

## Russia's Strategic Choices

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President Putin's speech in Munich, his address to parliament, the Foreign Ministry's policy paper, and the practical developments that followed from these statements have set the stage for a closer look at Russia's role in the world and the implications for the West.

Anyone listening to Russian officials is impressed by their self-confidence, and even triumphalism. As the Russians see it, Russia is up, the United States is down, and Europe is out. This jubilation is understandable. For too long, Russian elites felt humiliated, rejected, and ridiculed. Just ten years ago, the talk of the global village was of a world without Russia. Today it is about a Russia resurgent: a sea change, one worth celebrating.

### An Apparent Success Story ...

There is no question that Russia is back on its feet, at long last. The post-Soviet economic slump is almost history—in 2007, after eight years of steady growth, Russia's gross domestic product will reach its 1990 level. The macroeconomic indicators are stellar. Moscow is no longer a supplicant at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), it is on the threshold of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), and is setting its aim on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As the West lost much of its leverage over Russia, the country's territorial integrity was restored: Check-

enization *has* worked, so far. The United States has become an object of rough official censure, and some near neighbors, like Georgia and Estonia, are being subjected to tough actions. "We are now big and rich," said Vladimir Putin as he shrugged off a reporter's question about other nations' revived concerns about Russia. He is also on record saying that defending national interests normally arouses foreign opposition. It is only one-sided concessions that win the applause.

Like most developments within the country, Russia's foreign policy is informed by a clear material interest. Moscow is looking for opportunities wherever they may be, and is prepared to compete tooth and nail to get what it wants. This is the foundation of what Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov calls common sense, which has replaced ideological, idealistic, or, indeed, any other nonmaterial affinities in Russia's foreign relations.

Russia's ultimate interest is a status of a major world power, on par with the United States and China. With the country sovereign again, and the Kremlin fully sovereign within it, the next step is to eliminate arrangements that were concluded when Moscow's influence was at its nadir. Having recovered from a period of weakness, Russia is turning revisionist. That should come as no surprise: since the mid-1990s Russian foreign ministers adopted Prince Gorchakov, Alexander II's able top diplomat, as their role

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### Summary

Russia's recent foreign policy has taken on a combative tone and adopted a revisionist content. Moscow today speaks its mind publicly and freely, and makes clear it no longer wants to be bound by accords concluded when Russia was weak. However, while the Kremlin is clear about what it does not like or want, it has yet to articulate a positive international agenda. In fact, Russia faces a number of fundamental foreign policy choices that cannot be explained by a reference to sheer pragmatism or the show of newly regained power. In dealing with Russia at this stage, the West needs to reach beyond the binary formula of integration or isolation and focus instead on the national interests.



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model. It took Gorchakov fourteen years to repeal the Paris treaty, which followed Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean war. In Gorchakov's footsteps, Vladimir Putin threatened to pull out of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty less than seven years after it was signed.

But this is hardly an isolated case. Russia has abruptly changed the rules of the game in the Sakhalin-2 project. Its intention to quit the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty is not a hollow threat. The Russian military see it as a relic of the Cold War, totally unsuited to twenty-first century strategic realities, and discriminating against the two countries which are parties to it, the United States and Russia. In the name of the Russian national security interests, it has to go. This is, verbatim, the Bush administration's rationale for withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Like the United States, Russia now prefers to have a free hand.

### Taking a Second Look

Critics say that this happy triumphalism is short-sighted and may be short-lived. It is not so much Russia that is up, but that energy prices are. Yet, what goes up, must come down. Even if the demand continues to be strong and prices stay high, there are well-founded concerns about Russia's ability to satisfy that demand. Investment, technology, infrastructure, and efficiency are all wanting. Russia, of course, will continue as an energy source for the industrialized and industrializing world, but it does not qualify as the world's secretary of energy. And, except for arms and metals, there is little else it offers on the global market.

Much in Russia's behavior continues to be a reaction to what outsiders do or say. Russia feels strong, but it is still strangely prickly, which reveals deep-seated insecurity. In a dramatic reversal from Soviet practices, Russian government propagandists masochistically seek out criticisms of Moscow's policies—the blacker, the better—and have them translated and beamed to the domestic audience, probably to

foment popular indignation with “foreign Russophobia.” Off-hand comments by U.S. officials, obscure articles in U.S. journals, and dull documents issued by U.S. government agencies that are not even mentioned by the U.S. media become top stories in Russia, serving as a proof of the United States' hidden agenda, believed to be still centered on Russia.

Russia takes issue with U.S. “attempts to construct a unipolar world” (as Putin put it in his Munich speech), NATO enlargement, U.S. missile defense deployments in Central Europe, and the official U.S. policy of democracy promotion. Interestingly, Moscow presents these issues as direct threats or at least serious problems; even as it says that, effectively, they mean little: a unipolar world is a chimera; NATO enlargement actually weakens the alliance; ten interceptors in Poland guided by a radar in the Czech Republic will not blunt the Russian deterrent; color revolutions have fizzled out, and an “orange” Ukraine is a more amenable partner for Russia than Leonid Kuchma's government ever was and certainly more than Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus is today.

### A Frustrated Russia

Privately, top Russian officials still reel from the rejection of their earlier overtures. Moscow's private probing on a possibility to join NATO was never seriously entertained; its removal of an intelligence gathering station in Cuba was taken for granted; its acceptance of U.S. forces in Central Asia and U.S. military instructors in Georgia were seen as reluctant bowing to realities; its mild reaction to NATO membership for the Baltic states and to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty were attributed to Russia's general foreign policy impotence. There was certainly a lack of sensitivity in the West, which frustrated Russia. However, what Russian leaders fail to realize is that a repetition of these litanies engenders no sympathy, let alone soul-searching in the West.

Putin's demarche in Munich vented this frustration. He also rejected the two previous

models of Russian-Western relations, as he saw them: Gorbachev's partnership through concessions and Yeltsin's partnership through submission. Instead, Putin sought to lay down his own terms of engagement—partnership through strength, built on respect and equality. It remains to be seen whether the new toughness will breed understanding and engagement or simply more toughness.

### Looking for the Positive Side of Russia's Foreign Policy

Unlike the perceived slights and strong responses, the positive elements of Russia's foreign policy agenda are understated. Moscow bungled a real chance to take the lead on energy issues during its G8 presidency: its heavy-handed handling of the gas price dispute with Ukraine, and then Belarus, effectively framed its first year in the world's top chair. By the time Russia's presidency had ended, its credibility had markedly ebbed. Russia ratified the Kyoto protocol as part of a deal to get the EU's approval of Russia's WTO bid, but its position on global warming is unclear. Russia joined its G8 partners in writing off poor countries' debts, in Moscow's case, mostly for past arms sales to the regimes that are no more. On fighting poverty itself, Russia briefly tried to act as an advocate of Cen-

tral Asian states, but the interest died down when this attempt fell flat.

The problem is that, just as inside Russia, a high and prestigious position is associated with privilege and status, rather than responsibility. The Kremlin appears to see the G8 as the equivalent of a global Politburo, and the UN Security Council as a central committee. Craving for status is natural among nations, but one has to match ambitions to capabilities. Great power only makes sense in the twenty-first century as long as it is also a great country, attractive to its own people. Energy superpower is a myth, and a dangerous one. Being the only major country that can openly defy the United States is a distinction laced with liabilities. Moscow, as an informal spokesman for the major emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, or BRIC), has few supporters in Beijing, Brasilia, or Delhi. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization may "unite" more than one-third of the world's population, but Russia's share in the SCO's "grand total" is a meager 5 percent.

Despite vast potential, Russia has not been able to make good use of its soft power. The fact that Russia has become a workplace for millions of people from across the former Soviet neighborhood is no achievement for Russian foreign policy. When Moscow felt the

#### BOX 1

##### The International Community's Toolbox for Russia

The international community, particularly the United States, can either harm or help its relationship with Russia in several different ways:

- When the issue of granting Russia permanent normal trading relationship (PNTR) status reaches Capitol Hill later this year, the discussion could go beyond economics and into a general debate on Russia. Should that debate lead to a negative conclusion on PNTR, it will further harm the relationship, and it will fail to bring about any desirable change in Moscow's domestic or foreign policy.
- Russia's WTO membership is the most powerful transformative instrument in the hands of the international community.
- The Jackson-Vanik amendment—which denies unconditional normal trade relations between the United States and certain countries, including Russia—has no real effect on the U.S.-Russian economic exchanges, but has become, in Russian eyes, a symbol of U.S. ill will toward Russia. It is a clear liability.

need to act to project or protect its interests in the new states, whether Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine, it squandered part of its moral authority with the new states. An early recourse to sanctions is hardly a soft power instrument. Russia has singularly failed to make others want what it wants, or see things as it does. The 2006 hate campaign against Georgian immigrants in Russia struck a particularly ugly note. The 2007 campaign against Estonia found Moscow isolated. Even when Russia has a point, as in the abolition of energy subsidies, fighting illegal migration, checking the quality of imported goods, or honoring the memory of WWII soldiers, its actions manage to fur-

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ther destroy the image it wants to build. This points to a serious and dangerous bug in the Russian foreign policy software.

Russia's foreign policy pragmatism is refreshing, but it cannot exist without a foundation of values. Otherwise, pragmatism would only stand for money, and the more money is offered, the more pragmatic the stand. For what does Russia stand? Presumably these are the same things that are written in its Constitution—the rule of law, human rights, and democracy. A senior Kremlin official recently also mentioned Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Why then does Russia, more often than not, side with the certifiably less representative regimes? Is it geopolitics, material interests, aversion toward Western, especially U.S., policies, or all of the above? Or is Russia building a different kind of democracy, which is closer to China's system than Europe's? This is no idle question.

#### **Russia's Foreign Policy Crossroads**

That today's Russia should be in search of foreign policy bearings is normal. It has just won

a survival battle, gotten off its crutches, and earned the luxury, but also the necessity, to think ahead. However, even Kremlin-friendly commentators point to the lack of priorities in its foreign policy. Russia is on its own, alone, and adrift. Where will this drift end up? With Gorbachev's diplomatic legacy derided and discarded, and Prince Gorchakov as a new icon from the Great Game era, is Andrei Gromyko making a comeback? Before it is too late, the Kremlin needs to restore the balance between the yeses and nos of diplomacy, re-evaluate its cooperation to coercion ratio, and find answers to a range of critical strategic choices it has yet to confront.

- What are Russia's aims in its immediate neighborhood? Is it merely seeking influence by means of its soft power, or does it want to dominate the region? This is a choice between post- and neo-imperialism.

- What about Russia's European vocation, so loudly proclaimed at the beginning of the decade? Is Moscow serious about building common spaces with the EU, which would effectively make Russia and Europe two semi-detached houses? Or is the EU just another partner among so many others: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the African Union? This is a choice between anchoring or drifting.

- Are oil and gas export commodities or energy weapons? Will Russian leaders seek a symbiotic supplier-consumer relationship with the rest of the G8 or will they see this relationship as essentially acrimonious, and try to bolster their position by building coalitions of suppliers to provoke intense competition among the consumers for scarce supplies?

- Is NATO a partner or a problem? Does the NATO-Russia Council primarily serve the purpose of gaining first-hand information on the alliance, or that of building common security and organizing strategic interaction? Should Russia look forward to NATO's im-

minent failure in Afghanistan, and get ready to cut deals with the Taliban when the Islamists retake Kabul? Is the intention to fight terrorism or to play a new Great Game in Central Asia? Meanwhile, is it wise to threaten the European NATO countries with a new version of SS-20 INF missiles? Does this recent threat mean brinkmanship, immaturity, or “longing for a simpler world”? Apart from the INF Treaty, is it really good for Russia to also quit the CFE? In short, does Russia consider the West a potential military adversary in the twenty-first century?

■ Perhaps China is the alternative as a true strategic partner, even eventually an ally? There is no doubt that friendship with China is a major asset not to be given away. It is also true that China’s national might has grown several times in the past twenty years, even as the Soviet Union disintegrated and Russia went through a painful transition. Do Moscow’s *Realpolitiker* envisage a strategy of balancing China’s strength vis-à-vis Russia, or, on the contrary, are Western democracies to be balanced by means of an unequal alliance with China? What is the realistic strategy for developing the Russian Far East and Siberia, so that they remain Russian fifty years from now? Russia has officially proclaimed 2007 as the Year of China: this should help concentrate the mind.

■ Can reaching out to India, another emerging Asian giant, give Moscow a major and totally unproblematic ally? In that case, how does Russia plan to engage with the principal movers and shakers of today’s India, its entrepreneurial class? Or are Russian leaders prepared to live with the fiction of a strategic partnership that is paper-thin, even if that paper has all the appropriate signatures?

■ Finally, Russia should consider the United States. Ironically, vehement Russian criticism of U.S. policies comes at a time when key Bush administration policies are being quietly revised. Is U.S.-driven democracy promotion, now clearly petering out, truly a bigger threat

to world peace than WMD proliferation and terrorism? Are enemies, instigated and led by Washington, really closing in on Russia, ready to link up with enemies within? Are these same ill-wishers seeking to lock Russia in its petro-state niche, even as they publicly and hypocritically voice concern that this is where Russia is moving? Is the Russian leadership seeking something like a new Cold War with the United States, determined to avoid one, or simply content to drift?

### Moscow on the Potomac

The United States may be down as a result of its policy failures and difficulties in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, but not nearly as much as some in Russia wish it to be. Global multipolarity will take some time in coming, and even when it arrives, the United States is likely to remain *primus inter pares*. Unfortunately, much of Russian thinking and rhetoric about the United States today is cen-

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tered on U.S. foreign policy. This obscures the central fact that a strong relationship with the United States is indispensable to Russia’s reaching its prime national objectives of modernization, economic integration, and security. Has Moscow given serious thought to how to get this relationship to work for Russia’s benefit? Without a dramatic change of attitudes in the United States, Gazprom’s dreams of entering the U.S. energy market will have no chance, no matter how much it spends on public relations firms.

The Kremlin needs to revert to its early 2000 maxim: don’t mess with the United States. The relationship is too important for pranks and posturing. Moscow needs to drastically improve its communication with



Washington. Putin's speech in Munich testifies to the lack of dialogue. To establish it, Moscow will have to rely on people who are serious, not just street-smart. It will have to reach out to Congress, not just the administration. It will need to learn to engage with Americans, not just sit and watch them as if from some bunker. The embassy in Washington should not be a mere listening post, but a hub for contacts and public relations in the

seem to know it. They are remarkably adaptable and highly successful abroad, and nowhere more so than in the United States. It is time the regime started to learn from its citizens.

As to U.S. foreign policy, it will take care of itself. The country has a great capacity for self-correction. The United States is not the world's main security problem. In a world "free" from the United States, Osama bin Laden would still be roaming somewhere, fighting "Jews and crusaders." Someone would still have to do something about nukes in bad hands, which would be threatening other countries, either for ransom or just out of spite for past wrongs. Afghanistan would loom larger on the Russian General Staff's radar. Other major nations would be free to rise faster, creating perhaps more disruption: historically, multipolar world systems are known for periodic tests of strength.

Yet Russia's foreign policy should not be held to a higher standard than that of other countries. Western approaches toward Moscow are certainly not beyond reproach. There is a danger that, in 2007–2008, due to the overlapping election cycles in both the United States and Russia, the relationship may suffer

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widest sense. In order to be successful at engagement, Russia will need to do unto the United States what it wants the United States to do unto Russia.

Rather than complaining about the rules of the game and ever-biased umpires, Russia will achieve more if it learns to adapt and succeed by the rules that exist, and thus earn the right and the capacity to participate in making future rules. At the individual level, Russians

### BOX 2

#### The Trouble with Iran

- For the Iranian nuclear issue, there is no military solution.
- For any diplomatic solution to succeed, Russia is indispensable.
- Russia's fundamental interest in keeping Iran away from nuclear weapons coincides with that of the United States, the EU, and Israel.
- If Washington decides to engage Tehran as it has engaged Pyongyang, Moscow will be the key partner, and must be treated as such.
- As the Russian civilian nuclear agency seeks to transform itself into a corporation with a global reach, Moscow has less of an incentive to cooperate with pariah states and every interest to seek entry into the global market, controlled by the United States and France.
- Therein lies the basis for U.S.-Russian potential collaboration, which could ensure that Iran agrees to forgo the nuclear weapons option, and Russia becomes even deeper integrated into the rules-based global economy.
- In 2007, a window of opportunity is presented to move ahead toward those goals.

still more. The current atmosphere is toxic. However, there is a chance coupled with a challenge. Russia and the United States are negotiating an agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation which, if concluded, could mean better business opportunities for both countries and enhanced security for the world. Also, since the United States agreed in November 2006 to let Russia join the WTO, the issue of granting Russia permanent normal trading relationship (PNTR) status must be addressed on Capitol Hill. This coming debate will probably not be confined to the merits of Russia's trade policies, but cover the entire ground of Russian domestic and international behavior.

Here are a few thoughts ahead of this discussion.

Russia is not in decline. It is experiencing the growing pains of reinventing itself. Today's Russia is not the Soviet Union II: consider the effect of private property, capital, open borders, and the utter absence of an ideology. It is not the eternal evil empire. Its current story is capitalism rather than democracy, but capitalism eventually leads to democracy via the institution of the rule of law and the rise of the middle class.

In dealing with Russia, interests are key. There is much common ground on such issues as Iran, North Korea, WMD and missile proliferation, and the global nuclear balance: nuclear multipolarity *has* arrived. The need to fight terrorism will stay after Bush and Putin go. Stability in Afghanistan is a common concern. On energy, for all their emphasis on energy sovereignty—which echoes energy independence calls in the United States and energy diversification in Europe—Russians realize that they need Western technology, and, above all, Western markets. Agreeing on the exact parameters of interdependence will not be easy, but the dialogue needs to restart.

Where the interests are opposed, damage control is in order. The new states of Eurasia will ultimately choose their own political orientation. However, an outbreak of hostilities in the zones of conflict in Georgia or serious instability in Ukraine must be prevented.

### Using the Right Roadmap

Getting the Russia policy right requires a change in focus. Washington would achieve much more if it thought first about what is good for the United States internationally, rather than about what is good for Russia internally. Eventually, Russia will take care of itself, but Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, and the broader issue of stability and security in the Middle East demand cooperation with Moscow.

For its part, the Russian leadership needs to make several strategic choices that would clarify Russia's foreign policy goals. Focusing on

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complaints wins no respect for a big country. Focusing on threats leaves one friendless. Russia needs to establish a positive international agenda of its own, one that is more than a set of slogans, and one it means to implement. In a dynamic world, Moscow can ill afford to be adrift. It's time to check one's bearings. ■

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**Bush and Putin Have a Lot of Work to Do**, Dmitri Trenin and Mark Medish (*International Herald Tribune*, November 17, 2006).

**Russia Leaves the West**, Dmitri Trenin (*Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006).

**Reading Russia Right**, Dmitri Trenin (Policy Brief No. 42: Special Edition, October 2005).