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Perspectives

Russia: America's new best friend



Some days it seems like Russia is America's new best friend. It's a development I've wanted to write about for some time, but in the aftermath of September 11 other topics seemed more important.

What makes Russia suddenly so agreeable and why is President Putin so eager to demonstrate that his country is no longer a threat, but should in fact join NATO? Some suggest that Vladimir Putin may simply have reflected on Russia's history—the descent of a once great culture into the abyss of Communism. Any objective comparison between the Soviet Union's and the Western democracies' values and accomplishments should sway an intelligent man. And there is every indication that Putin is intelligent.

But that is not the likely reason for Russia's miraculous shift. After all, the roller-coaster which led from Gorbachev's central planning system to Yeltsin's liberalization and brought Russia to the edge of economic oblivion, was hardly a time to philosophize. More likely, Putin's actions represent a blend of crisis management (with all the gambles that come with that) and cool reasoning. The Russian leader correctly recognized that to stabilize Russia he'd have to reverse some of the Yeltsin era's economic and political liberalization. In taking a harder line, President Putin has marginalized the oligarchs who, under Yeltsin, had taken over almost every key economic decision and, in the process, stolen what they could lay their hands on. MIT's Rudiger Dornbusch recently observed that what was said of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations is just as true of the Soviet Union's collapse: more money was made in the short period of its demise than during the entire period of its existence. Putin's purging of the oligarch class is no mean achievement.

The new Moscow

Economic data illustrate how the state has benefited. The specters of hyperinflation and currency collapse have been tamed, and Russia's budget and current account are in surplus. The transition from economic freefall to economic growth has had its imprint on Russian society and politics. It's astonishing how little this has been commented on by the Western media.

To those visiting Moscow five years ago, when inflation destroyed people's savings and forced them to go begging for food, today's Moscow is unrecognizable. The mood is upbeat. The Communists, whose popularity surged during the Yeltsin years, are on the decline. A broad alliance of right wing parties has taken the lead--rightist, in the Russian context, means reformist, democratic, pro market.

Still, daunting challenges remain. From a political viewpoint, Russia's dilemma is that it has two key choices: to accept that its economy is essentially that of a large third world power (about the same as Brazil in scope) or to aspire to its former might. So far, President Putin seems to have recognized the realities of each. To return to a politically expansionist agenda would mean that Russia would rely almost completely on its military complex, which is equivalent to returning to the dark ages. Neighboring Ukraine and Belarus beckon as first logical targets of expansion. Russia wouldn't even have to invade; both states have made enthusiastic overtures suggesting a merger. To Vladimir Putin's credit, he has resisted. Any move in this direction would quickly reverse Russia's economic progress.

Resource wealth an advantage

The other alternative, to gradually abandon the role of a superpower, has, to a logical mind, far greater appeal. Putin has seen how China, another nation overly reliant on military production, has successfully transformed itself into a diversified manufacturer and is now a member of the World Trade Organization. There is little doubt that Russia, with its pool of labor, an educated middle class and a record of scientific accomplishment, can do the same. Equally important, Russia has a highly developed base of resource assets, which can serve as a springboard to its next economic stage.

As a matter of fact, it already has. The recent energy crisis has put substantial wealth into Russia's hands and this may well be what Putin has in mind when he uses the current political turmoil to spin Russia's membership in NATO or, at least, to be a good friend to America and Europe.

Signals that Putin is working overtime on a *rapprochement* with the West abound. Putin went out of his way to develop a personal bond with the newly elected President Bush (Bush at the time said "I trust Putin...I can see into his soul", which annoyed several European politicians, who missed the opportunity at hand). When the September 11 calamity occurred, Putin was the first leader to call George W. Bush with his condolences. He also ordered Russia's armed forces not to go on alert, as would have been the prescribed response to a US military emergency. In October, at a NATO meeting, he readily abandoned Moscow's doctrine to oppose any eastward NATO expansion. Other friendly gestures by Putin include the close-down of Russia's surveillance posts in Cuba, its remaining deep-water naval base in South East Asia and, most notably, the loan of tanks and military equipment to the Northern Alliance—the very army that fought the Soviet Union to a standstill a decade ago!

Skeptics abound

As always when a new wind blows, there are many skeptics. A number of commentators have suggested that all of Putin's advances are the hallmark of an opportunist and, besides, are completely in Russia's own interest. Fair enough. I suppose that closing Russian bases makes good financial sense and backing the Northern Alliance was backing what everyone knew was a winner. Moreover, the recent terrorist attacks were perpetrated by what has long been Russia's most feared foe: the restless Muslim populations of Central and South Asia.

On the other hand, who cares? Political arrangements are always to the advantage of those who attempt them. What's important is that, in this case, the arrangement is as useful to the United States as it is to Russia. The US, once again, is staring into the face of a Middle East that is bothersome in the extreme. The West's enemies threaten to derail energy supplies, while would-be allies, like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, are seen by increasingly many as unreliable, if not dishonest. Yet this time, there is an alternative: Russia, with virtually unlimited resource wealth, wants to fill the void.

Predictably, Vladimir Putin has chosen the US over Europe as his ideal partner. The advantages to Russia are many. America forges global policy, while Europe follows it. America is decisive and bold, while Europe's ability to make decisions is impaired by the complexity of its structure and tempered by a culture of wavering.

What's now needed is that the US sends clear signals. The friendship between Bush and Putin will help. In opening itself to Moscow, Washington needs to be careful, but the immediate risks are minimal when compared to the opportunities. There is no reason why, as an immediate step, the US cannot help Russia achieve stable economic growth while reducing its energy dependence on the Middle East. Medium term objectives should include the fight against terrorism, continued reduction in nuclear arsenals, while a Russian entry into NATO is probably a long-term objective. Putin seems to understand this. The recent energy crunch and the heightened instability of the Middle East region are his big chance. Once the US considers Russia a partner, other things will follow. □

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