

The Return of Russia under Putin

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Among the central topics that have lately received widespread coverage in the American press is the improving international status of Russia, and within this new reality, the role of its president, Vladimir Putin. More than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, an attempt once again is underway to emphasize the importance and influence of Russia on the international scene. Today Russia is pursuing policies and taking actions that it abandoned over the last sixteen years. The post-Soviet economic regression has ended, and Russia is boosted by the fantastic wealth of its vast and varied energy sources and the high prices they currently command. This wealth has enabled Putin to adopt a contrary and belligerent policy vis-à-vis the United States and the West, his objective being to restore Russia's former glory and consolidate Russian's status once again as a power to be reckoned with.

Back to the Cold War?

Putin has orchestrated moves to return Russia to center stage by creating a new global reality. On August 17, 2007, Putin announced that Russian bombers were again on patrol around the world after these flights were suspended in 1991 when the Soviet empire collapsed. He added that the planes were on "battle alert." On September 4, Putin announced that twelve of its bombers would be training to fire cruise missiles at the Arctic Circle. One day later, two Tupolev TU-95 bombers neared Canadian territory close to Inuvik, on the Beaufort Sea. The Canadian air force responded by immediately sending two CT-18 fighter jets to intercept them and succeeded in fending them off. This was the

first time in over ten years that Russian fighter planes have come close to sovereign Canadian territory. Lieutenant General Angus Watt, commander of the Canadian air force, responded by saying, "This is an old challenge that has reemerged." In recent months, similar reports have come out of England, Norway, and Guam, and as in the Cold War days, Russian fighter jets are flying up and down the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States. Indeed, the Pentagon too has announced that Russian bombers and ships are again patrolling the shores of the US, as they did at the height of the Cold War.

Over the last year, the Russian leader, who enjoys widespread support at home despite – or perhaps because of – his sidestepping

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of principles of democracy, has confronted Western policies, and in particular those of the United States, claiming that in the 1990s the US disregarded and discounted Russias interests, and took advantage of its economic weakness in order to humiliate it. Putin in particular was angered by the United States' desire to build anti-missile defense bases and early warning systems along Russia's borders in former Warsaw Pact countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland. He has called US policy "unilateral," and with vagueness that is understood very well by the Russian public, has compared current American policy to the policy of Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II. Putin compared the US desire to station missiles in Eastern Europe to the June 1941 German attack on the Soviet Union, despite the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Lately, Russia has ignored agreements it has with the West and with NATO, and has tried to secure its sovereignty over vast, oil-rich areas at the North Pole. In confrontational fashion, Russia sent submarines to the North Pole and hoisted the Russian flag there. The United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway ignored Russia's action, viewing it as nothing more than a symbolic act, in effect meaningless, and the crisis passed. However, this has not stopped the Russians from insisting from time to time on their sovereignty over the area. The West has decided to respond with thunderous silence or to look at the whole affair as a fairly unsuccessful stunt. Putin has also accused England of foolishness because of its investigation of the "nuclear murder" of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London.

Russia's neighbors too, former members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, have felt the Russian pressure and renewed aggression. For a short period of time, Rus-

sia suspended the supply of natural gas to Ukraine, and limited the import of wine and water from Georgia and fired unarmed missiles into its territory – a clear message to a country that is particularly friendly with the US. Moreover, in the first so-called cyber-war in history, Russia paralyzed the computer system of the Estonian government. In 2004, Putin even succeeded in changing the geopolitical map via agreements of understanding with China, and thus brought to an end many decades of distrust and suspicion between Russia and China. Putin has expanded and intensified economic cooperation with China, and has even solved the problem of border conflicts via a series of agreements. In September 2007, Russia, China, and four former Soviet Republics in Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgistan – converted the Shanghai accords into a vehicle for cooperation, in a new Eastern version of the Warsaw Pact, with joint military maneuvers in the Ural Mountains.

Putin: Russia's National Trumpet

Since assuming the presidency, Putin has made it his aim to restore Russia to its former status as a power with global influence and to rival the international weight of the United States, the European Union, and China. In order to attain this goal, he has consolidated his rule at home, and embarked on a policy whose goal is the expansion of Russian influence throughout the world. Indeed, Russia has begun to emphasize its influence and renewed importance in many arenas. It has threatened to use its veto right in the UN to obstruct Kosovo independence; interfered with and prevented the use of sanctions against Iran; sold new sophisticated weapons systems to Syria; sowed disinformation; and stirred up tensions in the Middle East. Last

summer the Russians relayed false information regarding Israel's strengthening its forces on the Golan Heights, touching off a chain reaction that resulted in growing tensions in the Middle East. Another key goal has been to stop the encroachment on Russia's security along its borders, particularly in its traditional regions of control and influence in Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltic Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia – all areas that border Russia. Many of Putin's foreign policy moves have been intended to elevate his power at home and to send strong signals to the West, but do not necessarily herald future military action.

In order for Russia to be able to return to its former status as a superpower, a mission that is unattainable in the short term, Russia must renew its nuclear stores, rehabilitate its military might, prepare for the challenges of terrorism at home and in the immediate surroundings, and also serve as deterring element, both far away and closer to home. Significantly, the West too needs a strong Russia to maintain stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The West is now learning the meaning of maintaining order in Afghanistan, and there is no doubt that it desires to avoid a similar mission in Georgia.

Putin's foreign policy emphasizes maintaining might and unity, factors intended to combat Russia's sense of insecurity resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing economic, social, and political crises. The economic collapse of the 1990s, the growth of internal terrorism in Russia, and the collapse of political and social systems in the face of aggressive and uncompromising Western policies towards Russia all served to undermine the belief of the Russian citizen in the country. Putin would have Russia become an independent player in the world

by strengthening it at home and increasing its ability to influence events throughout the world.

Renewed Armament

The arena where the new policy is most apparent is the military budget. Putin has undertaken to rebuild Russia's military might, which, destroyed by corruption and inefficiency, reached a nadir. For over a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, soldiers were not paid their salaries for many months; morale in the armed forces was at a low; equipment was old and malfunctioning because of improper maintenance and a severe shortage of spare parts; the fleets rusted in the ports; the air force did not have enough fuel to undertake training exercises and was reduced to half its size; and the air force did not receive funds for new aircraft. All this has changed. In 2007 Putin announced a seven-year armaments program at a cost of \$200 billion for equipping the army with new missiles, planes, aircraft carriers, and submarines. Since 2001, the military budget has increased fourfold, and Putin intends to double Russia's aircraft manufacturing by 2025.

According to *Jane's*, Russia's shopping cart now includes two nuclear submarines with ballistic nuclear missile launch capabilities, S-400 anti-aircraft missiles, estimated by experts as more effective than the Patriot at missile interception, and a new generation of TU-160 strategic bombers that will be able to launch cruise missiles. In addition, there are plans to build SU-34 attack bombers, capable of attacking well-defended targets in any weather, and a fifth-generation of T-50 fighter jets that are to constitute the backbones of

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the Russian light fighter plane fleet. The Russian navy requires six new aircraft carriers powered by nuclear fuel and eight nuclear submarines carrying ballistic missiles.

On September 11, 2007, Russian spokespeople boasted that they now had “the mother of all bombs,” after the successful trial of the Vacuum bomb, which has the explosive capacity of nuclear weapons without the radioactive fallout. In early 2007, sources in the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that they were starting to manufacture the S-24 intercontinental missile, capable of overcoming any current defense system. In August 2007, Admiral Vladimir Masorin, commander of the Russian navy, announced that Russia intends to maintain an ongoing presence in the Mediterranean, and specified that Russia is prepared to renew its two naval bases in Syria, at Tartus and at Latakia.

The Economic Transformation and its Political-Strategic Effects

When Putin became prime minister in August 1999, Russia was in the midst of a severe crisis. The 1990s were the oligarchs’ decade in Russia: years of shortages, crime, weakness,

and humiliation. Those close to the ruling power made underhanded, opportunistic grabs in the economy, especially in the natural resources sector. Power lay in the hands of various

corrupt elements and criminals. Neo-fascist groups reared their heads, and millions of Russians stood helplessly by when their savings and social securities dissolved “in the name of reform.” Hard currency reserves dropped to \$8 billion, and the debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) soared to \$17 billion. Russia was, in effect, bankrupt, and by 1998, Russia was unable to repay its

debts, which amounted to many billions of dollars

One decade years later, Russia is witnessing one of the most dramatic reversals of direction in economic history. Its hard currency reserves have grown and stood last year at some \$406 billion as a result of the sharp rise in the prices and demand for natural gas and oil. Russia added \$120 billion to the Oil Stability Fund (OSF). Russia’s lack of dependence on the IMF was expressed by Putin describing the institution as “archaic, undemocratic and inefficient,” and he proposed – contrary to the position of the United States and Great Britain – that Josef Tosovsky, former Czech Prime Minister, head the IMF. (The position – with American support – went to the Frenchman Dominique Strauss-Kahn.) Putin has succeeded in bringing the standard of living of some Russians close to that of Western Europe.

Ten years ago, the discourse about the global village did not include Russia, whereas today a central topic on the agenda is the awakening Russia. In 2006, the total GNP of Russia grew by 67 percent more than the average of the G-8 countries. This was the seventh consecutive year of growth. The average income has grown by 10 percent in every year of Putin’s presidency. The annual growth percentage is 7 percent, and, for the first time, markets are overflowing with consumer goods. In addition, a new layer of the middle class has emerged under Putin, one that gives him almost complete support, and there is a feeling that a better future is on its way. The Russian economy has revived, and Putin – encouraged by the coffers generated by the international energy market – is instituting an aggressive, assertive foreign policy in order to wipe out the humiliations of the former generation of Russians.

Among Putin’s most noteworthy achievements is his success in restoring hope and national pride.

Russia has the biggest reserves of natural gas in the world. It is the second largest exporter of oil, after Saudi Arabia, and there are those who estimate that Russia's oil reserves are the biggest in the world. Exports of oil and natural gas now represent about 60 percent of Russia's total exports. The dizzying climb of energy prices has allowed Putin to pay off all of Russia's international debts, and to build up the third largest cash reserve in the world. He has established a fund of \$80 billion to stabilize the Russian economy. Unlike the Cold War years, when the Soviet Union built its immense military power at the expense of its citizens' economic and social welfare, Russia can now afford to build its military strength and invest in its economy. Indeed, the attempt to maintain an equal military balance with the United States was one of the chief reasons for the Soviet Union's collapse, because then it did not have the resources to keep up the race it had run from 1945 to 1990. To maintain military parity with the US, it exhausted all of its financial resources. Today, renewed investment in military strength has made Russia an influential factor on the international scene, allowing it to respond to real and imagined threats against its security and national interests. Putin's foreign policy is designed to take advantage of the United States' weaknesses, entanglements, and problems and to restore national pride to the Russian people, which in turn strengthens his support at home.

When Putin took the reins of leadership in 1999, he was a candidate about whom very little was known: a former secret serviceman, who served as prime minister and as mayor of St. Petersburg without leaving much of an imprint, and who came to take the place of the faltering Boris Yeltsin. According to Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment

for International Peace, the Russian elites felt humiliated, rejected, and ridiculed for over a decade. Overall, Russia was in a state of atrophy; corruption and crime ruled the day; the military was crumbling; and the Russian people – whose suffering was great – felt degraded and deceived. And thus among Putin's most noteworthy achievements is his success in restoring hope and national pride. In many speeches he has seemed almost an uncompromising gangster sticking to his goals no matter what. He promised to rout the terrorists from Chechnya and wipe them off the face of the earth. He attacked the oligarchs who were raking in fortunes, amassing companies, and stripping the natural wealth of the country they had bought with pennies. (Naturally he helped the oligarchs who supported him financially.) He worked hard to restore to the state and to himself supervision and practical control of the nation's mines. In this manner Putin has led Russia out of anarchy and a lack of hope, to optimism, progress, and even a measure of esteem. Without a doubt, this is a tremendous achievement in so short a period, and it is this recovery that has granted Putin the opportunity to exert much more influence over the international arena.

In his 2005 state of the nation speech, Putin determined that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century. This assertion caused a lot of consternation in the West, but was received with sympathy and agreement in Russia, where many were decidedly ready to turn a blind eye to the authoritarian element of their leader because of his ability to restore a measure of law, order, and security to their lives. In exchange, most Russians ig-

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nore Putin's disregard for the values of democracy he is sworn to, both constitutionally and by declaration. Opposition parties are weak, and their opposition to Putin's calling off the regional elections aroused minimal protest. In September 2007, the unknown Victor Zubkov, Putin's candidate for prime minister, was approved by a 381 to 47 vote after only two days of discussions in the parliament. There was also no opposition when Putin returned thousands of former security service veterans to government service, and they strongly support their savior with blind, overwhelming fervor.

Problems of the Awakening Giant

As Putin strives to restore Russia to its status as a superpower after years of rot and disintegration, he has focused on building military and strategic infrastructures. On the international scene he has used Cold War tactics, and is prepared to come to near-confrontations in pursuing his objectives.

The reversals of the post-Gorbachev era took a very heavy toll on the Russian people. The essential changes of the 1990s included a reduction in life expectancy because of a sharp drop in the level and scope of health services, a state of affairs not unlike the great hunger and starvation of the 1930s and the indescribable suffering of the World War II era. The 1990s of Russia are described as "hell," and it is easy to understand the support Putin enjoys because of the collective memory of the depredations of the recent past. Those in the West who claim that Russia is marching towards a new hell do not understand that Putin's Russia, even with the great and cruel price exacted for improvements that are currently underway, has changed direction under his leadership, and is moving farther away from the shortages of the 1990s.

Today, Russia is certainly not as threatening as was the USSR at its peak of power, and militarily, technologically, and demographically it is not equal to the "Evil Empire" at its height. Russia in many ways can no longer claim to be an empire. It paid an enormous price and suffered tremendous losses of resources and manpower when the republics that were a part of the USSR broke off and became independent states. Vast regions that in the past were inseparable parts of the Soviet Union became NATO and EU members, and a similar picture of dismantlement exists in Asiatic Russia.

His successes notwithstanding, Putin still faces many uphill battles. One fundamental problem is the demographic challenge. The population of Russia has shrunk to such an extent that towards the middle of this century Russia will not have the human resources needed to effectively control the vast regions under its flag. Today, there are 141 million residents. Since 1993, 840,000 more people have died every year than were added to the population. At this rate, in 2031, Russia's population will be 131 million, and the number of Russians in 2050 will stand at 110 million. Russia is now in its second generation of demographic retreat at a rate that has no parallel in Western Europe. The results of this process are liable to be severe. The military's reserve resources reached their peak four years ago, and they will continue to decrease at least until the middle of the next decade. The number of women reaching the age of fertility is also declining, and thus the next generation of Russians will be smaller than the present one, and the generation after that will be even smaller. Life expectancy in Russia remains similar to that of the early 1950s under Stalin's rule. Mortality of 25 to 55 year olds is much higher than that of other indus-

trialized nations, and mortality of 24 to 34 year olds in Russia is five times higher than in Canada or the United States. The British medical journal *The Lancet* reported that half of the deaths of people 18 to 65 years old in Russia are alcohol-related. Russia is also enduring the worst AIDS epidemic in Europe, and is rife with other infectious diseases, particularly tuberculosis.

Despite the economic boom of the last few years, the GNP is only 85 percent of what it was in 1984 in the USSR. The per capita GNP in Poland and Venezuela is higher. Moreover, according to the Human Development Index (HDI) that compares life expectancy, educational level, and standard of living of the countries around the world, Russia lags behind Cuba and the USSR. Like the Red Army in the USSR during the Cold War, energy sources and those who control them today represent the strongest and most influential pressure group in contemporary Russia. Today, Russia is capable of balancing any energy crisis that is liable to occur. In oil, ore, and weapons, Russia has a lot to offer these days, but in technology, investments, infrastructures, and efficiency it lags very far behind in the race with international markets.

Militarily, Russia is still but a shadow of the former Soviet machine. Corruption continues to weaken the armed forces, as do lack of professionalism and efficiency. Military equipment is old and poorly maintained. The problem of soldier salaries has been solved in part, but morale is still low and desertions are common. Despite the massive investments, soldiers suffer from poor conditions and inadequate training. With the breakup of the USSR, Russia lost its Black Sea ports – where most of the Soviet navy ships were built and maintained – to the Ukraine. The Russian navy lost more than half of the ship-



yards and factories that served it until 1990, a serious loss for the Russian fleet. So far, very little has been done to rebuild the industry and communications centers and other infrastructures that were lost to the countries of the former Soviet Union. Overall, many reforms have yet to take place before the military can begin to function at a reasonable level.

These realities cast a shadow over Putin's achievements in other areas, particularly his economic and security achievements. In the meantime, Russia is experiencing the difficult birth pangs of redefinition and rebirth. Russia of today is not an imitation of the Soviet Union. Unlike the past, it can now point at extents of capital and private acquisition unknown in the past and at open borders – and at a complete and total absence of ideology. The current story is the story of the rise of capitalism but not of democracy. There is a possibility that the rise of the middle class will, in the future, generate groups that will demand a rule of law and democracy, but the road to that is a very long one indeed.

A Look Ahead

There is no doubt that Putin, in a relatively short period, has succeeded in returning a crumbling power to the center of the international stage. At the same time, today's Russia, despite the great wealth flowing towards it, has severe economic and social problems that are far from being solved. In the near future, there is no chance that it will return to superpower status and once again be an empire whose might and influence will equal the levels of the Cold War era, which ended with the USSR conceding defeat.

Putin will likely continue to adopt confrontational and antagonistic stances with regard to the United States, Western Europe and its neighbors, former members of the Warsaw Pact, and the countries bordering Europe that were formerly included in USSR. These stances have helped Putin garner massive support at home, because by his policies he has succeeded in restoring pride and a belief in a more brilliant future for many of Russia's citizens. He will also likely continue massive armament and tremendous investment in the armed forces, because anxiety over

Russia's security has constituted a central theme throughout Russian history. Therefore, the process of strengthening the might of the Russian armed forces stands to generate difficult shockwaves among international players.

Putin is far from being a democrat. Above all, he presents himself as a Russian patriot who wants to restore Russia to prosperity and influence. Should there be democratic developments in Russia, they will come only with his blessing and at his direction. Russia has no tradition of democratic regimes

and behavior, and most of the Russian public supports Putin's authoritarian approach. One issue is certainly clear: Putin intends to rule Russia with a high hand, and there is no locus of power that can stop him. After eight years as president, his popularity is at its peak, and this affords him almost unprecedented authority. The secret agent, the spy, the former KGB officer, can do as he pleases without any significant opposition or free press, and with the support of more than 80 percent of the public, his power is similar to that of Stalin at his peak. Thus policy planners on the international scene will find that they are dealing with a Stalin-like leader, perhaps less murderous but with similar authority and influence, who has in mind a Russia that plays a starring role on the international stage.

Russia will almost certainly try to strengthen its influence over the Middle East, a critical area from its perspective in terms of its strategic complex of considerations. It will likely intervene through significant military, financial, and political support of countries like Iran and Syria, and of Palestinian elements not stigmatized as collaborators, i.e., that do not work to lower the tensions in the region. In this way Russia on the one hand will try to interfere with important US and European interests, and on the other hand will attempt to increase weapons sales and thereby exert greater influence over the region. Russians and Americans have a long history of a zero sum strategic game in the Middle East, and there is no change on the horizon in this regard. Therefore, the level of risk and likelihood of conflict in the Middle East is sharply rising and will continue to rise as Russia, a power whose priorities are not advanced by a stable Middle East, joins in the regional game.

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