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Russia Is Punching Above Its Weight

By Mark Galeotti

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A certain smugness, even triumphalism, is evident in the Kremlin pronouncements about Russia's place in the world. To an extent, this is wholly understandable given that the country appears to be exerting a geopolitical influence out of proportion to its objective economic, military and political strength.

The U.S. administration is grappling with the threat of 'losing' Iraq; the European Union is facing the rise of secessionist politics; the United Nations is, well, as relevant as the UN ever is. By contrast, Moscow seems instead to be active, assertive, even aggressive, and above all, able to shape the world to its will.

Of course Crimea is the classic example, a territory plucked almost bloodlessly from Kiev's grip through a combination of bluff, misdirection and rapid military deployment. While events in eastern Ukraine are turning out to be much less tidy and even posing potential risks to Russia in the longer term, nonetheless Moscow is proving itself able to place serious pressure on its neighbor at, so far, relatively minimal political cost.

In the modern age of nonlinear warfare, in which economic pressure, political manipulation,

self-confidence, and covert and deniable tactics are every bit as important as raw firepower, Russia has a number of distinct advantages.

Putin does not have to worry about keeping his tame legislature on side or pesky legal constraints on his maneuvers. The recent call for the Federal Council to rescind its law authorizing operations against Ukraine, for example, was a piece of political theater and in no way limits his future options.

The interpenetration of government and business means that almost any Russian corporation may find itself being used as a tool of state policy. This could range from investing wherever the Kremlin wants to extend patronage to lobbying for the current official line.

The Kremlin's near-complete control of television and its heavy weight on print and online media ensures that it can mobilize domestic opinion. Meanwhile, it spins and speculates abroad with gleeful cynicism, seeking to shape foreign public opinion or at least introduce doubt and division where none ought to exist.

None of this, though, should obscure one essential point: Russia's current influence reflects a very efficient use of what meager assets it has, rather than any real strength in depth.

Militarily, while it possesses a range of quite effective units, not least the Naval Infantry and Spetsnaz commandoes seen in Crimea, much of the armed forces are still in the throes of a lengthy, painful and often wasteful modernization effort. Russia is a regional power able to overwhelm small neighbors — as it did with Georgia in 2008 — but not a global one. Russia lacks credible power projection capacities and even in its own backyard its strength is not necessarily overpowering. While the Russians would be able to deliver a devastating initial blow should Putin choose to invade Ukraine, they risk then getting bogged down in the kind of messy, close-quarters warfare that would deny them the kind of quick, clean victory they achieved in Crimea.

Economically, Russia is a country with a GDP little more than Italy's and is dangerously dependent on gas and oil exports. The much-vaunted 'energy weapon'— the ability to turn off the taps — is a distinctly two-edged sword given that Russia depends on these sales.

Politically, Putin gains some points abroad for his tough-guy image and his social conservative politics, but it is hard to see countries turning to Russia for leadership. The latest BBC Country Ratings poll — an imperfect measure, but probably the best around — shows 31 percent of global respondents recording a positive perspective on Russia and 45 percent negative, making it one of the lowest rated.

Perhaps most striking is the extent to which Russia's long-term allies outside Eurasia tend to be marginalized dictatorships such as Venezuela and Syria. Even then, there is a strong undercurrent of pragmatism behind these alliances, and especially with seeming partners such as China and Iran.

We should not confuse temporary alliances with affection. China had no qualms turning the screws over the recent gas deal, understanding that Russia was in a weak bargaining position. Venezuela is happy to buy Russian guns — but with money Moscow loaned it. Likewise, while Iran will swap its oil for Russian goods, it was furious when Moscow bowed

to international pressure and reneged on a commitment to supply advanced anti-aircraft missiles

Instead, Russia's soft power is essentially negative, deriving from its role as a global spoiler, willing to use its UN Security Council veto, its weapons and its rhetoric to challenge the U.S. and NATO.

This certainly makes it impossible to ignore Moscow — and indeed, Moscow's voice deserves to be heard. In this respect, Russia is undoubtedly punching above its geopolitical weight. However, if the Russians are making the best of what they have, this should not obscure the fact that the West has vastly greater military, political and economic resources. It is currently simply unable or unwilling to deploy them effectively.

The West is divided, unwilling to pay the price of confronting Russia seriously. It is bound by its commitment to constitutionalism, democracy, rule of law and plurality of expression. It cannot as easily sequester nonstate assets and use them for its own purposes. It has massively more capable military forces than Russia, but does not want to use them.

However, democracies can and do eventually mobilize, when they feel sufficiently threatened, challenged or outraged. China was once caricatured as the "sleeping dragon," and Russia was once the "sleeping bear." Moscow ought to hesitate before awakening the sleeping West.

Mark Galeotti is professor of global affairs at New York University.

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