

A European view of Putin's foreign and security policy

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Vladimir Putin has clearly been busy setting out his manifesto for the presidential election, due on 4th March, with a series of extensive articles in the Russian media, relayed instantly and in impeccable English translations to international readerships.

European readers of his texts will pay particular attention to what he has to say about our continent in his article of 27th February:

Russia is an inalienable and organic part of Greater Europe and European civilisation. Our citizens think of themselves as Europeans. We are by no means indifferent to developments in united Europe. I propose again that we work toward creating a harmonious community of economies from Lisbon to Vladivostok, which will, in the future, evolve into a free trade zone and even more advanced forms of economic integration.¹

When Putin says that Russians think of themselves as Europeans, for their part most Europeans are happy about this. In the two decades since the end of the Soviet Union, West Europeans and Russians have begun to get to know each other better. Older generations from the former Soviet bloc will not forget, and may never forgive, the traumatic experience of the Soviet occupation in their own lifetimes. Yet the overwhelming European attitude, from foreign ministries to the population as a whole, is to hope for European-Russian relations to become more normal, as between all other nations of the continent. And 'normal' means to be open, friendly, and appreciative of the same human and cultural values, common human rights standards, the legal order, and above all to be devoid of mutual threat perceptions. For their part, foreign policy circles are looking for a convergence of positions on matters contributing to an enlightened, or at least soundly functioning world order, with particular concern for how the newly expanded collection of major world powers can work together.

In this regard Putin's texts, while mostly familiar in substance, raise a number of pointed issues that question the overall coherence and feasibility of his objectives. We select three of them here; his ideas for an economic community from Lisbon to Vladivostok; his plans for increased military spending, and Russia's stance over Syria.

¹ For full texts of this and other articles in the series see "Articles by Vladimir Putin" at: (<http://premier.gov.ru/eng/>).

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The idea of a free trade zone from Lisbon to Vladivostok may sound utopian, but there are increasingly practical arguments that would warrant the EU to respond with interest. The status quo is a messy amalgam of competing and partly overlapping projects. The EU seeks to conclude deep and comprehensive free trade areas with Eastern partner states, including Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. Russia has recently formed a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. It is also pushing Ukraine to join this union, which, however, would be incompatible with free trade with the EU unless the customs union also entered into a free trade agreement with the EU.

Russia also seeks to expand and deepen the Eurasian Economic Area with all former Soviet states that are willing to do so. Neither the EU nor Russia are contemplating free trade with China, but Russia can see in free trade with the EU a mechanism for economic modernisation, and the EU is interested in economic alliances to face the competition from a highly competitive China. The formula to square this circle would be for the EU to add a free trade agreement with Russia, or presumably with the customs union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, to its expanding set of free trade agreements in Eastern Europe. Since Russia has now joined the WTO, the way is open for this. In the past Russia has viewed free trade with the EU as a deal that would only be to the EU's advantage. If Putin's view on this has changed, let the matter be taken up at the next EU-Russia summit. If the idea of EU-Russia free trade were to be taken up, the door would be open to think about a further step, namely to multi-lateralise a Greater European free trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok; and to this the EU would want to consider adding, or doing first, Lisbon to Cairo, and thus a Greater Euro-Med free trade area. These are ideas of huge potential significance.

Returning to Putin, later on in his articles he complains of how Russian economic interests are treated in the rest of the world:

So far Russian economic actors have been getting a raw deal abroad. We are trying to attract foreign capital to the Russian economy. ... But our investors are not welcome abroad and are often pointedly brushed aside.²

It is true that the West at large is wary of big investment stakes in Russia and of Russian investments abroad. But has Putin adequately reflected on the reasons for this? His remarks are all about alleged anti-Russian sentiment and conspiracies in the world. The rest of the world is wary about Russia for a host of reasons: Russia has a habit of mixing geo-political power with commerce, including trade sanctions against East European states as a mark of mere political displeasure. Russia is a hazardous business environment, due to its uncertain rule of law. And then these economic concerns compound broader matters of political trust on matters of strategic security. This leads into other aspects of Putin's current writings.

As regards hard security matters, Putin says in his article of 20th February on defence that Russia is threatened by (unnamed) enemies:

We continue to see new areas of instability and deliberately managed chaos. There also are purposeful attempts to provoke such conflicts even within the direct proximity of Russia's and its allies' borders.

In response there has to be a huge expansion of military spending:

In the coming decade, Russian armed forces will be provided with over 400 modern land and sea-based inter-continental ballistic missiles, 8 strategic ballistic missile submarines, about 20 multi-purpose submarines, over 50 surface warships, around

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100 military spacecraft, over 600 modern aircraft including fifth generation fighter jets, more than 1,000 helicopters, 28 regimental kits of S-400 air defence systems, 38 battalion kits of Vityaz missile systems, 10 brigade kits of Iskander-M missile systems, over 2,300 modern tanks, about 2,000 self-propelled artillery systems and vehicles, and more than 17,000 military vehicles.

We have been warned! But who is threatening Russia in this way? Obviously not Europe, which is cutting back on its already modest military spending. Hardly China, with whom it has settled previous border disputes and shares the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. And is not President Obama withdrawing his military forces from Afghanistan, Iraq and reducing Western European bases? Russia may have soft security threats coming from its south in the shape of terrorism, drugs and criminality, but this is hardly a matter for intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear submarines. There is of course the threat of Iran's nuclear proliferation, to which the US and NATO plans for anti-missile defences in Europe are addressed. Russia argues that these anti-Iranian defences might be engineered in a way that undermined its own strategic missile capabilities. But this rests on the strange logic of nuclear deterrence: these defences might be engineered in such a way as to reduce Russia's capability to obliterate Western Europe and the United States. Have we not got beyond this? Moreover, former Finance Minister Kudrin says that Russia cannot afford this military spending bonanza. Or maybe with the new high oil price, Russia can at least temporarily fund this, but is it what the economy and society needs? Putin's new arms build-up seems to be ascribed to some kind of politically convenient neo-cold war mythology, or incredibly expensive political posturing at election time; disconnected from the real politics of the world at large.

Moving on to Syria. Russia and China vetoed a resolution of the UN Security Council on the 4th February, which was otherwise a consensus text proposed by a large group of Arab and Western states. The text excluded external military intervention. A similar text was put to the UN General Assembly on 16 February, revealing more fully who the friends of Syria are, and who are the supporters of a world order based on modern humanitarian norms and traditional security norms: 137 states voted for, 12 against, and 17 abstained. Of the 12 votes against, five are international pariah states: Belarus, North Korea, Zimbabwe, Iran, and Syria itself. Two of these are nuclear weapons proliferators and all are brutally repressive authoritarian regimes. Another five is a group from Latin America, led by Hugo Chavez; Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela, whose leaders pedal anti-capitalist and anti-American polemic, despite their disastrous economic records.

Then there were the two big No votes: Russian and China. Of the two, Russia has taken the lead on Syria, given the importance of its military (naval base, arms supplies) and political commitments there. China has far fewer direct interests. Its joining Russia at the UNSC vote seems to be driven by both parties' commitment to some kind of diplomatic mutual support pact: you help me here, and I'll help you elsewhere.

The 137 votes in favour of the Resolution saw a solid backing of Arab League states, except Algeria and Lebanon, all European states except Russia and Belarus, all other OECD states, and a considerable number of African, Asian and Latin American states, including Brazil, India and South Africa from the BRICs, and all G20 states except Russia and China. The BRIC alliance was divided down the middle, between the democrats (Brazil, India and South Africa) and the non-democrats (Russia and China). The democratic BRICs joined with the liberal democratic club of advanced nations.

And so it was that the non-democratic BRICs joined up with the bizarre grouping of international pariah and dissident states. Should not the foreign policy planners of Russia and China be thinking more about the positions they adopt that lead them into this exclusive

and utterly disreputable company? How can it be that Russia and China aspire to major roles in global affairs while keeping such alliances?

Or, put differently, what does it mean for the possible evolution of the new world order when two UN Security Council veto-carrying powers find themselves only in such company in the UN General Assembly? The message from the current Syrian crisis is clear enough. The UN system has been bypassed and ad hoc coalitions are formed in its place. A first meeting of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People was held in Tunis on 24th February 2012, with the participation of more than 60 countries and representatives from the Arab League, the European Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab Maghreb Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Russia and China were the notable absentees. With the UN structures in this way, a huge international coalition of the willing is assembled in ad hoc meetings elsewhere. Putin, for his part

warns our Western colleagues against the temptation to resort to this simple, previously used tactic: if the UN Security Council approves of a given action, fine: if not, we will establish a coalition of states concerned and strike anyway.³

Sadly, this is precisely what Russian policy is leading to, not 'strike anyway' since the Friends of Syria exclude military action, but Russia is undermining the functionality of the UN by adopting spoiler positions. Over Libya, Russia and China abstained, and for a moment it seemed that there was a partial convergence of positions with the advanced democracies and the Arab League.

Both Russia and China advance normative principles, above all non-interference and absolute respect for the sovereignty of recognised states. These are hugely important principles, time-honoured since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. But the international system and realities of globalisation have moved on from this 'pure' order, if ever it existed. The development of international humanitarian law, the creation of the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P) endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2005, all amount to intrusions of international norms, law and institutions into the politics of the world's sovereign states, quite apart from the long-established intrusion of the international financial institutions into matters of economic sovereignty. However, over Syria it is clear from the texts that Western powers will not intervene militarily. But, in blocking the UN resolution, Russia and China go to the other extreme, signalling encouragement to the Assad regime to go on with their deadly bombardments.

Russia, Europe's big and eternal neighbour, thus finds itself in a bizarre situation. It wishes to be accepted as a normal civilised modern state, and to hang on to its post-World War ranking as a great power. But it seems convinced that it can achieve the latter only by using its privileged position in the UN Security Council as blocker or spoiler, thereby undermining the crucial matter of trust with the world's advanced democracies. This damages both the country's status in ways that are desirable for its economic modernisation, and pushes international diplomacy away from the forum on which it has privileged status. Will the next president of Russia, after the forthcoming election, reflect on these truly strategic questions with a more open mind?

³ Op. cit.