

Putin on International Security

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President Vladimir Putin's speech at the 43rd Munich Security Conference¹ was the sharpest systematic attack on US foreign policy by a post-Soviet Russian President. It is true that Boris Yeltsin in December 1999 stated that then US President 'Clinton appears to have forgotten that our country has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons and we will not allow America to dictate to the whole world how to live, labour, work and rest,' but while this reflected resentment and frustration over the USA's international role, it did not amount to a systematic critique.

Putin's speech reflected an increasingly harsh attitude towards the USA that has developed since May 2006, when in his state of the nation address he noted that US defence spending was 25 times higher than Russia's, and:

The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. It knows who to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems. How quickly all the pathos of the need to fight for human rights and democracy is laid aside the moment the need to realise one's own interests comes to the fore. In the name of one's own interests everything is possible, it turns out, and there are no limits.²

Although criticism of American unipolarity has long been a standard feature of Russian foreign policy, the hard-hitting tone is now quite different from that which prevailed in 2001 and 2002. Even the operation against Iraq in 2003, which was strongly opposed by Moscow, did not move the president to use such terminology. He characterised the 'unipolar model' as 'not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world...flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilisation'.

Putin characterised the USA as a lawless power, which although it constantly lectures Russia about democracy, behaves in a very undemocratic way in the international system. He accused the USA of the almost unrestrained use of force in the international arena, and of consequently engendering further conflicts.

Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts. As a result we do not have sufficient strength to find a comprehensive solution to any one of these conflicts. Finding a political settlement also becomes impossible...One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?

Putin considers that the consequence of this policy is the undermining of global security, as no-one feels safe; this leads to nuclear proliferation, as other states seek to safeguard their security. In short, Putin appears to regard the USA as the single greatest threat to international stability and security.

The president also found fault with the current tendency towards violence rather than diplomacy in international affairs, contrasting the 'peaceful transformation of the Soviet

regime' with the current propensity towards the use of force, 'in which countries that forbid the death penalty even for murderers and other dangerous criminals are airily participating in military operations that are difficult to consider legitimate'. He criticised the Italian Defence Minister for allegedly naming NATO and the EU as bodies which could legitimise the use of force: 'The use of force can only be considered legitimate if the decision is sanctioned by the UN'.

The early Putin period saw Russia as a power that sought to become if not part of, then at least close to, the Euro-Atlantic community. Moscow sees a Europe with looser American ties and closer Russian ties as a more natural linkage. However, the energy disputes with Ukraine in January 2006 and Belarus in January 2007, together with the expansion of NATO and the US missile shield to eastern Europe, which Putin also chose to dwell on, have soured relations on both sides.

Russia is therefore consolidating its influence in other directions, and is not deterred by US disapproval from developing closer relations (particularly in the form of arms sales and energy deals) with states such as Venezuela and Algeria. Putin's February 2007 visit to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar also signals the development of a more active phase in Russian diplomacy. His speech at Munich is partly a reflection of Russian concern over the possibility of US military action against Iran. At the same time, Russian confidence in her ability to shift the international orientation towards multipolarity stems from her increasing energy wealth. As Putin mentioned, the BRIC³ countries' GDP surpasses that of the EU, and 'there is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centres of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence...'

Whilst supporting the international stance on Iran, Putin highlighted the need for equitable access to energy and Russia's policy of cooperation. 'In the energy sector Russia intends to create uniform market principles and transparent conditions... energy prices must be determined by the market instead of being the subject of political speculation, economic pressure or blackmail.'

He contrasted Russia's openness to investment with other countries' protectionism and with aid programmes 'that are linked with the development of...donor country's companies', which 'not only preserves economic backwardness but also reaps the profits thereof. The increasing social tension in depressed regions inevitably results in the growth of radicalism, extremism, feeds terrorism and local conflicts.'

To redress these inequities, Russia is seeking to 'interact with responsible and independent partners,' as Putin said in his peroration, and will act with 'a realistic sense of [its] own opportunities and potential'.

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.securityconference.de/> For Vladimir Putin's speech, see http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=179&. Unless otherwise given, quotations in this paper are from this speech, as published not necessarily as delivered.

² See the presidential website: http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/05/10/1823_type70029type82912_105566.shtml

³ Brazil, Russia, India, China

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