

# Foreign Policy Out of Tandem

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I have noticed that tandemocracy, while beneficial for Russia's internal development, may not be such a healthy arrangement for the country's foreign policy.

Where political pluralism and multiple centers of decision making may be key drivers for progress in domestic affairs in Russia's super-centralized system, it is always a shortcut to disaster in foreign affairs. It disorients foreign partners and paralyzes the foreign policy bureaucracy in an unhealthy rivalry for allegiance to various leaders.

One big adverse effect is that the inherent rivalry within the tandem produces ill-prepared foreign policy initiatives with little chance of success from the outset. This reflects the desire of each leader to assert primacy in Russia's external affairs, frustrating its partners abroad.

For example, President Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 foreign policy initiative — a new pan-European security architecture — was a good idea, but it was so hastily put together that it was not immediately clear whom it was addressed to. Several practical details of the proposal emerged only much later — a year after Medvedev's proposal was officially announced.

Medvedev's 2010 proposal to develop a joint sectoral missile defense system with NATO bears the same marks of poor preparation, total disregard for political realities in partner nations and a desire to achieve maximum PR effect at home and abroad.

The same could be said about Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's reckless proposal in 2009 that members of the newly minted customs union would jointly apply for membership to the World Trade Organization. This scuttled an all but complete deal with Washington on Russia's WTO accession and forced Medvedev to disavow this decision a few months later.

Medvedev's eagerness to try to claim gains in Russia's international standing has led to a childishly silent endorsement of NATO's air war in Libya. Now, four months into the unsuccessful operation, some Western leaders are wondering whether they all would have been better off had Russia's foreign policy been in Putin's adult hands. Most likely, Putin would have pushed for a veto of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which was so loosely worded that virtually any military action, except the use of land forces, against the government of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, including his removal by force, could be justified under the resolution's wording to "protect civilians" in the country.

The other adverse effect is that some foreign players could take advantage of differences within the tandem to play one against the other.

One example is U.S. President Barack Obama's stake on a highly personalized relationship with Medvedev. Obama has developed specific policies tailored to strengthen Medvedev's domestic position and increase his chances of re-election in Russia's March presidential vote. Obama's belated attempts to open communications channels to Putin through Vice President Joe Biden have failed, auguring a potentially testy relationship between Obama and Putin if both are re-elected as president in 2012.

Like Obama, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich is also betting on Medvedev, hoping to secure a better price for Russian gas deliveries. Yanukovich is doing all he can to ignore or publicly humiliate Putin by staging a kangaroo trial against Yulia Tymoshenko for signing a bad 2009 gas agreement with Putin or snubbing Putin's proposals for Ukraine's entry into the customs union.

And the strongmen of Belarus and Transdnestr, Alexander Lukashenko and Igor Smirnov, may be looking up to Putin for defense against Medvedev's pressure to unseat them.

This is turning into Russia's weakness in foreign affairs. To paraphrase former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, it is hard to know what number to call on foreign policy in the Land of Tandemocracy.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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