Russian foreign policy under Medvedev will probably continue to have a powerful streak of economic self-interest. With enormous constitutional authority and controlling access to both wealth and power, the Russian president is the central factor in determining Russia’s foreign policy course. The transition from Vladimir Putin to Dmitry Medvedev thus has serious implications for Russia’s relations with other countries, above all the United States, still the chief reference point for Russian diplomacy. Since Medvedev was Putin’s hand-picked heir, it would seem logical to expect a fair degree of continuity in terms of the objectives Russia will pursue in its relationships with other powers—especially since Putin is positioned to continue influencing events as prime minister. This expectation is hardly far-fetched, yet there are enough uncertainties that the problem deserves closer attention. Despite the increasingly authoritarian, centralized nature of the Russian political system, the president’s preferences are not the only factor shaping foreign policy. Looking ahead, at least three additional considerations bear close watching: the ideological preferences of the country’s elites, the interests of important bureaucratic players who are intertwined with the decision-making authorities, and the ease (or lack thereof) with which Medvedev asserts his authority over these competing factions.

Understanding how Medvedev’s elevation to the presidency will affect Russian foreign policy also requires an appreciation of Putin’s impact in this sphere, which was far from negligible. Putin has had substantial influence on foreign policy, and especially on relations with the United States (despite the end of the cold war, still Rus-
Putin’s legacy regarding the United States is mixed. On the Putin Factor
the United States.

after Putin will approach the outside world, especially
to operate can help us get a clearer picture of how Russia

results. Nonetheless, having a better sense of what these
other influences are likely to be and how they are likely
to operate can help us get a clearer picture of how Russia
after Putin will approach the outside world, especially
the United States.

The Putin Factor
Putin’s legacy regarding the United States is mixed. On the whole, he was more accommodating than he is often given credit for, despite his evident frustration with Washington’s perceived slights to Russia’s Great Power aspirations. Putin’s at times earthy tirades about what he saw as the U.S. proclivity to ignore or downplay Russian interests are well documented. These outbursts include his rejection of the criticism that he used excessive force to end the September 2004 Beslan school siege (he countered that countries like the United States take advantage of such events to attack Russia because they “wish to tear from us a juicy chunk”), his declaration, in response to criticism of Russia’s heavy-handed activities in Ukraine, that Washington had no business telling Moscow not to meddle in the affairs of its neighbors (“Comrade Wolf knows whom to eat; he eats without asking permission”), and his February 2007 accusation that the United States was the main destabilizing force in world affairs (“The U.S. is overstepping its bounds in all areas”). The hostile rhetoric emanating from Moscow increased during the run-up to the presidential election in March 2008, since manufacturing hostility toward the United States is an effective way of mobilizing Russians to go to the polls in a fairly meaningless election. There have also been more substantive and lasting disagreements, especially over Russia’s role in the affairs of its Western-leaning neighbors Ukraine and Georgia, and its opposition to U.S. missile defense plans, which led to the announcement in July 2007 that Russia would suspend its compliance with the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.

Despite his rhetorical flourishes and these more substantive spats, Putin was fairly supportive of good relations with Washington, arguing that they were critical to Russia’s overall security. To be sure, relations between Moscow and Washington were better at the beginning of Putin’s term in office—when the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and the ongoing war in Chechnya gave the two sides a common interest in combating Islamic terrorism—than at the end. By 2008, disputes over oil and gas, Moscow’s bullying of its neighbors, and a Kremlin crackdown on dissent had provoked varying degrees of outrage in the United States. On the Russian side, years of being ignored or bypassed by Washington on a series of issues ranging from NATO expansion to missile defense have come to underpin a profound sense of disappointment, which Putin’s outbursts reflected.

Yet Putin presided over real and lasting achievements in the bilateral relationship with the United States. These included securing agreements on arms control (the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty, SORT) and winning U.S. approval for Russia’s membership in the World Trade Organization. Most important, Putin did not overreact to a series of actions seen in Russia as extremely provocative, such as the admission of the Baltic states to NATO, U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and its support for Kosovo’s independence from Serbia. Most of the steps taken by Putin’s Russia to express its displeasure with the United States, such as overflights of U.S. military facilities by Russian aircraft and withdrawal from the CFE Treaty (which Washington had never ratified in its amended form anyway) were mainly of symbolic importance. The major exception continues to be in the states of the former Soviet Union, which Russia still regards as a special, semi-sovereign zone of Russian influence (as demonstrated by the recent creation of a Ministry for Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs separate from the Russian Foreign Ministry), and which the Kremlin has worked tirelessly to keep in its own orbit through sometimes dubious means.

Putin always seemed to favor maintaining pragmatic relations with the United States as part of a larger strategy of seeking to ensure Russia a central role in managing global affairs, at least to the extent that Washington was willing to recognize and accept what he saw as Russia’s legitimate security interests. Most notable was Putin’s willingness to overrule his closest advisers on behalf of closer cooperation with the United States. In late 2001 Putin was almost alone in supporting the establishment of U.S. military facilities in Central Asia as part of the campaign against the Taliban; most Kremlin security officials saw the United States as a danger at least equal to the Taliban’s Islamic radicalism. Even when he disagreed with the United States on major policy issues, Putin refrained from reacting in a way that would have jeopardized the overall framework of U.S.-Russian cooperation. To appreciate the importance of such measured
opposition, it is helpful merely to recall the dangerous fluctuations that occurred at times under Yeltsin—most memorably the decision to have Russian troops seize the airport in Pristina, Kosovo, in June 1999, nearly provoking a firefight with NATO peacekeepers. Even Putin’s aggressive rhetoric often served to clear the air in the U.S.-Russian relationship.6

The chill in U.S.-Russian relations during the last year or so of Putin’s presidency should thus be kept in perspective. For all the sound and fury about Russia’s increasingly assertive foreign policy, Putin continually acquiesced and accepted U.S. decisions with which he disagreed out of a recognition that open confrontation with Washington ran counter to his aim of establishing Russia as a powerful and respected member of the international community. What also tends to be overlooked in the sometimes hysterical talk of a new cold war is the fact that the objectives of Russian foreign policy have not fundamentally changed since the mid-1990s. Enhancing Russia’s status as an independent pole of the international system (apart from, but not necessarily in conflict with, the West) and dominating the space around its borders have been fundamental goals of Russian foreign policy for well over a decade, at least since Yevgeny Primakov became Yeltsin’s foreign minister in 1996. Today, Moscow’s ability to pursue these goals has been heightened by factors like the rise of global energy prices and the check on U.S. power exerted by the war in Iraq. By the last years of Putin’s presidency, Russia was merely in a better position to achieve long-standing aims, not pursuing an entirely new strategy or seeking confrontation with the United States.

That said, Putin’s aggressive style ruffled feathers in Washington and made the U.S.-Russian relationship increasingly challenging. Medvedev’s inauguration thus represents something of a fresh start. He will no doubt have his own priorities for Russian foreign policy that will not entirely coincide with Putin’s. The overall objectives of Russian foreign policy may be shared broadly across the elite, but there remains a great deal of debate over specific priorities and over the best means for obtaining objectives. Besides elite preferences, the corporate interests of important bureaucratic actors will also continue to exert substantial influence on foreign policy. The energy sector and the defense industry, in particular, will seek to protect their shares of the pie; their access to top Kremlin decision-makers ensures that they will be heard, even if their narrow mercantilism is at odds with the competing ideas about Russia’s national interests advanced by many intellectuals. Finally, the nature of the transition will itself matter a great deal. It remains to be seen how these bureaucratic factions will respond to the Medvedev presidency, and their actions will to a great extent determine how much autonomy he will have to implement his own designs.

The Role of the Elite

Putin’s departure from the Kremlin is likely to usher in an era, at least temporarily, of greater foreign policy pluralism. In place of a tightly controlled system where disputes between different factions of the elite take place behind closed doors, the period after Medvedev’s inauguration will probably witness an increasingly public debate between competing ideological groups over the future course of Russian foreign policy and Russia’s definition of itself in relation to the West and, specifically, the United States.7

Of course, elite divisions matter less in Russia than in many other countries. In a certain sense, Russia enjoys a broad consensus among its elites on the overall aims of foreign policy. Regardless of their other disagreements, most members of the Russian elite share a common vision of Russia as a fully sovereign Great Power existing—at least in part as a result of the blunting of U.S. power in Iraq—in a multipolar world, not subject to the limitations of international norms and institutions, and with a particular right to manage affairs around its own borders. The debate in Russia, then, is less about what sort of foreign policy Russia should pursue than how to achieve a set of broadly shared aims. Specifically, the debate centers on the proper “vector” for Russian foreign policy—that is, whether Moscow should focus on its neighbors, the West, or both equally.

Putin’s political success was attained, in part, by not siding too closely with any faction in the elite and by finesse the debate over Russia’s foreign policy vector. He appealed to different elite factions on different occasions and over different policy issues. As a result, Putin was able to truly dominate the landscape, co-opting or crushing opposition, although at times only by pursuing incommensurable ends. Since Medvedev may well enjoy less legitimacy than Putin, at least at first, and will presumably need time to consolidate his hold over the various factions and actors, the intra-elite debate is likely to sharpen in the immediate aftermath of the transition.

Elite Factions

Compared to the 1990s, ideology played less of a role in shaping Russian foreign policy during the Putin years.
Putin implemented an essentially corporatist model of governance in which the immense profits derived from the oil and gas sectors were used to co-opt different factions within the elite—both ideological movements and bureaucratic “clans.” In this way, the ideological clashes of the 1990s were subsumed. Yet the deep polarization within the Russian elite continues to exist, and under the new political circumstances post-Putin, ideological differences about Russia’s fundamental identity may again play a prominent role in setting the foreign policy agenda.

Roughly speaking, Russia’s elites fall into four main ideological camps that one may term ethnic nationalists, neo-imperialists (or Eurasianists), centrists, and Westernizers. Putin managed to effectively balance among these camps, promoting Russia’s re-emergence as a major international player in a way that was supported across the political spectrum while giving each camp some, but not all, of what it desired. If Medvedev lacks Putin’s ability to balance the factions, he risks having this debate spill into the open, a development that would most probably favor the neo-imperialist hardliners thanks to their close ties to the military leadership and the notorious siloviki, the former spies who were a pillar of Putin’s administration but may prove less accommodating to a President Medvedev.

Ethnic Nationalists. Of the ideological camps involved in foreign policy, the ethnic nationalists are the one least occupied with Russia-U.S. relations. Organized in groups like the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (Dvizhe­nie protiv nelegalnoi immigratsii, DPNI) and the Rodina party, the nationalists focus on defending the rights of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet states and enhancing the ethnic purity of the Russian Federation. The DPNI and others in the nationalist camp are essentially in favor of a Russia that is smaller, more homogeneous, and more isolationist (except in respect to the Russian-inhabited areas of the former Soviet Union). The nationalists benefited from Kremlin patronage during the Putin years, most likely because Putin and his advisers viewed them as preferable to the Communist Party as a political home for the disaffected. In terms of the outside world, the nationalists believe that an active foreign policy beyond the frontiers of the former Soviet Union will dilute Russia’s identity, and they are interested neither in conciliating nor confronting the West. Of course, their illiberal politics and desire to stir up trouble in Russia’s neighbors make the West justifiably nervous about the consequences should they attain real power.

Neo-Imperialists. The neo-imperialists, conversely, at times seem obsessed with the danger posed by the United States. They often invoke the language of geopolitics devised by the British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder, who spoke of Eurasia as the “heartland” and the “pivot of history,” and consequently see Eurasia as Russia’s natural sphere of influence. Beginning with Eurasia, the neo-imperialists believe that Russia can construct a bloc of states to challenge the West for global leadership. The neo-imperialists essentially see the West as a direct geopolitical competitor to Russia, much as it was during the days of the cold war. They urge Russia to act as the nucleus for a new bloc of states able to stand up to what one outspoken general has termed the global “military dictatorship of the United States.” Many neo-imperialists see the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a bloc that unites Russia, China, and the Central Asian states, as the nucleus of an anti-U.S. political, economic, and, potentially, military coalition.
The leading ideologue of the neo-imperial camp is Aleksandr Dugin, a former Duma deputy and consultant to the Russian military. Dugin was the author, with help from several senior members of the military and security services, of Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii (Foundations of Geopolitics; Geopolitics in Russia’s Future), which one Western scholar has termed the “most influential textbook of Russian geopolitics” in the post-Soviet era. Dugin’s book calls on Russia to save the world from Western domination. His reveries would be little more than armchair philosophizing if not for the close connections he and the neo-imperialist/Eurasian movement have developed with key figures in the Russian national security bureaucracy. As John B. Dunlop has shown, leading military figures, including General Nikolai Klokovot of the General Staff Academy and Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, formerly of the Defense Ministry’s International Department, participated in the drafting of Foundations of Geopolitics, which thus reflects at least in part the thinking of the Russian high command about the nature of the post–cold war world. Dugin himself has served as a consultant to former Federation Council speaker Gennady Seleznev and, more important, has managed to forge links between his Eurasia Movement and the Federal Security Service (FSB) and—through contacts with prominent Kremlin adviser Gleb Pavlovsky and former defense minister Igor Rodionov—with the inner circle of Putin’s Kremlin. Putin’s Presidential Administration as a result provided funding for Dugin’s International Eurasianist Movement, and Dugin himself played a central role in drafting Russia’s National Security Concept. Moreover, despite Putin’s attempts to limit the neo-imperialists’ influence, some of Dugin’s followers, including Pavlovsky as well as former Kremlin security chief and current deputy prime minister Igor Sechin, held important positions throughout Putin’s presidency.

Of all the ideological factions, the neo-imperialists pose what may be the greatest difficulties for the United States. Their approach essentially rejects the legitimacy of the post–cold war world and seeks to re-create the bipolar confrontation of times past. Putin himself was careful to prevent them from becoming too powerful. Some of the more prominent and outspoken neo-imperialists, such as General Ivashov, were quickly pushed out in favor of less confrontational figures. On the other hand, Putin’s reliance on the FSB to underpin his rule necessitated making a kind of truce with the remaining imperialist hardliners, whether by subsidizing Dugin or keeping Sechin in his inner circle. Given the prominence of the largely anti-Western siloviki in the government and the economy, the neo-imperialists will be well situated to advocate their own agenda, and potentially to make serious trouble for Medvedev, who (unlike Putin) does not have a background in the security services.

**Centrists.** Not all of those who see Eurasia as Russia’s natural sphere of influence share the anti-Western obsession of men like Dugin. The centrists merely believe that Russia, as a state whose history and culture mix elements of Europe and Asia, occupies a special position straddling the civilizations of East and West. This approach has been influential in the upper reaches of the Russian government since the mid-1990s, when such Yeltsin advisers as Sergei Shakhrai, Andranik Migranyan, Yevgeny Ambartsumov, and Sergei Stankevich, not to mention Primakov, then head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), were quite open about their belief in the continuing relevance of traditional geopolitics and Russia’s unique position between East and West. This outlook remained important under Putin, who believed that Russia’s proper sphere of influence was the entire world, but who shared the centrists’ understanding of good relations with the former Soviet republics as well as Russia’s other close neighbors (China, India, Iran, as well as the European Union) as a necessary component of a truly global foreign policy.

Of course, if Russia’s priorities lie in its immediate neighborhood, then ties with Washington are of secondary importance. Many centrists would argue that the United States, while no longer an enemy state, cannot reconcile itself to the existence of a strong Russia. Consequently, they support a diplomacy that will strengthen Russia as a fully sovereign independent international actor and focus on improving its relations with its neighbors while attempting to avoid lapsing into confrontation with the West. Indeed, for many centrists, the concept of “the West” holds little meaning. They see Europe and the United States as fundamentally different (as the experience of the Iraq War has shown), and by virtue of historical ties and economic interests they argue that Russia ought to participate in the institutions that collectively comprise Europe, including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Many foresee an eventual close partnership with the EU that encompasses visa-free travel and a Russia-EU free-trade zone. The distant United States, meanwhile, is to the centrists a large and important power, but one whose influence on Russia’s peace and prosperity is minimal compared to the EU and the states of the former Soviet Union.

The key concept for the centrists is a “multivector” foreign policy that seeks good relations with the EU and
The Westernizers. The final, and least influential, ideological grouping among the Russian elite are the Westernizers—those who see close relations with an undifferentiated West as the keystone of Russia’s international position and who call for Moscow to prioritize ties with both the EU and the United States. This sentiment, associated largely with the Union of Right Forces (Soyuz pravykh sil, SPS), economic officials in Putin’s government, and a variety of academic specialists, emphasizes above all Russia’s need to cooperate with the highly developed countries of the West as part of an overall strategy of transforming itself into a liberal democratic state and member of the “democratic world community.” For the most part, support for integration with the Western world and its institutions is accompanied by support for liberal (i.e., democratic and market-oriented) domestic priorities. The connection, of course, lies in the fact that supporters of a pro-Western foreign policy believe that only adherence to “international norms” will allow Russia to achieve integration with Western institutions.

A number of officials with liberal leanings held prominent positions under Putin—especially in positions related to economic policy. They include former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin, Unified Energy Systems head (and former privatization guru) Anatoly Chubais, and former minister of economy and trade German Gref, who played the leading role in Russia’s negotiations to join the World Trade Organization. Westernizers can also be found at a number of well-connected think tanks and NGOs, including the Carnegie Moscow Center, the Gorbachev Fund, and the Institute for World Economics and International Relations.

The Westernizers’ overall influence is limited by the fact that their priorities tend to clash with the vested interests of the bureaucratic elite in the security services and military-industrial complex. Inside Putin’s Kremlin, it was only in the realm of economics, especially economic integration, that the Westernizers had a consistent impact on policy, and then largely because of the strong support of President Putin himself, who saw Russia’s economic revival as critical to restoring the country’s geopolitical weight. Even in the economic sphere, however, the picture was mixed. Leading Westernizers like Kasyanov and former economic adviser Andrei Illarionov were driven from office and into opposition by the state’s increasing hold on the commanding heights of the economy.

Kremlin, Inc.

While the transition to a new president has opened more space for public debate of Russia’s foreign policy priorities, the ability of any faction to impose its will may be sharply limited by what may prove to be Putin’s most lasting legacy—the state’s growing hold on the economy, especially in the energy sector. The cross-fertilization between the Kremlin’s inner circle and the boards of major companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Transneft has already given this new class of officials and managers an extraordinary degree of influence that will only increase in the period of uncertainty as Medvedev works to consolidate his rule. The success of these bureaucratic clans will further entrench a foreign policy that essentially seeks to maximize profits for state-owned companies at the expense of broader political and ideological goals, a process already visible in Moscow’s energy diplomacy. Such de-ideologization of diplomacy was an important consequence of Putin’s model of governance. Yet divisions still run deep within the Russian elite and could again prove decisive if the Kremlin, Inc. model breaks down during Medvedev’s presidency.

To be sure, the linkage between money and power first emerged under Yeltsin, as oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky used their wealth to buy political access. Under Putin, though, members of the bureaucratic elite like Sechin, Presidential Administration official Arkady Dvorkovich, Minister of Industry Viktor Khristenko, and indeed Medvedev himself were installed by administrative fiat on the boards of major state-owned enterprises like Gazprom (Medvedev as well as Gref), Rosneft (Sechin), and Transneft (Khristenko, Dvorkovich). Moreover, many of the individuals placed by the Kremlin, which became something of a state-within-a-state under Putin and continue to hold key positions in government at least for the moment as Medvedev consolidates his hold on power.
This fusion of wealth and power was a central element of Putin’s strategy for restoring the Russian economy. From the earliest days of his presidency, Putin understood that Russia’s economic struggles in the 1990s had undermined its quest to play a more prominent global role. As president, he consequently sought to increase Russian competitiveness and to channel the country’s economic strength for geopolitical ends. Doing so required a break with the economic model of the Yeltsin years, when the so-called oligarchs made vast fortunes while ignoring the broader interests of the state. Putin’s solution was to lay the foundation for a type of corporatism, ensuring a dominant position for the Kremlin in a handful of strategic sectors such as energy, defense industry, and aviation. This approach succeeded in breaking the hold of the oligarchs and enhancing the autonomy of the Russian state internationally. However, linking the economy’s commanding heights and the strategic interests of the state complicated the pursuit of a coherent grand strategic vision.

The resulting connection between wealth and power means that the people responsible for choosing Medvedev as Putin’s successor and managing the transition process have their own very lucrative fiefdoms to protect. If, to paraphrase Calvin Coolidge, the business of Russia is business, then the philosophical and ideological argument about the relative importance of the West and Eurasia in Russian foreign policy matters much less than does ensuring that Russia’s oil and gas reserves continue to bring the state, and its servitors, as much revenue as possible. This paradigm also means that the president of Russia is as much the CEO of Kremlin, Inc. as the proponent of any broader conception of the national interest.

The resulting mercantilist approach to foreign policy was evident in the parallel crises over Russian gas supplies to Ukraine and Belarus that broke out in 2006 and 2007, respectively. In both cases—especially with Ukraine, where Washington and Europe sharply criticized Moscow—the desire to seek higher prices for Russian energy came into direct conflict with important Russian foreign policy objectives. In 2006, the dispute with Ukraine disrupted Russian gas deliveries to the EU (since Ukraine had begun to siphon gas earmarked for the EU to make up for its own shortfall), cast serious doubt on Moscow’s reliability as an energy supplier, and drew stinging rebukes from the West for what was read as an effort to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. If the Kremlin were merely a corporation, its decision to cut gas supplies to a customer behind on its payments would have met with complete sympathy from foreign governments. As a state, however, Russia had other interests to consider, including its relationship with the United States and the European Union. Kremlin, Inc. was wrong-footed by the Ukrainian gas crisis precisely because it failed to assess the situation from the perspective of Russia’s interests as a state and an actor in the international system.

The same is true with regard to Russia’s participation in building a nuclear reactor in the Iranian city of Bushehr. The Russian military-industrial complex, which is closely tied to the Ministry of Atomic Energy, is reaping hundreds of millions of dollars in profits from the Bushehr deal alone (not to mention the free publicity that comes with it). Yet the diplomatic cost to Russia is high: international opprobrium for aiding the mullahs’ regime in Tehran, as well as for possibly helping Iran to obtain a nuclear weapons capacity that even the Kremlin sees as dangerous. In both the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Iran, a major consequence of the fusion of the state with its largest corporations has been a narrowed conception of Russia’s national interest that has not always provided maximum benefit to the Russian people.

The influence of personal and sectoral interests seems, if anything, likely to grow as the turnover to Medvedev gets underway. The simultaneous presence of men like Sechin and Dvorkovich in the Kremlin’s inner circle and on the boards of the state’s major corporations (and sources of revenue) raises the question of whose interests are ultimately being served by this corporatist arrangement. The Kremlin portrays the presence of state officials on the boards of corporations like Gazprom as ensuring that Russia’s largest corporations act in the public interest. Yet influence flows in both directions, and it is unclear whether the board members will be loyal to the Kremlin or to the corporate interests they are charged with overseeing. Medvedev himself has spoken of the need to get the Kremlin out of the business of business, in part by removing state officials from the boards of major corporations (although Medvedev himself was chairman of Gazprom’s board as of spring 2008 until his inauguration as president in May 2008), increasing the chances that important elements of Kremlin, Inc. will resist Medvedev’s attempts to assert his authority.

The very presence of corporate representatives at the top of the Kremlin hierarchy ensured them an important say in the process that selected one of their own, Medvedev, as Putin’s successor, and in establishing the conditions under which he took office. Powerful economic interests have a massive hold on the state, and the uncertainty of the transition provides them an opportunity to consolidate their grip. Whatever coalition comes out on top, Russian foreign policy will still contain a powerful
The Kremlin will use its energy supplies to squeeze as much money as possible from its customers and pursue other kinds of deals (especially arms sales and nuclear construction) without regard for how they are perceived in the West. Of the ideological groups, the centrists will benefit most, since a profit-maximizing Russia is a Russia that needs good relations with both East and West. Such a marriage of convenience between apparatchiks and ideological centrists seems the most likely outcome, leaving a Russia whose foreign policy is simultaneously prickly and schizophrenic, as it was under Putin.

If he seeks to dismantle the nexus of wealth and power built up by Putin, Medvedev will risk re-inflaming the ideological debate about Russia’s identity as a civilization and its position in the world, with uncertain results. If he succeeds, Medvedev could ultimately move Russia in a more pro-Western direction. Should he try and fail to break up Kremlin, Inc., it will be easy for his bureaucratic and ideological rivals to team up in promoting a more serious confrontation with the United States. Much therefore depends on how Medvedev, his rivals, and Putin manage the transition process.

If for one reason or another the succession turns contentious, the neo-imperialists are likely to come out on top. They are well represented in the military and the security services, which could well play the decisive role if Medvedev fails to rapidly consolidate his control.31 For the United States, the success of the neo-imperialists would be problematic but probably not catastrophic. Russia might then become more intransigent about, for example, Iran (a state the neo-imperialists see as a potential partner) and more aggressive toward its immediate neighbors. Whatever the ambitions of Dugin and his ilk, Russia’s lingering military weakness and lack of appeal as an alternative to the West—for even if they could re-create the Soviet Union, the neo-imperialists cannot restore the ideological appeal that the Soviet model held for much of the world in the 1950s and 1960s—means that a Eurasianist foreign policy would inevitably fail to create a bloc of states capable of challenging the West’s dominance, although the price, for Russia and others, might well be tragically high.

Conversely, if intra-elite paralysis forces the competing factions to make real appeals to public opinion, it could well be the nationalists who benefit, since xenophobia has become a proven vote getter that contenders for power would be hard-pressed to ignore. Were that to happen, relations with the United States would probably worsen even though the nationalists are not necessarily hostile to U.S. interests per se. Rather, the problem would lie in the fact that the nationalist insistence on defending the Russian

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streak of economic self-interest liable to antagonize other countries—whether the United States or Iran—that seek to bind Russia to some sort of stance based on principle.

The Politics of Transition

One of the greatest uncertainties regarding the future direction of Russian foreign policy has to do with the nature of the transition from Putin to Medvedev. Medvedev, a lawyer by training who worked with Putin in the reformist St. Petersburg mayoral administration of Anatoly Sobchak, is generally seen as the most liberal and potentially pro-Western figure among those who were considered serious contenders to succeed Putin. But despite being anointed by Putin, it is unclear whether the non-silovik Medvedev will enjoy Putin’s legitimacy, particularly with the security services. Putin’s own role is also something of a wildcard. While Putin remains onstage as prime minister, the incumbents of this office have never played a central role in formulating or carrying out foreign policy. Then again, modern Russia has never had a Putin as prime minister.

As a first deputy prime minister in the Putin administration, Medvedev focused on domestic affairs, particularly the so-called national projects, and his views on foreign policy were not as clearly articulated. Still, Medvedev asserted his support for an active international role, saying that Russia, as one of a handful of major powers in the world, would “conduct an independent foreign policy.”29 While Medvedev has kept his views on foreign policy somewhat vague, his criticism both of over-reliance on the energy sector as a source of wealth and of the corporatist economic structure promoted by Putin is noteworthy. Foreign investors, who are key to Russia’s future competitiveness, largely welcomed the elevation of Medvedev to the presidency in part because of the presumed similarity between his views and those of known Westernizers like Kudrin and Chubais.30

In any case, how the succession is conducted will tell observers much about the direction of Russian foreign policy after 2008. The political-economic apparatchiks did much to control the process from the inside, elevating Medvedev as their preferred candidate at the proper moment, undermining potential opposition, and (presumably) arranging a division of spoils ensuring that Medvedev’s erstwhile siloviki rivals will be well compensated for accepting his presidency. If they succeed in maintaining their positions, Russian foreign policy will continue largely along the path it has trod for the past few years. The Kremlin will use its energy supplies to squeeze as
diaspora in the near abroad would generate conflicts between Moscow and several of its neighbors that Washington sees as strategically important, but which have substantial Russian minorities, particularly NATO members Latvia and Estonia, as well as Ukraine and, increasingly, Kazakhstan (which is nearly 40 percent ethnic Russian).

In any case, the Westernizers are in no position to benefit, at least in the short run. It is possible Medvedev will turn out to be a committed Westernizer, but even if that is the case, he will need time to consolidate his position, in part by demonstrating to the skeptical siloviki his bona fides as a defender of Russia’s international ambitions. Besides, the general elite consensus about Russia as a Great Power will limit the ability of any leader to pursue the kind of integration with the West sought by Yeltsin and his advisers in the early 1990s. Only a major external shock, like a collapse of world energy prices, could induce a sufficient portion of the elite to abandon its belief in Russia as an independent force in international affairs.

Medvedev may turn out to be more overtly pro-Western than Putin. Yet many of the siloviki and members of Kremlin, Inc. have long questioned his intentions and will be in a position to block any attempt to chart a course that threatens their interests. Besides, Medvedev, like most of the Russian elite, remains committed to Russia’s Great Power aspirations. He may well favor better relations with Washington, but only on the basis of a partnership of equals. On that point, there is no debate within the Russian elite. Regardless of Medvedev’s ultimate priorities, the United States must get used to dealing with a Russia that sees itself as a major player on the world stage, and whose interests on issues ranging from U.S. missile defense to even if Russians themselves remain divided about what, precisely, those interests are.

Notes


11. Leonid Ivashev, “Vpozlanie v ‘miatezhevoiun’” [Crawling into an Insurgent War], Nezavisimaia gazeta (November 13, 2002).


17. “Lavrov komentiroval otnoshenia Rossiia s SShA” [Lavrov Comments on Russia’s Relations with the United States], Izvestia (May 21, 2007).

19. See especially Trenin, End of Eurasia, who argues that with the collapse of its empire, Russia is too weak to become a separate geopolitical pole. Restoring imperial control over Eurasia would be catastrophic for today’s smaller, less potent Russia. At the same time, since the emergence of China and India as major powers means that Russia is no longer in the first rank of powers, a multipolar strategy of the kind advocated by Primakov and others would, in essence, mean becoming a vassal of Beijing.

20. Of course, even Sergei Ivanov, the former intelligence operative once identified as Putin’s most likely successor, describes himself as “liberal enough” on economic policy. At the same time, Ivanov has expressed a fair degree of skepticism regarding Western-style democracy and little interest in Russia’s political and security integration with the West. See Sergei Ivanov interview, Financial Times (April 18, 2007).


25. For a sharp criticism of Russia’s use of energy to exert influence on its neighbors, see “Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the U.S. Can and Should Do,” Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force Report No. 57 (March 2006).


31. Some analysts have not ruled out the possibility of a siloviki-led coup against Medvedev. See Anders Åslund, “Purge or Coup?” Moscow Times (January 9, 2008).

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