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Assessing Russia's Global Role: What are Moscow's Ambitions?

At the *stars Switzerland symposium 2018*, **Ivan N. TIMOFEEV**, Director of Programmes at Russian International Affairs Council and Director of Euro-Atlantic Security Programme at Valdai Discussion Club, shared his view on Putin's role within the Russian political system, key bilateral relationships and various hot spots of Russian foreign policy. This summary has been written by Markus Herrmann, Co-Head Asia Program, Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy (foraus).

Does Russia "equal" Putin?

- Political scientists characterize Russia as a **super-presidential system** with the president and his administration exerting an unusually high level of influence on political decision-making in relative absence of corrective functions of the parliament, courts or media
- However, there are indeed important **limitations**:
 - **Constitution** – the formal authority of the Constitution, which Putin **respected in 2008 as part of the power transition** from him to Medvedev, although he could have extended his presidential term via a highly likely majority via a popular referendum
 - **Foreign vs. domestic policy** – the President is constitutionally empowered for foreign policy making, while power for domestic policy domains is devolved and executed by a **bureaucracy-, agency- and experts-driven decision-making apparatus**
 - **Duma** – while not a decisive power factor and rather conformist to the President, as a constitutionally authoritative force the Duma has **formal power** and in particular provides balance to Russia's policymaking by traditionally being more receptive to popular signals
 - **Political elite factions** – **conservatives** fearing foreign interference and loss of sovereignty and grand power status vs. the **economic bloc** with more liberal visions and economic policy stance
 - **Opposition** – a recent case with protesters rallying against allegedly "stolen" election of a pro-Putin candidate in Vladivostok where Moscow eventually felt pressured to annul the elections show that Russia is not a monolithic power bloc
 - **Implementation** – estimated only about 30% of Presidential decisions are consistently implemented across the multi-level governance system

What are likely scenarios when Putin's six year-term ends in 2024?

- Putin's **options** are:
 - Cultivating a loyal, younger candidate
 - Changing the constitution and staying on
 - Same as in 2008, switch into the Prime Minister role
 - Stepping-down and "leave"

- **Key factors** that will influence this power transition:
 - Fragility of international context
 - Russia's involvement in crises (e.g. Syria, Ukraine)
 - State of the Russian economy and level of reforms achieved
 - Perception of Russian political elites on Putin's performance
 - Putin's need for ensuring his personal security after the power transition
 - Attitude and behavior of elite networks facing potential loss of privileges
- It is unlikely that Putin will try to further extend his term, he will rather **cultivate a loyal, younger (40s or 50s) candidate** from his presidential team and strive for a peaceful power transition (like Yeltsin in 1999), some considerations:
 - After 18 presidential years, Putin has a **very high power concentration** which makes him vulnerable in case of under-performance
 - The **Putin/Medvedev tandem** has been viewed as quite effective, nonetheless this "switch" is unlikely to happen again
 - Regardless, it will be difficult to **"sell" his candidate** to the Russian public

Make Russia great again, or does Russia have a "grand strategy"?

- Russia has **ambitions** (rather than a strategy), its three key ambitions:
 - Preserving its great power status (nuclear status, UN Security Council)
 - Spurring economic growth – also finding ways of dealing with sanctions
 - Improving domestic situation (public discontent, lack of reforms, infrastructure gaps, lack of technological innovation)
- Putin is not viewed as a strategist, rather as a **tactician** who cleverly leverages situations of crises or concrete constellations for Russia's interest without pursuing a clear bigger picture – this approach has been legitimized in the domestic discourse by invoking strategies as inadequate means for **dealing with a complex world in turmoil**; Russia would also lack the **management bandwidth** and **capability** to execute such a grand strategy
- **Two examples** showing the **lack of strategic approach**:
 - Russia failed to devise a strategy for its announced **"turn to the East"**: therein, Russia's goal to reach USD 100 billion trade volume with China is unrealistic, as there are too many constraints such as the lack of infrastructure, market understanding and language/competency gaps
 - The only more recently announced **comprehensive reform plan** was drawn up by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and has been presented to Putin, but implementation is dragging
- However, not only Russia **fails to produce a coherent strategy**
 - Contrary to the US and the EU, **China** has stronger capability to devise strategies and continuously coin new narratives, visions and concepts (e.g. community of common destiny, Belt and Road Initiative)
 - Specifically, China's strength is to **acknowledge its key issues** (financial stability, environment, poverty reduction) which is the prerequisite to identifying one's interests and devising a supporting strategy

Russia-China relationship

- Politically, it is the **best relationship since 20 years** and Trump's actions (latest sanctions communicated by the US Department of State on 21/9 against Russia) keep driving Russia closer to China

- Key areas for attempted **deepening of bilateral cooperation**:
 - Economic cooperation, e.g. in Russia's Far East for agricultural industry
 - Joint positions on international issues, e.g. Syria
 - Joint military exercises
- **Factors** positively influencing this relationship:
 - Mutually most important **strategic partner**
 - **Personal chemistry** between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin
 - Broad and high-level **political dialogues**
 - **Conflicts** with the US (Russian foreign influence, China-US trade war)
 - Being mutual **fall back options** to avoid international isolation
- **However**:
 - In Russia's perception, China is quite comfortable in a US-led world order and thus a **formal alliance** would reduce China's room for maneuver and would be contrary to Russia's traditionally **independent foreign policy** and its attempt to avoid strategic interdependence with China
 - Russia's need to balance Sino-Russian ties **with its Europe relationship**
 - Thus, Russia's broader **Asia-Pacific policy** cannot be viewed as Sino-centric; e.g., the **Russia-Japan** relationship revolves around Japan's fear of China's rise as well as the need to solve territorial disputes
 - A strain in the China-Russia relationship is the **asymmetry in economic power**; Russia, unlike the US, EU, Japan, Korea or Australia, is not an important trade partner for China
 - Finally, China hopes for **betterment in the EU-Russia relationship**, as this would also benefit the EU-China relationship
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**
 - **Important initiative** for Russia
 - Accessions by India and Pakistan will impact **SCO's effectiveness**
 - No visible capitalization of this foreign policy investment due to **priority mismatch** (Russia's focus on political, China on economic collaboration)
 - Importance should **not be overestimated**, incomparable to NATO or EU
- **Belt-and-Road (BRI) initiative**
 - Russia should openly and actively engage in this **opportunity** and focus on the "**Silk Road Economic Belt**" which, however, is more politicized
 - **Benefits** should be only expected in the longer-term
 - Austrian **EU presidency** puts connectivity high on the EU agenda

Russia-US relationship?

- Relations are at a **low point**, manifested in the fact that these two nuclear powers **stopped all bilateral security dialogues**
- Although, there is an array of important **agreements** governing this relationship such as arms control regime, treaty on strategic weapons, missiles, etc.
- The most toxic topic for this relationship is about **Russian interference**
- It is important that security policy circles **remain rational** to minimize the risk for **accidental crashes** (esp. in the Middle East)

Vision for Russia with Europe?

- End of the cold war was a **missed strategic opportunity** of integrating Russia
- Today, the EU-Russia relationship is rather **short-term oriented, technical and issue-centered**, while strategic narratives or a vision which could constructively help guiding the future development of this relationship are clearly missing
- However, for Europe's **long-term stability** a positive vision for EU-Russia relationship is essential

Who is in the best geo-strategic position: Beijing, Moscow or Washington?

- **Golden rule of diplomacy** "in a triangle, you need to have the better relationship with both bilaterally than these two countries have among themselves"
- Applying this logic, the **US in the worst position**, as it has to contain both China and Russia which is a nightmare for Kissinger-style US foreign policy
- **China** still has space to maneuver in the overall relationship with the US which as such is a great achievement of Chinese diplomacy, whereas **Russia-US relationship** is clearly in a low
- Thus, in case of a **global crisis** Chinese diplomacy would likely play a critical role

Syria

- Russia only started to **engage in Syria in 2015** (civil uprising was in March 2011)
- Russia's **main motivations** to initiate military operations in Syria were:
 - Push back on West's self-legitimized **interference in sovereign states**
 - Not leaving the **Middle East** to the US and the Gulf states
 - Preserve its **military air base** in the Mediterranean
 - **Power projection**
- Although domestically being viewed as a resource-effective and successful military operation that secured Assad from collapse, **economic and diplomatic costs are very high** and **key questions** remain unanswered:
 - How to achieve recognition of Assad's regime?
 - How to rebuild Syria's infrastructure and economy?
 - How to bring in foreign donors and investors?
 - How to lead the transition process?
- Russia's Syria engagement is **not part of an overarching Middle East strategy**, but likely more motivated by tactical reasons

Ukraine/Crimea

- Main challenge for Russia from the Crimea issue is the **relationship with the EU**
- More "**simple**" situation than in Syria: less stakeholders and clear interests
- Managing the Crimea crisis is like an "**exam**" for **EU diplomacy**: if they succeed, the EU can emerge as a much more respected international actor
- The EU has leverage to help solve this issue with its **more flexible decision-making on sanctions** (EU Council), and it could set off a **positive tit-for-tat** in case it accepts ongoing lifting of sanctions proportional to the requirements met
- Regardless, **Donbass** is not up for negotiation for the Russian side

Skripal issue

- This issue has **severely affected** the already tense Russian-UK relationship
- Lack of **publicly accessible data** and thus very hard to build a solid judgement
- Nonetheless, UK and Russian versions portrayed in media are **not plausible**:
 - **UK version**: what would be the political goal for Russia and why would Russia choose this type of “unprofessional” plan?
 - **Russian version**: what would be political goal if UK had arranged it itself, and why would the UK government take this political risk?
- Regardless, Russia’s diplomacy failed in the tone of addressing the international concerns around the Skripal case, reaction was partially sarcastic and hostile
- Although recent **Russian-Swiss bilateral** relationship has been generally good (except: Ueberlingen plane-crash and Berezovsky affair), with regards to the alleged **recent Russian intelligence activity in Switzerland**, Russia should more actively reassure Switzerland of its intentions
 - This relationship goes beyond bilateral, as Swiss diplomacy performs the mediation function with regards to the **Russia-Georgia relationship**

Can Russia and Turkey become closer partners?

- Turkey is **NATO member** and is not willing to alienate its relationship with the **US**
- Furthermore, there is **insufficient common** ground for joint action (e.g. misaligned interests on Syria or Middle East)
- Thus, they will likely **remain opportunistic partners** (not strategic partners)

Russia as a threat to the Baltics?

- Perception of a security threat by Russia is **highly exaggerated**
- Baltics are part of **NATO**
- Russia plays a key role in the **domestic political discourse** in the Baltics

Recent articles written by Ivan N. TIMOFEEV:

- [U.S. Sanctions against Iran: Background and Possible Consequences](#)
- [DASKAA and the New Anti-Russia Sanctions: Does the US Want Self-Isolation?](#)

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