

Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change

The imminent return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency of the Russian Federation in 2012 raises many questions about the future of Russian foreign and security policy as well as U.S.–Russia relations. To what extent will Putin seek to continue and implement the goals of current President Dmitri Medvedev’s modernization program? Will Putin reform the political system in the direction of decentralization of power and pluralism? Will the “reset” in U.S.–Russia relations endure? Even with these issues up in the air, the return of Putin as president will not significantly alter the course of Moscow’s foreign policy. Some argue that Putin never relinquished authority over foreign policy in the first place, and that may well be true. But even if it is, there are deeper structural reasons involving debates among Russian elites about foreign policy and Russia’s place in the world that are more important in explaining why Putin’s return will not usher in a significant policy shift.

Liberals, Balancers, and Nationalists

The debating parameters over Russia’s national identity and its core foreign policy goals are rooted in five elements of Russian history.¹ First, an enduring belief exists that Russia is a great power and must be treated as such. Second, that international politics is essentially a Darwinian or Hobbesian competition in which “realist” and “neo-realist” state-centric power politics is the dominant paradigm. Third, that Russia from Peter the Great 300 years ago to Putin and

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Medvedev today continually faces challenges to “catch up” to the economic, technological, and military achievements of its rivals. Fourth, that strategies concerning *how* to catch up are based in, and continue to define, contested aspects of Russian national identity that link domestic economic and political order with foreign policy priorities and orientation. And fifth, that the central debate today and for at least 200 years revolves around the extent to which Western liberalism is an appropriate model for Russia, and subsequently how closely Moscow should ally with the West, or certain partners in it, to achieve its goals.

Putin’s return as president will not significantly alter the course of Moscow’s foreign policy.

An analysis of the foreign policy views and programs of various political parties, groups, leading think tanks, and prominent experts leads to three major perspectives concerning main global trends and how Russian foreign policy should be formed. Pro-Western liberals advocate major reform of Russia’s political system, using Western market democracies as a model, and close ties with Europe and the United States. Great power balancers promote a more multi-vectored Russian foreign policy that is not so closely tied to Russia’s domestic economic and political development.

Nationalists tend to ascribe a special mission for Russia in international relations that calls for more integration, if not domination, of its neighbors who were formally part of the Soviet Union. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

These three groups are more or less ideal types. Some schools of thought might include features of other perspectives, and some subgroups within different schools of thought might serve as the basis for intellectual and political coalition-building on concrete foreign policy issues. The intellectual sources and theoretical foundations of these political outlooks have been in place for at least 200 years in a Russian debate over its identity, role in the world, and its interactions with the West. Slavophiles are the historical antecedents of the nationalists—emphasizing the unique character of Russian civilization based on Slavic Orthodox communitarian traditions and opposed to alien Western civilization—while Westernizers argue that Russia should emulate and learn from the West.

Liberals

The intellectual traditions of these Westernizers are the roots of modern Russia’s liberals, combining aspects of liberal institutional theory and realist thinking. The group usually advocates measures such as collective security, globalization, and membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). They are “Détentists” as opposed to “hawks.” Some pro-Western liberals of the early 1990s described

Table I: Who are the major domestic groups?

<i>Major groups</i>	<i>Important subgroups</i>	<i>Political representation</i>	<i>Influential Institutions</i>
Pro-Western liberals		Non-parliamentary parties and movements, including Yabloko; the Party of People's Freedom and Solidarnost movement	INSOR; Liberal Mission; Carnegie Moscow Center; partly—Academy of Sciences institutions (IMEMO, ISKRAN)
Great power balancers	Former pro-Western liberals	Most of the government's executive branch; parliamentary parties: United Russia and Just Russia	United Russia's "clubs"; Council on Foreign and Defense Policy; The Institute for Social Forecasting; partly—MGIMO and Academy of Sciences institutions
Nationalists	Neo-imperialists; proponents of regional domination; ethnic nationalists	Parliamentary parties: CPRF and LDPR	Many independent intellectuals; Historic Perspective Foundation; Institute for the CIS Countries

their goals not just as integration with the West, but as assimilation on the terms of the West. This was the core foreign policy goal of Boris Yeltsin's government in its first year (1992) when Yegor Gaidar was acting prime minister.

The idea was that Russia should subordinate its foreign policy goals to those of the West since the hope, and even the expectation for many, was that Russia would soon become a fully Western country. Becoming part of the West greatly overshadowed traditional Russian images of the country as a great power, and the sovereignty and role of the state were diminished by the goal of transforming into a market democracy. It was not long before this most liberal pro-Western wing lost traction in Russian politics, and an emphasis on Russian sovereignty, a greater role for the state, and the goal of re-emerging as an independent great power gradually came to predominate in Russian policies as well as policy debates.

Today, the liberals' views have been so marginalized that they are associated with strictly opposition politicians who have no significant influence such as Garry Kasparov, Boris Nemtsov, and Vladimir Ryzhkov. When liberal sentiments are voiced, they are quickly marginalized and often categorized as the "a-systemic" opposition with little influence on foreign policy.²

Great Power Balancers

For the purposes of this analysis, great power balancers interpret the dynamics of the international system to be more state-centric, focusing on Russian national

interests in the context of the balance of power. One might also call this group “realists” in an international relations theory framework, but because its belief in Russia’s status as a great power is such an elemental driving force of this identity, we think great power balancers is more appropriate. The main difference between liberals and great power balancers is that, for the former, for Russia to attain its rightful role as a great power does not necessarily mean a decrease in the status of the West—the two can coexist in parity. For the balancers, it means that the West is overplaying its role and should cede some of it to Russia.

Great power balancers are well represented politically and have significant government influence. The founding father of the great power school of thought is Evgeniy Primakov, who was an academic, Russia’s prime minister in 1998–1999, and its foreign minister before that starting in 1996. Primakov is considered Russia’s Henry Kissinger, both for being a statesman and for his straightforward realist conception of international affairs. Russian great power balancers may be called broader defense realists, who advocate maintaining a sphere of influence in the territory of the former Soviet Union and striving to contain U.S. global preeminence.

One of the versions of the great power balancers’ approach is “the independent foreign policy path” that political insider and analyst Vyacheslav Nikonov articulated in 2002. The argument was that while the principles of the Washington Consensus were not nearly as universal as had been hoped, there were still many universal values that Russia had in common with the West.³ These could be combined in a new global concert framework—one that would more accurately reflect the new balance of power in which Russia could pursue its separate path, but its independent national self-image would not be drastically different from Russia’s Western rivals. Nikonov is the ultimate insider intellectual, and his analytical framework steeped in traditional realism is at the heart of mainstream Russian thinking in international relations.⁴ Sergey Karaganov, an influential head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, is another representative of this group, although Karaganov is more inclined to promote Russia’s European orientation.

Great power balancers do not reject Western experience and are in favor of learning from the West. Their notion of Russia’s modernization relies in some respect on the historic tradition established by Peter the Great. They would like to import Western technology, attract direct foreign investment, and compete successfully with the West. The existence of “polarity” on the global arena is taken for granted, not perceived as simply one possible analytical lens. They strive to play the great power game not just on the regional stage, as most nationalists do, but on the global stage (e.g., in the G-8, G-20, and UN Security Council). Nevertheless, unlike current Chinese policy, Russian policy based primarily on great power balancers’ views seems to approach the global economy with its guard up.

Nationalists

The group broadly defined as “Russian nationalists” may be especially adverse to U.S. and Western interests. It includes at least three subgroups, namely neo-imperialists, proponents of a Russian sphere of influence (Russia’s regional domination of the post-Soviet space), and ethnic nationalists. Many nationalists challenge Russia’s current political boundaries, but draw different conclusions about the subsequent map and desirable foreign policy options.⁵

The essence of the neo-imperialist project is to restore a state within the borders of the Soviet Union. The most influential party that effectively backed neo-imperialism throughout the 1990s was the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The essence of those in favor of regional domination, the second subgroup, is state-building within the borders of present-day Russia, accompanied by subjugating other successor states and creating a buffer zone of protectorates and dependent countries around Russia. Finally, the essence of an ethnonationalist program is to unite Russia with the Russian communities in the near abroad and build the Russian state within the areas of settlement of ethnic Russians and other Eastern Slavs. This would mean reunifying Russia, Belarus, parts of Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan. Advocates of both ethnonationalism and neo-imperialism argue for redrawing political borders, but along different lines.

Unlike most ethnonationalists who often cherish traditional preindustrial values, neo-imperialists and regional dominators are modernizers, albeit 20th-century style. They favor a strong army, big cities, and industrial development. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, founder and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and vice-chairman of the State Duma, dismissed the image of a Russia of “small villages, forests, fields, accordion player Petr and milkmaid Marfa” as a writers-assisted communist plot aimed to partly compensate for the suppression of Russian nationalism.⁶ His is the Russia of historic might, world influence, and impressive richness. Zhirinovskiy sided with the painter Ilya Glazunov, who created images not of a country of drunken peasants, but an “empire with shining palaces of Petersburg, great historical traditions and achievements, thinkers of genius and the leading culture.”⁷ In 2010–2011, Zhirinovskiy’s rhetoric has included much more ethnonationalist, xenophobic overtones framed in his focus on the “Russian question.” It is a reflection of the growing popularity of this perspective in Russia.

The regional dominance outlook might be viewed as very similar to a neo-imperialist approach. Principles for a Russian policy of dominance over the “near abroad” were developed initially by then-presidential council member Andranik Migranyan in the early 1990s.⁸ In more policy-oriented and moderate terms, this outlook was advocated by the former chairman of the Committee for International Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations of the Russian Supreme

Soviet, Yevgeniy Ambartsumov. Dominance rhetoric was also present in some statements, articles, and reports of Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev from 1993.⁹ From 1996–2010, the most vocal advocate of the policy of domination was Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, who relied heavily on the political expertise of Konstantin Zatulin, who until April 2011 was first deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee for CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Affairs and Relations with Compatriots.

Views on U.S.–Russia Relations

Russian perceptions of the United States and its role in the world provide a powerful lens for framing not only how Russia conceives its foreign and security policies—far more broadly than U.S.–Russia bilateral relations—but also for understanding deeply-rooted notions of contemporary Russian identity and the country’s domestic political system.¹⁰ For most of the second half of the 20th century, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a competitive struggle for global power and hegemony, and each country viewed its adversary as the principal “other” around which much of its identity and foreign policy revolved. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a searing event for citizens of Russia as well as the other newly sovereign states of the region. Yet for most policymakers and elites in Moscow, old habits of measuring success or failure through a U.S.-centric prism have endured.

Throughout the whole history of post-Soviet Russia, the nationalists in particular have seen the United States as the main ideological and geo-strategic opponent. Ethnic nationalists are not as much concerned with the United States as neo-imperialists and proponents of Russian domination in Eurasia. Ethnic nationalists are essentially isolationists who “give away” the world to the United States. Neo-imperialists and regional dominators are concerned primarily with the U.S. “meddling” in the Russian neighborhood.

Table 2: Beliefs about the United States

<i>Major groups</i>	<i>The image of the U.S.</i>	<i>Desired response from U.S.</i>
Pro-Western liberals	Proponent of liberal democratic values; strategic partner	Not to assume that this group is mainstream; not to discredit it by too close association
Great power balancers	Power striving for dominance and unipolar world	Cooperate when possible and encourage more benign trends within the group
Nationalists	Ideological and strategic opponent	Understand that this group may strongly influence great power proponents or present a viable alternative

The Brief Liberal Interlude

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a dynamic evolution in Moscow toward the role of U.S. power in the world. For a brief period that concluded with the defeat of Russian liberal reformist parties in the December 1993 parliamentary elections, the United States was regarded as a model for Russian development, and key Russian government officials had high hopes for a “new world order” that would be co-managed by Washington and Moscow, even with Russia playing the role of junior partner. In other words, the views of the United States held by pro-Western liberals influenced official Russian thinking strongly in 1992–1993. However, the results of the December 1993 parliamentary elections favored those who backed more aggressive and anti-Western policies such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose misnamed Liberal Democratic Party won a plurality.

The defeat of the liberal reformers, caused principally by the economic crisis in the early 1990s, shifted Russian foreign policy to more traditional realist concepts asserting national interests and expanding power and influence. Increasingly, the U.S. liberal democratic model was viewed as perhaps inappropriate for Russia, but at the least it needed to be introduced far more gradually in order to take into account Russian traditions and values.

The dominant paradigm for Russian government officials and political elites since 1993 has been realism, with a higher relative weight probably placed on economic and military indices of power than soft power metrics. In the traditional Russian calculus (Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet), it is the power of coercion that dominates—typically through intimidation and/or buying support (a very hard-edged realism)—rather than the power of attraction. When Westerners emphasize values such as human rights and democracy, the default Russian reaction is deep concern that their interlocutors are being disingenuous, especially in dealing with Americans. U.S. promotion of democracy, liberal capitalism, a rules-based system of global governance, and similar ideas are interpreted as ideological fig leaves designed to conceal naked U.S. ambition to expand American power and influence abroad.

Balancing Returns

From 1993–2003, Russian foreign policy was dominated by great power balancers who were joined by many liberals disappointed with reform and the West. Beginning in 1996, Evgeniy Primakov started playing the key role in Russian foreign policy and the views of pro-Western liberals, as noted earlier, were gradually marginalized. Unfortunately for Primakov, the late 1990s were when Russia’s power was at its weakest, and U.S. unipolar dominance arguably at its peak. Nevertheless, Russia tried to shape the perception that it was a great power.

Primakov wanted to see Russia as a great power and an influential center of a multipolar world. He saw the formation of such a world and U.S.-led Western attempts to dominate the world arena as the major competing trends in global affairs. As we will demonstrate later, this view of Russia's role in the world and the international system coincides with that of Vladimir Putin.

The proponents of Russia's great power status understand that the United States sets the agenda and rules of the game in many interactions with Russia, controlling Moscow's policy options and strategies in many situations. However, they believe that the United States has had much less of an effect on Russia's thoughts—its preferences and desires.¹¹ It could not get Russia to want what the United States wanted in areas where the two countries' fundamental interests conflict. According to great power status proponents, Russia does not need U.S. protection and believes Moscow's views and interests have not been taken into consideration. U.S. preponderance is seen by great power proponents as a fact of life, but not as a source of legitimate authority. As Putin claimed in his much noted speech in February 2007 at the *Verkhunde* security conference, the era of U.S. unipolar predominance had come to an end, and a real multipolar world was emerging.¹² But even at the height of its power in the 1990s, in the view of Russian realists, the United States had not successfully transformed its hard power into soft power in its relations with Russia.¹³ Being true realists, Russian great power balancers are not very interested in the internal economic and political arrangements of other countries.

The ascent of realists dominating Russian foreign policy coincided with increasing disaffection for the Western model of liberal democracy for Russia. The ruble's financial collapse in 1998 was a watershed in this regard as even the most avid "liberal transformers" in the Clinton administration understood their efforts to support Russia's domestic transformation appeared at an end. The remarkable Russian economic recovery since 1998, as fragile democratic institutions were weakened under Putin's presidency, further damaged the case for the appropriateness of the Western model for Russia.

Putin's Shift

From 2000–2008, like many other nations in the world, Russia sought means to balance, or more correctly contain, U.S. unipolar hegemony. The United States was not viewed as malign, but often as misguided and overbearing. This perspective of the United States endured for the most part through the first term of Putin's presidency (2000–2004). It is especially important to keep in mind this time—Putin's first-term foreign policy—because it sheds light on the U.S.–Russian rapprochement in 2009–2011 and its potential future. Putin is conventionally characterized as deeply opposed to U.S. interests. For some, their analysis is based on his authoritarian centralization of power (i.e., dictatorial

rulers are inherently anti-American). For others, it is based more on the growing rift in U.S.–Russian relations during Putin’s second term. In our view, however, both characterizations are flawed. It is conveniently forgotten that, for a brief period in 2001–2002, Putin pursued his own version of a “reset” in U.S.–Russia relations, and his foreign policy orientation was at least as amenable to U.S. interests as Dmitri Medvedev’s has been during his presidency.

Russia’s circumstances started to change in the mid-2000s, but at least as importantly, Moscow’s disappointment with the Bush administration’s policies led to Putin’s increasing willingness to oppose Washington on a number of issues. Russian public opinion grew more negative on the U.S. role, but this was fairly consistent with the rest of the world, including Washington’s NATO allies.

The period from 2003–2008 marked another shift in Russian foreign policy and Moscow’s perception of U.S. power capacity and intentions, but principally because Russia’s confidence about its *own* re-emergence strengthened as economic growth accelerated. The watershed moment came in 2006 when Moscow paid off its Paris Club debt early, thus putting an end to Russia’s financial destitution of the 1990s, and this sense of financial sovereignty equated with a renewed emphasis on political sovereignty. Differences beginning in 2003 over the Yukos affair—which resulted in the kangaroo court trial and jailing of Russia’s most successful businessman, Mikhail Khodorkovsky—and especially over the series of “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan gave more sustenance to the argument that the United States sought to weaken Russia and thwart Moscow’s interests. Russian foreign policy remained embedded in a realist and pragmatic framework for the most part; the most significant change was the perception that Russian power was growing while the U.S. “unipolar moment” was receding into history. Putin’s position moved from a first-term centrist power balancer with Western inclinations to more of a second-term effort to appeal to Russian nationalism and opposition to U.S. policy, especially in post-Soviet space.

Mid-2000s Russian foreign policy reflected growing confidence about Moscow’s *OWN* re-emergence.

This phase of absolute great power balancers’ dominance in Russian foreign policy concluded in the second half of 2008 with the near concurrence of the Georgia War and the global financial crisis. While the Georgia War was a shock, the global economic crisis has had a far deeper impact on Russian leadership and elite perceptions of their interests in the ongoing changing balance of power in the world. After a decade of extraordinary economic growth, Russia’s economic

vulnerability was exposed once again to powerful external circumstances, especially the vicissitudes of oil prices. But as the global economic crisis started in the United States and hit European economies especially hard as well, the credibility of the Western model of development has also eroded further in the views of many Russian elites. It is quite an extraordinary turn of the wheel that in the late fall of 2011, the BRICS group of large emerging market economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) found themselves vulnerable to some highly indebted Southern European economies that not only threaten the Eurozone but the stability of the global economy at large.

In short, Russian elites are more unsure about the capacity and durability of U.S. power, but also less confident that the shifting global balance of power in

The global economic crisis has had a far deeper impact on Russian foreign policy than the Georgia War.

which China appears to be the principal beneficiary redounds to Moscow's favor. The almost knee-jerk inclination of the Russian leadership to identify the United States as the primary global threat to Russian interests on issues such as NATO expansion and missile defense has eroded to some extent. The growth of Chinese power, primarily projected in economic terms, has been extensive in recent years not just in Central Asia, but also throughout the "post-Soviet

space," which has been consistently defined by Russian leaders as their first priority, even "zones of privileged interests," as President Medvedev stated in 2008.¹⁴

Moscow's View of Obama's Reset

Moscow was initially skeptical about Barack Obama's intentions and capacity to alter some of the Bush administration's policies in Russia's neighborhood, but that skepticism has melted. The Bush administration's concerted efforts to admit Ukraine and Georgia into NATO were deeply unsettling. The perception of Washington's role in promoting the color revolutions of 2003–2005, especially the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, struck a very deep wound in Putin's capacity to trust his counterpart in the White House. The administration's announcement in January 2007 about missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic hit right on Moscow's deepest insecurities about encroachment in its backyard, the broken promises of NATO, and the erosion of Russia's nuclear deterrent. The perception of virtually unconstrained support for Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili before and just after the August 2008 five-day

war provoked Moscow's deepest suspicions of U.S. policy and intentions to undermine Russian interests.

The Obama administration's policies have subsequently helped to convince the Russian leadership that the United States does not seek to weaken Russia and that the role of U.S. power in the world is not counter to Russian interests. The question of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine is virtually off the table for the time being. The Obama administration changed the Bush administration's plans for ballistic missile defense in Europe. Most important from Moscow's perspective is that not only has the momentum for the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space completely reversed, but the 2010 Ukrainian and Kyrgyz presidential elections contrasted dramatically with their predecessor elections in 2004–2005. In Ukraine, the Western-supported candidate, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, lost—as one would probably expect for a sitting prime minister in the midst of a deep economic recession—to the Russian-preferred candidate, Viktor F. Yanukovich. Presidents Obama and Medvedev also cooperated to alleviate deeper fallout from the toppling of Kurmanbek Bakiev's government and civil and ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2010. All of these events and policies together have mitigated the Russian belief that the United States cannot be trusted and seeks to weaken the global position of the Russian Federation.

Putin's Return: Much Ado About Nothing New

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a newly independent Russian Federation facilitated far-ranging debates and diverse schools of foreign policy thinking in the early 1990s. The spectrum of debate concerning Russian foreign policy has since narrowed considerably, as all those who aspire to be a “player” politically must frame their positions in ways that support a more significant role for the Russian state and in ideological terms that resonate with traditional themes of Russian nationalism.

Still, the main magnetic pole in Russian debates over identity and foreign policy is the status of the Western democratic market development model as well as the role of the United States and the West more broadly in international relations. Our three categories of pro-Western liberals, great power balancers, and nationalists can be approximately correlated to pro-Western, neutral towards the West, and anti-Western. The danger of Russian policy moving in an overtly anti-Western position peaked with the Georgia war and its aftermath in the summer of 2008.

As we enter the 2012 presidential political season, the main axis of debate revolves around the liberals and great power balancers, yet both of these schools

must cast their positions in terms of Russian nationalism. This is done not so much in terms of the old imperial mission and/or the restoration of some new version of the Soviet Union, but rather in terms of the advancement of Russian interests, power, and influence, including reconnecting with ethnic Russians and

Russian speakers outside of Russia as a key national resource.

The danger of Russia moving toward an overtly anti-Western policy peaked with the Georgia war.

Liberals have had to recast their program in ways that include threads of both great power balancer thinking as well as Russian nationalism. This has been done by abandoning the early 1990s inclinations to make Russia subservient to the West. Instead, they describe Russia's natural inclination to favor Europe and the West for historical and cultural reasons, for those of national interest to better

promote Russia's modernization, and to balance against the rapid growth of China. The liberals regained some traction in Russian debates in the wake of the global economic crisis when Russian vulnerabilities were exposed. The drivers of Russia's economic recovery from the decade of 1998–2008 appeared to be losing steam. It was not realistic to expect the oil price to increase by four to five times again, as it did over this period, nor was Russia going to be able to increase oil production by 50 percent as it did from 1999–2003. Moving forward, structural economic reforms appeared the most likely way to increase productivity and sustain the high growth rates of the past decade. This was the hope of liberals for the Medvedev presidency that was not realized.

The most significant external (or internal for that matter) factor with the potential to tip the Russian balance in one direction or the other is the world economy and how it affects oil prices. The lower-price environment favors liberals who call for deeper structural reform of the Russian economic and political system to increase efficiency, while higher prices discourage reform and fuel greater assertiveness.

Rhetorically, the worldviews of Medvedev and Putin have appeared to differentiate, with Medvedev in the liberal camp and Putin in the great power balancer camp (the latter with nods to Russian nationalists as well). However, we must be wary about exaggerating the differences.¹⁵ It is true that Vladimir Putin has never been a real proponent of democracy in Russia, but he did enter office more than 10 years ago with his own economic modernization agenda and, early in his first term, arguably pursued a more overtly pro-Western foreign policy than Medvedev has as president. While our analysis of the development of different visions and foreign policies demonstrates a narrowing of the spectrum over the past decade, it is also true that the magnitude of change during the past two

decades should induce caution for the analyst assuming stability in how Russia's national interests may be defined in the future.

Like the bilateral relationship, Russian elite perceptions of U.S. power and role in the world have experienced a lot of volatility in the past 20 years. How durable is the current Russian perception that the United States is not only less threatening but also

pursuing policies far more accommodating to Russian interests, particularly as we are entering a new Russian (and American) presidential cycle in 2012? There is no definitive answer to this question, but from reviewing the last 10 years or so since Putin first became Russian president, our conclusion is that U.S. policies and Russia's economic prospects will be far more important factors in affecting Russian leader and elite views of the United States than who the next Russian president is. The Russian perspective on U.S. power and role in the world did not change over the last two years because Dmitri Medvedev replaced Vladimir Putin as president of Russia. The Russian perspective changed because of the impact of the global economic crisis and changes in the Obama administration's policies that addressed issues of greatest interest to Moscow.

Putin's return to the Kremlin is viewed by many skeptics as a threat to cooperation and a blow for the Obama administration's "reset" policy. We, however, are more optimistic and believe that unlike two previous U.S.–Russian rapprochements, both of which ended in disappointment—in 1991–1992 after the emergence of the new Russia and in 2001–2002 after 9/11—the current warming trend should be more sustainable (unless there is a significant change in U.S. policy if there is a new U.S. administration in January 2013).

Russian elites are still unsure about the durability of U.S. power capacity, but they have seen the United States renew itself in the wake of global foreign and economic setbacks before—in the 1980s, for example. Russians are as aware as anybody of the current U.S. fiscal challenges and the questions about whether the U.S. political system will be capable of resolving them. They are also watching closely the political commitment of the United States to stabilize Afghanistan. If the United States makes progress on these domestic and foreign policy fronts, and more importantly continues to pursue a pragmatic set of policies that accommodates some of Russia's core interests, then the current trend toward a more positive assessment of U.S. power and growing cooperation on a wide variety of issues will continue.

In other words, the United States is the critical variable for Russia and its relations with the United States, not Putin's return. The larger variable for

The most significant factor for Moscow will be the world economy and its effect on oil prices.

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Russian domestic and foreign policy broadly is the global economy. A return to global recession in 2012 would depress the oil price, hurt Russia's economic performance more than other major economies—as the crisis in 2008–2009 did because of the high dependence on oil and gas revenues for budget stability and economic growth—and force significant cutbacks in the

Russian budget. If such a downturn were prolonged, the spectrum of possibilities for the Russian economy is wide, ranging from a return to liberalism to a Russian nationalist revanche.

Notes

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5. The discussion that follows concerning Russian nationalists' views is partly based on material in Igor Zevelev, *Russia and Its New Diasporas* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001).
6. *Trud*, January 1, 1995.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 12 and 15, 1994.
9. *Izvestiya*, January 2, 1992; *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, March–April 1992.
10. Much of the following is derived from Andrew C. Kuchins, "Reset Expectations: Russian Assessments of U.S. Power," in *Capacity and Resolve: Foreign Assessments of U.S. Power* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), http://csis.org/files/publication/110613_Cohen_CapacityResolve_Web.pdf.
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12. See http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=179&.

13. See Igor Zevelev and Mikhail Troitskiy, *Sila i vliyaniye v amerikano-rossiiskikh otnosheniyakh. Semioticheskiy analiz* (Power and influence in U.S.–Russian relations. A semiotic analysis) (Moscow: NOFMO, 2006).
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15. Andrew C. Kuchins, “The Speeding Troika,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 21, 2010, http://rbth.ru/articles/2010/09/21/the_speeding_troika04953.html.