

# Putin Reconstitutes Russia's Great Power Status

PONARS Policy Memo 318

*Pavel Baev*

*International Peace Research Institute*

*November 2003*

That Russia is a great power appears to be an axiom of world politics, a point of reference accepted even by those who venture advice along the "Forget Moscow" line. Countering reams of political analysis and decades of policy tradition are the words of Joseph Brodsky, who said in February of 1996 in an interview reprinted in *Izvestiya*: "I think that Russia as a Great Power is over... Russia's space will shrink. You can stand up from the gambling table. It is all over." Indeed, so much power was lost during the 1990s, so much influence spent and opportunity wasted that this status cannot be taken for granted any more. Vladimir Putin, a self-styled pragmatist, is aware that sustained efforts have to be invested in upholding Russia's "greatness," while pretending that it is a given may help to increase returns on these investments. Often struggling against odds and playing a weak hand, he has achieved a lot more than his critics (including this author) ever believed possible. To give him due credit (and cut down on undue praise), we need to look into the substance and parameters of great power in a world shaken by terrorism and stirred by the U.S.-driven war against it.

## Geography of a Power Play

Starting with the spatial dimension, it was Mikhail Gorbachev who accepted the reduction of the USSR's global reach, discontinuing Soviet involvement in exotic places such as Angola or Ethiopia. Putin, ordering the closure of military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, is following suit while avoiding any reference to his predecessor. But already at the start of Russia's new life as a post-Soviet state, a consensus has emerged among its reshuffled political elite that superpower ambitions have to be scaled down to a regional great power level.

The problem with this reasonable self-depreciation is that due to its unique vastness, Russia could not recast itself as a major power in one particular region; it has to stretch this role over four regions: Europe; the Caucasus, with Turkey and Iran behind it; Central Asia, flanked by Afghanistan; and Asia-Pacific, where China looms large as the ascending power. This four-region spread reveals that Asia as a geopolitical concept makes no sense whatsoever when looking from Moscow, and the mystical "heartland" is an entirely artificial academic construct.

Russia has to employ different instruments to support its aspirations in these regions and, characteristically, it is only in the Asia Pacific region where its tremendous nuclear

capabilities are a factor of political strength. Beyond the immediate frontiers in the three southern directions, Russia has forged special relations with three key regional powers: India (where the traditional friendship is kept alive by the vast export of conventional arms); Iran (where the controversial nuclear program is very much center stage); and, remarkably, Israel (where the large community of émigrés from Russia provides for a wide web of links).

If Putin's first steps in raising Russia's profile in these four regions and in cultivating these special relations were informed by the concept of multipolarity, he has since discovered that a different guide is needed. There was little to gain in opposing U.S. hegemony, so instead of spending scarce resources on this futile counterbalancing, Putin has opted for bandwagoning. This strategy faced much internal criticism for appeasing the United States by scrapping the ABM Treaty, retreating from Central Asia and losing Georgia. The proposition of a security partnership might initially have seemed far-fetched, but now even the hard traditionalists concur that by joining ranks with the United States in the war against terrorism, Moscow has managed to rebuild its influence by utilizing the assets (as well as vulnerabilities) of the hyperpower, the United States.

## **Trajectory of Climbing Up**

This re-orientation has not been achieved in one somersault but involved a succession of difficult choices. In the span of four years, Russia has faced four crucial crossroads, and if it did not always make the right turn (too good to be true), it did manage to get out of dead-ends. NATO's war against Yugoslavia provided the first of these crossroads, and Moscow—despite all the emotional quarrels—contributed to finding a solution and even sent troops to Kosovo. Putin, therefore, has not started his networking from such a low point (the real nadir was perhaps the financial meltdown of August 1998). His arrival at the Kremlin on the Chechen war ticket in fact created the second crossroads, where broad Western condemnation of human rights violations combined with pronounced suspicions about Russia's new leader tempted him to adopt a defiant stance and exploit anti-American sentiments in Russian society. He took a different course and, with a maturity rare in such a novice, patiently exploited every available opportunity to explain himself to the Western counterparts.

His performance at the next crossroads, the September 11 attacks, with their vast resonance, was praised perhaps beyond merit, because it was the quickness of his response rather than the quality of the cooperative effort that made the difference. Putin instantly saw a chance to increase his international ratings by making a few symbolic gestures (rather than, for instance, sending Russian troops to the familiar Afghan theater) and did not spoil this chance by untimely bargaining.

He hesitated much longer at the most recent crossroads, the run-up to the Iraq War, before throwing his lot with the "old Europe." Many commentators rushed in with the opinion that a red carpet in Paris was not worth the spoiled personal friendship with President Bush, but even the fast collapse of Saddam's regime did not prove Putin wrong. He has managed to restore relations with the United States with the kind of ease that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder can only dream about. Putin even continued to play hard-to-get on the October 16 2003 UN resolution on Iraq. Overall, the fact of

Russia moving to the very center of the international power play may have a lasting resonance.

It would be a gross exaggeration to claim that at each of these crossroads Russia gained only in prestige and profile. In fact, much influence in the Balkans has been lost since the Kosovo war; Russia's dominance in Central Asia was visibly reduced by the impressive U.S. victory over the Taliban; and ties with Iraq (for what they were worth) have been effectively cut off. Nevertheless, the overall balance of gains and losses is definitely in Moscow's favor because it has managed to build new positions of strength in areas that really matter.

## **Substance of Greatness**

It has not only been opportunism that has helped Russia to climb, it has been also a serious revision of the very concept of great power that has happened along the way. Yeltsin's barely comprehensible nuclear "reminder" at the outset of the Kosovo war marked Moscow's last attempt to exploit its strategic capabilities for upholding its international status. It was probably the *Kursk* catastrophe in August 2000 that forced Putin to accept the fact that the nuclear arsenal was a huge problem rather than a usable asset for Russia. That devaluation also reduced Moscow's concerns about nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, while it maintains all the proper non-proliferation stances insofar as it helps keep up its reputation.

Putin cannot find much comfort in illusions deriving Russia's greatness from its sheer size. As a man from St. Petersburg, Putin never had much exposure to the vastness of Russian space before he arrived at the Kremlin; although he has traveled a lot during his first presidency, little of what he has seen matches the image of a modern and dynamic country that he tries to sell to Western partners and investors. He cannot rely on demographics either: the country's population is shrinking with alarming speed. In fact, Putin himself spelled out this problem in his first address to Parliament in June 2000, and even if he has abandoned it later as politically unprofitable, it has not gone away.

Worth noting is the fact that Moscow's stock exchange has outperformed most emerging markets (and Russia's credit rating was raised by Moody's to the investment grade) but this still leaves a serious discrepancy between Russia's modest economic success and sharp improvement of its international profile. There is a distinctive new quality to this yet uncertain greatness, and it is Putin who is eagerly developing it along the way. Indeed, you can only be great if others not only invite you for the sake of tradition but also take your position into serious consideration even when you are not present at that particular table. Carefully measuring his bets, timing, and space for maneuvering, Putin has time and again secured for himself a position where his voice really mattered. It is very much a one-man-game while, overall, the quality of Russian diplomacy has hardly improved since the times of Andrei Gromyko, who was Soviet foreign minister from 1957 to 1985. For this president, being centrally involved in global decisionmaking often appears more important than the substance of decisions collectively made; accordingly, a major challenge to this fledgling greatness is the pronounced unilateralist tendency of the Bush administration.

## Frameworks of Self-promotion

The greatness that Putin seeks to build exists only in the ever-shifting interplay among the key international players, which has to be structured accordingly. Moscow shows little interest in working through the established international organizations, which follow their bureaucratic patterns and provide few opportunities for solo performance. What appears to be its framework of choice is a small exclusive club (like the G8), around which various informal *troikas* and ad hoc coalitions of the willing spring up and intertwine. For that matter, Russia has little interest in the UN as an organization (and even less in the OSCE, despite habitual lip service), but shows much enthusiasm for the Security Council, making sure that no reform proposals would change its nature as an exclusive club where it enjoys privileged membership.

This pursuit of greatness combines in a peculiar way modern methods of networking and ancient Talleyrand-style intrigue, so much more useful because there is not much soft power behind it. Crucial opportunities for Putin have appeared in the gap between the United States and its European allies, and he has exploited those with remarkable skill, never slipping into the old Soviet pattern of hammering along the cracks in the Western alliance. Casting himself as a leader with impeccable European credentials, who has no difficulties whatsoever communicating with the polished Tony Blair and the somewhat less-polished Silvio Berlusconi, Putin at the same time sets Russia on a course that hardly takes it any closer to Europe (Iver Neumann has greatly influenced my thinking here). Indeed, whatever differences Berlin and Paris and London may have over Iraq, the fundamental trend remains toward the ever-closer European integration, while Russia falls further and further behind. Its newly upgraded greatness may be entirely incompatible with building a common European foreign and security policy, tortured as this process is. And the famous Community *acquis*, the body of common rights and obligations that bind all EU member states and which the East European candidates have spent so much time studying, remain incomprehensible for bureaucrats in the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Nevertheless, Russia has climbed to a level of Euroatlantic visibility and prominence that can qualify as greatness, even if of a very ephemeral kind. Treating international relations much the same way as public relations can take you only so far, whatever your personal charms and skills with PR technologies. Whether the next crossroad involves North Korea, Iran, or Cuba, Putin's ability to deliver will be tested anew, and one false step could cost him dearly. His courtiers appear to be at each other's throats and thus are of little help in selling his services. Presiding over a one-dimensional superpower was certainly a much easier job than keeping a virtual great power on track.