
A New Explanation for Russian Foreign Policy THE POWER OF INFORMAL PATRONAGE NETWORKS

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When most analysts look at Russian foreign policy today, they treat Russia as if it is a unified state with a meaningful strategy and clear goals. They focus on Russian national interests, state security concerns, relative power in the international system, or the cultural identity and tendencies of the Russian nation. Sometimes they focus on Vladimir Putin as an authoritarian leader, and foreign policies are assumed to reflect Putin's personality or personal ideology. Even then, though, the assumption is that Putin leads the state and has a strategy to achieve clear state-based goals.

Yet when most serious analysts look at Russian *domestic* political and economic questions today, they instead see an opaque world of competing, overlapping, and evolving informal networks of individuals. In this world, people ensure their own futures by attaching themselves to powerful patrons. The resulting patron-client networks scabble against each other for control over resources and cash flows, merging and splitting as circumstances warrant. In the political sphere, the transition from President Dmitry Medvedev back to Putin is sometimes seen as an indicator that the hardline *siloviki* (power ministry and former KGB) faction gained advantage over the more moderate and westward-leaning economic faction. The moderate faction may now be fueling the opposition, even though it earlier bought into the *siloviki's* wealth-for-stability bargain. Meanwhile in the commercial sphere, Putin's Rosneft oil faction of Igor Sechin seems to be beating the Gazprom natural gas faction of Medvedev and his colleague Aleksei Miller, although the personal standing of Sechin has lately been called into question.

From this perspective, Putin is not simply an authoritarian state leader with normal state interests. He is instead the leading representative of a shady cohort of interconnected bosses who struggle to maintain their precarious positions at the top of the Russian pyramid. A sudden power shift might send Putin tumbling, too.

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The argument of this memo is that Russia's foreign policy should logically be treated as an extension of domestic politics. If Russian political and business interactions reflect the interplay of opaque personal patronage networks, then foreign policy must flow from those interactions too. While network competition in the foreign policy realm is undoubtedly bounded by some shared sense of Russian national interests, concerns, and culture, it is patronage politics and network competition—not just “normal” state interests—that best describe Russian foreign policy today.

Individual personalities, not the official offices they occupy, determine influence over policy. These individuals are self-interested, and they seek to protect and expand their own network's power at every opportunity; ideology plays a backseat role at best. State resources will be used on behalf of important individuals and their clients, and individual network interests will sometimes outweigh the interests of the state itself. As Henry Hale has noted in his pathbreaking research on patron-client systems, powerful leaders must constantly signal their continuing strength to their internal audience, in order to hold their networked coalitions together.

Five major foreign policy implications result from this perspective on Russian politics. First and most obvious, Russian leaders cannot afford to be seen as capitulating to American pressure. The patron's strength determines the wellbeing of the network. Given Russia's Cold War and immediate post-Cold War history, strength will continue to be defined in terms of independence from Washington.

Second, while leaders will try to appear tough and even aggressive internationally, to prove that they are strong and ascendant, they will avoid high-risk foreign policy actions that might damage the state whose resources they are milking. Putin engages in bluster, easy shots across the bow, and even small aggrandizements—as in the nine-day Georgian border war of 2008—but he pursues a foreign policy that is fundamentally conservative and risk-averse.

An example is found in Russian-Iranian relations. While U.S. politicians sometimes accuse Russia of helping Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, a review of the evidence indicates that this is unlikely. Three times in the Putin era Russia has voted in favor of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, especially when Iran has thwarted IAEA inspectors. In 2010 Russia agreed to forego S-300 surface-to-air missile deliveries to Iran that might have helped Teheran defend suspected nuclear sites from airstrikes (apparently in return for a promise of Israeli drone technology sales to Moscow, to assist Russia's ailing defense industry). Putin has loudly asserted Russia's independence but has been careful not to undercut core U.S. security interests or the functioning of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). He even seemed to rein in some assistance coming from Russia's nuclear defense science complex to Iran early in the 2000s. Russia did complete the civilian nuclear energy facility at Bushehr. While this cuts against U.S. unilateral sanctions, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear that the Obama administration did not object to the Bushehr facility in principle—only to the timing of Russia's support for it.

Third, even security-related foreign policy situations will be viewed through the lens of the economic interests of core patronage network members. The Bushehr project,

for example, brought money into Russia's civilian foreign nuclear construction complex and helped maintain the contract-fulfilling reputation of Rosatom and its Atomstroyeksport affiliate for projects in other countries (including India, China, and Turkey, among others). Rosatom oversees both civilian and defense-related nuclear matters in Russia, likely giving it connections to the *siloviki* faction. It is also telling that Gazprombank, which is 80 percent owned by Gazprom, was a primary source of loans for Rosatom in recent years (at one time owning a 49.8 percent stake in Atomstroyeksport). This indicates that Russian network interests in Bushehr extend beyond the *siloviki* and the nuclear complex to Medvedev's network, too. The timing of various delays in Bushehr's construction in the 2000s seem to reflect Iranian payments difficulties more than any other factor, again indicating the primacy of economic considerations.

Fourth, leaders will tend to view all actors, including foreign state leaders and officials, through the prism of individual and informal network-building or network competition. We know that decisionmakers everywhere tend to engage in "mirror imaging": people are hardwired to assume that other people face similar constraints and opportunities to their own. Russian leaders will likely assume that their foreign counterparts are also individuals at the top of competing patron-client systems. Every interaction will be seen as a network-to-network offer or payback and will be intensely personalized. This personalization of international interactions has been evident throughout the Putin era. Among the most infamous examples are Putin's refusal to negotiate with Georgia as long as President Mikheil Saakashvili was the primary representative of the Georgian state, and the Kremlin's undiplomatic hounding of U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, apparently over McFaul's prior academic publication and nongovernmental organization record.

More recently we have seen it at a quieter level in Putin's interactions with U.S. President Barack Obama. Most commentators have focused on the strained photos from their bilateral meeting at the June 2013 G-8 summit in Northern Ireland; Obama contributed to the strain by joking about both leaders' age-related sports disabilities (which undermined, intentionally or not, Putin's need to project strength at home). But there is a different story that helps to explain Russia's relative restraint in the Edward Snowden NSA leaker affair. Before their June meeting, Obama sent a personal letter to Putin, laying out areas of joint interest and potential resolution to the conflicts plaguing U.S.-Russian relations. Putin responded in kind, and Russian state news sources reported on the fact of this personal letter exchange. After the June meeting, Putin said in an interview that he thought Obama was sincere but not necessarily in control of his own domestic situation. In other words, Putin twice publicly indicated his desire to cooperate with and support Obama *as an individual*—even if this did not imply amity between Moscow and Washington as a whole, given Obama's lack of strength at home.

Snowden threw a wrench into this cooperative effort in July. Putin's desire to preserve the tie to Obama explains the otherwise puzzling stasis of Snowden's asylum bid. Much of the Russian public seemed to prefer that Putin admit Snowden as a political refugee. Pundits repeatedly predicted that such a decision was imminent, and

loud voices in the U.S. Congress threatened various (rather non-credible) forms of revenge under the assumption that this was just one more round of Russian confrontation with the United States. Meanwhile, Obama indirectly let it be known that he might cancel his next summit meeting with Putin in Moscow if Snowden were allowed to leave the airport. In other words, Obama threatened to symbolically disengage from Putin as an individual, and this explains why at every opportunity for several weeks Putin stalled for time. Putin couldn't maintain his reputation for strength if he were seen to be capitulating to American pressure, but he couldn't maintain his reputation for loyalty and good judgment if he first identified Obama as an individual worthy of his network's support, and then kicked sand in his face and squandered that network tie. Even when Snowden was eventually granted temporary asylum on August 1—a step that was probably inevitable—and Obama cancelled the summit as expected, the Russian reaction involved little fanfare and none of the grandstanding anti-Americanism that might have been predicted. Within days it was announced that Snowden's father would come to Moscow for the purpose of negotiating his return home to stand trial, and Obama said at a press conference that his personal relations with Putin remained good.

These first four implications help explain Russia's reaction to the Syrian civil war. Putin and Bashar Assad have had warm personal relations since Assad's first visit to Moscow in January 2005, when Putin wrote off huge Syrian debts to Russia and promised new arms sales. While Russia's actions toward Syria have been enormously frustrating to the Western community and to Israel, Putin has limited Russian risks by foregoing active intervention on behalf of Assad, despite the sometimes alarmist media coverage of an impending resumption of Cold War-type proxy military conflict. Moscow has repeatedly blocked potential UN Security Council inspections and resolutions against Assad, fulfilled contracts for advanced weapons, and even reportedly helped transport Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon to Syria. Yet the Russian naval ships that periodically appear at Russia's port facility in Tartus have thus far engaged in show, not military action. Some recent Russian deliveries to Syria of SA-17 surface-to-air missiles and advanced Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles were immediately destroyed by Israeli airstrikes, yet this did not provoke even a verbal official protest from Russia. And while Putin has talked about fulfilling Russia's earlier S-300 surface-to-air missile contracts to Assad, those missiles (like the earlier ones for Iran) do not seem to be in immediate transit—perhaps because some analysts believe that they would need to be maintained by Russian contractors on the ground in Syria, putting Russian lives at risk from another Israeli airstrike. If Putin's key goals are to maintain a positive personal connection to Assad and to support key Russian arms industry network members—rather than to ensure an Assad victory—this places his choices in a different light.

There is a fifth implication of this framework: we should expect the unexpected. Rather than following a consistent and predictable decisionmaking pattern, Russian policy comes in fits and starts. Decisions are crafted neither through formal institutions nor public debate, but by hidden bargaining between actors whose identities remain

shrouded. In domestic politics we saw this in July 2013 with the treatment of Aleksei Navalny, who in the space of several days received an unfair but publicly broadcast trial (throughout which he was allowed to send tweets to his supporters); was arbitrarily convicted and led away in handcuffs; was publicly encouraged to run for Moscow mayor anyway; and was then suddenly freed for an unknown amount of time with the threat of re-imprisonment held over his head, on what was said to be a technicality. We know that this was not done simply in reaction to the protests that followed Navalny's conviction, because the authorities predicted those protests. (Photographs showed three buses for taking away arrested protesters moving to central Moscow's Revolution Square ten minutes before the verdict was read.)

In foreign policy, the Snowden case showed the same signs of disjointed decisionmaking. At least twice in July there were reports that Snowden's release from the transit area of Sheremetyevo airport was imminent, but both times saw further delays and backtracking. When Snowden eventually left the airport it was not for the three-month administrative consideration period previously indicated by Russian authorities, but for a full year of temporary asylum—although only after the security services announced that they could not guarantee his safety, potentially leaving the door open for a future U.S.-Russian deal of some sort. This means that we should also expect that Putin's policies toward Syria might suddenly veer in one unexpected direction or another, in reaction to opaque domestic network bargains rather than a clear strategic direction.

The eventual end of the Putin era will likely not mean an end to the patronage-based politics on which the entire Russian system is currently based. Any successor to Putin will also focus on personalities more than institutions. That leader will also need to appear aggressively strong and independent, while avoiding truly risky actions, and privilege the economic interests of key network clients, even on security issues. We should also not expect that leader to be consistent over time.

The networks controlling the top may eventually shift. But as long as the Russian security services retain their ability to embarrass and selectively prosecute individuals through the release of compromising information, any shift in the system will be limited, regardless of who the leader is and what happens in the electoral sphere. Old KGB methods are well matched to the personality-driven patronage politics that currently drive Russia.

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