

On the Cheap and for the Elite: Great Power as the New Legitimacy

Putin's third term has been almost entirely consumed by a foreign agenda with only residual attention to domestic issues

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For Putin and a small group of Russia's elites this new Russian foreign policy — ideologically anti-Western, geopolitically assertive, unpredictable, impulsive, pugnacious, and sublimely cynical — has been a smashing success. It has reconstituted the perception of Russia as an indispensable great power with global reach, demanding a vital say in every international issue of importance, and capable of defending such claims through some effective, but limited use of force. It has reenacted the 1970s bipolar rivalry between Moscow in Washington in Europe and the Middle East, boosting the Kremlin's prestige at home and abroad.

More importantly, it has redrawn the concept of political legitimacy for Russian rulers. Now foreign policy success and the pursuit of Russia's international greatness are the satisfying sources of legitimacy — much more than higher incomes, better health care and better education for the people. European democracy is no longer Russia's alternative path of development, eliminating an internal political threat to the regime.

Tight media controls ensure that the Russian public mostly consumes the Kremlin's narrative of its foreign policy successes. This ensures a strong level of public support for Moscow's international exploits (87% according to the latest Pew Research poll), but creates a political trap of having to demonstrate continuous foreign policy victories while making any foreign policy debacle (not a low eventuality) a critical vulnerability in the regime's domestic position.

There is an organizing principle to Russia's new foreign policy — to constrain and diminish US power and its global leadership within the rules-based international order. It permeates its every gambit and position on any issue. Moscow now views the US not only as a threat to its international influence, but also as a menace to the regime's domestic stability. This creates an artificially manufactured threat environment which facilitates an internal consolidation for Russia's ruling elites.

Yet Moscow needs the US as a subdued and cooperative partner on certain international issues. It needs to bolster the perception of Russia's status as a US co-equal — despite the glaring deficiency in Russia's economic stature (Russia's GDP in nominal terms is about half that of California's.) To compensate for this weakness, and punch above its real geopolitical weight, Moscow resorts to risky gambits with a limited use of force to create or exacerbate crisis situations that make it impossible for the US to ignore.

The problem with this strategy is that the list of “crisis situations” with minimal risk of a direct US-Russia military clash is nearing exhaustion in Syria, and possibly Libya too. Other options entail significant escalation risks. There are also calls by some hot heads within the Russian foreign policy community to “bring the geopolitical fight” closer to America's shores by meddling in Venezuela, Nicaragua and even Mexico. While this may be a bridge too far even for the Kremlin's tastes, the internal debate on whether Russia should act more assertively in the Western Balkans to prevent Serbia and Macedonia's entry into NATO is far from settled — despite the glaring failure of such efforts in Montenegro.

The artificial threat environment that Moscow has resulted in a military posture in Europe that is now more unfavorable to Russia than at any point since 1991. By September 2013, the last US main battle tanks had left Europe, but by May 2017 they were re-deployed to Poland and the Baltic states. Moscow is now forced to spend its limited resources to counter military threats that would not have existed without the initial Russian moves to counter the largely imagined challenges.

Russia's daring gambits in Ukraine and Syria have attracted the world's attention and forced the US to directly engage with Moscow. But they are yet to produce clear wins for Russia and the risks of getting stuck in an open-ended stalemate are rising. Does Russia really need those military bases in Syria, whose sole purpose would be to defend Assad? Is getting stuck in Donbass without discernable strategic goals, from the very beginning of the effort, really

a victory for Russia?

The growing gap between Russia's inflated foreign policy ambitions and its broad economic and technological vulnerabilities is finally forcing a rethink within the Russian foreign policy community. Two recent reports by leading establishment think tanks have called for a policy of restraint and consolidation to replace assertiveness and unpredictability. They also call for internal modernization, including in the political sphere.

Opinion polls show Russians heavily favoring foreign policy restraint and a significant pullback from the world. According to the Pew survey, 65% favor Russia focusing on its own affairs, while only 30 % support Russia involving itself in affairs of other countries. 34% want Russia to wind down its presence in Syria and only 11% want to increase it.

If anything, Russian voters want to enjoy Russia's great power status on the cheap. But they do not have a means to effect a change in Russia's foreign policy in accordance with their real priorities. The policy was never designed to serve their interests, but instead the interests of the elites that seek to perpetuate their grip on power.

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