

Can Russia Sustain Its Foreign Policy Power Plays?

Russia's grip on the world order may be tightening, but how long can the Kremlin hold on?

By [Jonathan Brown](#)

January 31, 2018



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When Vladimir Putin landed in Syria late last year, he was greeted by President Bashar Assad not as a foreign dignitary, but as the guardian of the embattled nation. “Syria has been preserved as a sovereign and independent state,” Putin told soldiers assembled at the Khmeimim airbase, Russia’s flag flying alongside Syria’s. “You are returning victorious to your homes, your families, parents, wives, children and friends.”

However, his mission to declare victory, order troops home and accept the gratitude of a president whose staying power had baffled the entire Western world was just a layover. Next was Egypt and a \$21-billion nuclear energy deal. Then to Turkey, where he and President

Tayyip Erdogan chastised the United States for recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

In 2017, Russia took center stage abroad. Moscow strong-armed Syria's peace process and sent the West into a state of collective hand-wringing after revelations about Russian trolls sowed confusion on social networks. The country's state oil giant Rosneft snatched a flurry of high-risk energy deals in warring countries where the West is vying for influence.

But how much longer can Russia keep this pace abroad? "The Russian economy does not match the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions," says Vladimir Frolov, a Russian political scientist. Russia's foreign policy plays in 2017, he says, might have come cheap but "even the Kremlin's current scrappy influence-promotion abroad has a cost."

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What West?

Relations between Washington and Moscow went into a dramatic tailspin after U.S. President Donald Trump signed fresh sanctions against Russia into law last August. When Moscow retaliated by ousting hundreds of U.S. diplomatic staff, Washington shuttered Russia's consulate in San Francisco.

"The U.S.-Russia relationship is non-existent at this point," says Frolov. "It may look like our presidents have a phone relationship, but chances are it does not go beyond pandering to Trump's sense of self-importance."

The possibility of an extension of sanctions later this year will show whether relations can plummet even further. "The big unknown, of course, is how Putin will react and where the point of impact will be," Frolov told The Moscow Times.

Any thaw between the powers would first require Russia to change its position on Ukraine or convince the U.S. it did not meddle in elections. This would require a "completely off-the-books secret dialogue between two or three trusted advisers," says Frolov. "Unfortunately, neither Russia nor the Trump team have such people or leaders who trust their advisers."

Barring a meltdown in oil prices or an embargo on the sale of Russian oil, Putin can afford to sustain its confrontation with the West well beyond the March elections, which he is expected to win hands down. For now "Putin is invulnerable to external and internal pressure," says Frolov.

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Political drilling

Western sanctions against Russia's energy sector after the annexation of Crimea have not stopped the Kremlin from brokering new economic partnerships abroad.

Early last year, Russia's state-run oil giant Rosneft closed a pair of high-risk oil deals in volatile countries that left analysts scratching their heads — they seemed to be motivated

less by economics than by politics.

Rosneft's agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government in February came as Iraq was in the throes of ousting Islamic State (IS), the terrorist group banned in Russia. Kurdish authorities, whose deal with Rosneft was the first independent of Baghdad, were also in the middle of planning an independence referendum that threatened civil war.

Although Putin has denied Russia was wading into politics, the deals in Iraq have important political implications, says Livia Paggi, a Russia specialist at the risk consultancy GPW. "Influence over Kurdish oil not only enables Russia to consolidate its growing influence in the Middle East but also gives it political leverage over Turkey and the United States."

Chris Weafer, an analyst at the Macro Advisory consultancy, noted the geopolitical importance of the deal at the time, describing it as "potentially good economics for Rosneft and good politics for the Kremlin." Rosneft struck similar deals in India, Libya and Venezuela last year.

The state-run oil giant is "absolutely" working to implement Russia's foreign policy aspirations, Paggi told The Moscow Times. "Looking at Rosneft's recent deals, there is no easy way of untangling what is a clear-cut political or economic motivation."

Russia also wants to combat the perception at home and abroad that sanctions have marginalized the country. But, Paggi warns: "The political and economic benefits of these deals will only become clear in the long-term. They are very high-risk and there is significant uncertainty around them."

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Russia's Middle East

The Kremlin's new role as the main power broker in the Middle East, sidelining the United States, is not as fragile, says Dmitry Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank. Not only did Russia bring rival parties of the Syrian conflict to the negotiating table, but it also solidified relationships with the region's fiercest adversaries Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose king last year made a historic visit to Moscow.

'Russia is not imposing some kind of order that it will have to sustain, like the United States,' Trenin told The Moscow Times. 'It is projecting its own interests. And that's an entirely different proposition.'

Unless Russia takes on a policy goal it is not capable of delivering, like bringing the Israelis and Palestinians to a final peace settlement, its strategy in the Middle East is sustainable, Trenin says.

With IS on the backfoot, however, the Kremlin also faces the prospect of thousands of jihadists who traveled from Russia and Central Asian countries to Iraq and Syria returning home.

In 2017, St. Petersburg was hit by two terror attacks claimed by groups linked to al-Qaida and

IS. But fears that Russia will suffer more attacks because of returnees — when it stages presidential elections and hosts the World Cup — are unfounded, says Trenin.

Russia is in constant danger of terror plots. ‘What is spectacular,’ he says, ‘is how few terror attacks there have been since the beginning of Russia’s intervention in Syria.’”

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Back home

Meanwhile, poll data suggests the home crowd is enjoying the show. Asked what they liked most about their president in an October survey by the independent Levada pollster, a majority of respondents pointed to Putin’s “decisive, manly and firm” characteristics.

A close runner-up was “foreign policy, defending Russia against the West and being respected around the world.” During Putin’s fourth term, the tide of Russia’s work abroad may change, says Frolov, the political analyst. Putin will be a “lame-duck” president, and Moscow will be consumed by succession and plotting the transition to a post-Putin world.

“The thing to watch would be how this impacts Russia’s foreign policy,” he adds. “In the process of transferring power, the regime may decide that better relations with the West will give the new leadership legitimacy.”

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