KENNAN CABLE

No. 71 | September 2021

President Vladimir Putin addresses the plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum. (St. Petersburg, June 7, 2019. Source: en.kremlin.ru)

The Role of Deflection in Putin's Diplomacy toward the U.S.

By Mark N. Katz

Despite their many differences, the U.S. and Russia do (or at least in Washington's view, should) have common interests regarding certain countries of concern. These include China, Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan. Post-Cold War American presidents have, at various times, hoped that such shared concern might lead to improved Russian-American cooperation on these challenges, and eventually lead to an overall improved Russian-American relationship.[1] Russia's Vladimir Putin, though, has seldom shown much interest in cooperating with the U.S. against any other country. Perhaps Putin did not share America's assessment of these countries as constituting quite the threat to Russia as Washington believed, then or now. Yet even when Putin does recognize the very real risks that these nations pose, his preferred policy is not to cooperate with the U.S., but rather to pursue a policy of deflection (or buck-passing) that leaves Russia largely aloof from tensions between the U.S. and those states which may pose concerns for Russia as well.

With China's large population, growing economic and military strength, and increasingly assertive leadership, it is not surprising that the U.S. and many of its allies have become wary of China. Many analysts in the West consider that Russia (with its much smaller population, weaker economy, geographical proximity to China,

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and history of conflict with it) should be even more worried about the rise of China than the U.S. is. As Isaac Stone Fish wrote in *The Washington Post* this past May, "Moscow has more to fear from Beijing than Washington."[2] Some (including former President Trump, among others) have even hoped that Russia and America would "join forces" against China.[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin, though, describes China as Russia's strategic partner. In June 2021, Putin proclaimed that, "We do not believe that China is a threat to us. China is a friendly nation. It has not declared us an enemy as the United States has done."[4]

Similarly, the U.S. and several of its Middle Eastern allies are extremely concerned about Iran and how it might behave should it obtain nuclear weapons. From an American viewpoint, Moscow should also be worried about the possibility of a nuclear Iran. Moscow and Tehran, though, have maintained a close partnership despite not just whatever concern Moscow may have about this, but several ongoing Russian-Iranian differences (including over Syria and over Moscow's close ties to Iran's Israeli and Arab Gulf adversaries).[5] If U.S.-led efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons should ultimately succeed, Moscow would benefit anyway—all while avoiding worsening Russian-Iranian relations that could well occur if Moscow were to join Washington in pressuring Tehran. And if U.S.-led efforts do not succeed and Iran does obtain nuclear weapons, Moscow will definitely prefer that Tehran be at odds with the U.S. and not with Russia.

In addition, the behavior of nuclear-armed North Korea should be of concern to all its neighbors, including Russia. Putin, though, has largely stayed out of the diplomatic fray with regard to Pyongyang. He has long been unwilling to join in U.S.-led efforts to pressure North Korea into renouncing nuclear weapons, as any such Russian effort may only succeed in eliciting North Korean hostility toward Russia as well as toward the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.[6]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and then Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif talk on a panel at the Valdai Club's Middle East conference, Moscow, February 19, 2018 (photo by Mark N. Katz).

In contrast to this pattern, Putin was initially supportive of the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan that overthrew the Taliban regime which had provided safe haven not just to Al Qaeda, but also to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Moscow later helped the U.S. establish and sustain the "Northern Distribution Network"—a supply route for U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan through Russia and Central Asia (which provided Moscow with substantial transit income) that allowed Washington to reduce its dependence on supply routes via Pakistan (which was covertly supporting the Taliban at the same time).[7] Moscow, though, also began talking to and seeking improved ties with the Taliban beginning in 2009.[8] The Taliban's 2021 return to power could spell the renewal of the threats emanating from Afghanistan to Russian-backed governments in Central Asia—something that the U.S. does not want to see either. But unlike the U.S. and other Western governments, which have expressed great concern about the Taliban and threatened it with international isolation, Russia has signaled its willingness to cooperate with the new government.[9]

In all these cases, Moscow has declined to join with Washington in what many Western analysts see as common threats to both Russia and the U.S. emanating from China, Iran, North Korea, and (more recently) the Taliban. But while the Kremlin may understand the various risks to Russia coming from these nations, Putin prefers to let the U.S. and some of its allies bear the burden of containing them. In effect, Russia prefers "free rides" to collaboration with the United States.

Putin, then, really may be worried (as Washington thinks he should be) about China's growing strength; Iran's belligerent behavior toward Israel and Gulf Arab states that Moscow has improved ties with; the erratic and threatening behavior of North Korea; and the possibility that the Taliban will once again provide safe haven to groups seeking the downfall of Central Asia's pro-Russian regimes. It is doubtful, though, that Moscow would openly work with the U.S. against any of these risks today—not when it can benefit from U.S. efforts to contain these actors. In other words: even though a state or movement poses a threat both to Russia and the U.S., Putin sees Russia as better off if the U.S. and its allies bear the burden of responding to these common threats while allowing Russia to avoid doing so. Russia not only stays out of the fray while the U.S. acts to contain the common threat, it also benefits from Washington's diminished capacity to focus on its differences with Moscow.

Putin himself seemed to acknowledge this "deflection doctrine" at the June 2019 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. In response to a question about Russia's place in the growing U.S.-China tariff war, Putin answered, "There is a good Chinese proverb that says 'when tigers fight in the valley, the smart monkey sits aside and waits to see who wins.'"[10] With President Xi alongside him on the platform for this occasion, Putin went on to soften his statement by noting that, "if trends like today's persist, it will be bad for everyone."[11] Still, the fact that Putin himself raised the idea that Russia preferred to remain aloof from U.S.-Chinese competition was telling.

Putin clearly pursues a policy of deflection with regard to Iran in Syria. Their ongoing joint efforts to shore up the Assad regime proved a success. Now, though, Moscow and Tehran are increasingly in competition with each other for influence in Damascus as well as for reconstruction contracts and other economic benefits.[12] In addition, Putin does not wish to see Iran grow so powerful in Syria

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov walking toward the stage at the Rome 2019 Mediterranean Dialogues sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Rome, December 6, 2019 (photo by Mark N. Katz).

that it spoils Moscow's highly cooperative and profitable relations with America's anti-Iranian allies Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. But instead of confronting Iran directly over its behavior, Moscow has deflected by turning a blind eye to Israeli strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria[13] while pursuing a largely neutral policy toward Yemen, where Iran is backing one party in the conflict there and Saudi Arabia and the UAE are supporting others.[14] By the same logic, it makes sense for Russia not to get involved in U.S.-led efforts aimed at getting Iran to agree to tighter restrictions on its nuclear and other military programs[15]. While Russia does not want Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, it prefers not to risk its own relations with Iran by joining the U.S. in pressuring Iran on this issue. Moscow, of course, did formally support the Iranian nuclear accord (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) because this was something Tehran itself sought, but as former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif revealed, Moscow collaborated with Iran's hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in attempting to sabotage the agreement.[16]

The Trump administration pursued a vision of a U.S.-North Korean rapprochement—one that would result in Pyongyang renouncing nuclear weapons to the benefit of all other countries (including Russia). Yet at the time Moscow (along with Beijing) seemed more worried about the possibility of that process leading to a Korean unification in which the South absorbs the North (much like West Germany absorbed East Germany during the 1990 German reunification), and a united Korea allied with the U.S.[17] Moscow may very well have breathed a sigh of relief when Trump's efforts came to nothing.

Similarly, Moscow may have feared that the U.S.-Taliban agreement for the U.S. to withdraw from Afghanistan might mean the return of the pre-9/11 situation, in which Russia largely bore the main burden of supporting anti-Taliban forces to counter the Taliban-backed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan from threatening pro-Russian regimes in neighboring

Central Asia.[18] Moscow's attempt to establish good relations with the new Taliban government now may be an attempt to persuade the Taliban not to support such forces again, and instead keep the Taliban focused on its differences with Washington.

Of course, efforts at deflecting the attention of two adversaries away from oneself and toward each other can backfire. As Sean McMeekin observed in his new book, *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II*, Stalin believed that the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 would deflect Hitler's attention away from the Soviet Union and toward the West. His hopes that there would be a stalemate between Germany on the one hand and France and Britain on the other, though, did not turn out as he anticipated.[19] Instead, after Germany overran France and the Low Countries and British forces withdrew from the Continent in 1940, Hitler turned his attention toward the Soviet Union, invading it in 1941.

Putin, it should be noted, has stoutly defended Moscow's signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.[20] But pursuing a policy of deflection in the hopes that one's adversaries will keep each other in check runs the risk, as Stalin discovered in 1941, of failing should one side defeat or weaken the other, thereby increasing the potential threat to oneself. If, for example, China should one day grow sufficiently powerful to dissuade the U.S. from countering Chinese aggression in the South China Sea or against Taiwan, Russia should not expect much practical or diplomatic assistance from America or any of its allies if a triumphant Beijing should then turn its attention to regaining Chinese territory lost to the Tsars. Beijing hinted at precisely this claim last year on the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok. On this occasion, as the Atlantic Council's John Herbst observed, "state-owned China Global Television Network [noted] that Vladivostok sits on land ceded by the 'unequal Treaty of Beijing' and that Haishenwai was the Chinese city replaced by Vladivostok."[21] Moscow's possession of nuclear weapons might be seen as a guarantee against any such claims, but when it comes right down to it: Would the Kremlin risk Moscow for the sake of Vladivostok?

It is understandable, then, why Moscow may see it as being more prudent to risk what it regards as the unlikely possibility that China will become much stronger than America in the future than to encounter the certainty of Beijing's wrath now if Moscow joined the U.S. in a joint effort to reign in Beijing. Likewise, any Russian effort to push Iran out of Syria in cooperation with America, Israel, and the Gulf Arabs could backfire and result in Iran and its Hezbollah allies making it too hot for Russian forces to remain in Syria. A vigorous Russian stance against a nuclear-capable North Korea might only result in Pyongyang threatening Russia along with the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. Finally, a strong Russian stance against the Taliban might backfire and result in renewed Taliban support for Central Asian jihadists.

Indeed, to a suspicious mind like Putin's, any U.S. attempt to enlist Moscow in a joint effort to contain a common adversary is more likely to be an American ploy to deflect that adversary's animosity away from the U.S. and toward Russia. Thus, while allying against a common adversary may seem a logical course of action to analysts and policymakers in Washington, deflecting a common adversary's attention toward the U.S., Russia's "main adversary," likely seems the more sensible path to Putin.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

Endnotes

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