

Video-Blog Diplomacy Could Trap Medvedev

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President Dmitry Medvedev has introduced an innovative way to conduct foreign policy — video-blog diplomacy.

On Oct. 3, Medvedev recorded a video message to the Russian and Belarussian people. He made clear that the Kremlin no longer views Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko as Russia's strategic partner. Medvedev basically called for a regime change in Minsk.

Sending powerful video-blog messages to neighboring states and their leaders has become a drill for Medvedev. In August 2009, a few months before the presidential election in Ukraine, Medvedev bluntly called for a freeze in relations between Russia and Ukraine until Ukrainian voters replaced their "anti-Russian president," Viktor Yushchenko. They did, and Russian-Ukrainian relations are back to normal.

This strategy has the advantage of publicly identifying laudable foreign policy objectives. It

provides a direct channel of communication with broad audiences in the target states and Russia. In his video-blog messages, Medvedev is presenting the Kremlin's foreign policy as grounded more in moral imperatives and less in realpolitik. He is rallying international and domestic support behind his positions— and thus campaigning for leadership at home and abroad, boosting his self-esteem.

But there is a downside to the video-blog diplomacy. It could turn out to be a high-stakes bet, front-loaded with risks of failure, especially when taping a video blog predates strategy development.

Once you publicly unveil the desirable policy outcomes, you deny yourself the advantage of a strategic surprise. You are locked into a strategy that is basically being developed on the go. You no longer have the luxury of making a timely U-turn. Your policy options are further constrained by the public appeal to moral values, all but precluding a face-saving deal to avoid failure.

Medvedev's call for a regime change in Kiev was successful largely because the Ukrainian political winds had already been blowing in Moscow's favor. Yushchenko had such low ratings that his defeat was all but a given.

This is hardly the case in Belarus, where the "last dictator of Europe" stands a good chance of being re-elected without resorting to electoral fraud. The Kremlin would then be forced to deal with Lukashenko.

Lukashenko will surely challenge Medvedev's video-blog diplomacy. Let's hope that Medvedev has a strategy to deal with the aftermath.

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