



Putin-3

By Leon Aron

In the past nine years, Russian foreign policy has been examined several times in these pages.¹ At no other time, however, has its direction been as troubling as it is today. To understand the causes of this disturbing evolution and to gauge its future course, the changes have to be examined in the context of the regime's ideological and political transformation since 2000, when Vladimir Putin was elected president.

The de facto appointment by Putin of Dmitri Medvedev to become Russia's next president has incited hopes that Russia's disconcerting foreign policy might begin to change. Yet even assuming that "President" Medvedev and not "Prime Minister" Putin will eventually formulate Russia's policies (something that is hard to imagine today), such expectations only underscore the very heavy and deeply entrenched legacy Medvedev, and the West, will have to tackle.

Let's first discard simplistic clichés. When the post-Soviet, protodemocratic, anticommunist, revolutionary Russia of the 1990s was poor—as such "explanations" go—it was also peaceable and willing to be a friend of the West. Now that the accursed period of weakness and alleged chaos of the 1990s is behind it, Russia has "recovered" this, "regained" that, and is "reclaiming" the third thing. Off its knees, we are told, Russia is back—back, that is, to spar and bicker with the West because . . . well, because this is what a prosperous and strong Russia does.

Nonsense. Countries' behavior in the world, their choice of truculence or accommodation, is not decided by accountants in green visors,

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calculating what countries can or cannot afford. As Germany and Japan recovered from the devastation of World War II and became many times richer than they were in 1945, they grew more, not less, peaceful and devoted smaller shares of their national income to the military—and those, only after recurring and brutal political fights. Western Europe's spectacular economic resurgence has not brought back squabbling, jingoism, and militarism—and neither did South Korea's after the communist aggression and decades of authoritarianism. By contrast, China—under no external threat whatsoever and with per capita GDP one-seventeenth that of Japan, one-eighteenth that of Germany, and one-ninth that of South Korea²—last year spent five times more of its GDP on its military than did Japan, almost three times more than Germany, and one-and-a-half times more than South Korea,³ which is still in a state of *de jure* war with a lunatic totalitarian regime in the north.

Putin-1: Spring 2000–Fall 2003

In the past seven years, the trajectory of Russian foreign policy under Putin has mirrored, and changed with, the domestic ideological and political order, going through three main phases. What might be called Putin-1 spans almost three-and-a-half years of his first term, from spring 2000 to fall 2003. This was a time of bold liberal reforms in the economy and continuing privatization of state

enterprises. A new Criminal Procedural Code was introduced to enshrine Western-style independence of judges, bolster the rights of the accused, promulgate trials by jury, and sharply reduce the powers of state prosecutors, who in the previous eight decades had been unchallenged masters of the courts.⁴

By and large, it was still a revolutionary, firmly anti-Soviet Russia: free from fear and censorship, its politics not controlled by the Kremlin, and the opposition in the parliament (the Duma) real and powerful. Moscow also was remarkably restrained in the imperial meddling in the affairs of the post-Soviet states and continued the self-administered demilitarization of economy and society, unprecedented in scope for a great country not defeated in war and unoccupied by the victors.

Putin-1 followed the “new political thinking” course set by Mikhail Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, and continued by Boris Yeltsin. Russia searched for what was known as “a path to the common European home,” for ways to secure the country’s place in “a civilized world,” to integrate itself into the world economy, and to adjust its behavior to fit this agenda.

Antiballistic Missiles, Arms Control, and 9/11. It was at this time that Russia accepted the U.S. exit from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which left both countries virtually defenseless against a missile attack—MAD, for “mutually assured destruction,” was an apt acronym for this state of affairs—and signed a treaty committing Moscow and Washington to one of the sharpest nuclear arms reductions in history, pledging to have less than half of their current arsenals by the end of 2012. (Insisting on steeper cuts than the United States felt it could afford, Moscow said that it would implement them unilaterally.) The accord was negotiated in slightly over a year—instead of years and years of bitter haggling—and took two pages instead of the tome that previous arms control agreements had required. As U.S. and Russian officials implied at the time, friends do not need numbing casuistry.

Another highlight of Putin-1 was Russia’s coming to America’s aid after the 9/11 tragedy—crisply and competently, as if it had waited for this moment and had done all the homework. From Putin’s call to President Bush minutes after the attack in New York (the first expression

of condolences by a foreign leader on that day) to Moscow’s permission for U.S. and NATO planes to overfly Russian airspace on the way to Afghanistan, from Moscow’s effective acceptance of U.S. bases in the former Soviet Central Asia to the sharing of Russia’s vast intelligence sources in Afghanistan and the links to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance—Moscow acted decisively and generously in every instance, without preconditions or diplomatic horse-trading. At the same time, Russia closed the Lourdes military complex in Cuba—which had been Russia’s largest military base and electronic listening post in the Western Hemisphere—and shut down the eavesdropping post and naval base in Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay.

Putin-2: Fall 2003–Winter 2007

The regime’s credo and policies came to another turning point in the fall of 2003. In retrospect, the arrest, trial, and conviction of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the founder and principal owner of Russia’s largest private oil company, Yukos, between October 2003 and May 2005 seems more than a coincidence. It was emblematic of the Kremlin’s new political and economic agenda of reclaiming the government’s ownership of the political process, justice, and key sectors of the economy. Khodorkovsky had contributed millions of dollars to opposition parties; he and his partner, Platon Lebedev, were railroaded through a palpably fraudulent, Kremlin-managed prosecution and trial that shamelessly violated both the letter and the spirit of the 2001 code; and the most transparent and modern of Russia’s largest companies, Yukos, was driven into bankruptcy by state tax claims that exceeded its profits, broken up, and its most profitable units “sold” to the majority state-owned Rosneft well below its market value.

By the time Khodorkovsky was sentenced to eight years in a hard labor prison camp on the Russo-Chinese border 3,700 miles from Moscow, the imperfect but real division of power between the executive, the legislative, and the judicial that began to emerge in the previous decade and a half was no more. The key postulates of the Russian political tradition were returning in force: the state guides society, not the other way around; all that is good for the state is automatically beneficial to society; and to strengthen the state means to strengthen

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the country. A state functionary, a bureaucrat (enlightened, intelligent, hardworking, and a model of probity, of course) is a far more effective and consistent agent of progress than a free press (so corrupt, sensationalist, and concerned with profits instead of the good of the country!); a voter (so naïve, uneducated, and fickle!); an independent judge (such a bribe-taker!); or, God forbid, a private entrepreneur (thinking of nothing else but his profit!).

In myriad articles, the Kremlin's paid and unpaid propagandists called this arrangement "sovereign democracy"—in essence, a still rather soft authoritarianism, increasingly with nationalistic and isolationist overtones. As an independent Russian analyst noted, such exegeses "would have been labeled as fascist, chauvinistic, anti-democratic or anti-Western during Yeltsin's term. Now such texts have become mainstream."⁵

Omnivorous Pragmatism. The sovereign democracy's equivalent in foreign policy, Putin-2 has discarded Russia's integration into the family of liberal capitalist democracies even as a long-term objective and, with it, the need to behave accordingly. In an April 2005 state of Russia address to the Federal Assembly, Putin declared the end of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."⁶ Recovering and expanding on what was lost in that "catastrophe" became the alpha and omega of the Kremlin's agenda.

Moscow became omnivorously pragmatic. The abstractions of "Western civilization," "democracy," or "human rights" and long-term alliances rooted in these notions were no more accepted as a basis or even as considerations in bilateral relations. The character of the regimes was not important so long as dealing with them yielded additional influence, and profit, *today*. The comparative advantages—nuclear technology, conventional arms, and, of course, oil and gas—were to be deployed without hesitation.

The *locus classicus* of Putin-2 was Iran. In an obvious quid pro quo, Russia opposed sanctions against a uranium-enriching Iran in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, while Iran refrained from fomenting fundamentalism and terrorism in Central Asia and the Russian North Caucasus and bought billions of dollars worth of Russian nuclear energy and military hardware, including the Bushehr nuclear power plant, mobile air defense missiles, fighter jets, and tanks. (At the request of the United States, Yeltsin suspended arms sales to Tehran in 1995.)

With Russia's gold and hard currency reserves around \$300 billion at the time (today they are over \$425 billion⁷),

the money, although by no means insignificant, was hardly the primary objective. Instead, as a Russian expert put it, the Iran policy aimed at taking "a unique and historic chance to return to the world arena once again as a key player and as a reborn superpower. . . . If Russia firmly stands by Iran in this conflict with the United States Russia will immediately regain its lost prestige in the Muslim world and on the global arena at large . . . and no lucrative proposals from the United States can change this situation strategically."⁸

Putin-3: February 2007–Present

Putin-2 lasted until early 2007, when the Kremlin's ideology and propaganda took a sharp turn toward fanciful and darker themes, and Russian foreign policy morphed from cynical pragmatism to an assertive and pointedly anti-Western, especially anti-American, posture.

Like much else in Russian official discourse today, key components of this *Weltanschauung* were first sketched by the author of the sovereign democracy concept, a deputy head of the presidential administration and the Kremlin's main ideologist, Vladislav Surkov. Already three years before, he accused those "who consider the non-violent collapse of the Soviet Union [to be] their success" of trying to "destroy Russia and fill its enormous space with many weak quasi-states."⁹ The malfeasants' main goal, Surkov contended, was to "annihilate Russia's statehood." Most ominously, they are not without allies inside: in the "de-facto besieged country," Surkov found "the fifth column," its ranks filled with the "left and right radicals" who have "common foreign sponsors" and are united by "the hatred of what they claim to be Putin's Russia but, in fact, of Russia herself."¹⁰

Nary a month has passed this year without Putin's expanding or elaborating on Surkov's themes. "In 1990–1991 we . . . disarmed ideologically," he averred. "What we received [from the West] was this recipe: you become democrats and capitalists, so to speak, and we will control you."¹¹ Speaking at the military parade to celebrate the sixty-second anniversary of victory in World War II, the Russian president likened the perpetrators of "new threats" to Russia to the Third Reich because of "the same contempt for human life and the same pretensions of exclusivity and [the desire to impose] *diktat* on the world."¹² (Everyone in Moscow that day understood the unnamed evildoer to be the United States.¹³) This past November, on the occasion of the other main national holiday, the Day of Reconciliation,

which supplanted the commemoration of the 1917 revolution, Putin spoke of “those who would themselves like to rule all humanity” and who “insist on the necessity of splitting [Russia]” because it had “too many natural resources.”¹⁴

The Narrowing of the Bilateral Agenda. The formerly diverse bilateral U.S.-Russian agenda—energy security, nuclear nonproliferation, the global war on terrorism, the containment of a resurgent authoritarian China, Russia’s integration in the world’s economy—has been deliberately and systematically whittled down by Moscow to what it was in Soviet days and what the Kremlin now wants it to be: arms control. Suddenly pulled out of mothballs and imbued with the gravest and most vocal concern for Russia’s safety are some key agreements struck at the end of the Cold War: the intermediate missile force agreement, signed by Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987; the 1990 treaty on conventional forces in Europe between the Warsaw Pact and NATO; and the 1991 START nuclear arms

accord. Moscow has threatened to “abandon” the first, has “suspended” its participation in the second, and has hinted at renegotiating the third when it expires in 2009.

Some of Moscow’s concerns may be legitimate and worthy of negotiations, but the alarmist, ultimatum-like rhetoric and the mode of its delivery—shrill, public, and from the very top of the Russian power structure—have been utterly disproportionate to the rather trivial military essence of the issues. “All of this is devoid of any [military] sense,” wrote Alexandr Gol’tz, one of Russia’s finest independent military experts. “The most important thing [for Moscow] are the negotiations themselves. In making progressively more and more nonsensical demands on the U.S., Russia’s objective is to preoccupy Washington with the discussion of military matters for the duration of the electoral cycle. Russia’s stance is a classic case of ‘offensive diplomacy,’ the main goal of which is to put forward demands that the other side could never meet.”¹⁵

The future deployment of ten missile interceptors in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic is Moscow’s biggest official fear. This scrawny outfit is said by the Kremlin to be capable of hindering Russia’s nuclear retaliation with 2,480 nuclear warheads on 704 long-range ballistic missiles.¹⁶ Addressing Moscow’s concerns,

the United States offered to have Russian observers directly monitor the missile defense sites and to delay the activation of the sites until Iran actually possesses the missiles capable of targeting Europe.¹⁷ Yet Putin threatened to retaliate by aiming Russia’s missiles at “new targets” in Europe and warned of a possibility of another 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (thus equating a rudimentary *defense* system with the Soviet Union’s gift of nuclear-tipped missiles that could reach Washington and

New York to Fidel Castro). Most recently, General Yury Baluyevsky, chief of the general staff, suggested that the launching of an antimissile rocket from Polish soil could trigger an attack by Russian nuclear ballistic missiles.¹⁸

From Exploitation to Exacerbation.

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whose Albanian Muslim majority sought independence. Today, Moscow appears to be determined to support Serbia to the bitter, self-defeating end, risking the resumption of hostilities and jeopardizing the Serbian minority in Kosovo. As with arms control, the issue is not the legitimacy of Russia’s concerns about the rights and safety of the Serbian minority but Moscow’s extreme, inflexible, and shrilly advertised position in the UN Security Council that seems designed to torpedo any Serbian-Albanian agreement. As President Boris Tadić of Serbia reportedly told the foreign minister of Italy, Massimo D’Alema, who presided over the UN Security Council’s most recent round of the Kosovo negotiations on December 19, 2007, “I can’t let the Russians be more Serbian than I.”¹⁹

In addition to its by now habitual and almost instinctive opposition to virtually every Western initiative in international affairs, Russia’s prevention of a negotiated transition of power in Kosovo under UN supervision is certain to lead to the Kosovar Albanians proclaiming it unilaterally. Moscow could then encourage its client provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia, to use the Kosovo “precedent” to reiterate Abkhazia’s claims to an independent statehood

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and South Ossetia's desire for independence from Georgia and acceptance into the Russian Federation. Russia then could respond with "understanding" to both moves and perhaps even with recognition of an independent Abkhazia and the admittance of Ossetia. (This past December, the Speaker of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov, suggested putting Abkhazia's independence and Ossetia's request on the parliament's 2008 agenda.²⁰) Such *démarches* are almost certain to trigger a military response from pro-Western Georgia, which since its democratic Rose Revolution of November 2003 has been a thorn in Moscow's side. (Unlike in the Yeltsin era, Russia now looks at all political and economic development in the territory of the former Soviet Union as a zero-sum game, in which Russia automatically loses whenever Western influence spreads and takes root.)

With the majority of Abkhazians reportedly holding Russian passports,²¹ the hostilities in Georgia would give Moscow a number of advantageous policy options: punish Georgia by recognizing the Abkhazian and South Ossetian "states" and by imposing economic sanctions on Georgia in retaliation for the latter's military response, further bolster its position as a regional superpower by making itself indispensable to any settlement of the conflict, and whip up anti-Georgian and anti-Western hostility should the Putin-Medvedev-Putin succession plan run into difficulties and require additional mobilization of public opinion against domestic and external "enemies." (A still more forceful political "backup" that a conflict in Georgia could make possible would be ensuring the continuance of Putin's rule by involving Russia directly in the fighting, introducing "emergency rule," and postponing the presidential election.)

Iran. A similar, and still more troubling transformation, has occurred in Moscow's Iran policy, which began to change from money-making, influence-peddling, and diplomatic arbitrage to a far riskier brinkmanship in pursuit of a potentially enormous prize. The longer Moscow resists effective sanctions against an Iran that continues illegally to enrich uranium²² and, thus, keeps the bomb option open and available at the time of its choosing, the greater the likelihood that the situation will deteriorate, through a series of very probable miscalculations by both sides, toward a full-blown crisis with military action

increasingly probable. As Iran's patron, Moscow would be crucial to any resolution of such a conflict, as was the Soviet Union, which sponsored Egypt in the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

Of course, none of these objectives has been publicly stated. Yet the Kremlin's clever, chancy, and utterly cynical policy toward Iran has consistently pointed to the

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Kremlin's seeking, in one fell swoop, to achieve all three key strategic goals in the region: reoccupy the Soviet Union's position as a key player in the Middle East and the only viable counterweight to the United States in the region, keep oil prices at today's astronomic levels by feeding the fears of a military strike against Iran (and see them go as high as \$120-\$130 a barrel and likely higher if, as widely expected, Iran blocks the Strait of Hormuz and disrupts the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf), and use the West to prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran a few hundred miles from Russia's borders, while publicly opposing the West's efforts to stop the uranium enrichment.

Toward a Revisionist Power? Most worrisome in the long run might be Russia's evolution toward what is known in the theory of international relations as a revisionist power. Up until a year ago, it could be said that, while railing at the score, Russia was not seeking to change the rules of the game. This is no longer certain. Missed in the avalanche of commentaries that followed Putin's startling speech in February 2007 in Munich—where he inaugurated Putin-3 by denouncing the United States for, among other grave sins, seeking to become the world's sole "master" and "sovereign," "disdaining the fundamental principles of international law," overstepping national borders in every way, and "forcing" its policies on other states, which no longer "feel secure"—was a most disquieting phrase: "We have approached that watershed moment, when we have to think seriously about the entire architecture of global security."²³

On November 8, 2007, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov followed up on the boss's suggestion by blaming NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty (the cornerstones of European stability and Russia's bugbears, all) for unspecified "major problems."²⁴ The "moment of truth" has arrived, Lavrov declared: Moscow intends "to clear out" the offending institutions, or, as a

Russian news agency put it, to “break up the old system of international security.”²⁵

What Is to Come?

Making Putin-3—with its unprecedented, intense, and almost daily escalating rhetoric—particularly frustrating for Washington is the entwining of Russian foreign policy with the Kremlin’s all-out effort to ensure the transition of power from Putin’s presidency to what might be called Putin’s regency under a figurehead president. Despite Putin’s popularity and the projection of supreme confidence and serenity, the successful rearrangement of power is fraught with serious political risks, and many things could still go wrong. Thus, between now and the presidential inauguration next May, a key (if not *the* key) purpose of Russian foreign policy is to provide support for the management of the succession.

A Besieged Fortress. Forging a sense of a besieged fortress at a time of domestic political uncertainty or economic downturn to rally the people around the Kremlin and, more importantly, its current occupant is part and parcel of the Soviet ideological tradition, which this Kremlin seems increasingly to admire and draw on. His country lying in ruins, with millions starving and living in dugouts, Stalin launched the Cold War in a February 1946 speech and two years later blockaded Berlin. With his political and economic reforms running into trouble, Khrushchev lashed out at John F. Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961 and two months later began building the Berlin Wall. In September 1983, Yury Andropov welcomed a chance to consolidate his first year in power and dispel the (correct) rumors of being barely alive by authorizing the shooting down of a South Korean airliner.

Between now and at least next spring, Russian foreign policy is likely to be almost entirely subservient to the ambitious and dicey domestic political agenda and inexorably propelled by it toward progressively nastier rhetoric and greater mischief-making. Moscow is “conjuring the image of external enemy to mobilize the population,” Alexei Sidorenko, an expert at the Carnegie Moscow Center, recently said. “The Kremlin’s entire political strategy at present,” he continued, “rests on consciously created myths, and they are beginning to dominate the agenda.”²⁶ Until the succession crisis is resolved, no

amount of importuning, begging, or kowtowing, neither emergency trips by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to Moscow, nor heart-to-heart chats in Kennebunkport, are likely to produce an ounce of good.

Stand Firm and Wait. We are thus faced with one of those don’t-do-anything-just-stand-there moments, which are so hard for large bureaucracies, such as the State Department, to bear. After presenting Moscow with a set of clear, nonnegotiable redlines not to be crossed during the tense half-a-year ahead (first and foremost, military provocations of any kind against Georgia, Estonia, or Ukraine), there is not much for Washington to do but wait for Russian politics to settle and for its foreign policy to regain a measure of autonomy from domestic concerns. Then Moscow is almost certain to extend to Washington an olive branch, or at least a twig, as the leaders of the Soviet Union invariably did upon consolidating power.

In the meantime, Washington ought to ignore the inevitable op-ed urgings to “explain ourselves better” to Moscow; or to be careful not to “feed the Kremlin’s paranoia” or “push it into the corner”; or to be therapeutic and gentle in light of Russia’s traumatic historic memories; or to constantly reinvent progressively larger and juicier “carrots” for the Kremlin—as if the street-smart and tough-as-nails former KGB men who run Russia today (and sit on its fabulous wealth, to boot) could be “induced” to deviate from their vision of what is good for Russia (and themselves) by Washington’s proffers.

No Foreign Policy Change without a Change of Ideology. One hopes also that, with the presidential race underway in the United States, there will be no reprise of yet another round of the silly hand-wringing and finger-pointing on the subject of “losing” Russia. Alas, she is not (and never has been) ours to lose. Back on the “never altered circuit of its fate”²⁷—to borrow from one Robert Graves’s finest poems—under Putin she is doing a fine job of it herself. Resuming the Gorbachev-Yeltsin heroic labor of dismantling this circuit, and thus altering Russia’s relations with the West, could be Medvedev’s job—if he wants it and, even a larger if, is allowed to proceed.

But such development is not very likely. As the record of the past seven years reviewed above demonstrates

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amply, there is a strong correlation between the regime's domestic ideological priorities and policies on the one hand and its behavior in the world on the other. Given Putin's continuing dominance of Russian politics, no significant change for the better in Russia's relations with the West should be expected, even as the especially noxious rhetoric of the past few months will be toned down by the Kremlin after the succession crisis is resolved.

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