

Putin's Rearguard Battle

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Russia's recent diplomatic successes in Syria and Iran, together with foreign-policy missteps by U.S. President Barack Obama, have emboldened President Vladimir Putin in his drive to position Russia as capable of challenging American exceptionalism and Western universalism. But Putin's December address to the Federal Assembly was more a reflection of his resentment of Russia's geopolitical marginalization than a battle cry from a rising empire.

To be sure, with America exhausted from its fruitless wars in the Middle East, and Europe turning inward as it faces its own crises, the case for a multipolar discourse is more convincing today than at any other time since the Cold War. But this does not change the fact that Russia is a declining power, whose diplomatic triumphs are mere tactical achievements that do not add up to a strategic game changer for the world.

If, as Lenin put it, communism was, "Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country," Putinism can be reduced to nuclear weapons and oil extraction. In all other areas, the West retains a clear advantage: Russia's demographic decline, antiquated military forces,

one-dimensional economy, low productivity and chronic internal unrest dwarf the challenges faced by the U.S. and Europe.

In fact, Putin's recent address was replete with references to Russia's weaknesses — specifically, "interethnic tensions," local-government authorities "constantly shaken by corruption scandals," an incompetent administration, capital flight through economic "offshore activity" and the inability to achieve "technology breakthroughs." These traits certainly are not the makings of a dominant power in a globalized world. Like it or not, talk of Russia competing with the West is nothing more than sentimental nostalgia or meaningless rhetoric.

For Putin, the agreement reached in 1945 at the Yalta Conference is not dead; its limits on the Kremlin's influence have simply shifted eastward, essentially to the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. While Putin managed to stop Georgia from joining NATO, his Eurasian Economic Community, is a poor replica of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, which included all of the countries of the Eastern Bloc and a few other socialist states. Likewise, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led Eurasian defense alliance, is a far cry from the old Warsaw Pact.

Moreover, although Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yanukovich, have so far managed to derail Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union, they probably will not be able to block it for long. Despite having been cajoled by Putin with lavish financial support and cheap gas, Ukraine is unlikely to join a Russia-led Customs Union, which is more a means of anchoring former Soviet republics to Russia's sphere of influence than it is a vehicle to promote trade.

But the most serious threat to Russia's global status is the coming obsolescence of its nuclear arsenal. Putin has been unable to counter America's development of "prompt global strike," which would render Russia's nuclear deterrent irrelevant, by enabling the United States to hit targets worldwide with conventional weapons within an hour. Russia is no more able to compete with Western technology and capabilities today than the Soviet Union was when it collapsed under the stress of its arms race with the U.S.

In his address to the Federal Assembly, Putin positioned himself as a defender of conservative values against "tolerance, neutered and barren" (a euphemism for gay rights) and a champion of morality and traditional family values. Russia might not be a superpower anymore; but, according to Putin, it represents a morally superior civilization battling America's foreign-policy recklessness, malevolent economic practices and moral depravity.

Putin's moral claims are, however, mired in politically unsustainable contradictions. "Today, many nations," he warned, "are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures." But Russia is a kaleidoscope of ethnicities and cultures, whose efforts to assert themselves were dismissed in the very same address as the criminal behavior of "ethnic mafias."

Furthermore, the Western values that Putin rejects in the name of Russian nationalism (and anti-Americanism) are precisely those that many Russians endorse. More than a cultural statement, Putin's description of Russia in Slavophile or Eurasianist terms reflects his aspiration to forge an alliance with China and other emerging economies to offset America's

global dominance.

But Putin cannot expect China to underwrite his pretensions. China may have joined Russia in opposing the West's embrace of "humanitarian intervention" in other countries' internal conflicts, but the Cold War premise that ideological affinity is an adequate basis for military alliance would not work for China today. Simply put, China has no interest in revolutionizing an international system from which it has benefited so much.

For all of his grandstanding, Putin's ambitions are not new. Indeed, he represents a continuation of Russia's centuries-old drive to be treated as a great power in a world order that it views as a Hobbesian struggle of all against all. But authoritarianism and ham-fisted diplomacy are not exactly a recipe for success in the twenty-first century.

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