



INSS Insight No. 470, October 2, 2013

New Winds Blowing from Russia?

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The tenth annual conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, which took place on September 16-19, 2013, was attended by experts and media professionals who focus on Russia, as well as senior Russian establishment figures and policymakers. The international gathering traditionally serves as a national forum of sorts for discussing a range of topics, both domestic and international, that lead Russia's national agenda. Since its inception, the project has been under the direct sponsorship of President Putin, who views it as an important channel for Russia's leadership to relay significant messages to the international community.

In addition to foreign experts and Russian public representatives, including members of the opposition, the upper echelon of the Kremlin was present, including President Putin himself, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Defense Minister Shoigu, Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Ivanov, and others. The major issues discussed at the forum related to Russia's forging its future path domestically (definition of its political system and the main features of this approach) and internationally (a situation assessment of the regional and global systems and delineation of foreign policy goals). New approaches as to the essence of the governing structure were formulated, such as a preference for the autocratic trend and a controlled democracy.

Defined after two decades of uncertainty and ambiguity, the leading foreign policy goals reflect Russia's overt intention of reconstructing a Russian empire. Russia sees itself as a separate civilization seeking parity of status with the West, symbolized first and foremost by the United States, and seeks to undermine the current unipolar model. Within this context, Russia is prepared for military, technological, and economic competition with the West, i.e., in fields in which it currently lags behind. Russia favors turning toward Asia and seeking to establish integrative frameworks with nations in the region – the Eurasian approach.

It seems that some of Russia's decisions stem from its assessment that the international status of the United States has declined, a direct result of the weakness of the Obama

administration. This is considered a window of opportunity for Russia in its competition with the United States.

As for the Middle East – still considered a region critical to Russian interests, in part because it is the focal point of the threat of radical Islam against Russia itself – the discussion centered primarily on Syria. Senior Russian officials conveyed the following messages:

- a. Apart from its role in resolving the chemical weapons issue, Russia is an important actor in the Middle East. Regarding Syria, Russia is interested not only in resolving the civil war but also in realigning the overall world order.
- b. Russia does not need Assad himself; rather, it is interested in the welfare of the Syrian people and in international justice.
- c. The end of the Syrian chemical weapons affair does not spell the end of the civil war. Ending the war is possible only through an international settlement, and the road to such a settlement runs through Geneva-2.
- d. The Russians continue to insist that the identity of the culprit in the chemical weapons attack is unclear, though they strongly suspect the opposition. Nonetheless, they continue to support the agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.
- e. While Russia is not sure whether Syria will fully cooperate in the dismantling of its chemical weapons stockpiles, it does not think Syria should be punished (i.e., Russia does not want the agreement to include a threat of sanctions), as Syria is not like the West and conducts itself differently.
- f. The achievement in Syria can be leveraged regarding the Iranian issue.

Among the Middle East issues raised – explicitly and bluntly – by Putin himself was the Israeli nuclear issue. Putin's claim was that Syria's chemical weapons were Damascus' alternative to Israel's nuclear arsenal, and that it is reasonable to demand that Israel divest itself of its nuclear capability, as it doesn't need it given its military and technological superiority in the region. Putin argued that Israel's atomic weapons, which threaten its neighbors, only hinder Israel on the international arena and make Israel a target. He added that there are those in Israel who oppose its possession of nuclear weapons (he referred to the Vanunu affair though without mentioning the name), and that Israel, which in any case is not a member of the nuclear club, can legitimately be required to relinquish its nuclear weapons.

President Putin's statement raises serious questions. To be sure, it contained no change in Moscow's fundamental positions, as Russia consistently votes against Israel at the International Atomic Energy Agency (as it does on many issues in the United Nations) and supports the Arab resolution on "Israel's capabilities." Russia did so as well at the most recent IAEA forum, where it remained – along with its supporters – in the minority, against all the countries of the West that opposed the resolution. One may assume that the

United States will not join the Russians on this issue any time soon. At Valdai, however, the bluntness and tone of the message coming from so senior an official imply a different posture than what was in the past, both in the bilateral and regional contexts.

Bilaterally, Russia has so far made a point of keeping its relations with Israel friendly and has promoted cooperation in a range of fields. This time, the message from Russia's top political figure leaves no room for doubt that Russia is prepared to heighten tensions with Israel and damage the positive relations painstakingly constructed over the last 20 years. It may be the result of Russia's frustration with the level of Israel's cooperation on political and economic issues. In any case, evident here is the victory of those in the Russian establishment who do not support the strong relationship built with Israel.

Regionally, this Russian posture reflects the desire of the would-be empire to raise its status as a regional player with a say in the rules of the game while lowering the status of the United States as the leading power in the arena. Among its motives is Russia's desire to drag Israel into negotiations on Syria and Iran, in part as additional Russian leverage in its regional game against the United States. In this context, Russia's interest would be to promote Iran's influence while delaying the emerging dialogue between Iran and the United States, by creating an association between the Iranian nuclear program and the atomic arsenal that Israel, according to foreign media, possesses – a move that is consistent with Iran's interests. Also, should the process of dismantling Syria's chemical weapons be derailed, the idea could come into play with the accusatory finger pointed at Israel.

Russia will likely avoid translating this approach from rhetoric into practice. Still, if this approach is pursued on a practical level, it has the potential to change the regional rules of the game. Russia would be shifting its so-called balanced policy on the international arena and its status as a fair mediator, and instead choosing a unilateral stance on the Middle East. In turn, Russia's international and regional conduct could well negatively affect Israel's strategic interests.

