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What's Good for Putin Is Bad for Foreign Policy

By Vladimir Frolov

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Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency was expected to bring more brains and dexterity to the country's foreign policy. Putin, it was argued, would take foreign policy in his hands and deftly steer the Russian ship in troubled global waters. Where President Dmitry Medvedev had been lofty and idealistic, Putin would be purposeful and pragmatic.

It's turned out a bit differently.

While some of Medvedev's initiatives were ambitiously naive — the European security treaty or the joint missile defense project with NATO — his foreign policy had a clear strategic purpose. He wanted to carry out a technological and social upgrade through "modernization alliances" with the West. This strategic purpose overrode other less important foreign policy considerations.

Medvedev had a sober view of Russia's capabilities and sought to match them with Russia's

real, privileged interests. He viewed Russia as a regional, not global, power.

Medvedev began closing the values gap between Russia and the Western world in responding to international challenges. Hence his calls for advancing human rights and freedoms. He seemed to aspire for Russia to be a pivotal force for good.

Putin quickly dispensed with Medvedev's strategic purpose and modernization alliances. His foreign policy so far has been surprisingly tactical, heavily tailored for domestic PR and tinged with his personal attitudes.

Putin has staked out a global role for Russia as defender of absolute sovereignty. On Syria, Moscow is defending the sovereign right of any autocrat to kill his own people at will and stay in power. Using the UN Security Council, the Kremlin opposes any attempt to change an oppressive dictatorship. If that were a strategic purpose, it would be better left unstated.

The policy is tailored to look tough to the people at home and to the apprehensive autocracies in the former Soviet space. Russia's intransigence on Syria may have won it the central role in the UN debate, but it has undermined the UN's effectiveness as a tool for Russian influence. It has also enhanced Russia's isolation on the global arena.

Putin has allowed his personal sensibilities to drive policy at the expense of strategy. His dissing of U.S. President Barack Obama and public humiliation of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych satisfied his personal dislike for those leaders, but they hurt Russia's broader interests.

Medvedev's foreign policy was visionary but unpopular. Putin's is situational and impulsive but broadly supported. Go figure.

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