



# Assertive, but Alone

Some would say that Russian foreign policy has become belligerent. But the strident, confident tone is playing well at home in this election season. More discerning domestic commentators are pointing out that it is simply not working and may have unintended, longer-term consequences.

**R**USSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY HAS BECOME increasingly assertive since President Vladimir Putin's February speech in Munich, in which he strongly criticised American policy, saying: 'the United States has overstepped its national borders in every way.' Since then, Putin seems determined to prove that Russia can also do so.

Shortly after the Munich speech, Moscow threatened to aim Russian missiles at Europe in response to Washington's plan to deploy a limited ballistic missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic. America says the system would be focussed on Iran, but Moscow fears it would be directed at Russia. Putin has also suspended Russian participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, and threatened to withdraw from it altogether. He has, if anything, increased his opposition to the American- and European-backed proposal to grant Kosovo independence from Serbia.

Although Russian-Iranian relations have deteriorated over a number of issues this year, Moscow – along with Beijing – has resisted American and European efforts to increase United Nations Security Council sanctions against

Tehran for its continued unwillingness to deal with the international community's concerns about its nuclear intentions.

In addition, Russian military aircraft have recently been testing European defenses and have even been flying as far away as Guam in the Pacific. The August Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek, attended by Iran's anti-American President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was used by Moscow as an opportunity to step-up its calls for outside powers – America, Europe, and Japan – to stay out of Central Asia.

There has also been a Russian press campaign aimed at convincing Kyrgyzstan to expel American forces from the base they are using at Manas just as Uzbekistan turfed them out of Kharshi-Khanabad two years ago. The recent planting of the Russian flag underneath the North Pole raises the prospect that Moscow intends unilaterally to lay claim to much of the Arctic and what are believed to be its vast petroleum resources.

While it is not entirely certain whether the unexploded missile found in Georgia was actually fired by a Russian military aircraft as Tbilisi claims, Moscow's vitriolic reaction to the episode demonstrates that Putin is not trying to calm Russian relations with its tiny neighbour. The same can be said about Moscow's vehement response to the Estonian government's removal of a Soviet war memorial from downtown Tallinn to a less central location.

Finally, Putin's blustering refusal to cooperate with the British investigation of the poisoning of his opponent Alexander Litvinenko in London implies not only that Moscow has something to hide, but that it is completely indifferent to the damaging impact this episode has had on its relations with Britain.

What does the Kremlin hope to achieve by all this? Putin's statements express high dudgeon over Washington acting unilaterally as well as an expectation that other governments, including some in Europe, will join Russia in opposing American foreign policy. At the same time though, Putin displays an almost contemptuous disregard for many of those governments – especially European ones – that he wants to recruit as opponents of the United States.

Four factors appear to contribute to Putin's willingness to pursue a more assertive foreign policy. First, in this pre-election period, his tougher policy is very popular with the

nationalistic Russian public, which strongly believes that America and the west took advantage of Moscow's weakness when Mikael Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were in power. Second, the steady rise in oil and gas prices since Putin first became president has certainly made his government richer and hence less dependent on the west than under Yeltsin. Third, there is a perception in Moscow often noted in the Russian press, that America has grown weaker as a result of becoming bogged down militarily both in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, President George Bush's declining domestic popularity has limited his freedom of action greatly, while Putin's continued high ratings have bolstered his own.

How likely is the assertive foreign policy to succeed? Several Russian commentators have identified problems with the assumptions apparently behind it that could render it either unsuccessful or lead to unintended consequences harmful to Russia. There are four such problems:

#### ● American weakness may be temporary

This possibility was specifically noted by Nikolai Babich, Deputy Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of Foreign Policy Planning. Reacting to Putin's Munich speech in the Moscow-based International Affairs journal, Babich observed that the US is being defeated in Iraq, is 'looking for a way out,' and that Iraq has become another Vietnam. But, Babich noted, 'America recovered from the Vietnam war pretty soon; it restored its influence by reviving its alliance with Europe ... Trans-Atlantic solidarity can be restored – let us hope that this will happen not at Russia's expense. This may happen, however: Europe has grown accustomed to rely on American political and military might; it is not yet ready to go ahead on its own.'

In other words: once the US withdraws from Iraq, Russia may have to deal with an America that is not only stronger, but also irritated with Moscow as a result of Putin's foreign policy.

#### ● American weakness may not strengthen Russia

Sergei Karaganov of Russia's prestigious Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, noted this possibility: 'The US will inevitably flee Iraq yet the mistake thus corrected will not create a fairer or better-governed world. The failed claim of unipolarity will not create effective multipolarity – it will create chaos.' And Russia will not benefit from this situation, he warned,

**BOTH PUBLIC OPINION AND PUTIN HIMSELF APPEAR QUITE PLEASED WITH MOSCOW HURLING INSULTS AT AMERICA, BRITAIN, ESTONIA, GEORGIA, AND MANY OTHER GOVERNMENTS, EVEN IF THIS DOES NOT MAKE THEM MORE AMENABLE TO RUSSIAN WISHES**



also in International Affairs: 'We should avoid self-assuredness. We imagine ourselves stronger only because others grow weaker. It is impossible to be strong and successful in the unstable and dangerous world.'

### ● Governments and public opinion in other countries may be less friendly to Russia than Putin assumes

In the same issue of International Affairs, Boris Shmelev, Head of the Russian Foreign Ministry Diplomatic Academy's Department of Foreign Policy and International Relations, stated this viewpoint bluntly when he wrote: 'I regret to say that we are alone in this vast world – we have no allies and receive no geopolitical support from the neighbours.'

In June, Novaia Gazeta commentator Kirill Rogov blamed this state of affairs directly on the president: 'Overall, the results of Russia's foreign policy during Vladimir Putin's second term as president are surprising. One would be hard-pressed to find in this world any other country that has managed, in just a few years, to spoil or exacerbate relations with so many of its neighbours and partners in the international arena.'

### ● China may be more of a threat to Russia than America

Several Russian commentators have made this point, including Aleksandr Khramchikhin of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis. In an article published in *Izvestia* in February, he argued that the Russian military's fear of NATO was misplaced since NATO forces were demonstrating 'absolute incompetence and, most importantly, a total unwillingness to fight in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, China's capabilities are beyond question ... If China becomes even more powerful, and Russia becomes even weaker, it will "ask" us for more territory. Will we just hand it over again, the way we did so meekly two years ago?'

The director of the same institute, Aleksandr Sharavin, was quoted by the Moscow weekly *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie* on April 25 as saying that China's military strength, 'is growing stronger from day to day and its geopolitical ambitions could diminish the Kremlin's significance in the post-Soviet space, especially in Central Asia, where Beijing's role is increasing more and more. And it is becoming increasingly difficult for Russia to counter that somehow.'

Some Russians argue that a more productive foreign policy approach might be trying to persuade others to adopt Moscow's point of

view instead of attempting – often unsuccessfully – to force them to do so. In June, *Kommersant* commentator Sergei Strokan argued: '...in this era of globalisation we can't afford to keep our old understanding of the world order, much as we might want to. The nature of modern-day international relations is such that we need to find a way to convince those whom we continue to regard as our strategic partners that we're right.'

So why does Putin not try to persuade rather than bully or coerce? Actually, he has often attempted to convince others to adopt his viewpoint, and frequently failed. It is because persuasion has failed that he attempts to get his way through other means.

In his *Novaia Gazeta* article, Rogov described the pattern of Putin's diplomacy: 'If we recall how most of our foreign policy conflicts have come about, we find the same scenario in nearly every instance. When the Kremlin has a foreign policy objective, it first proposes a backroom deal to the government or elites of the other country. If the terms of the deal are declined, the Kremlin immediately takes offense and moves the conflict into the public arena, puts forth its aims in the form of an ultimatum and starts bullying and making threats. The ultimatum is rejected, relations reach the crisis point, the foreign policy objective becomes unattainable even in a truncated form, and the threats are never carried out or prove ineffective. The upshot is that relations become frozen.'

Rogov's description points out that the assertive foreign policy does not appear to be very successful. Instead of giving in to Russian demands, other states either resist or ignore it. The result is that Moscow's relations with many countries – especially the US, an increasing number of European Union governments, and Russia's immediate former Soviet neighbours – have all deteriorated without Russia having gained much.

Yet while the assertive foreign policy may not have been a success, it has not been a failure either – especially among the Russian public. Indeed, both public opinion and Putin himself appear quite pleased with Moscow hurling insults at America, Britain, Estonia, Georgia, and many other governments even if this does not make them more amenable to Russian wishes. Nor does the realisation that this might be counterproductive for Moscow appear likely to occur before Putin is due to leave the presidency next year, and perhaps not for a long time afterward.

