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Is Russia a Kamikaze Country?

By Ivan Sukhov

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov played an active role in the negotiations between the six world powers and Iran. That is one tool Kremlin strategists can use to pretend that things are not so bad, to create the illusion that Russia is still an important and respected player in the international arena — influencing the resolution of global problems.

Meanwhile, Russians are breathing an almost audible sigh of relief as they see the value of the ruble gradually climbing upward again. Of course, the exchange rate is not as good as it was a year ago, but it is still much better than a month ago, and hopefully, they think, everything will return to normal soon.

That hope that the situation will somehow normalize without any serious effort on Moscow's part shows that Russia is now, more than ever before, a victim of wishful thinking.

In fact, this question of which is more important — Russia's image or its reality — has quietly become the most pressing issue of the day. In fact, ever since 1991, Russia's image has always taken precedence over its reality.

Russian leaders think they have duped the rest of the world into believing the illusions that they themselves have long taken as fact.

The main illusion that the Kremlin has attempted to foist on the Russian people and the world is that Russia is somehow the Soviet Union in new garb, and that as such, it has not only the power, but also the privilege to settle any questions arising on former Soviet territory.

It remains a mystery as to how much of that tale Kremlin officials actually believe, and how much is intended for public consumption.

That distorted perception of Russia and the world stems directly from the early 1990s. For the first few years after 1991, Russian officialdom interpreted the Soviet collapse as the result of a democratic revolution.

That burgeoning Russian democracy ostensibly inherited the legal, financial and nuclear structures of the Soviet Union and even had to shell its own parliament building with tanks in 1993 to weather the political storm threatening its survival. From the rubble of that conflict arose the Russian Constitution, still in force today and presented to the world as a charter of democracy.

There are now two prevailing points of view in Russia concerning democracy. The first is that democracy is absolute evil and that it was the advocates of democracy who brought down the Soviet Union.

The second is that democracy is not so bad, but that the way it was implemented during the early post-Soviet period discredited it in the eyes of many Russians.

Characteristically, those holding the latter point of view are often the same people who did everything in their power to discredit democracy during the 1990s and 2000s. They deceptively referred to the Soviet collapse as a "democratic revolution" when, if it was a revolution at all, it was more a revolution of government bureaucrats who got rid of bothersome Soviet controls by dismantling the entire Soviet Union — with the silent and passive citizenry looking on.

And after 1991, they referred to that citizenry as "civil society" to keep Western observers from guessing that they intended to trample on the reforms initiated by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. These were people who had not participated in anything themselves, but who associated that supposedly democratic government with the horrors that caused the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From the very beginning, post-Soviet Russia tried to appear to its citizens, its neighbors and even to itself as something that it was not. By indulging in this game of mimicry, leaders missed the moment when the new country needed to understand the reason it had come into being, for whom it would serve as a home and refuge, and what goals would guide it into the future.

When a new country appears in the place of an older one, a window of political opportunity opens. However, it cannot remain open as long as 25 years.

Russia used that time to engage in a strange role-playing game, trying to act as both

a democracy and as the successor to the Soviet Union, on one hand denying the Soviet legacy, and on the other perpetuating it.

However, something went wrong, and now it is clear that, unlike the Soviet Union, modern Russia has no ideas to offer.

At first it seemed like technocratic chic: after years of Soviet ideological intoxication, to have the luxury of not thinking about any ideas at all. Then it turned out that without some form of national idea, nothing would work. However, new ideas arise only after a country has undertaken the gargantuan task of understanding itself and the hard reality of its history.

Russia is still avoiding that work. All of the ideas that today's officials pull out of their hats are from the same bag of tricks that Soviet leaders, and before them the tsars, first conjured up.

Of course, the West does not take a very fond view of Russia.

Anyone not viewing this country through the prison window of state-controlled Russian television sees all too clearly Moscow's ridiculous attempts to hide its lack of a meaningful national agenda with its pretentious facade of Olympic Games, wars in Georgia and the Donbass, the annexation of Crimea, the ostentatious attempts to settle the Syria problem and its participation in six world powers negotiating with Iran on its nuclear program.

This is not a new Cold War — but not because Russia still acts as a relatively equal partner in certain international structures. This is not a new Cold War because it is obvious to everyone outside of Russia that this country has spent a quarter of a century fruitlessly pondering whether it wants to break with its Soviet past or return to it, that it has no heart, mind or means for waging a confrontation with the West that would revive the bipolar world of the past.

This does not mean, however, that the West should dismiss Russia as a potential threat. At a conference in Moscow last week devoted to the question of whether a new Cold War had begun, one Russian political analyst compared the Russian state to a suicide bomber.

He argued that Moscow suffers from an anxiety complex stemming from the realization that the country will either collapse or find itself hopelessly far behind Western levels of development, and that this has prompted leaders to ever more frequently hint at using its nuclear weapons in a last-ditch effort to assert its right to exist.

Russia and the West must find an escape from this dangerous deadlock.

And yet Moscow leaders continue pretending that nothing unusual is happening: Foreign Minister Lavrov casually speaks about Iran and everyone watches as the ruble strengthens to 58 against the dollar.

In the end, Russia's leaders know they have a nuclear button, and that if this country cannot — or will not — solve its problems any other way, it can always opt out of the game by triggering global Armageddon.

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