

## **Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of "Multipolarism" in Asia**

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**Abstract:** This article explores why Putin has revived Primakov's efforts to build a "multipolar" alliance challenging American "hegemony" and "unipolarity," examines why he is pursuing it primarily in Asia, and assesses how effective this policy has been and can be.

**Key words:** Asia, Putin, Russian foreign policy

**W**hen he was Russia's foreign minister and then prime minister under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Yevgeny Primakov attempted to build a "multipolar" international order in response to what he (and many others) perceived as the "unipolar" world order being built by the United States. Vladimir Putin, who became Russia's president at the end of 1999, initially continued this foreign policy course. In the wake of September 11, 2001, however, he appeared to abandon it in favor of close cooperation with the United States. With the emergence of differences between Washington and Moscow over a number of issues, Putin has reverted to building a multipolar international order. Putin has been making this effort primarily in Asia and only secondarily (at best) elsewhere.

This article explores why Putin has revived Primakov's multipolar policy, examines why he is pursuing it primarily in Asia, and assesses how effective this policy has been and can be. First, something needs to be said about what Primakov's multipolar policy consisted of and why Putin seemed to abandon it in the wake of September 11.

### **Primakov's Multipolar Policy**

In the latter part of the Gorbachev era and the first two years of the Yeltsin era, Moscow and Washington enjoyed unprecedented close relations. The conviction that America was not a threat helped induce Gorbachev to peacefully retreat from

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the Marxist empire that had been built up in Eastern Europe and the third world. Yeltsin strongly sought American and other Western advice and support for the ambitious marketization project he set in motion in Russia right after the breakup of the Soviet Union. There was a general expectation in Russia that after being adversaries in a predominantly bipolar world for so long, Washington and Moscow would now work together to manage the world.<sup>1</sup>

This general Russian expectation was not met, however. Nor were a number of specific Russian expectations regarding the United States. The Russians expected massive American economic assistance and were disappointed at the amount Washington actually gave. The Russians expected that in response to Moscow voluntarily disbanding the Warsaw Pact, Washington would disband NATO. When this did not happen, Moscow expected that NATO would not expand into the countries of the former Warsaw Pact. This expectation also was dashed. Russians were disappointed in Washington's criticism of and lack of support for Moscow's efforts to suppress the Chechen rebels. In addition, after Moscow expressed strong objection to any American intervention in the former Yugoslavia against Serbia, the Russian public as well as the Russian elites were enraged that the United States intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo, and even bombed Serbia.<sup>2</sup>

These and other Russian disappointments with the United States did not occur all at once, but over a period of several years. Early on in the post-Soviet era, these disappointments resulted in many Russians, including both Primakov and the Eurasianists, concluding that instead of rewarding Moscow for the many concessions that it had made (for example, peacefully withdrawing from Eastern Europe and the third world), Washington was taking advantage of them to expand its own power. To stop this, Moscow must stand up to Washington instead of continuing to make concessions to it, as Gorbachev-era Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and the Yeltsin era's first Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev were said to have done.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Soviet Russia was not strong enough to do this by itself. However, many other countries also opposed American hegemony. Primakov hoped that Russia could emerge as the leader of an alliance of such countries. The list of countries that the Russian press regarded as actual or potential members of this alliance varied, but usually included China, India, Iran, Iraq (under Saddam), Syria, Serbia (under Milosevic), most of the CIS countries, and even France and Germany. Primakov seemed willing to build as broad and inclusive alliance of countries as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Much of Primakov's motive for pursuing this idea appeared directed at Russian public opinion, which had come to regret the loss of Russia's great power status as well as resent—especially after the American bombing of Serbia—Washington undertaking actions that Moscow saw as objectionable. Primakov's efforts to be seen constructing a grand anti-American alliance headed by Russia certainly had much to do with his own presidential ambitions. To the extent Primakov's effort was aimed at the foreign policy sphere, though, it did not appear that he intended either to revive the cold war or create an alliance that would seriously compete with

the United States in the international arena. Instead, what Primakov seemed to want was to create a situation in which Washington would have to seek Moscow's advice and consent before it could act.<sup>5</sup> But although Russia by itself was not strong enough to make Washington do this, Russia with important allies could. In other words, Primakov wanted to create a situation in which Washington would have no choice but to respect Moscow's interests.

### **Putin's Approach**

Primakov's efforts to build the alliance he hoped for were not notably successful. Nor were Primakov's domestic political ambitions: Yeltsin ousted Primakov as prime minister in May 1999, but then Yeltsin resigned at the end of December 1999 and left a subsequent prime minister, Vladimir Putin, to become acting president. Up to this point, Primakov appeared to have a good chance in the 2000 presidential elections, but as many of those opposed to Yeltsin began supporting Putin, Primakov withdrew his candidacy.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, Putin continued Primakov's foreign policy approach. In late 2000, Putin unilaterally abrogated the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995, whereby Russia had agreed to limit its arms sales to and nuclear cooperation with Iran. This was followed a few months later by a much ballyhooed visit by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to Moscow, which Russian commentators relished because of Washington's presumed discomfiture over it.<sup>7</sup> The signing of a Russian-Chinese "Friendship Treaty" in July 2001 suggested that Primakov's vision of a Moscow-Beijing alliance to counter the United States was becoming a reality.<sup>8</sup> Yet although Putin's policy toward the United States was decidedly cool, he met with Bush and appeared open to Russian-American cooperation. As with Primakov, one of Putin's main aims in building alliances with governments either wary of or hostile toward the United States was to put Moscow in a position to block American foreign policy initiatives that were objectionable to the Kremlin. Putin, like Primakov, sought not so much to oppose Washington than to force it to respect Russian interests.

Putin's foreign policy approach, though, changed dramatically in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Moscow hoped that Washington would now see the Chechen rebels as part of a larger Islamic terrorist threat to both nations.<sup>9</sup> When it quickly became clear that the Bush administration planned to launch an invasion of Afghanistan, Putin overrode his own defense minister's objections to the establishment of American military facilities in former Soviet Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin portrayed Russia as one of America's closest and most reliable allies in this time of crisis, while the Primakovian quest for allies against the United States was quickly deemphasized.

What underlay Putin's shift in foreign policy approach toward the United States was the prospect that Moscow's hopes of the late 1980s and early 1990s of America and Russia working together to manage the world could now be realized. Indeed, America's being directly attacked by Islamic terrorists as well as the Bush administration's launching of the "global war on terror" pointed to Washington needing Moscow's support much more after September 11 than it had previously. Putin's expectation, of course, was that Russia's cooperation with the

United States was now so important to Washington that the Bush administration would adjust its foreign policy to accommodate Russian interests.<sup>11</sup>

It would not be long, though, before these post-9/11 Russian expectations would be disappointed. In a move strongly opposed by Moscow, the Bush administration announced in December 2001 that America was withdrawing from the 1972 Soviet-American Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to pursue a ballistic missile defense program.<sup>12</sup> Despite Moscow's objections, the Bush administration sought international support for intervention in Iraq, and then carried out this intervention with relatively few allies.<sup>13</sup> Moscow bridled at Washington's continued criticism of Russia's assistance to the Iranian atomic energy program.<sup>14</sup> Russian observers blamed Washington for the success of democratic revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005.<sup>15</sup> Putin even seemed to suggest that America was somehow responsible for the 2004 Islamic terrorist attack in Beslan.<sup>16</sup>

It did not come as a surprise that Putin began to revert to the Primakovian quest for allies against the United States in response to this renewed demonstration of American disregard for Russian interests. Putin pursued such an effort during the time before the American-led intervention in Iraq in 2002–03. This effort appeared promising, because there were so many countries that opposed the Bush administration's actions, including France and Germany—two of Europe's three most important states.<sup>17</sup> The prospect of a Russian-French-German alliance was particularly appealing to Moscow. Not only were these three combined arguably as strong as the United States, but as leading democracies, France and Germany gave this triple alliance a moral authority that Russia alone lacked.

Yet, no matter how much Russia united with France and Germany in opposition to the American-led intervention in Iraq, neither France, nor Germany, nor the other European democracies would ally with Russia against the United States. Indeed, the European Union often proved to be as unyielding as the United States (if not more so) on several issues of importance to Moscow, such as NATO expansion, Kaliningrad, Chechnya, and democratic revolutions in the former Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup>

An alliance with France, Germany, and other European democracies could have put Russia in a much stronger position to pry concessions out of the United States, but the Europeans were not willing to cooperate with Russia on this. There were, however, a number of relatively powerful and wealthy states in Asia that had important differences with the United States and were more willing to cooperate with Russia against the United States (or so the Kremlin hoped). By contrast, outside of both Europe and Asia, there were very few states that were powerful, wealthy, and willing to work with Russia against the United States. (Venezuela was the most notable exception.) As a result, Putin has focused his efforts in Asia to build a multipolar international order aimed at limiting American power and influence.

### **Asian Opportunities**

In Asia, there are a number of countries that Moscow has identified as potential partners for this anti-American multipolar order. The most important of these, of course, are China and India. Other potential partners include South Korea, Viet-

nam, Malaysia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Turkey, and even Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (although these last two are more problematic). The circumstances of these countries differ greatly. All of them, however, share certain common features with Russia (albeit to varying degrees):

- Opposition to American “unilateralism” (especially regarding the use of force) is common to each of these countries, although the reasons for it may differ. Some (Iran, Syria) fear American unilateralism because they see themselves as potential targets of American intervention similar to the case of Iraq. Others (China vis-à-vis Taiwan) oppose it because they do not want the United States to interfere with their own ambitions. Still others oppose it because they fear American intervention will create problems for them that neither they nor the United States can resolve. Finally, there are those who oppose the United States acting to reshape the international order without their consent because this makes them look and feel both

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weak and unimportant. These last two reasons for opposing American unilateralism are not unique to Asia, but are common in Europe and other countries as well.

- Opposition to Sunni Islamic fundamentalism is also common to each of these countries, whether their governments are non-Muslim (China, India), secular Muslim (Turkey, Syria), Shia Muslim (Iran), or Sunni Muslim (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan) but regarded as pro-Western by their Islamist opponents. Opposition to Sunni Islamic fundamentalism is not limited to Asia, but is also found in Europe, America, and elsewhere. Indeed, with the downfall of the Taliban, there is no government that overtly supports Sunni Islamic fundamentalism.

- Opposition to (or lack of support for) democratic revolution is also common to these countries. The United States and some of its allies support democratic revolution. Yet, even those European and other developed nations that do not strongly support it do not strongly oppose it, either. Authoritarian governments in Asia, by contrast, strongly oppose democratic revolution because they fear that they may be overthrown by it. Nor do they want to see it in countries that they have or wish to have influence in, because they equate democratic revolution with the spread of American influence and the loss of their own.

- Demonstrated or potential ability to make sizable purchases of Russian arms, nuclear technology, or other items that the United States does not want them to buy also characterizes these Asian states. There are not all that many states that are both willing and able to make substantial purchases of Russian weapons or atomic reactors. However, most of the countries that are willing and able to do so are in Asia. Furthermore, many (although not all) Asian states that buy these items

from Russia do so because America and Europe have thus far been unwilling to sell these items to them. (This could change, however, with the prospect of European arms sales to China.) America and Europe do not want these items from Russia, whereas most countries outside Europe and Asia simply cannot afford them. Finally, although Russia earns far more from petroleum sales to a wide variety of countries, weapons and nuclear reactor exports are crucial for the survival of these two industries, because the market for them inside Russia itself is weak.

There is, then, a set of mutually reinforcing reasons for Russia and several countries in Asia to cooperate with one another in opposition to the United States. At the same time, Putin (unlike the Eurasianists) does not wish to completely exclude the United States from Asia either, as it is a powerful ally against Sunni Islamic fundamentalism. But the more that Russia and other Asian nations can cooperate with each other in creating a multipolar system in this region, the more Russia and others hope they can limit the United States to pursuing goals they all (especially Russia) approve.

### Asian Obstacles

At the same time, however, there is also a set of obstacles to creating a multipolar world in Asia—or, more precisely, to creating one that responds positively to Russia's leadership, as Putin seems to hope for. These obstacles include:

- Russian uneasiness about growing Chinese power. Despite all the talk about a Russian-Chinese friendship, there also has been commentary in the Russian press questioning whether Moscow working with Beijing to reduce American influence in Asia is really in Russia's interest if China turns out to be unfriendly after all.<sup>19</sup> Russian concerns about Chinese migration into Siberia, even if exaggerated, also reflect a concern about the Russian ability to keep a powerful China in check.<sup>20</sup> Although China and India are the two largest purchasers of Russian weaponry, the fact that Moscow is willing to sell more advanced weapons to India than it is to China indicates that the Kremlin is also wary of China becoming too powerful.<sup>21</sup>

- There are persistent enmities that exist between the Asian states that Moscow wants to recruit into its vision of multipolar Asia. These enmities include those between India and Pakistan, India and China, Vietnam and China, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, and many others. Their persistence makes it difficult for Moscow to maintain close ties to each of the parties involved simultaneously. In addition, these disputes make it unlikely that the parties involved will focus equally on joining with Moscow to limit American influence in the region. In fact, one or both parties usually have strong incentives to seek American support against the other. This problem would be alleviated if Moscow could help resolve these disputes. So far, however, Moscow has not shown a greater ability to resolve these often long-standing disputes than any other outside power.

- Wariness toward Russia exists in many Asian states, despite whatever differences they have with the United States. This wariness sometimes stems from the Russian habit of selling arms to states that are at odds with each other. Moscow, for example, sells arms to both China and India, and to both Iran and the United

Arab Emirates. While selling arms to Syria, Moscow cooperates closely with Israel in the security sphere. In addition, although Russia seeks to ally itself with various Asian countries against the United States, Moscow has often been unwilling to make any concessions to those countries when there are differences between them and Russia. Moscow, for example, has been unwilling to make any significant concession to Iran over the division of the Caspian Sea. (Russia actually is building up its naval forces there.)<sup>22</sup> In reaction to a Syrian expression of concern over Russian-Israeli security cooperation, Moscow did not scale its activities back, but instead offered to increase Russian-Syrian security cooperation at a price.<sup>23</sup> Finally, just as Washington is annoyed with Moscow for cooperating with Tehran, Tehran is annoyed with Moscow for cooperating with Washington.<sup>24</sup> The result is that Asian states often do not fully trust Moscow or view it as a reliable ally.

• Most Asian states have important reasons to maintain good relations with the United States, despite whatever differences they may have with it. In particular, Asia exports far more to the United States than to Russia. Russia could not afford to dramatically increase its imports from Asian states if Asian trade with the United States declined significantly as a result of political differences. The willingness of Asian states to ally with Russia against the United States, then, is quite limited. Even those states that have very bad relations with the United States, such as Iran and Syria, do not want to engage in hostilities with America—especially after Russia proved unable to prevent an American-led attack on Moscow's old friend, Saddam Hussein. There can even be dramatic rapprochements between Washington on the one hand and states long hostile toward it on the other, as Libya recently demonstrated. Most Asian states are not so anti-American that Moscow can ally with any (much less all) of them against the United States whenever it chooses.

### Conclusion

What, then, are the prospects for Putin's hopes of building a multipolar world in Asia? There are strong motivations for various Asian states to cooperate with Russia against the United States for various purposes. The problem for Putin in building alliances in Asia is that most Asian nations have the same motivations that Moscow does—they are not trying to push the United States out of the region, but want to maneuver Washington into pursuing only those policies that each Asian nation prefers. But of course, different states want different things from the United States, and those things are not necessarily what Russia wants. Finally, with the exception of some of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and Armenia, Asian states—including those with the sharpest differences with the United States—willing to ally with Russia in some respects do not look on Moscow as the leader of an alliance. The states of Asia are not particularly reliable allies for Russia, just as Russia is not a particularly reliable ally for them.

The differences that many Asian states have with the United States, as well as with each other, practically guarantee that Moscow will find some partners in Asia willing to cooperate with Moscow against Washington. At the same time, the many differences among the Asian states, their many differences with Russia, and their

many common interests with the United States limit both how many Asian states Moscow can ally with and, more important, how closely it can ally with them.

### NOTES

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4. Yevgeny M. Primakov, *A World Challenged: Fighting Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, DC: Nixon Center/Brookings, 2004), 94–101.

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