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Putin's Coming Presidency: Tougher for Russo-Western Relations?

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

President Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly on 1 March 2018 places the onus on the West to improve the current tense relationship. What is the Russian leader trying to achieve?

Commentary

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's State of the Nation address to the Federal Assembly (FA), Russia's national legislature, not only laid out details of the socio-economic challenges facing the country. In a not-so-subtle message, it significantly also unveiled a new generation of weapons and technology which could neutralise the global missile defence system of the United States.

It was to be expected that more attention was given to Russia's socio-economic challenges in a speech that was dominated by domestic issues, coming just days before the presidential election on 18 March 2018. But when he did touch on foreign policy, Putin's message was unsurprisingly tough.

Putin's Strong-man Posture

Putin wanted to stress that while Russia is interested in "normal and constructive cooperation with the US and EU", it would not allow itself to be dictated to. Western pressure in the form of economic sanctions; the build-up of NATO forces and infrastructure close to Russia's borders; and the US' global missile defence shield; etc would not alter Russian policy.

The blame for the current state of Russo-Western relations was placed on the West,

specifically the US for its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, which he described “as the cornerstone of the international security system”.

Putin also cited NATO expansion to the east and the establishment of missile defence systems in Romania and Poland as reasons for developing and eventually deploying its new generation of weapons and technology.

He pointedly criticised the West for taking advantage of post-Soviet Russia’s weakness. He stressed the fact that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia “lost 23.8 percent of its national territory, 48.5 percent of its population, 41 of the GDP, 39.4 percent of its industrial potential (nearly half of our potential, I would underscore), as well as 44.6 percent of its military capability due to the division of the Soviet Armed Forces among the former Soviet republics”.

In addition, he said: “The military equipment of the Russian army was becoming obsolete, and the Armed Forces were in a sorry state. A civil war was raging in the Caucasus, and US inspectors oversaw the operation of our leading uranium enrichment plants.”

Still Open to Better Relations

Putin noted it had been assumed that Russia would not “even be able to safely store and maintain the nuclear weapons that we inherited after the collapse of the USSR. Russia had outstanding debts, its economy could not function without loans from the IMF and the World Bank; the social sphere was impossible to sustain.”

The West, he argued “got the impression that it was impossible in the foreseeable historical perspective for our country to revive its economy, industry, defence industry and Armed Forces to levels supporting the necessary strategic potential. And if that is the case, there is no point in reckoning with Russia’s opinion, it is necessary to further pursue ultimate unilateral military advantage in order to dictate the terms in every sphere in the future”.

Putin however made it clear that he was not closing the door to future negotiations on improving the relationship with the West, noting that “we hope common sense will prevail and our partners will opt for honest and equal work together”.

Putin’s Strategic Goals

His speech served both domestic and foreign policy purposes.

First, it outlined his vision for the next presidential term of office and was obviously meant for the electorate. While conventional wisdom states that Putin would emerge the victor, he himself is known to be a thorough individual and never takes matters for granted. In fact, his speech focused more on domestic social and economic issues than foreign policy challenges.

Second, with respect to foreign policy, his messages in the speech were directed primarily to the US and subtly to China. The message was simply this: Russian military

strength cannot be dismissed as irrelevant; hence, Russian interests must be taken into account on issues like nuclear parity and NATO expansion.

Third, his messages were meant for the Russian people who have never really reconciled themselves to seeing their country as anything less than a global superpower.

Finally, his speech also had a larger audience – the global community. It was meant to show the world that despite Western sanctions, Russia has not and will not collapse. The last two decades or so of Putin's rule have seen him successfully rebuild Russia's strength to restore the country's place in the sun.

Implications for ASEAN

The continuing tension and apparent stalemate in Russo-Western relations do not serve the overall interests of Southeast Asia which enjoys good ties with both sides. If tense Russo-Western relations were to spill over into the economic realm of their relationship with Southeast Asia, then obviously the latter will suffer as well.

Moreover, the possibility exists that the more difficult the relationship becomes for both sides, the more they might be inclined or feel forced to bring their disputes into this part of the world; they might try to seek advantages over each other, either bilaterally with Southeast Asian countries or with ASEAN as a whole. That would complicate the already apparent competition between the US and China in the region.

Unfortunately, as things stand now, Southeast Asia's good ties with both sides do not allow it to play an honest broker's role. It is not a reflection of Southeast Asia's irrelevance to the larger currents of international developments but more a manifestation of the reality that the great powers' differences sometimes do not lend themselves to outside mediation.

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