

# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3530 | MARCH 7, 2012

## How the U.S. Should Deal with Putin's Russia

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Vladimir Putin's victory in Russia's presidential election was marred with fraud, but nevertheless he appears to have a mandate from the Russian voters to rule for another six-year term. If re-elected in 2018, he may rule until 2024.

Regardless of the outcome of the November U.S. elections, a clear Russia policy is necessary, and it should not be the ill-fated "reset," which naively bet on President Dmitry Medvedev's staying in power.<sup>1</sup>

### Roadblocks to Rapprochement

**Anti-Status-Quo Foreign Policy.** During his campaign, Putin provided ample insights into how he views the world and Russia's relationship with the U.S. The picture is bleak. Much of Putin's pre-election rhetoric

harkened back the 19th-century nationalism and imperialism.

He likes to quote the 19th-century Russian foreign minister Count Alexander Gorchakov that "Russia is concentrating." Another slogan from the same era, often heard in the Moscow policy circles, belongs to the Czar Alexander III: "Russia has no allies but its army and navy." This is a prescription for a prickly foreign policy, belt tightening, rearmament, wars with neighbors, and a chronic confrontation with the West.

**Xenophobia.** Anti-Americanism in Russia is rampant.<sup>2</sup> Putin has relentlessly created an image of Russia under attack from Western enemies. It worked for the elections and is likely to continue as a pillar of Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Putin accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the State Department of "giving the signal" for recent mass demonstrations in Moscow.

Putin dehumanized opposition leaders by calling them "jackals scavenging near Western embassies"<sup>3</sup> and, taking a page from Rudyard Kipling, "monkey packs." After the elections, some of them—such as Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin, and hundreds of others in Moscow and

St. Petersburg—were detained during a post-election protest and issued summons to the notorious dissident-busting judge Olga Borovkova. It is likely some of them will be jailed for some time.

### The New Imperial Union?

Putin's geopolitical vision for Fortress Russia dominating the former Soviet Union is an independent pole in a "multi-polar world." It includes the overlapping organizational spaces of the Joint Economic Space, the Customs Union, and the Eurasian Union under the Russian leadership. The pressures on Georgia and Ukraine continue unrelenting, with the view to bring Kyiv into Moscow's fold and to change the regime in Tbilisi. Such a quasi-imperial contraption, however, will come at a cost—and Putin is willing to pay the price as long as oil prices are in triple digits.

### Enabler of Iran and Syria.

Flush with oil cash, Putin chose to confront the West and the Arab world over Syria and Iran. Together with China, he imposed two vetoes in the U.N. Security Council against the Syria sanctions. Russian support enables Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to kill his own people with impunity.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3530>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

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**Rearmament.** Putin put his money where his mouth is. He demanded that the U.S. severely curtail its NATO missile defenses, provide a treaty-like guarantee that ballistic missile defense will not be aimed at Russia, and share these technologies at no cost. He also announced a \$700 billion rearmament program, including a massive nuclear missile modernization.<sup>4</sup> So much for President Obama's "getting to zero."

Russia will also spend billions of dollars buying French *Mistral* assault ships, Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles, and German combat training systems. No more autarkic military-industrial complex when the Russian software and electronics industries are falling behind.

## The Real Problems

However, Russia's problems are the 21st century's problems: the lack of good governance and the rule of law to make the citizens safe and to attract domestic and foreign investment, the rise of Islamic minorities at home, poor relations with the West and the geopolitical competition with China and Turkey, and a threat of economically falling behind even India and Brazil.

Yet Russia is increasingly integrated into global trade flows. International business views Russia as an unsaturated market

for housing, durable and consumer goods, oil and gas services, and infrastructure. Today, many Soviet-era infrastructure—roads, airports, and power stations—are falling apart and need trillions of dollars in investments.

However, investors pay a high price for the Kremlin's domestic heavy-handedness. As Russia joins the World Trade Organization this summer, the U.S. Congress is likely to lift the obsolete 1974 Jackson–Vanik Amendment, which predicated Permanent Normal Trade Relations on free emigration. Yet, given the sorry state of the rule of law in Russia, Members of Congress are unlikely to remove the Jackson–Vanik roadblock without gaining a legislative tool to address Russian corruption and human rights violations.

## “Reset” Failure

The current anti-American tilt of Russian foreign policy prevents diplomatic cooperation, as a shared threat assessment and mutual understanding between the U.S. and Russia in dealing with the changing global environment is currently absent.

Despite clear statements to the contrary by Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the Obama Administration repeatedly declared that it is not competing with Russia for regional influence—not in the

Middle East and not in Eurasia. Apparently, the Kremlin has not received the memo. Instead, Russia is attempting to constrain U.S. foreign policy with little or no counteraction from Washington. Moscow would like to see the U.S. power so diminished in the Middle East and Europe that America could not act without Russia's permission.<sup>5</sup>

To address Putin's anti-American foreign policy, the U.S. should:

- **Reexamine** the strategy of “reset” with Russia. The President should commission the National Security Council to form a task force for a bottom-up review of Russia policy in view of Putin's return to the Kremlin and Moscow's sabotage of the U.S. policies on Iran and Syria. The U.S. should use its public diplomacy assets to “name and shame” Russia as an enabler of the Iranian and Syrian regimes.
- **Revitalize** relations with the sovereignty-minded countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, which were neglected during the first two years of the Obama Administration. The U.S. should emphasize ties with countries that care about their independence—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan—without compromising the U.S. democracy

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1. See Ariel Cohen, “Reset Regret: U.S. Should Rethink Relations with Russian Leaders,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3294, June 15, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/reset-regret-us-should-rethink-relations-with-russian-leaders>.

2. Ariel Cohen and Helle Dale, “Russian Anti-Americanism: A Priority Target for U.S. Public Diplomacy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2373, February 24, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/02/russian-anti-americanism-a-priority-target-for-us-public-diplomacy>.

3. Michael Bohm, “The Jackals Scavenging Among Us,” *Moscow Times*, December 14, 2007, at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-jackals-scavenging-among-us/351692.html#ixzz1oMfw3IMy> (March 6, 2012).

4. Fred Weir, “Fearing West, Putin Pledges Biggest Military Buildup Since Cold War,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 20, 2012, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0220/Fearing-West-Putin-pledges-biggest-military-buildup-since-cold-war> (March 6, 2012).

5. Ariel Cohen, “U.S. Should Respond to Russia's Unhelpful Role in the Middle East,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, March 2012 (forthcoming).

agenda and, if requested, provide economic advice and political-military cooperation, which is particularly timely as the U.S. is planning to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by 2013.

- **Consider** the bipartisan bill called Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, proposed by Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Benjamin Cardin (D-MD). It is named after a lawyer who exposed a \$230 million corruption scheme and died in pre-trial detention, apparently as a result of torture, beatings, and denial of medical care. The Magnitsky Act would ban most notoriously corrupt foreign officials from entering the U.S. and allow their

ill-gotten property to be seized and confiscated by U.S. courts. Similar legislation is being debated in Canada and some European countries.

### **Tough Times Ahead**

Russia's intransigent foreign policy will require the Administration to recognize its "reset" failures and provide leadership and consistent and robust pushback. With the fourth Putin term, it is Russia's zero-sum foreign policy that prevents Washington and Moscow from exploring areas where there may be a convergence of U.S. and Russian interests, including anti-terrorism, nonproliferation, and business ties. Spillover of disagreements over security and geopolitics hinders

cooperation in nonproliferation, global security, and business, as demonstrated in clashes over Iran, Syria, and missile defense.

Putin's comeback could mean tough times ahead for U.S.-Russian relations. But when engaging Moscow, the U.S. has to guard its national security interests, not engage in a self-deluding feel-good policy exercise.

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