

Russia needs more than Putin's maneuvering to revive itself

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Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin (photo by the website of the president of the Russian Federation).

With his diplomatic intervention in Syria and his much-discussed article in the *New York Times* last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin has reaffirmed his reputation as a shrewd interlocutor on the world stage and a discerning analyst of global sentiment. He has inspired a wave of commentary about Russian resurgence reminiscent of 2007, when *Time* magazine named Putin person of the year for putting "his country back on the map." Unless Russia can improve its demographic outlook and retain its competitiveness in global energy markets, however, occasional maneuvers on Putin's part will be unlikely to translate into an enduring Russian renaissance.

In 2000, when Putin first assumed the presidency, Russia's population was 146.3 million; last year, it was 143.5 million. The United Nations recently estimated (.pdf) that it will decline to 107 million by 2100. Russia's population did increase in 2012 for the first time since 1991, a fact that led some to hope that the country will be able to stave off demographic decline. It is unclear, however, how much of that increase comes from births of ethnic Russians. "Anecdotal evidence," notes Walter Russell Mead, "suggests strongly that the ethnic Russians are still dying out and that they are having many fewer children proportionately than the many non-Russian nationalities on the territory of the Federation." There is also a broader question of integration: How will Russia assimilate its rapidly growing Muslim population—estimated to be about a seventh of the country's total—and respond to the surge of Chinese migrant workers in its sparsely populated Far East?

Meanwhile, the energy bonanza underway in North America, and especially the United States, is challenging the influence that Russia can wield in global energy markets. Some analysis of that phenomenon has admittedly been exaggerated, even breathless at times. It strains credulity to imagine that the U.S., the world's second-largest energy consumer, will ever achieve complete energy independence, let alone in as little time as a decade or two. And while energy dependence is a fundamental reason for America's entanglements in the Middle East, it is not the only one. The uprisings in the Arab world, the chaos in Syria, the prospect of nuclear proliferation and the reconstitution of various al-Qaida affiliates, among other phenomena, will require continued U.S. engagement in the region. Even so, the *Economist* rightly argues that the U.S.-led shale-gas boom "is shaking Russian state capitalism to its foundations." Putin himself said last April that the shale boom could "redefine the hydrocarbons market in a big way. Russian energy companies have to be ready right now to meet this challenge."

Externally, Russia is quick to tout its relationship with China. Both Russia and China resent what they regard as a misalignment between the evolving global strategic balance and the distribution of power within major international institutions; as such, they are likely to continue forming ad hoc coalitions to counter U.S.-led efforts that they perceive to be interventionist and militaristic. China also remains a beneficiary of Russian natural resources and weapons systems. Even so, it would be a stretch to argue that Russia is indispensable to China's strategic position. China will continue to cooperate with Russia to counter U.S. initiatives, give voice to global misgivings about U.S. foreign policy and challenge the purported universalism of U.S. values. It will not, however, prioritize its relationship with Russia over its relationship with the U.S., the country that is both most important to China's continued rise and most capable of constricting it. A sharp downturn in Sino-Russian relations would be unwelcome from China's perspective, but would not fundamentally threaten its trajectory. Russia, however, must increasingly depict itself as an all-weather ally of China to certify its great-power credentials.

Nor is the alleged ideological affinity between China and Russia as strong as discussions of a Sino-Russian axis would suggest. While both countries can broadly be classified as authoritarian, Russian governance is considerably more ossified. China, by contrast, is accepting a moderate slowdown in growth so as to transition to a more consumption-centric growth model. It is also growing more adept at pre-empting threats to its rule by encouraging popular criticism of its policies and ousting local authorities when citizens seek redress of grievances. In addition, it is taking incremental steps to liberalize the renminbi and give small- and medium-sized enterprises a greater role in China's economic development. These are not the actions of a country that is invested in a Cold War-style ideological confrontation.

Not all, of course, is discouraging on the Russian front. Russia joined the World Trade Organization in August 2012 after nearly two decades of negotiations, raising hopes that it can gradually reduce the extent to which its economy depends on energy exports. Moreover, while the U.S. has a significant head start in extracting shale gas, Russia is keen to follow suit by tapping the potential of the Bazhenov formation in Siberia. "One estimate," the Financial Times reports, "suggests that the dense rock could contain as much as 100 billion barrels of recoverable oil, making it five times larger than North Dakota's Bakken shale, the engine of America's oil renaissance."

On balance, however, talk of a Putin-engineered Russian revival seems premature. At an event at Harvard University last April, Henry Kissinger summarized Russia's strategic outlook as a combination of three "nightmares":

It has a frontier of 3,000 miles with China, which is a strategic nightmare, with 30 million Russians on one side and a billion Chinese on the other. It has a frontier of 2,000 miles with the Muslim world, which is an ideological nightmare, because a growing part of the Russian population is Muslim, and those Muslims are mostly at the border. It has a frontier with Europe, which is a historical nightmare in the sense that it is a rejection of 300 years of Russian imperialism.

One should hope that Moscow can awaken from all three nightmares. A Russia that stagnates or declines can only undermine the international system.

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