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Goodbye, Putin

Why the President's Days Are Numbered

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The longer the Russian war against Ukraine continues, the more likely it is that President Vladimir Putin's regime will collapse.

Despite Putin's bluster, the authoritarian regime he has constructed is exceedingly brittle. At the center stands Putin; surrounding him, the power-hungry loyalists he has folded into his inner circle. Some, called the *siloviki*, belong to powerful institutions such as the secret police or the army. Others, formally affiliated with various government agencies, are loyal only to Putin. In such a system, sycophantism is rewarded above good governance, empire-building runs rampant, policy loses its effectiveness, and corruption becomes routine.

The neo-tsarist ideology of Russian imperialism, Orthodox revival, and anti-Western Slavophilism that Putin has constructed has limited appeal to the cynical men who help him run Russia. Therefore, Putin's ability to retain their loyalty rests primarily on his control of the country's financial resources. Thanks to the record-high energy prices that accompanied his assumption of power in 1999, Putin was able to personally purloin some \$45 billion and still have enough money to raise the country's standard of living, strengthen the Russian military, and keep his cronies happy. No longer. Oil prices have collapsed and are likely to stay low; Western sanctions are hitting hard; and the Russian economy is on the downswing.

Sooner or later Putin will be forced to make some cuts, but it is hard to know where that money will come from. Given the ongoing war in Ukraine and his anti-Western ideological crusade, reducing military funding will be unfeasible. And Putin's popularity would take a serious hit if he were to roll back support to the lower classes. The only option, therefore, may be to stop his cronies from dipping into state coffers, even if doing so will alienate them.

For 15 years, Putin's record of success won him enormous public support. He crushed the Chechen rebellion, presided over military reforms, built infrastructure, improved the lives of ordinary Russians, and regularly outwitted the West. And then, just after the Sochi Olympics, he blew it all. The Crimean annexation has been an unmitigated economic disaster. The Russian war in eastern Ukraine has killed Russians by the thousands. Ukraine, which was well on its way to becoming a Russian vassal state under former President Viktor Yanukovich, has turned against the Kremlin. The ruble, along with the Russian economy, is in free fall, as Western sanctions bite. Putin, Russia's "Man of the Year," is now routinely compared to Adolf Hitler.

Beyond his policy mistakes, Putin also has an image problem. Fifteen years ago, Putin could pass himself off as a charismatic leader who, despite his diminutive size, was man enough to chase down Chechen rebels—in his own words—“even in the outhouse.” That tough-guy image was essential to Putin, who claimed that he could reestablish Russia’s imperial glory and needed to look the part. Now 62 years old, Putin looks tired, his face distended, and it’s hard to imagine that the two leggy singers who once sang, “I want a man just like Putin,” would still feel that way today.

Putin knows he’s in a tough spot. He started the war in Ukraine, and now it’s up to him to bring about some satisfactory conclusion, even though it’s clear from his erratic behavior that he lacks a strategy. He has no way to crush Ukraine without unleashing a global conflict. He has no way to erode Ukraine’s economy without simultaneously destroying Russia’s. Ironically, the one thing Putin could do easily—declare victory in the Donbas and withdraw his troops—is off limits for him, not because it’s politically unfeasible (most Russians would be delighted to get out of this mess), but because his own cult of personality forbids him from blinking.

OUSTING THE PRESIDENT

All signs point to the eventual collapse of Putin’s regime.

Although 85 percent of Russians currently support the president, an Orange Revolution in Moscow—a city that has seen a series of mass anti-Putin demonstrations in the past few years—is not out of the question. Such a movement need not encompass the entire country to be effective. Demonstrations in the capital, like past displays of “people power” in Cairo, Kiev, and Manila, can effect regime change.

A coup d’état is another possibility. The *siloviki*, like all Praetorian guards, are a mixed blessing. They can keep him in power by crushing political opposition, but they can also stage a coup should they conclude that Putin’s policies are undermining their own security and wealth. Putin knows that he replaced Boris Yeltsin (and that Leonid Brezhnev replaced Nikita Khrushchev) in just this fashion.

Even if Putin is not ousted by popular revolution or by a coup, he will be crippled by unrest in Russia’s non-Russian regions. Much of the North Caucasus, for example, has already spun out of Moscow’s control, as the recent terrorist attacks in Chechnya and the continued violence in Ingushetia and Dagestan demonstrate. As the regime visibly decays and Putin loses his sheen, militant non-Russians may emulate Putin’s invocation of Russians’ right to self-determination in southeastern Ukraine and pursue their own separatist agendas—with mass protests when possible, and violence when necessary. The Crimean Tatars, whose frustration with increasingly oppressive Russian rule in their homeland is growing, could be the first to act out violently. The Volga Tatars and Bashkirs, both of whom have large reserves of oil in their regions, could easily follow, as they did in the 1990s, with demands for greater autonomy or independence.

RUSSIA AFTER PUTIN

Will Russia and the world be better off without Putin? Yes, but only if Putin’s successor ends the war and comes to a rapprochement with the West.

Putin’s successor, whenever he takes power, is likely to be a hardliner; even so, his first priority will have to be to clean the mess created by Putin. Chances are that the new president will be more inclined to end the war and more likely to adopt a conciliatory tone vis-à-vis the rest of the

world.

If Putin's successor is not a hardliner, those chances will be even better. This is a small but real possibility: Russia's democrats might just be able to take control of the country at a time of chaos and instability, especially if they succeed in forging coalitions with the increasingly disgruntled Russians whose sons are dying in Ukraine and with non-Russian minorities, as Boris Yeltsin did in the waning days of the Soviet Union. Besides, if history is any indication, Russia's next leader is anybody's guess. The awful Lenin was succeeded by the dreadful Stalin, but Stalin was followed by the decent Khrushchev, who was replaced by the worse Brezhnev, who was succeeded by the good Gorbachev. And Gorbachev handed over power to the pretty good Yeltsin, who was ousted by the dreadful Putin.

In the meantime, the West should do all it can now to support Ukraine and encourage Putin to deescalate the war. The West can also limit the fallout from a possible regime collapse by supporting Russia's neighbors—especially Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—economically, diplomatically, and militarily. When the rotten Russian dam breaks, as it inevitably will, only strong and stable non-Russian states will be able to contain the flooding, shielding the rest of the world from Putin's disastrous legacy of ruin.

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The Putin Doctrine

Russia's Quest to Rebuild the Soviet State

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A Vladimir Putin float in Nice, France.

(Eric Gaillard / Courtesy Reuters)

Much in Russian foreign policy today is based on a consensus that crystallized in the early 1990s. Emerging from the rubble of the Soviet collapse, this consensus ranges across the political spectrum -- from pro-Western liberals to leftists and nationalists. It rests on three geostrategic imperatives: that Russia must remain a nuclear superpower, a great power in all facets of international activity, and the hegemon -- the political, military, and economic leader -- of its region. This consensus marks a line in the sand, beyond which Russia cannot retreat without losing its sense of pride or even national identity. It has proven remarkably resilient, surviving post-revolutionary turbulence and the change of political regimes from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin.

After his election as president in 2000, Putin added to this agenda an overarching goal: the recovery of economic, political, and geostrategic assets lost by the Soviet state in 1991. Although he has never spelled it out formally, Putin has pursued this objective with such determination, coherence, and consistency that it merits being called the Putin Doctrine. Domestically, the doctrine has guided the regime to reclaim the commanding heights of the economy (first and foremost, the oil and natural gas industries) and reassert its control over national politics, the judicial system, and the national television networks, from which an overwhelming majority of

Russians get their news. In foreign and security policy, the doctrine has amounted to a reinterpretation of Russia's geostrategic triad, making its implementation and maintenance considerably more assertive than originally intended. Although U.S. President Barack Obama has signaled lately that he will attempt to revive the "reset" with Russia, Washington's best option may well be a strategic pause: a much-scaled-down mode of interaction that reflects the growing disparity in values and objectives between the two countries yet preserves frank dialogue and even cooperation in a few select areas.

THE PUTIN DOCTRINE IN PRACTICE

The first imperative of Russia's foreign policy consensus is maintaining the country's position as a nuclear superpower. The centrality of preserving Russia's parity with the only other nuclear superpower, the United States, explains Moscow's eagerness to engage in strategic arms control negotiations with Washington. At the same time, Putin's assertive pursuit of this goal accounts for the vehemence with which Moscow has opposed anything that could weaken this strategic parity, such as NATO's missile defense system in Europe. It is hardly surprising, then, that the claims of top U.S. and NATO officials that the system poses no threat to Russia's nuclear deterrence have fallen on deaf ears. As Putin declared in his speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry last July, the missile shield allegedly "upsets the strategic balance" -- that is, it weakens Russia's status as a nuclear superpower.

A secondary but symbolically important (not to mention financially rewarding) pillar of Russia's position as a nuclear superpower is its export of nuclear technologies. The state nuclear energy corporation, Rosatom, has been busily selling nuclear technology and currently has contracts for the sale of nuclear reactors to China, Turkey, India, Belarus, and Bangladesh. Iran has been a particularly attractive customer -- Russia helped construct the \$1 billion Bushehr nuclear power plant in the face of U.S. resistance. The Bushehr project underscored not only Russia's nuclear technological capacity but also Moscow's willingness to assert its policies in the face of Washington's resistance.

This imperviousness to U.S. wishes is central to Putin's reinterpretation of the second objective of Russia's foreign policy consensus: broadly maintaining the country's status as a great power. It is in this context that Moscow has actively pursued former Soviet clients in the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia. Emblematic of this policy were the upgrading in 2009 of the supply-and-repair facility at Tartus in Syria and Putin's visit to Cuba in December 2000, the first by a Russian or Soviet leader since Leonid Brezhnev's trip there in 1974. Moreover, Moscow's use of the UN Security Council to weaken or block U.S. initiatives has steadily risen: in the 1990s, Russia cast two vetoes in the Security Council; between 2000 and 2012, it wielded its veto eight times.

The pursuit of the third component of the foreign policy consensus -- regional hegemony -- has led Moscow to strive for the political, economic, military, and cultural reintegration of the former Soviet bloc under Russian leadership. In his speech at the Foreign Ministry last summer, Putin reaffirmed this commitment, calling the "deepening of the integration" of former Soviet territory the "heart of our foreign policy." Despite less-than-enthusiastic cooperation from the newly independent states, this quest has resulted in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (a military alliance that includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and the customs union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, which is set to evolve into the Eurasian Union by 2015, a project that Putin has advocated frequently and forcefully.

Under the Putin Doctrine, the pursuit of regional hegemony has acquired a new dimension: an attempt at the "Finlandization" of the post-Soviet states, harkening back to the Soviet Union's control over Finland's foreign policy during the Cold War. In such an arrangement, Moscow would allow its neighbors to choose their own domestic political and economic systems but maintain final say over their external orientation. Accordingly, Moscow has taken an especially hard line against former Soviet republics that have sought to reorient their foreign policy. In the case of Georgia, which openly aspired to NATO membership, Russia went to war in an attempt to humiliate and dislodge President Mikheil Saakashvili's regime. Similarly, Moscow sought to destabilize the Ukrainian government of Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko -- who advocated joining the European Union and, eventually, NATO -- by shutting off or threatening to shut off natural gas deliveries in 2006 and 2009. Today, even with a far more pro-Russian government in Kiev, Moscow refuses to lower the prices of its natural gas exports to Ukraine -- which pays more than many European importers -- until the country abandons plans for gradual integration into EU economic structures and, instead, charts a path to membership in the eventual Eurasian Union.

Another central pillar of the Putin Doctrine, the pursuit of unchallenged military superiority in Russia's neighborhood, explains the steady increase in Moscow's defense budget during Putin's years in power, from an estimated \$29 billion in 2000 to \$64 billion in 2011 (both figures are listed in 2010 U.S. dollars). Even in today's tough economic environment, Moscow continues to expand defense outlays at rates far outpacing those for other domestic programs, including education and health care. During his campaign for the presidency in February 2012, Putin promised a "comprehensive and systematic rearmament" of the Russian military and "modernization of the military-industrial complex," pledging to spend 23 trillion rubles (\$770 billion) on these projects in the next ten years.

THE BESIEGED FORTRESS

With its fundamental objective of recovering state control over politics and the economy, the Putin Doctrine has inevitably led to authoritarianism. Just as inexorably, the Russian authoritarian restoration has forced the Kremlin to draw on sources of legitimacy outside the subverted democratic institutions. As a result, the regime has played up alleged external threats. Russians' only plausible protection from these foreign dangers, Putin has argued, is the courageous leadership of the current regime. This mode of legitimizing can be called the besieged fortress strategy.

In 2004, a few weeks after Chechen extremists took hostages in a North Ossetian school, Vladislav Surkov -- the deputy chief of the presidential administration who is now deputy prime minister -- laid out a vision of Russia as a besieged fortress. According to Surkov, anonymous foreign malfeasants, hungry for the country's natural resources, were plotting to "destroy Russia and fill its enormous space with many weak quasi-states." Furthermore, he added that in the "de-facto besieged country," outside plotters were helped by "the fifth column" of traitors, the "left and right radicals," who have "common foreign sponsors," and that these traitors are united by "the hatred of what they claim to be Putin's Russia but, in fact, [is the hatred] of Russia herself." Since then, Surkov's three themes -- the never-ceasing attempts to subjugate or destroy the Russian state, the anti-regime opposition as tools of those behind the plotting, and equating the present government with the Russian nation -- have become the staples of the regime's propaganda. As one might expect, the besieged fortress theme is given most visibility and intensity when the regime's need for bolstering its legitimacy appears to be the greatest. And the threat of the United States is a common focus.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of Obama's first term, U.S. and Russian interests seemed to overlap enough for both countries to compromise on some divisive issues. After Washington and Moscow launched the "reset" in March 2009, a number of cooperative efforts followed. These included the Northern Distribution Network (a series of logistic arrangements used to ship NATO materiel and personnel through Russian territory to Afghanistan); the cancellation of Washington's planned deployment of missile interceptors and a radar in Poland and the Czech Republic; the signing of New START; and Moscow's vote in June 2010 for UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which imposed sanctions against Iran.

But by the end of 2011, Washington and Moscow began to drift apart, as a changing geopolitical context has produced a growing disconnect between the two countries' objectives and guiding values in key policy areas. In the nuclear arena, European missile defense appears to have hardened into an insurmountable obstacle to Russia's cooperation on other strategic arms reduction agreements. Moscow has threatened to withdraw from New START, and in October 2012, it announced its abandonment of the 20-year-old Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, under which the United States has spent more than \$7 billion to help deactivate over 7,500 Russian strategic warheads.

Meanwhile, from Washington's vantage point, this new geopolitical context is also marked by a significant diminution of Russia's relevance to key U.S. interests. In Afghanistan, the rapid drawdown of U.S. troops obviated much of the need for the Northern Distribution Network after 2014. With respect to Iran, Moscow has ceased support for even the weakened version of sanctions it previously voted for in the UN Security Council. Syria, of course, has been the starkest demonstration of the divergence in guiding values and objectives between the United States and Russia: Moscow has thrice vetoed U.S.-supported Security Council resolutions calling for sanctions against Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Domestic politics has also emerged as an increasingly complicating factor. In Russia, the regime's repressive response to the rise of the anti-Putin, pro-democracy movement -- led by the middle class -- has pitted two structural imperatives of the countries' foreign policies against each other: U.S. support for democratic self-rule on the one hand, and the Putin Doctrine's focus on maintaining the state's firm control over national politics on the other. Meanwhile, in the United States, Congress passed the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act last December, prohibiting Russian officials implicated in human rights abuses and corruption from entering the United States and freezing their U.S. assets. In reaction, Moscow banned the adoption of Russian orphans, many of whom are sick or disabled, by American families.

TIME FOR A PAUSE

The divergence of the United States' and Russia's core foreign policy objectives has left the White House with two strategic options. The first is attempting to revive the "reset." Washington appears to be trying this strategy at the moment. According to sources in Moscow, during a phone conversation with Putin last November after the U.S. presidential elections, Obama accepted Putin's invitation for a summit in Russia before the end of 2013. In February, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden held a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Munich, and it now appears that U.S. National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon will be dispatched to Moscow soon to discuss ways to revive nuclear arms control negotiations. (Acting Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller, who was the chief negotiator of New START, traveled to Russia in the second week of February.)

But there is also another option for U.S. policy -- and it may well be wiser: a strategic pause. In relations between countries, as between individuals, such intermissions can provide much-needed time to define priorities in the relationship and the price each side is prepared to pay for achieving its goals. There is no better time than now for the United States -- both its leaders and the public -- to engage in such a debate. A pause in engagement, moreover, need not mean inaction or silence. As the Obama administration ponders what to do about the most pressing and divisive issues in U.S.-Russian relations -- missile defense in Europe, U.S. opposition to growing authoritarianism and repression in Russia, and Moscow's pursuit of the "Finlandization" of its neighbors -- the lines of communication should be kept open for a frank dialogue.

In the end, the decisive role in shaping the future of U.S.-Russian relations will be played by the Russian people themselves -- and the success of their democratic impulse seems closer today than at any time since 1991. The emergence of a free, democratic, stable, and prosperous Russia would be enormously beneficial to the United States, so assisting this process ought to be the overarching priority of U.S. policy. In the years ahead, the challenge will be to find the middle ground between the hubris of thinking that Washington can shape and guide Russia's domestic evolution and the folly of complete resignation.

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