

Putin Pivots Away From U.S. and Toward the East

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The U.S. should seriously consider how to build a new relationship with Russia. After the episode with former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden and the postponement of the bilateral summit, Washington should take a sober look at the facts. Was the Snowden episode unique and did it change the overall logic of recent U.S.-Russian relations? Has the "reset" succeeded in ridding those relations of Cold War-era stereotypes and approaches?

The answer to both questions is an unequivocal "No."

If Washington wants to gain a clear understanding of what is happening, it needs to set aside the idealism inherent in U.S. President Barack Obama's approach to international relations. The time has come to view Moscow's behavior in terms of realpolitik. After all, that is what motivates President Vladimir Putin in his own approach to international relations.

Putin has already sent several simple and clear messages to Washington and to Obama personally in recent years. His goal has been to show the new reality in international relations — namely, that the world has become multipolar.

The most important message is that Russia will not miss any opportunity to participate in building the new world order amid the reduction in U.S. global dominance and the rise of China. Under such circumstances, Russia has no interest in trying to "save" the declining West by offering the type of strategic partnership Dmitry Medvedev proposed when he was president. Russia will build its own, independent center of power — a Eurasian Union based on a strategic partnership with key former Soviet republics. This perhaps is Putin's own "pivot" away from the West and toward the East.

In practice, Putin's worldview explains why Russia is so uncompromising on a number of issues of critical importance to the West. After the events of the Arab Spring and the intervention in Libya, the Kremlin realized its mistake and will no longer permit the countries of the West — and in particular the U.S. — to orchestrate regime change. Putin is convinced that the actions of the U.S. only destabilize the overall security situation in the world. Russia's task is to act as a counterbalance by denying Washington the type of *carte blanche* to pursue all of the initiatives that former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush enjoyed.

At the same time, however, Washington should not conclude that Moscow's policy is directed exclusively against the U.S. Putin sees the emerging reality in international relations as a "new balance of power." It is very similar to the world order that existed prior to World War II.

The second message is that Russia will no longer tolerate Washington's policy of promoting "universal human rights." If Washington wants a positive dialogue with Moscow, it would do well to exclude the question of protecting "minority rights." With the help of legislation passed by the State Duma, Putin has built an almost impenetrable wall preventing the West from meddling on the issue of human rights in Russia. What's more, Putin is prepared to shut down or evict any organizations or foundations that attempt to circumvent that prohibition — even those that have been operating in Russia for the past 20 years. Putin is confident he can pursue such initiatives because he believes he has the support of the majority of Russians, and this emboldens him to go one step further each time.

Any attempt to influence Russia's domestic agenda will be nipped in the bud. An illustrative example is the Magnitsky Act, a U.S. initiative designed to address corruption in Russia. It was met swiftly with the "Dima Yakovleva law" banning U.S. adoptions of Russian children, an attempt to show that any attack by the West will be repulsed with double the force.

The third message that Washington needs to accept is that Russia has warm relations with China. In fact, the very scenario about which U.S. military planners had warned is now becoming a reality. Moscow and Beijing are developing and continuously expanding both economic and military cooperation. The two countries are currently conducting Peace Mission 2013 in the Southern Urals, the longest-running joint military exercises in the history of Russian-Chinese relations. Only one month earlier, the two countries conducted joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan code named Sea Cooperation 2013. The maneuvers were clearly a response to similar joint military exercises held by the U.S. and Japan.

Putin does not see any reason why Russia should seek a compromise with the U.S., all the more since the Kremlin has always equated compromise with weakness. It would only make sense if it produced some strategic benefit, but unfortunately, there are no such payoffs that might be of interest to Putin.

Above all, Putin wants the U.S. to recognize Russia's "Monroe Doctrine" with respect to Moscow's strategic sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Yet Washington resists this notion because of its own geopolitical interests in the region.

Washington should abandon its double standards with respect to Russia and initiate a new concept for the global balance of power that takes Russia's interests into account. Only in that way can the U.S. engage Putin in joint projects and prevent a total Russian pivot toward the East.

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