

The emphasis on multipolarity is reflected in officials' statements and government documents that touch on Russia's grand strategy for dealing with the world. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, adopted prior to September 11, 2001, identifies "a unipolar world structure dominated by the United States" as one of the major dangers to Russian interests.[9] In the interest of retaining its global influence, Russia has fiercely defended institutions such as the UN Security Council, in which it retains a decisive voice. Russian opposition to the U.S. bombing of Serbia in 1999 and to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 had as much to do with defending the primacy of the Security Council and the notion of state sovereignty as with a desire to preserve the regimes of Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. More recently, Russian leaders, while continuing to condemn U.S. unilateralism, point to the war in Iraq and Washington's inability to influence even its closest allies as proof that, in practice, the era of unipolarity is over.

If the twenty-first-century world is destined for multipolarity, the Russian elite is largely unanimous in believing Russia must be one of the poles. For all of the talk of cooperation with the West in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, no one in Russia really believed that it would give up its identity as an autonomous actor in world affairs. The ongoing discussion of the concept of "sovereign democracy" to describe the Russian political system focuses to a great degree on this issue. A truly sovereign state, as defined in contemporary Russian political discourse, is one whose goals and methods, at home and abroad, are made solely on the basis of calculations of national interest rather than because of external pressure to conform to behavioral norms. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov underlined the importance of foreign policy autonomy in a September 2006 address: "I think that the rapid revival of Russia's foreign policy autonomy is one of the issues [that] is complicating relations between us, since far from everyone in the [United States] has gotten used to this. But they must get used to it."[10]

The resulting worldview is analogous perhaps to the Concert of Europe arrangement that prevailed in Europe between the Napoleonic Wars and World War I, when the great powers managed the affairs of the world constrained by nothing but their own interests and power. In this view of today's world, formally equal and fully sovereign great powers are the upholders of world order, their relations are dictated by calculations of national interest, and the cause of stability is best served by upholding those norms and institutions (above all, the Security Council) that formalize the existence of a great-power concert. As Putin said in his 2006 address to the Federal Assembly, "We must clearly recognize that the critical responsibility … for securing global stability will be borne by the leading world powers—powers possessing nuclear weapons [and] powerful levers of military-political influence."[11]

The Language of Geopolitics

Power is a necessary component of such state interactions, as it is only through the possession and ability to exert power that a state is capable of defending its own interests. Moscow recognizes that the nature of power has changed since the end of the Cold War. An important component of Russian strategy in the short term has therefore been to acquire the attributes of power, which are military, economic, and institutional. In his 2005 annual address to the Federal Assembly, Putin declared that "[o]urs is a free nation. And our place in the modern world, I wish to particularly emphasize this, will only depend on how strong and successful we are."[12]

Russia's foreign policy elite and public, which increasingly identify with traditional Russian values of centralization, a strong state, and an emphasis on Russia's uniqueness, share this understanding of the world to a high degree.[13] The elite's understanding of the world is expressed in official strategic documents, particularly the Foreign Policy Concept and the National Security Concept, which were drafted by Yeltsin's team and adopted early in Putin's presidency, at the high point of Russia's supposed integration with the West. Although the importance of these documents should not be overemphasized—they are the work of bureaucratic horse-trading and are often left deliberately vague in order to satisfy competing constituencies—the language they use does provide some insight into how the men responsible for Russian national security view the world. The papers define the mental universe within which policy decisions are supposed to be made.

The current Foreign Policy Concept was drafted by the Security Council during the last months of Yeltsin's presidency and adopted in December 2000 after Putin had taken over. It lists the first priority of Russian foreign policy:

> Ensuring reliable security of the country and preserving and strengthening its sovereignty and territorial integrity and its strong and authoritative position in the world community, as would to the greatest extent promote the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power and one of the most influential centers in the modern world, is necessary to the growth of its political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual potential.[14]

This statement, along with the Foreign Policy Concept's subsequent desiderata—"shaping a stable, just, and democratic world order … [based] on equitable relations of partnership among states; creating favorable external conditions for the progressive development of Russia"—is notable for the attention it gives to notions such as sovereignty, great power, and partnership among states.[15] This language is that of geopolitics, a world of states seeking power and pursuing their national interests while subject to a balance of power. Such language and such a worldview would be unthinkable in official statements from the United States, much less the European Union.

The Russian worldview is analogous perhaps to the Concert of Europe.

In concrete terms, the pursuit of power in Putin's Russia has meant seeking economic expansion and stability at home and using the benefits for strategic purposes. This development is an important change from previous periods in Russian and Soviet history, during which the principal measures of power were military. Putin's Russia uses its international economic role largely to exert geopolitical influence. Putin has made conscious policy choices designed to stimulate and harness economic growth for the purpose of enhancing state power, even though the results have been somewhat mixed. Despite continuing difficulties with corruption and capital flight, Russia's gross domestic product continues to rise, albeit at a slower rate than in the early years of the decade. The IMF forecasts growth of 5.5 percent for 2005, compared to 7.1 percent in 2004.[16]

The economic expansion of the early 2000s has underpinned Putin's policy of strengthening the state by keeping government coffers full. The funds have been heavily spent on strategic initiatives such as reducing Russia's foreign debt and modernizing the military. Putin has used the windfall from oil revenues to pay off Russia's international debt burden early, reducing foreign leverage over Russian policy. Moscow's debt payments to the IMF and the Paris Club of sovereign creditors have proceeded ahead of schedule.

In keeping with this view of the world as an arena for great-power rivalry, Russia has also moved to take advantage of its newfound wealth to upgrade the military substantially. Military spending, especially on conventional forces,

has increased rapidly. The 2006 defense budget authorizes an increase of 22 percent over 2005 levels, which were already 27 percent higher than those of 2004.[17] This additional spending is going toward not only increasing pay for troops, but especially for the research and development of new weapons systems.

The reasons for this upgrade have little to do with a desire to frustrate U.S. designs. Rather, they are indicative of an enhanced willingness to stand up for Russian interests regardless of U.S. objections. The distinction is critical. This approach has been discernable in Russian policy toward the United States for several years now and reveals that hopes for a U.S.-Russian partnership have been largely misplaced but not that Russia has suddenly become reflexively anti-Western or anti-U.S. If anything, Putin's focus on rebuilding the foundations of Russian strength signifies great circumspection in dealing with Washington over NATO expansion, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and even the war in Iraq. Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov described Russia's overall cooperation punctuated by serious quarrels with the United States as resulting from the fact that

> Russian and [U.S.] strategic fundamental goals in international affairs essentially coincide—they aim for more security and more stability and predictability for our countries and the entire world. But we have different ideas about how to reach these goals and with what means. Each country is independently forming its own national interests. … So disputes between us are inevitable. This brings us to the question of how to regulate them. It is obvious that joint action and a multilateral approach are the preferable choice. So if a country chooses to react unilaterally, it must be prepared to take the full brunt of the consequences.[18]

Misreading the Effect of the September 11 Attacks

Proponents of the idea that recent frictions in the relationship between Russia and the West represent a fundamentally new development in the post–Cold War alignment often contrast current tensions with the rhetoric of partnership that prevailed after the September 11 attacks. The conventional wisdom in late 2001 to 2002, namely, that Russia had made a fundamental civilizational choice to be part of the West, seems to be completely out of place today.

Putin was the first foreign leader to call President George W. Bush after the attacks to express his condolences. Russia subsequently provided real cooperation in the battle against the Taliban and al Qaeda. It also joined the U.S.-sponsored Proliferation Security Initiative and backed U.S. efforts to pressure Iran and North Korea to give up their nuclear weapons programs. Unfor-

tunately, some in the West, including, it seems, some in the White House, misinterpreted this cooperation as signaling a fundamental shift in Russia's external orientation. Instead, it was an instrumental decision to cooperate on the specific issue of fighting Islamic terrorism and a gamble that working with the United States would bring Russia recognition as an indispensable pillar in the post–September 11 world order.

The decision to pursue close cooperation at that time was made by a small circle around Putin in the face of much opposition from the broader foreign policy elite. This suggests that much of the Russian political class did not change its fundamental outlook as a result of the terrorist attacks.[19] Given what most of Russia's leadership thinks about the country's international role, the post–September 11 decision to cooperate was hardly sufficient to bring about a more fundamental convergence of Russian values and institutions with those of the West, as a few observers cautioned at the time.[20]

Areas in which Russia appeared to adopt a more accommodating position after the September 11 attacks—attempts to increase energy exports to the United States, softened opposition to U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, and signing a strategic arms reduction agreement—all helped promote Russia's global role and influence even as they improved ties with Washington. Fighting fruitless battles, for example, over the U.S. decision to abrogate the ABM Treaty, would have done little for Russia's image as a powerful, responsible member of the global community.

Cooperation with the United States was only one element in Russia's struggle against terrorism. Other elements, such as escalating the war in Chechnya and advocating a more active role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Central Asia, were not well received in Washington at all. Moscow's post–September 11 rapprochement with Washington, in other words, served longstanding Russian foreign policy goals at the time but was only one element in a broader strategy of asserting Russia's role as a pivotal state. Today, these goals have not fundamentally changed, but the global environment and Russia's position in it has, hence, Moscow's more assertive tone throughout 2006.

Charting Its Own Course

Russian relations with the West have, with the exception of the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, followed a fairly consistent pattern over the past decade. Yet, the experience of the September 11 attacks and Russia's response to it after Yeltsin's flirtation with integration as a Russian grand strategy in the early 1990s gave birth to a myth that Russia has somehow adopted integration with the West as a fundamental strategic choice. That myth has fed much frustration and disappointment in Russia's more recent international

behavior. It makes more sense to see both Putin's response to the terrorist attacks and the more recent confrontations over Ukraine, Georgia, and Iran as part of a longer narrative on Russian foreign policy. This narrative's real turning point came sometime around 1995, when Russia's political elite realized that integration with the West was not a path most Russians were willing to follow. Since then, Moscow has attempted to carve out a distinct role in the world and insisted on remaining one of the central pillars of world affairs.

Underpinning this policy is not a desire to actively confront the West collectively or the United States individually. Given the realities of contemporary Russian politics, Putin is about as pro-Western a leader as Russia can be expected to have. One of the more popular explanations for Litvinenko's assassination in the Russian press suggests that disaffected members of the security services orchestrated it to discredit Putin's relatively nonconfrontational approach toward the West. If that is indeed the case, the West has less to worry about from the success of Putin's consolidation of power in the Kremlin than from his inability to bring the security services to heel.

> Putin's Russia uses its international economic role largely to exert geopolitical influence.

Putin's promotion of Russia's role as a great power in a way that is not overtly anti-Western or anti-U.S. represents an important stage in the development of Russia's post-Soviet consolidation. Russian leaders have a clear notion of their country's interests and will not ask their U.S. counterparts to explain it to them as Kozyrev did. A Russia that is sure of itself and of its standing in the world is likely to make a more stable, predictable partner for the West, even if it will not always agree with decisions made in Washington or Brussels.

The great question is, what comes after Putin? He has said repeatedly that he will step down as constitutionally mandated in 2008. The men most often mentioned as potential successors—First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov—are not Western-style liberals. They seem even more skeptical of U.S. intentions than Putin is. Regardless of who sits in the Kremlin after 2008, the Russian elite as a whole is not going to change its stripes. Absent some truly unexpected developments in the next year, Russia's next leader will not repudiate the foreign policy course set by Putin and Primakov precisely because of the broad consensus on which that course rests.

For Washington, pining for the days of Yeltsin and Kozyrev or for the "strategic partnership" proclaimed after the September 11 attacks is not going to build a productive relationship with Moscow. The "West" is of course a community of values as much as it is a geographic expression; witness the increas-

ingly bitter debate over Turkey's admission to the EU. Russian integration with the West can only happen on the basis of shared values, and the experience of the past decade makes clear the great distance that continues to separate the two sides. This values gap exists in the realm of foreign policy as well as in domestic politics, in which Russia's political system is becoming increasingly authoritarian. As long as this gap continues to exist, Russia will remain outside the West. That does not mean they are doomed to confrontation. The United States and its partners will need to continue engaging Russia on problems of mutual interest, while keeping their expectations limited and understanding that Moscow will remain intent on pursuing its own course in the world well after 2008.

Putin is about as pro-Western a leader as Russia can be expected to have.

Notes

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