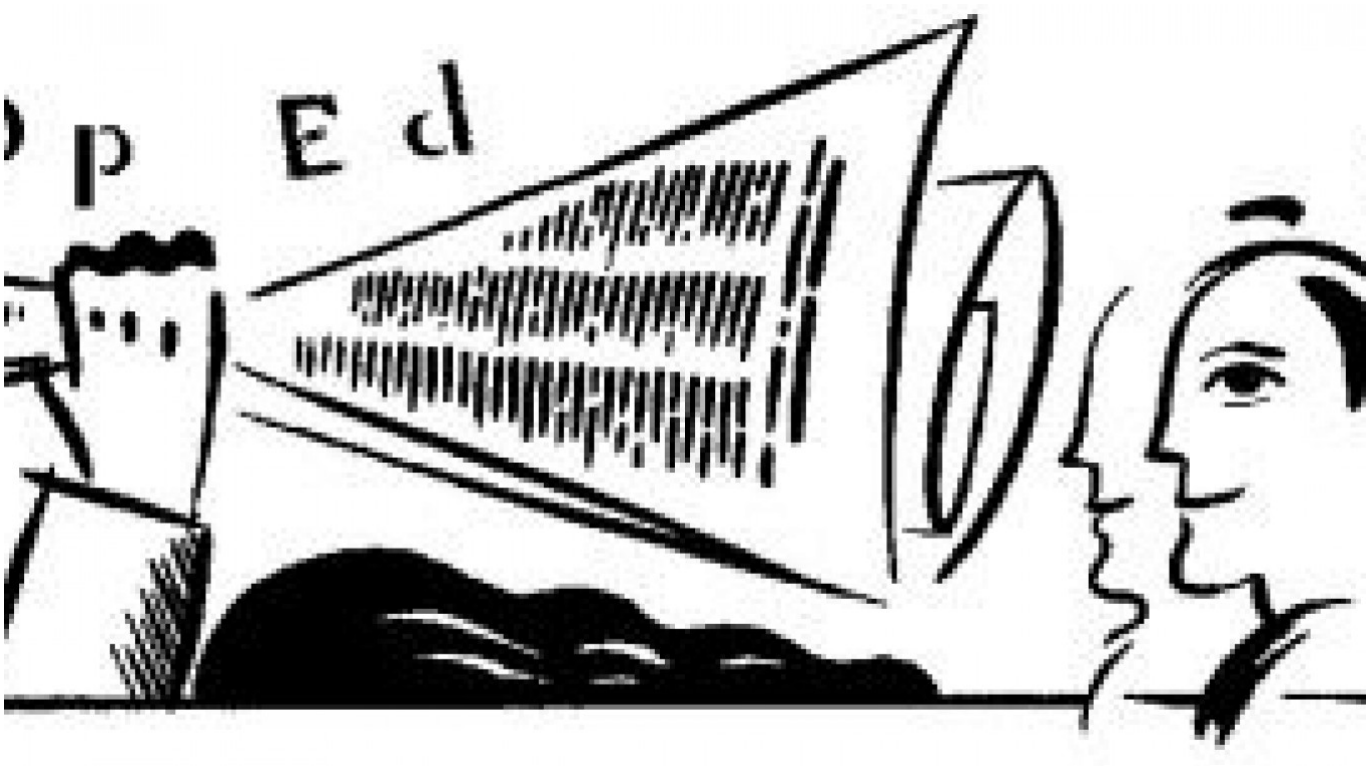
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Putin's Month in the Limelight Shows His Growth

By Gilbert Doctorow

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The UN Security Council's unanimous approval Friday of a resolution along the lines urged by Russian negotiators, without invocation of Chapter 7 provisions and automatic imposition of punitive measures in case the Syrian government fails to fulfill all its obligations on the handover of chemical weapons, was a particularly sweet victory for Russian diplomacy. And although it was Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who delivered Russia's speech to the General Assembly that same day rather than President Vladimir Putin, who remained at home, key points in the address closely followed those put forward to the American people by Putin 16 days earlier, so that his personal aura hung over Friday's events.

Putin's essay in The New York Times, published Sept. 11, elicited an extraordinary level of reader response and analysis in the broader media. Many commentators have concentrated on the essay's tactical intent, to influence American public opinion on the urgent issue of a potential military attack by their government on Syria.

In this context, members of the American elite expressed outrage, none more vividly and less

diplomatically than Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, who had successfully steered the President's resolution on use of military force through the skeptical questioning of his colleagues only to see Russian diplomacy change the script and his president make a U-turn. Menendez was quoted by CNN as saying that Putin's essay "made him want to vomit."

While outsiders rarely succeed in changing perceptions of the American public by speaking over the heads of its government, one cannot ignore the effect that Putin's brilliantly argued message to the U.S.might have had on the rest of the world, enhancing America's self-imposed isolation and appearance as a rogue state.

Putin's essay must also be read for its strategic content. In it, he doggedly pursued the fight against U.S. unilateralism, which he so eloquently initiated behind closed doors at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, denouncing hegemony by the world's sole remaining superpower and promoting a multi-polar world in which Russia played a leading part. Now, he edged a step further by challenging exceptionalism and the notion that the U.S. is not bound by international conventions and can reject the attributes of sovereignty of other nation-states.

But, above all, the piece in The New York Times must be seen within the continuum of a hyperactive period of month-long Russian diplomacy and exercise of soft power. It began with Putin's stewardship of the Group of 20 conference in St. Petersburg on Sept. 5, where he facilitated a civilized discussion among world leaders of the Syrian crisis. He made it obvious to all but the blind that there is no consensus of the "international community" and many countries, representing a majority of the world's population, oppose intervention.

The initiative moved on to gain important traction on Sept. 9, when the Russians took up U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's offhand remark about Syria turning over its chemical weapons and made the Obama administration an offer that it could not refuse, thereby taking the crisis back firmly into diplomatic channels with Russia as a key participant.

Putin's op-ed two days later hammered home the constructive and principled role that Russia is prepared to assume.

And the charm offensive continued in Putin's keynote speech on Sept. 19 at the festive 10th anniversary session of the Valdai Discussion Club, where he delivered a tour d'horizon of the ideals that he is furthering in the Russian Federation during his presidency, reaching out to opposition leaders and minorities while frankly looking after majority interests. This was done in the presence of unusually high-level foreign guests on the dais and in the hall, and, for the first time, the proceedings were broadcast live and in full on state television, carried globally via satellite.

In short, September 2013 has seen the most intense burst of Russian diplomacy since September 2008, when, in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian War, the country marshaled all its resources to lock in relationships with friendly governments around the globe in the face of American threats to subject Russia to the world's opprobrium, to isolate it and punish it for alleged aggression.

But where the hyper-active September of 2008 was an exercise in self-preservation, the activity of 2013 has served to project Russian statesmanship and responsibility. It has been

a demonstration that Russia also can stand tall, see further and resolutely defend international law and shared values.

Whether out in front as the author of the op-ed page piece in The New York Times or standing back somewhat as the father of the diplomatic solution over Syria now being implemented, Putin's persona has been in the world news daily, as noted above. It is entirely in line with this preeminence that the Sept. 16 issue of Time magazine placed Putin's portrait on its cover (in all but the US edition).

Some commentators have retreated into their ad hominem attacks to avoid facing facts that might overturn their Russophobe prejudices. Others have suggested that what was attractive in Putin's message was purchased from a Western public-relations agency.

But still other American thought leaders have, like some of Putin's domestic opposition at Valdai, grudgingly conceded that there is a magnetism about the man, a strength that is hardly seen among other world leaders. As an example, see Fiona Hill's article in the September 11 issue of Foreign Affairs, "Putin Scores on Syria." Hill seeks to understand the sources of this strength, of this successful statecraft and identifies Putin's practice of judo and martial arts since childhood.

Looking to the distant past to understand Putin today, Hill is close to the standard American media script on Putin, where every article necessarily reminds the reader that he once was "a KGB spy."

All of this peering into the past misses the essential fact about Putin: his remarkable ability to grow. The consummate statesman, respectful and yet firm with his opponents, has dominated both the world stage and domestic politics these past several weeks and is worlds apart from the hesitant and inexperienced Russian president who responded to Larry King's question about what happened to the submarine Kursk with the tight-lipped remark: "It sank."

And let us be very clear about the meaning of the foregoing remarks. Such an ability to grow intellectually, and, as we saw most persuasively in his Valdai speech, spiritually and morally, is uncommon. Becoming a grand master in the skills of statecraft and dealing easily with fellow world leaders in periods of great tension, just as on the sporting field, is indeed a very rare trait.

Other world leaders have tread water before our eyes; German Chancellor Angela Merkel coming firmly to mind. Then there are those, like U.S. President Barack Obama, who has become steadily smaller and regressed in office. It was painful to recall that we Americans elected an editor of the Harvard Law Review when on Sept. 6 we saw him mishandle his press conference following the conclusion of the G20 meeting. Anyone watching his stumbling and crude response to a question about the National Security Agency spying on the Brazilian president must regret the course of the United States's political fortunes under his inattentive watch.

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