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New Putin Presidency's Foreign Policy: What to Expect

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

The contours of Russia's foreign relations with the West are not expected to change in the next six years, unless a dramatic shift takes place in Russia or the West. However, President Putin is unlikely to worsen the already fraught relationship.

Commentary

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's expected electoral victory on the 18 March 2018 with almost 77% of the vote marked the start of what many observers expect to be his final term in office. Russia's strained relationship with the West, exacerbated by the recent poisoning of Russian double agent, Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom, is not expected to change.

Its close ties with China, which Putin reiterated remained Russia's priority, are also not expected to change. Russia needs Chinese friendship and economic support even more now than in the past, given the past four years of Western sanctions and opprobrium.

Causes of Russo-Western Strains

The roots of the current strained relationship between Russia and the West lie in perceived Russian interference in the United States' presidential and other Western elections, the Ukrainian conflict in its contested eastern regions, the annexation of the Crimea and its role in Syria. They all remain largely unresolved.

The poisoned political atmosphere in the major Western countries about perceived Russian interference in their electoral processes remains deep-seated. With respect to Ukraine's contested eastern regions, the Minsk Accords have yet to be

implemented; the Accords, signed in February 2015 by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany, are meant to bring a settlement to the conflict.

Crimea's annexation has not been recognised by the West while Russia is determined not to return it to Ukraine either. Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's stronger military and political position, thanks to Russian assistance, has not been greeted with any enthusiasm by Western leaders who still appear keen on his stepping down from power.

It is logical to assume that these issues, coupled with the Skripal "affair" and Putin's tough speech on 1 March 2018 to the Federal Assembly during which he revealed that Russia had new weapons of mass destruction, will ensure that Russia's tense relationship with the West remains unchanged during the new Putin Presidency.

Could Current Dynamics Change?

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, one can argue that Putin is unlikely to make any more moves to further strain the relationship with the West.

First, he will now become Russia's longest-serving leader since Stalin. He is keenly aware of his legacy – bringing stability and economic growth and restoring Russia's place among the great powers. It is doubtful that he would want to endanger this legacy by engaging in a long-drawn out contest with the West during the next and perhaps final six years of his Presidency. Indeed he signalled this point in his post-victory press conference that he does not intend to remain in power indefinitely.

Ever the pragmatist, there is reason to believe that he remains interested in normalising relations with the West. Putin is aware that Russia still needs Western management skills and investments to modernise its economy. This is a point which economic liberals like former finance minister Alexei Kudrin and the head of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, Herman Gref, have long argued. They have his ear.

Putin could and might execute a volte-face in Russia's relations with the West, at a time of his choosing and when one least expects it. After all, he offered the US assistance against the Taliban after the September 11 events in 2001, reportedly against the advice of his military and intelligence officials.

His action was unexpected. True, at the time, Russia was weak on all fronts. But Russia is strong today and with a renewed mandate, Putin has the domestic political strength to implement any about-face.

'More European than Eurasian'

Indeed, President Trump's recent announcement that there might be a summit soon between both leaders offers Putin this possibility. Moreover, he has never closed the door to the West, despite his hardline tone vis-à-vis the West. He has made it clear that Russia will not engage in an arms race – a reflection of his awareness that a major reason for the USSR's collapse was the arms race with the US/West.

Second, Putin will devote more attention to domestic affairs during his new term of

office, not only to further stabilise the country and improve its standard of living but also having in mind the need to find, groom and legitimise his successor.

Third, at heart, Putin remains a “Europeanist”. He has never ceased to remind his people and the world of Russia’s European roots. During the 2017 World Festival of Youth and Students held in Sochi, he stressed that while Russia was a “Eurasian space”, its “culture, language group and history” is “undoubtedly a European space as it is inhabited by people of this culture”.

Expect the Unexpected

Finally, while relations with China today are a top priority, the hitherto hoped-for economic windfall from China has yet to materialise; indeed, in an article dated 28 February 2018, Paul Stronski, a senior fellow at Carnegie’s Russia and Eurasia Programme, argued convincingly that despite strong rhetoric and political will on both sides for cooperation in the Russian Far East (RFE), “there are serious doubts surrounding the realisation of pledged investments”. Russia’s Achilles heel is the RFE and Siberia in terms of socio-economic development.

Sergei Karaganov, one of Russia’s leading academics, and an influential voice in Russia’s foreign relations, pointed out in a recent article in *Rossiskaya Gazeta* that “Russia and China have proposed a big Eurasian Partnership, a “One Belt, One Road” and “a community of common destiny. But it needs to be specified and developed further.”

His standpoint reveals Russia’s ongoing reservations about whether its close political relationship with China can and will materialise into tangible and long-term benefits for Russia.

One can expect the unexpected from Putin. The last several years have shown that he is adept at making moves and decisions which stunned and surprised both his supporters and critics. Southeast Asian countries can only welcome any lessening of tension in the Russo-Western relationship, for obvious reasons.

Chris Cheang is a Senior Fellow in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He served three tours in the Singapore Embassy in Moscow between 1994 and 2013.
