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Putin's 2020 State-of-the-Nation Address: More Power?

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

Unlike the last two years, Putin's latest State-of-the-Nation address focussed more on domestic socio-economic issues, in particular the future of the presidential system of government. The absence of criticism of the West signals Russia's willingness to normalise ties with it.

Commentary

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's latest State-of-the-Nation address to both houses of the Russian parliament on 15 January 2020 was a little earlier than usual. The single topic of import which stood out was his proposed changes to the Constitution.

Hitherto, the president appoints the prime minister with the State Duma's consent. Putin's proposal envisages the Duma appointing the prime minister instead, as well as all the deputy premiers and other ministers recommended by the prime minister. Significantly, the president "will have to appoint them, so he will have no right to turn down the candidates approved by the Parliament".

Strengthening the 'Presidential Republic'?

Putin stressed this step "will increase the role and importance of the State Duma and parliamentary parties as well as the independence and responsibility of the prime minister and other Cabinet members, and make cooperation between the representative and executive branches of government more effective and substantive".

At the same time, he made it clear that "Russia must remain a strong presidential republic".

In this regard, the president “must undoubtedly retain the right to determine the Government's tasks and priorities, as well as the right to dismiss the prime minister, his deputies and federal ministers in case of improper execution of duties or due to loss of trust”.

Putin proposed that “the president also exercises direct command over the Armed Forces and the entire law enforcement system. In this regard, I believe another step is necessary to provide a greater balance between the branches of power”.

To ensure broad public support, Putin suggested putting the entire package of proposed constitutional changes to a referendum. “The final decision must be made only on the basis of its results”.

Putin's Move Not a Surprise

Putin's proposals are not unexpected. In 2018 and 2019, Duma Chairman, Vyacheslav Volodin, a former aide to Putin seen as a close political ally, proposed that the Duma's power be strengthened, including in the formation of the government.

In his 2019 year-end press conference, Putin himself suggested limiting presidential powers and increasing those of the Duma. Following Putin's 15 January speech, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev resigned from his post. He was subsequently appointed Deputy Head of the powerful Security Council.

The PM-designate was Mikhail Mishutin, a capable technocrat who ran the tax service. His appointment was expectedly approved by the Duma.

Mishutin is credited with having established an effective and well-run tax system. He met Singapore's Minister Mentor, Mr Lee Kuan Yew almost a decade ago during the latter's visit to Moscow. Fluent in English, Mishutin's articulation of ideas and clarity of thought about Russia's development and future was said to be most impressive.

Putin to Retain Power post-2024?

Speculation has been rife that Putin's wish was to retain power after 2024. This may entail integrating with Belarus in a unified state with him at the political helm or assuming a more powerful premiership in a new political configuration.

The integration with Belarus appears to have been stalled by Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko dragging his feet on Russia's consistent proposal. A more powerful premiership in a new political configuration would be a logical conclusion.

Putin's latest proposals have been interpreted as an attempt to assume the premiership again after 2024. He had held this position previously from 2008-2012 since the Constitution barred a third consecutive term.

Medvedev, who was then prime minister, became president. Unlike the 2008-2012 period, the prime minister's post after 2024 will come with more power.

Flawed Reading

This interpretation, however, is flawed. There are at least three reasons:

First, Putin's proposal to strengthen the Duma's powers is balanced by his proposal that Russia must remain a strong presidential republic, with the president retaining still wide powers.

Second, his suggestion that the entire package of constitutional changes be decided by a referendum indicates that he places trust in his people's view and decision on the matter. His approval ratings are still relatively high, despite the economic difficulties in recent years. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that a referendum would lead to the desired outcome.

Thirdly, it is, therefore, more likely that Putin seeks to ensure there will be a real transition to a post-Putin era with a power balance between the future president and prime minister.

Whether Putin himself might assume the prime minister's post is too early to determine. But one cannot dismiss the possibility that he would occupy an elder statesman role after 2024, by which time he will be 72.

Second Détente with the West?

Unlike his past State-of-the-Nation addresses, the absence of any harsh language about or criticism of the West is indicative of his desire to lessen tensions.

He is keenly aware of the important role that Western investments, access to markets, technology, and finance play in developing Russia's economy. He is equally conscious of the need to ensure that Russia's growing ties with China do not lead to an imbalance in Moscow's long-standing policy of not depending on either of its traditional rivals.

Hence, the emphasis on the need "...for a serious and direct discussion about the basic principles of a stable world order and the most acute problems that humanity is facing".

Putin's reconciliatory language with the West was clear in his offer "to enhance cooperation with all interested parties. We are not threatening anyone or seeking to impose our will on anyone".

To underscore that Russia was not behind the West or China in weapons' development, he observed that "for the first time ever – I want to emphasise this – for the first time in the history of nuclear missile weapons, including the Soviet period and modern times, we are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses".

Détente à la Brezhnev era must have been on President Putin's mind when delivering the 2020 State-of-the-Nation address.

Implications for ASEAN

Russia's concentrated focus on domestic socio-economic issues and signals to the West for a lessening of tensions are to be welcomed by ASEAN. If they come to fruition, it would mean a higher level of political and economic interaction with Russia.

Moreover, in the face of current tensions between China and the United States, a more active Russia in ASEAN would only benefit both sides and could lead to more balance in the region.

Chris Cheang, a retired Singapore diplomat, is a Senior Fellow with the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore where he covers Russia and Eurasia.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg