



Russia Drifts Eastward?

Andrew C. Kuchins

Surprise, Vladimir Putin is back as Russian president. For the first time in his now 12-year reign as Russia's "national leader," however, he has encountered dramatic public opposition to his rule. Putin will be inaugurated on May 7, 2012, with both his authority and legitimacy under greater question than ever before.

Putin's campaign was noted for its heavy-handed anti-Americanism, especially his lengthy foreign policy platform essay entitled "Russia and a Changing World," which appeared on February 27 in *Moskovskie Novosti*. In the essay, Putin asks, "Who undermines confidence?" His answer is the United States and NATO—especially the Americans who, "have become obsessed with the idea of becoming absolutely invulnerable." In Putin's worldview, the United States threatens Russia's sovereignty. Anti-Americanism has been a staple of Russian political campaign rhetoric since the onset of the Putin era, but never like this.

Conventional wisdom suggests that Putin's article, as well as other pronouncements—denouncing U.S. foreign policy goals and accusing the U.S. government of supporting the Russian opposition and even seeking regime change—were intended for a domestic audience during the presidential campaign. According to this view, we should expect continuity rather than change under Putin, since he was essentially in charge of Russian foreign policy the past few years, with Dmitri Medvedev acting as his "super foreign minister," to quote Russian expert Fyodor Lukyanov.

Even in his February essay, Putin praised the New Start Treaty and Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and sounded almost like the U.S. State Department in calling for a broader and deeper economic foundation in U.S.-Russia relations. Once things settle down after the heat of the election season, when the new middle class protesters tire of street meetings and go back to their cafes and shopping excursions, it seems quite normal to expect that the pragmatic Putin will return to conduct business with his U.S. counterpart.

Maybe so, but it behooves us to consider circumstances that could drive Putin further from Washington and closer to Beijing. In fact, it is already happening to some extent. The "reset" is over, and we should consider it successful in that it resulted in a number of important agreements including New Start, tougher sanctions on Iran, new transit corridors to support troops in Afghanistan, and civilian nuclear cooperation in the form of a "123 Agreement."

Rather than "resetting" the relationship, however, one might view the achievements of Obama and Medvedev as simply normalizing the relationship after the complete breakdown during the Georgia war. The problem now, however, is not so much that Putin has changed or his return necessarily implies change in Russian foreign policy, but rather that the domestic situation and external circumstances have changed.

The number of important issues where we find agreement with Moscow is overshadowed by those we fundamentally disagree on. And since regime preservation will trump any foreign policy goal, Putin will take whatever repressive measures he deems necessary and accept the damage this brings to ties with Washington and our European allies. Beijing would be unlikely to protest such measures.

The number of important issues where we find agreement with Moscow is overshadowed by those we fundamentally disagree on.

On foreign and security policy, negotiations on missile defense became deadlocked in the spring of 2011, and Putin has made this issue a focal point of his critique of the United States' supposed quest for strategic invulnerability. This issue is potentially the "game changer" or "game ender" in U.S.-Russia strategic relations, and unquestionably Beijing would be very disappointed to see Moscow and Washington achieve an agreement on deep cooperation.

Iran's nuclear program has been and continues to be Washington's first priority with Moscow, but bringing the Russians on board for another round of deeper sanctions may not be possible. China, meanwhile, has a deep and comprehensive relationship with Iran and may be just as opposed if not more so to stronger sanctions. Beijing and Moscow may

be frustrated with Tehran's intransigence, but they prefer the status quo to anything that might destabilize the Iranian regime and the region.

Syria carries far less strategic significance than missile defense or Iran for Moscow and even less for Beijing, but its emotional symbolism runs deep for the Obama administration as evidenced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's reference to the joint Russian-Chinese veto at the United Nations in February as "despicable."

The Syria impasse is also not endearing the Russians to the U.S. Congress, where Russia and Vladimir Putin have never been in good favor anyway. The problem now is that with Russia's WTO accession, Congress must vote to lift the Jackson-Vanik amendment and grant Russia permanent normal trade relations (PNTR); otherwise, we will be in non-application and U.S. companies would not benefit from the hard-won fruits of our own trade negotiators on lower tariff barriers and access to WTO trade adjudication dispute resolution institutions.

If we fail to grant Russia PNTR status, which is clearly in the U.S. national economic interest, this will also further confirm Putin's jaundiced view that the United States is simply not a trustworthy partner that can deliver on its promises. Deeply entrenched grievances about U.S. double standards when it comes to Russia will be further inflamed.

Although Putin rightly has some reservations about Russia being overleveraged to its rapidly rising neighbor to the east, he may well appreciate that when he strikes a deal with China, it is likely to stick. While the Chinese leadership has well-founded doubts about Putin's trustworthiness, they would welcome any benefits they may be

able to extract from a more isolated and weakened Russian leadership. Hardliners in the People's Liberation Army and elsewhere in the Chinese leadership would be especially gratified to see Moscow revert to a more confrontational posture with the Americans. A well-connected Chinese friend tells me that the "China-Russia reset" is a hot topic in Beijing.

Certainly there is no imminent Sino-Russian alliance emerging, and the scenario sketched out above is not Putin's preferred option. He supported the Medvedev-Obama reset to some extent because it brought greater balance to Russia's geostrategic position between Washington and Beijing and would be reluctant to abandon it. But just as the sudden emergence of a diverse anti-Putin protest movement at least temporarily knocked him off balance domestically, a set of external factors is testing his capacity to maintain balance in Russian foreign policy. In the Middle East, Moscow has deeply angered the Arab world and more closely aligned with Iran over Syria. And at the global level, Russia has drifted closer to Beijing and further from Washington.

If this drift continues, the new administration in January 2013, whether a second Obama term or the first for a Republican president, will have diminished capacity to pursue core U.S. security goals to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, to stabilize Afghanistan, to promote peace in the Middle East, among others. We may not like Putin and many aspects of his governance, but given the expected palette of foreign policy challenges in a year's time, we are likely to need Moscow's support even more in 2013 than the incoming Obama administration calculated when it embarked on the reset in 2009. ■