



Personality and Power in Russian Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the U.S.-Russia relationship has been completely transformed. The U.S. 2017 National Security Strategy highlights great power competition with “the revisionist powers of China and Russia” as one of the most important challenges for the United States.[1] This emphasis on great power rivalry with Russia stands in stark contrast to the 2002 National Security Strategy adopted fifteen years earlier, which prioritized the global war on terror. Back then, Russia was described as being in a “hopeful transition” and a “partner” with which the U.S. was “building a new strategic relationship.”[2]

By 2020, hope and the prospects of building a new partnership have been replaced with disappointment, mutual distrust, and rivalry. How did this happen? Traditional international relations approaches would emphasize growing Russian power and geostrategic competition, and potentially U.S. overreach, as the major drivers of this development. Scholarly approaches to foreign policy often downplay individual factors, such as the personality of individual leaders, assuming that rulers are constrained by seemingly more fundamental factors such as the global distribution of power or established political institutions in their own country.

Those factors are clearly important. Yet, particularly in a personalistic regime like contemporary Russia, we have to pay attention to, well, personality. Both Russian domestic politics and its foreign policy have been dramatically transformed by the choices made by Vladimir Putin, who has ruled the country for two decades—and with the constitutional referendum of July 1, 2020, has laid the foundation to rule for another sixteen years, and possibly for life.[3] Understanding the worldview and mentality of Putin and his close associates—what I have called The Code of Putinism[4]—is essential to accurately evaluating Russian foreign policy and crafting the U.S. response.

The Rise of Aggressive Foreign Policy under Putin

Over the last dozen years, Russian foreign policy has become bolder and more directly challenged U.S. interests. Most significantly, the military takeover of Crimea in 2014 represented the first forcible annexation by a European state of part of its neighbors’ territory since the end of World War II. Equally audacious was the direct and multi-pronged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, designed both to promote discord in American politics and to weaken the campaign of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Other noteworthy steps include the apparent violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty; support for far-right and far-left European political parties; the intervention in Syria to prop up the murderous regime of Bashar Hafez al-Assad; and the use of a nerve agent on British soil in an attempt to assassinate a former Russian spy.

It is worth placing the “resurgence” of Russian power in historical context. Forty years ago, the Soviet economy represented 8.5% of the world economy, and the Soviet population in 1980 was about 6% of world population.[5] Today, the Russian economy is less than 2% of the world economy, and the country now represents less than 2% of world population. From the third most populous country and the second largest economy during Soviet times, the Russian Federation is now ninth and eleventh, respectively. Little wonder that Putin referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major *geopolitical* catastrophe of the twentieth century” (emphasis added: BDT).[6]

Given its small economy and population compared to China—Russia is about nine to ten times smaller along both indicators—it is striking that the U.S. National Security Strategy places Russia on an equal footing as a revisionist power challenging U.S. interests. Yet Russia is still able to generate a lot of military power from its smaller population and hydrocarbon-based economy, and its size and location makes it a key player in multiple world regions.

Moreover, Russia’s growing economic and military power since 2000 clearly contribute to Russian capacity to challenge the United States. But power in itself can be used for multiple purposes, and it was not preordained that Russia would pursue these particular objectives as it became more powerful. Ultimately, understanding Putin’s mentality is essential for understanding the use of Russian power.

What the Boss Thinks

Russia is able to play this outsized role in world politics because its political leadership believes strongly that it must be a leading great power, and is willing to expend a lot of effort to “punch above its weight.” Putin is first and foremost a great power “statist,” believing that Russia must have a strong state both at home and abroad. He maintained in 2003, “All of our historical experience shows that a country like Russia can live and develop in its existing borders only if it is a great power. In all periods when the country was weak – politically or economically – Russia always and inevitably faced the threat of collapse.”[7]

This threat of collapse and feeling of vulnerability looms large in the worldview of Team Putin. One of the iconic stories of Putin’s time as a KGB officer in East Germany concerns the night a hostile crowd surrounded the building in which he worked, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Seeking to get military assistance from Soviet troops based nearby, Putin was told that could only be done with orders from Moscow, but “Moscow was silent.” He later recalled the feeling “that the country no longer existed. . . . [The Soviet Union] had a terminal disease without a cure – a paralysis of power.”[8] This paralysis of power, this loss of control, clashed sharply with Putin’s conviction that Russia must be strong state. His former political advisor Gleb Pavlovskiy observed in 2014 that after coming to power, Putin sought “the resurrection of the great state in which

we had lived, and to which we had become accustomed.” This state, he added, had to be “one that could be respected.”[9]

The emotional feeling that Russia had been disrespected, even humiliated, by Western powers looms large in Putin’s approach to international politics. While campaigning for his first term as president in 2000, he adamantly told a Russian journalist, “Anyone who offends us will not last three days.”[10] Putin’s first meeting with Barack Obama in July 2009 began with an hour-long lecture about U.S. foreign policy mistakes; U.S. officials came to expect what they called “the airing of grievances” at the beginning of every meeting with Putin. As one Russian journalist put it, describing how Putin and his colleagues view relations with the West, “It’s an emotional story of Russia not being treated like a superpower and, for many of them, it’s a personal story.”[11]

Undoubtedly, the United States has made plenty of foreign policy mistakes, including with respect to Russia, in the last several decades. U.S. policy frequently went against perceived Russian interests—including, to name three examples, NATO expansion, the withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and the Iraq War. But Putin and his closest allies in the Russian government often went further in their critiques, accusing the U.S. of fomenting coups in former Soviet countries, backing terrorists inside Russia, promoting protests among the Russian population designed to overthrow Putin’s government, and ultimately trying to undermine and dismember Russia from within. This is the vision Putin spelled out in 2014, when he argued that outside forces won’t leave “our bear” alone, trying “to put him in chains... [and] rip out his teeth and claws.”[12]

Based on this Putinist mentality, Western actors have repeatedly insulted and mistreated their Russian counterparts. While many Western observers consider Russia’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy and activities abroad as evidence that Russia is waging a vigorous assault against liberal, democratic norms and institutions, Moscow perceives the situation very differently. Specifically, rather than seeing themselves on the offensive, Russia’s leaders believe that they are playing defense against the hegemonic aspirations of the West, and the United States in particular. Clashing perceptions are a common feature of international relations, but the large gap in Russian and American views is reminiscent of the Cold War, even if the power differentials are much more pronounced today. This gap in mentality is a major reason for the difficulties in forging strong bilateral ties and crafting a strong U.S. policy on Russia.

Policy Recommendations: Modest Proposals Only

The implications of the Putinist worldview for U.S. foreign policy are discouraging for those hoping to put U.S.-Russian relations on a better footing. Given the limited possibility of a broader partnership, U.S. efforts should focus on more discrete goals in the highest priority areas.

1. First and foremost is the nuclear arms control agenda. There are now mere months left to extend the New START Treaty between the two countries. Without this extension, we will be in a world without numeric constraints or mutual verification between the two nuclear superpowers for the first time in nearly 50 years. Prospects for arms racing and miscalculation would increase.
2. It is also worth considering areas of cooperation that might be mutually advantageous, or could be pursued on a relatively even footing without invoking elements of great power competition. Potential areas include responding to climate change; space exploration; collaboration in the Arctic (if it is careful not to interfere with Russia's military operations there); and combatting terrorism.
3. Greater awareness of the role of personality and Putinist mentality, and how they affect Russian policy toward the U.S., is needed. Ideas about Russia's great power status, and feelings of vulnerability and resentment about mistreatment by the West, make Putin's Russia a prickly power with ambitions that exceed its material capabilities. If Putin and his closest associates from the military and security realm—the so-called *siloviki*—believe that the U.S. is out to get them, then a wider partnership is off the table as long as Vladimir Putin is Russia's president. The United States' traditional commitment to human rights and the spread of democracy, even if frequently ignored in practice, also fits poorly with Putin's illiberal worldview and concerns about weakening the internal control of the state. U.S. policy should take these conflicting ideas into account. This includes awareness of foreign policy decisions that might rub Russia the wrong way. Even if they cannot be avoided, steps can be taken to minimize negative impact to U.S.-Russia relations.

Beyond this minimalist agenda, U.S. policymakers should start laying the groundwork for a future relationship in a world without Putin. The new constitution adopted this year means the post-Putin world could be a long way off—he can now remain as president potentially until 2036. If he does stay in power for that long—which is by no means guaranteed—relations are unlikely to improve appreciably. For the moment, efforts to create a deeper level of societal engagement among the next generation of Russians and Americans may be the most for which one can hope. Potential areas for modest initiatives are less political spheres such as sports, entertainment, culture, and education. It's a far cry from the “new strategic relationship” envisioned in the 2002 National Security Strategy, but it may be the best we can do for now.

References

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- [2] The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. September 2002. Preamble and p. 26.
- [3] Amy MacKinnon, “Putin’s Russia Gets Voters’ Rubber Stamp.” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/putin-russia-voter-rubber-stamp-approval-constitutional-referendum-2036/>.
- [4] Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018).
- [5] Taylor, pp. 169-170, p. 199
- [6] Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin, April 25, 2005. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.
- [7] Vladimir Putin, quoted in Taylor, p. 14.
- [8] Vladimir Putin, in Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 79.
- [9] Gleb Pavlovsky, quoted in Taylor, p. 34.
- [10] Vladimir Putin, quoted in Taylor, p. 31.
- [11] Quoted in Taylor, p. 190.
- [12] Vladimir Putin, quoted in Taylor, p. 171.