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The Duma Elections and Russian Foreign Policy

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The victory of pro-establishment United Russia (UR) party in the recent Duma elections was never in doubt. It ensures President Putin's re-run for the presidency and his probable re-election in 2024. Externally, it confirms Russia's foreign policy course and reinforces the status quo in Russia's relations with the West and China.

COMMENTARY

ON 17-19 SEPT 2021, Russia held the Duma (parliamentary) elections in which the pro-establishment United Russia (UR) party expectedly swept back to power. In the last elections in 2016, UR secured 343 out of 450 seats in the Duma and 54% of the vote. This time, with 324 seats and almost 50% of the vote, it has a two-thirds majority, enabling it to enact legislation without the support of the other parties.

The Communist Party gained nearly 19% of the vote, up from over 13% in 2016. The nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party obtained 7.5% against 13% previously. The Just Russia party scored 7.4% versus over 6% (2016). The new centre-right New People party, considered part of the 'systemic opposition,' like the four other parties, received over 5% of the vote. They stand in contrast to the 'non-systemic opposition' outside the official political establishment, including those supporting jailed critic, Alexei Navalny.

Putin's Eroding or Growing Power Base?

While the Communists have emerged stronger than in 2016, they are unlikely to pose a real challenge to UR or President Putin, judging by past experience. Ditto for the other systemic opposition parties.

The socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and perceived abuse

of power as well as the cooling of positive national mood since the 2014 annexation of Crimea accounted for UR's latest electoral performance.

UR is widely seen as President Putin's mass power base. While his popularity has lost momentum in recent times, his approval rating remains highest among all politicians. His decision to nominate Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, both popular personalities, to head the UR candidates' list for the Duma elections, certainly played a role in the election results.

Months before, Navalny's supporters and other non-systemic opposition forces were subjected to perceived state pressure; this factor, together with allegations of electoral fraud, have led some observers to question the results.

On the other hand, the Russian electorate remains largely conservative and wary of abrupt political change. The voters generally favour stability and the status quo, which UR and the other systemic opposition parties represent.

The elections provided the country with the last barometer of public opinion before the presidential elections in March 2024. UR's victory will strengthen Putin's political support in the Duma.

Impact on Foreign policy

The systemic opposition parties and electorate support Putin's foreign policy.

The West

Relations with the United States remain strained and marked by mutual suspicion, tension, and hostility. For the next few years at least, it is difficult to conceive of a situation in which a genuine relaxation can come about, unless both sides are able and willing to compromise on their core interests and values.

US sanctions, concern over the growing Russian-Chinese relationship, and perceived Russian interference in the US electoral process will continue to trouble their ties.

With the EU, ties remain strained over Ukraine and Crimea; perceived mutual interference in each other's domestic politics; Russian support of President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Syria; and EU sanctions. Angela Merkel's departure from the political stage in Germany, EU's economically most powerful state, presents Russia with the greatest foreign policy challenge as Merkel has been a leading advocate of dialogue and cooperation with Russia.

This is epitomised by her unyielding support of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, in tandem with strong sanctions against Russia, on account of its annexation of Crimea and support of Ukrainian separatists. The German elections on 26 September 2021 have resulted in a new leadership which the Russians are unfamiliar with.

China

Relations with China have reached a high point in recent years and are crucial to

Russia. China is now a vital customer of Russian energy exports, and an increasingly important economic partner. China's economic and military weight adds considerably to Russia's strategic positioning vis-à-vis the US.

Yet, this is unlikely to lead to any formal, alliance-type relationship. Memories of failed Sino-Soviet strategic efforts of the past linger on. Perhaps more visceral is the cultural and racial gulf between the two populations; it is too wide to be bridged by their mutual suspicion of and making common cause against the US.

While historical grievances over their common border have been formally resolved, they remain in the consciousness of Chinese netizens, a fact judiciously pointed out by a prominent Russian observer, Alexander Lukin in a 22 September 2021 article on Russian-Chinese relations published in *The Washington Quarterly*.

Lukin stated: "In July 2020, Russian media and society reacted nervously to a surge of Chinese nationalism caused by a video posted on the official Weibo account of the Russian embassy in China. It was on the 160th anniversary of the city of Vladivostok. Many Chinese netizens, including *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin himself, criticised Russia."

They claimed that Russians did not found the city but annexed and renamed the Chinese settlement of Haishenwai in an unequal treaty in 1860. To Lukin, all this shows that Russian-Chinese relations are changing.

Central Asia, Arctic

There are also underlying differences in Central Asia and the Arctic. Historically, Central Asia was part of the Tsarist Empire, later the USSR, and remained under Russian influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), after the USSR's collapse.

In recent years, however, China's economic weight, through bilateral economic interaction and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), appears to have weakened Russian influence in Central Asia.

In the Arctic, China's growing interest is seen in the region's vast energy resources and its possible development into an alternative maritime route between Asia and Europe, symbolised by Russia's declared objective of developing the Northern Sea Route. This complements Moscow's own interest.

However, Beijing's ambition of an inclusive approach to managing Arctic issues is seen with trepidation in Moscow. Russia would like to confine the management of the region to the five Arctic states, namely, Canada, Norway, the US, Denmark, and Russia itself.

Afghanistan

Russian security and foreign policy interests were not served with the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Russia now faces the task of ensuring that its security and that of its Central Asian allies will not be compromised by the Taliban government in Kabul.

Russia's underlying fear is that ISIS and Al Qaeda might regain their past foothold in Afghanistan.

Geographical proximity, and longstanding historical, political, economic and security ties with Central Asia will not allow Russia to ignore the implications of an unstable Afghanistan. Yet, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was costly and unsuccessful and that experience presents a strategic dilemma for President Putin.

Putin's Challenge Ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a huge domestic challenge for Putin. Nevertheless, Russia's image and foreign policy have received a fillip. Its Sputnik V vaccine has reportedly been authorised in 70 countries worldwide, as of September 2021. The question is whether this would translate into tangible and longer-term economic, political and strategic gains for Russia.

To sum up, Russia's international image has not suffered irreparably from its policies or actions of recent years. Its links with a rising China ensure that its crucial eastern flank is secured, and its energy resources have a reliable customer in Beijing.

Yet, its interaction and relationship with the US and the West leave much to be desired. Thanks to its close cultural, racial, historical, and traditional links with Europe, Russia remains Euro/Western-centric in its outlook and orientation.

For Moscow, to establish a closer relationship with China and the Asia-Pacific, which are still largely alien to members of the Russian political and business elite, would be a tall order, which they are not only not inclined to but would be unable to achieve. Therein lies the challenge facing President Putin and his officials in the foreseeable future.

Christopher Cheang is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
