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Putin's State-of-the-Nation Speech: Primacy of Domestic Politics

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual address to both houses of Parliament on the 20 February 2019 predictably focussed on the country's domestic challenges. Like his 2018 speech it reaffirms his commitment to improving the lot of his countrymen while maintaining a strong posture abroad.

COMMENTARY

Putin's State of the Nation speech was meant to strike a chord with the domestic audience. Hence, the first part of his address was mostly devoted to socio-economic development, demographics, education and healthcare, with the shorter second half touching on foreign policy and defence challenges. This reflects the severity of the internal situation regardless of the fast-moving developments on the external front where Putin has firmly asserted Russian strategic interests, particularly in the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf.

Motivations behind the focus on domestic issues

Unpopular pension reform and increases in VAT are said to have led to a decline in Putin's approval rating. His popularity has been consistently high since his ascent to power almost 2 decades ago. Hence, it would seem natural that he must react to this development by emphasising socio-economic developmental issues, to regain the previously rather consistent high levels of public trust in him.

The second related factor is the need to ensure political stability for the next 5 years of his 6-year presidential term. There had been open expressions of dissatisfaction with Putin in 2018, in the aftermath of the decision to introduce pension reform. (Polls however suggest that Russians are unlikely to resort to mass demonstrations against

the established order on the scale seen in late 2011/early 2012 when there were large public displays of anger in Moscow and some large cities with respect to the demonstrators' then perceived parliamentary fraud). Hence, Putin's stress on deadlines to achieve success or goals in socio-economic projects. For instance, he expressed the need to build or renovate an additional 1,590 outpatient clinics and paramedic stations in 2019-2020. Another prime example was his call to ensure that "by the end of 2021, all Russian schools must have a high-speed internet connection rather than just a connection."

Third, Putin has been and still is driven by his vision of a stable and prosperous Russia. It is too simplistic to assume and assert that he was not and is not interested in the welfare of his people and has been motivated by narrow concerns of remaining in power. His speeches during the course of his 2-decade long hold on power show that improving the lot of his people has been a consistent theme. One can naturally argue about the extent of his success in fulfilling his vision but no one can deny that Russians today live better than in the 1990s and early years of the Putinite era, despite the last 5 years of Western sanctions and Russia's own systemic challenges, like corruption and other obstacles to stable and sustained economic growth. Putin is realistic enough to realise that for a united and strong Russia to take its place in the sun among the other great powers presupposes political stability based on his people's trust and confidence in his continued leadership.

Fourth, between now and 2024 could conceivably be Putin's last term of office. There has been speculation that he and his supporters might change the constitution to allow him to remain in office or assume a Deng Xiaoping-like role behind-the-scene, after 2024. Whatever the case may be, Putin would like to ensure for posterity that his political legacy is positive viz improving the well-being of the Russian people and ensuring Russia's continued great power status. Time is therefore not fully on his side as he has only 5 years to go. His full attention to domestic challenges can hence be expected during this time-frame which is not to say he would neglect foreign policy issues.

Foreign policy and defence issues

Predictably, Putin addressed arms control issues, principally the US' recent announcement that it would withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), in response to what the US believes, have been Russian violations. He emphasised that Russia would respond to any US attempt to deploy such weapons in Europe, by targeting not only the missile sites "but also in areas that contain decision-making centres for the missile systems threatening us." This was a clear reference to the US, without mentioning it by name.

Referring to his 2018 speech to the same audience during which he highlighted Russia's new weapons, Putin noted that work on developing them "continues as scheduled and without disruption." Putin caustically noted that within the US elite, "there are many people who have excessive faith in their exceptionalism and supremacy over the rest of the world." In words of caution, he urged them to "calculate the range and speed of our future arms systems", in a clear message that Russia's new weapons would be more than a match for US'.

Still, the Russian President cannot be too belligerent and he attempted a conciliatory tone. Putin made it clear that Russia was neither interested in nor wanted confrontation, “especially with a global power like the US.” However, Russia would not “knock on a locked door anymore” and would wait until the West was ready and become aware of the need for dialogue on the issue of arms control. Optimistically, these points reflect Putin’s wish not to exacerbate ties with the US/West. At the same time, he does not wish to appear to be a supplicant.

The Euro-centric and US-centric focus of Russian foreign policy was confirmed by the fact that Putin’s speech on foreign and defence issues had only one short paragraph which mentions Russia’s relations with China, India, and Japan. This may not satisfy the Asian countries. Surprisingly, ASEAN was given a sentence worth of attention when he said that Russia “intends to promote deeper ties with ASEAN.” Putin attended the ASEAN East Asia Summit (EAS) for the first time, when he travelled to Singapore in November 2018 for that gathering of 18 countries. He was en route to the APEC Summit in Papua New Guinea when he tried to show Russian interests in the South Pacific.

Ramifications for ASEAN

Putin’s 2019 State-of-the-Union speech was not essentially different from that of his 2018 address in that it confirmed the trend of tense relations between Russia and the US and the wider West (and his focus on domestic issues).

While ASEAN cannot benefit from the unfortunate state of relations between the two sides, it might be able to take some comfort from the fact that Putin’s commitment to “promote deeper ties” is a positive indication of Russia’s growing interest in the region. Deeds must now follow words.

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