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Russia's Foreign Policy in 2021

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Given President Vladimir Putin's increasing attention on domestic issues, Russian foreign policy in 2021 will assume a holding pattern with respect to relations with key players like the US and the EU. Ties with China will remain strong while challenges from Turkey and Iran have to be managed.

COMMENTARY

PRESIDENT PUTIN'S energies in 2020 were focussed on domestic problems associated mainly with managing the impact of COVID-19 on the country's socio-economic health and political climate. That will not change in 2021. His New Year message for 2021 made that clear. In it, he noted that "the outgoing year has taken in the burden of many years".

While acknowledging the sacrifices of the people, he pointed out that "unfortunately, the epidemic has not yet completely come to an end". Indeed, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 62,000 deaths have resulted from the virus with almost three-and-a-half million cases, the world's fourth highest.

Economy More Positive; Power Consolidation

Putin however might be able to take some comfort from encouraging news on the state of the economy. According to the World Bank, Russia's gross domestic product was expected to shrink by four per cent in 2020; earlier forecasts had estimated contraction between 5.5% and 7%. Growth in 2021 is estimated at 2.6%.

Further growth in the economy and the raising of living standards is being placed on the successful implementation of a US\$400 billion programme of National Projects by

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. Many analysts see PM Mishustin as a possible successor to Putin.

Consolidation of Power

With an eye on the future, Putin initiated a package of constitutional amendments that theoretically allow him to run for re-election in 2024 and 2030; were he to emerge victorious in those election years, he could remain in power till 2036; these changes were approved by a referendum in July 2020.

As part of the package, a law granting former presidents and their family members immunity from prosecution came into force on 2 January 2021. The law was approved by the State Duma and the Federation Council (Upper House) and signed by Putin in December 2020.

An ex-president's immunity may be revoked only if the State Duma charges him with high treason or serious crimes. However, only if those charges are confirmed by the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, will the Federation Council vote on whether or not to strip the ex-president of immunity, within three months. If no decision is reached within three months, the charges must be withdrawn.

Nevertheless, it is still too early for Putin to rest on his laurels. His popularity ratings reportedly fell from 68% to 65% in November 2020, according to the independent pollster, the Levada Centre. When compared to the ratings of 53% in April 2020, that is an improvement. However, Putin, like most leaders, must be keen on securing and retaining as high a level of popular support as possible.

Parliamentary Elections

The State Duma elections, scheduled for September 2021, are therefore important to Putin's political future. Long dominated by the pro-government and pro-Putin United Russia (UR) (with its 238 seats in the 450-seat body), UR faces loyal opposition from the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and Just Russia Party.

However, in the face of growing socio-economic discontent, UR cannot assume maintaining its continued parliamentary dominance will be plain sailing. According to prominent Russian economist, Vladislav Inozemtsev, Russians' real incomes today are 14.3% lower than they were in 2013.

It might not be a pure coincidence that in the spring of 2020, the Russian Justice Ministry registered four new political parties. They might contest the seats in the State Duma elections and in the process, secure two to three per cent of the vote from the current parliamentary opposition, thus splintering protest votes, according to *Kommersant*, a Russian business daily.

Another recent development is the institution of charges of large-scale fraud against Alexei Navalny; he was poisoned in August last year and sent to Germany for treatment. (The European Union and the United Kingdom have alleged that the Russian state was involved in his poisoning and have introduced sanctions against a

number of high-level Russian officials; Moscow has rejected the West's allegations and introduced counter-sanctions as well).

Some observers assume that this action is meant to politically neutralise Navalny, who has been critical of the Russian establishment for many years, and is becoming a prominent figure in the non-systemic viz. non-parliamentary opposition.

The outcome of the State Duma elections would be an indicator of the electorate's political mood as it will be the last major political event before the end of President Putin's current term in 2024.

At this stage, however, there is no real danger of UR losing its parliamentary dominance in September, as long as Putin remains overall popular and there is no other viable alternative to UR.

Foreign Policy Challenges

The US and the West: Putin would not be inclined to devote much energy and attention to relations with the West/US, given the prevailing mood against Russia.

However, much will depend on how the Biden administration handles Moscow's diplomatic moves vis-à-vis the US/West, and on issues like the renewal of the New START Treaty on arms control, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, nuclear proliferation, cyber governance, and the Middle East (especially Iran and the JCPOA – the Iran nuclear deal).

China: While bilateral trade has dropped, China remains Russia's largest trade partner. On the political front, Putin is likely to visit China in 2021, should the pandemic situation allow, according to Andrei Denisov, the Russian Ambassador to China.

If the visit does take place, it would reflect Russia's increased confidence in China's ability to tackle the pandemic and a signal of their growing relationship. Earlier in October 2020, Putin was quoted as saying there was no need for a Russia-China military alliance, but the possibility should not be ruled out in the future.

Turkey: Turkey's support of Azerbaijan helped secure victory over Armenia in their conflict last year over Nagorno-Karabakh, and its influence in the region has consequently increased. While Russia was instrumental in arranging a ceasefire and ending hostilities and its peacekeepers in the conflict zone act as a check on Turkey's position, it must still manage Turkey's growing role in that former Soviet space. Russia and Turkey already compete for influence in Syria and Libya where both parties support opposing sides in the conflicts there.

Iran: Russia and Iran maintain military forces in Syria and also compete for influence there. However, Iran's support of Syria and reportedly of units of Lebanon's Hezbollah has alarmed Israel which view them as a threat.

Russia maintains strong links with Israel and would not be keen on seeing a conflict emerge from Syrian soil between Iranian forces and Israel. Moreover, Russia cannot

be keen on seeing Syria falling under Iran's growing influence. This is another challenge for Russian foreign policy in 2021 and beyond.

Less Active Foreign Policy in 2021?

In the face of the increasing pressure from domestic challenges, Putin will therefore have less inclination to conduct a vigorous foreign policy in 2021. That does not mean, nevertheless, that Russia would forego any attempt to protect and promote its interests, particularly in the former Soviet space, which are crucial to its security.

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