

PUTINISTAN IN PROSPECT

January, 2012

While U.S. policymakers and their advisers have been preoccupied with East Asian strategy, Arab-world tactics, Iranian threats and European options, another challenge to American interests percolates below the radar. Its chief protagonist is making no secret of it, and his time will come: in 2012, by prearranged fiat, he will reassume the presidency of Russia. Post-election street protests notwithstanding, Vladimir Putin continues to dominate Russia's political scene and commands strong public support. To consolidate his revived presidency, Putin will rely on Russians' aversion to disorder and appetite for nationalism to pursue his goals.

Chief among these objectives is a Greater Russia. Vladimir Putin's big, not to say gigantic, plans for the Russia he deems to have rescued from disintegration in the post-Yeltsin years will, in his vision, transform the political and economic geography of Eurasia from Kaliningrad to Khabarovsk and from the White Sea to the Caspian. Enabled by petrorubles and facilitated by state ineptitude throughout the Russian periphery, Putin's project will not repeat the fiasco that was the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). As Russia's autocratic ruler, Putin will have the power, the resources, and a blueprint for the resurrection in a new guise of the empire whose demise he publicly and habitually laments.

The evidence is accumulating in various forms. Russian troops began arriving in Kyrgyzstan in 2002, shortly after Putin's first inauguration and ostensibly to counter Islamic terrorism – but more pertinently to offset the American military presence there. Although Russia's armed intervention in, and dismemberment of, neighboring Georgia occurred in 2008 on President Dmitri Medvedev's interim watch, it would not have happened without Putin's authorization and sent shock waves through Russia's "Near Abroad." In 2009 Russia's opposition to American plans to build a missile-defense system in Europe led to ugly threats to deploy tactical missiles in Kaliningrad, a threat repeated by Mr. Medvedev in November 2011 along with a warning that Russia might withdraw from the New Start arms reduction treaty. Also in late 2011, Moscow made the crucial U.S. military base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan an election issue there, urging its closure at a time when its role in NATO's Afghanistan campaign remained crucial.

In the economic arena, Putin's design envisages a new Common Economic Space (CES), initially a customs union that links Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and touted as the forerunner of a wider alliance that will move toward deep economic integration including the adoption of a common currency envisioned as a future competitor for the troubled euro. This explains Putin's long-term, lukewarm posture toward Russia's WTO

candidacy, an apparent crack in the Putin-Medvedev alliance as the latter has actively sought Russia's membership.

Putin's pursuit of a Greater Russia rising among world powers seeks to extend Moscow's reach and expand on the formula that has brought Russia back from the brink: centralized power and authoritarian government, military intervention within and outside the state when necessary, the exploitation of energy resources not only for state revenues but also for coercive purposes, and the use of Russia's nuclear arsenal and missile capacity as threats in strategic negotiations. The rewards of a wider CES will range from the reincorporation of Russian minorities (notably in northern Kazakhstan) and the reintegration of major energy reserves such as those in Turkmenistan to the compliance of governments and regimes in the Near Abroad still carrying the earmarks of their Soviet predecessors. A future Putinistan does not bode well for representative government in Central Asia.

But Putin's grand design hinges on one cornerstone: fractured and fractious Ukraine. With its large and geographically clustered Russian minority, Black Sea frontage, oil and gas pipeline corridor, industrial and agricultural output, and with Russia as its dominant trading partner, Ukraine is as important to any future Moscow-dominated CES as it was to the communist empire of the past. Russia's heavy-handed interference in Ukraine's chaotic democracy and Moscow's cutoff of natural gas supplies to (and through) Ukraine during a price dispute in the 2008/09 winter might suggest that Ukraine's future should lie with the European Union, not with Russia, but with the installation of pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich in 2010 the tide seemed to have turned in Putin's favor. Soon after this election, Ukraine's government agreed to extend Russia's lease on the naval base at Sevastopol for 25 years, for which Ukraine received a discount on the price of Russian natural gas. And before long, the habits of old resurfaced: the imposition of media restrictions, the reversal of democratic reforms instituted by the previous administration, the termination of discussion of the Great Famine of 1932-33 as Soviet genocide. With Europe in disarray and Putin back in charge in Moscow, it will not be difficult to envisage a new map of Eurasia.

H. J. de Blij is John A. Hannah Professor of Political Geography at Michigan State University. His book, *Why Geography Matters – More than Ever* (Oxford University Press) will appear in August, 2012.