



Putin's Problem

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Last May, on Vladimir Putin's one-year anniversary as president, throngs of Russians — wearing T-shirts that read "Team Russia: head coach V. V. Putin" — gathered in Moscow to announce that they had "turned their faces toward Russia, and their you-know-what's toward the West."

Putin's supporters had a lot to cheer about. Since his ascent to power, the former KGB operative has reestablished Moscow as a major player in world politics. Through a wide range of economic and diplomatic initiatives, the Kremlin is fast reemerging as the preeminent power in Central Asia. Its officials are busy strengthening formidable alliances with China and Iran — and, through much savvy international maneuvering, Russia is well on its way to becoming an energy superpower.

Not surprisingly, dreams of a new Russian empire have flourished. The doctrine of Eurasianism, long relegated to obscurity, has returned with a vengeance, drawing a growing number of adherents to its call for a Russian revival. Its ideas of a renewed quest for national greatness — to be accomplished through alliance-building and opposition to the West — appear to have resonated in the corridors of the Kremlin. Prominent members of Russia's policymaking elite, ranging from Communist Party leader Gennady Zhuganov to members of the Russian general staff, have flocked to the ideology's banner. As recently as this past June, a panel of experts from Moscow's influential Council for Foreign and Defense Policy officially concluded that Russia must adopt Eurasianism in order to bolster its international status. Even Putin himself appeared to have embraced its tenets when he publicly affirmed that "Russia has always seen itself as a Euro-Asiatic nation."

But a lot has changed since September 11. Over protests by hard-liners wary of a Russian loss of influence, Moscow has become an active partner in Washington's antiterrorism campaign. In a move long on symbolism, Russia announced that it would shed two Cold War-era military installations — in Lourdes, Cuba, and Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Finally, despite rumblings of discontent from the Duma (Russia's lower house of parliament), Putin barely reacted to the Bush administration's announcement of America's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

Without question, much of this has been self-serving. The Russian president has managed to wrangle valuable concessions from Europe and the U.S. (including a warmer Russian-British relationship and a freer hand in Chechnya) out of his post-9/11 dealings. And the Kremlin's active involvement in the Afghan campaign has been more than a little motivated by a desire to retain its foothold in the Central Asian republics. But there are glimmers of a newfound pragmatism in Moscow's foreign policy.

These moves have not gone unnoticed. A growing number of Russia's foreign-policy and military conservatives are increasingly apprehensive over Moscow's change in attitude. Their fears were recently articulated by General Leonid Ivashov, the former head of the Russian Defense Ministry's international cooperation department, who publicly blasted Putin's foreign policies as responsible for Moscow's strategic retreat from Central Asia and its growing weakness vis-à-vis the West. "Russia lacks a geopolitical doctrine," according to Ivashov, a fact that makes "our foreign policy inconsistent and... subservient to American and Western policy."

Ivashov is hardly alone. For much of Russia's leadership, the idea of *Derzhavnost*, their country as a great power, still holds a great deal of appeal. So it is not surprising that Russia's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, until recently staunchly pro-Kremlin, has lamented that 2001 was "a year of losses at the very moment when the CIS countries acquired some economic independence and Russia regained its status as the natural political leader." Alexandr Dugin, Eurasianism's main ideologue, has also weighed in on the issue, publicly urging the Russian president not to forget his pledge that "Russia should exist as great power, or not at all."

Of course, it's still far too early to judge whether these fears are justified. Putin's maneuvers may simply reflect a more cautious foreign-policy line, rather than a genuine reorientation, in the wake of September 11. And thornier issues between Washington and Moscow — for instance, Russia's deepening strategic alignment with Beijing, its assistance to Tehran's ballistic missile program and nuclear ambitions, and its designs over Central Asian energy — are likely to be the real tests of whether a new, more productive long-term relationship can be forged.

But with criticism of his perceived tilt toward the West growing, the most popular Russian leader in recent memory just might have a fight on his hands.