



NIAS Global Politics Brief

Russia in 2021: Expanding boundaries

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Russia's aspiration to dominate the world had fruitful outcomes in 2021. Russia's quest to reclaim power linger in every Kremlin interaction, with the trembling US world order, it is inevitable for Vladimir Putin not to revisit the memories of lost Soviet glory and incorporates into Kremlin's future agendas, which includes delivering Russian National interest to the world, establishing Russian- Eurasian bloc, curbing foreign influence at home and creating counter-resistance to the West. Putin is noted for being an iconic strategist in exhibiting these central features.

I

Major Political Developments in Russia 2021

Vladimir Putin stepped into third decade of Presidency and Parliamentary elections happened in September 2021, for 450 representatives. Putin's party, United Russia, had won 50 per cent of the vote share with 2/3rd majority in State Duma. Putin seized the majority in the State Duma since 2003, and it embraces Kremlin's initiative unquestionably, much evident with the Constitutional Reform of 2020 (package with 206 changes) that expanded Putin Presidential terms to 2036, citizens could only disapprove as a package and thus implemented unopposed on 2021.

The Russian Political Landscape

Vladimir Putin, is the pivotal element of Russian politics due to its popularity based on monetary policies and state of economy at home, countering Western interests and maintaining political stability. However, Putin realised in 2018 local election that United Russia Party's popularity diminished and, focused on strengthening the party by reorganising its key leaders for 2021. Medvedev's acceptance level amongst Russians faded due to accusations of economic mismanagement, thus in January 2020, Mishustin Mikhail was replaced as Prime Minister, apparently increased confidence of the party. The Defense Ministry Sergey Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, led the party, along with new faces from media and hospital administrators.

Election 2021 could have been fair as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the President of liberal democrat with 9 % approval and Gennady Zyuganov of the Communist front with 5% per cent trust, are Putin primary opponents with a much lesser approval rating. Sergey Mironov is the third opponent from the Fair Russia Party, who opines there is no reasonable alternative to Putin. Yabloko, a pro-Western and affiliated to Alliance of Liberals and Democrats of Europe (ALDE), petitioning to normalise the relationship with EU and US, do hold some significance in the Moscow regional assembly.

Constructively, Vladimir Putin's prospective opponents are blackout. Dmitry Gudkov, an ex-State Duma deputy, represented Fair Russia and Yabloko, exiled to Kyiv after Gudkov was taken under custody. The People's Freedom Party (PARNAS), a significant anti – Putin party, also affiliated to ALDE, with notably opponent Boris Nemtsov, is led by Mikhail Kasyanov, who was Putin's first Prime Minister. In June 2021 Ministry of Justice suspended PARNAS for three months, thus eliminating their contestation on elections. Pro – Navalny supporter Lev Shlosberg was debarred from standing in elections. The Russian Authorities also curtailed election observations, and Kremlin imposed limitations on observer's participation from OSCE and the Council of Europe. The Ministry of Justice foisted treachery charges on independent domestic election observation NGO Golos, thus excluding the NGO from the scene. Nevertheless, Golos received around 5000 complaints of fraudulent practices against the United Russia Party, and there is also a considerable decrease in Putin supporters than in the previous elections.

Human Rights in Russia

The second major issues is the pertaining Human Rights issues in Russia. Foreign Agent Legislation ceased several political NGOs, financed by foreigners since its inception in 2012. Kremlin believes that critics are foreign-sponsored, especially from the US. Contemporarily, Bill includes 60 items with severe restrictions on Privacy Rights, from media to individual targets. In October 2021, the Law embraced critics who study and report the problems in the military, space agency and security services.

Covid instigated a new wave of Human Rights law in Russia. Russia is enduring the 4th stage and had 40000 cases reported daily in November 2021. Russia was the foremost producer of vaccines, yet failed to get consent from WHO and Russian restraints foreign vaccine brands, thus making citizens hesitant to be vaccinated. Foreign Agents Laws were imposed on the citizen who criticised the health management system, in reality, Putin critic who condemned against controversial constitutional plebiscite was also targeted.

Another significant Human Rights outcry was the case of Alexei Navalny, a significant vocal critic of Putin, who gained global recognition for exposing Putin's Black Sea Palace was jailed for a 2014 money laundering case. The US President condemned through a joint statement signed by 45 states in the United Nations Human Rights Council and called Russia to oblige International Human Rights standards. The EU and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on high profile Russian officials, Russia rejected the claims and imposed counter-sanctions.

Wrongful prosecutions against journalists, artists, and activists through Foreign Agents Law were visible throughout 2021. The predominant instance includes Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an oligarch who turned Putin critic's MBKh Media was raided by Russian police and devices were confiscated. Independent media outlets such as Meduza, Vtimes and Dozhd TV were cracked down. The Memorial Society organisation, installed during Mikhail Gorbachev era through "Glasnost" for political repression and protection of Human Rights, had encountered repeated condemnation on receiving foreign funds for political engagement. A renowned Memorial Society researcher Natalia Estemirova murder, still remains unsolved and the European Court of Human

Rights (ECtHR) intervened and issued a judgment in 2021, stating Russia behaved inactive in Natalia's abduction in Chechnya in 2009. Notably, Natalia had also been investigating in Russia state-imposed violence during the 1999 – 2000 Chechen conflict. The Human Rights violations in Russia will prevail on Putin critic as the pandemic and border conflict lasts in the region.

II Trends in 2021

Russian Economy rebounded in the first half of 2021 due to an unprecedented increase in oil prices. However, it weakened in the second half due to inflation despite Russia surging economic cooperation and substantial investments. Biden administration pressurised Saudi Arabia, UAE and OPEC to increase oil production, however. Russia and OPEC refused to compel and maintained oil production by 400,000 barrels per day.

Russia – China

Russia and China enjoy high levels mutual trust due to their pertaining issues with the West in Eastern Europe and Indo–Pacific regions. Russia is indeed the largest provider of weapons and the second major oil supplier. Both countries delivered invariable support to Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, argue to remove sanctions enforced on North Korea and criticise ineffective American democratic values. Both conducted a naval exercise near Japan in the Pacific Ocean, also sent bomber flights to bully South Korea and Japan.

Russian-Middle East relations

Started with Lavrov visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE in March. Russia indulged on business talks with Saudi, particularly with chemical and Halal meat. [xix] Prince Khalid also announced the Military Cooperation Agreement with Russia through Twitter. Russia and UAE celebrated the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, and is also Russia's strategic – partnership since 2018. UAE is investing in transportation, property development and hospitality sectors in Moscow. In Doha, a trilateral agreement between Russia, Qatar and Turkey was held to discuss on political resolution in Syria. Putin wants to cease the Caesar Act imposed on Syria and emphasises the US/West to recognise Assad's regime, and is involved in liberating territories occupied by Syrian rebels though it stronghold in Tartus and Heimeim Air base.

After the official visit to Middle East, Lavrov met representatives from the Hezbollah in Moscow, which Kremlin considered a legitimate force rather than a terrorist. In a couple of days, Lavrov met Israel Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and also in October hosted an official visit to new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. In the following days, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian visited Lavrov on expanding ties and JCPOA discussions.

Turkey and Russia exhibit a Frenemy relationship as Turkey desires to assert dominance in former Soviet state Azerbaijan by defeating Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Russia made a ceasefire, maintained peacekeeping in the region, and on contrary it also supplied drones to Ukraine to strike pro-Russia forces in 2021. Russia is trying to create a new paradigm in West Asia by bringing positive relations and filling the vacuum of a major foreign power presence.

Russia in South and East Asia

Russian – Republic of Korea trade went to an all-time high of \$30 billion in 2021 and it will invest in the disputed Kuril Islands, Russian Far East and the Arctic. Russia is working to export hydrocarbon from Sakhalin region to South Korea. Russia is the primary arms dealer to Myanmar, Indonesia and Vietnam in South East Asia, overtaking America. Russia and Vietnam engaged in vaccine production and oil exploration on the Vietnamese continental shelf. The Vietnam – Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) free trade agreement (FTA) was created, and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are expected to boost the trade between regional blocs. China and America contestation is making SEA countries move closer to Russia. ASEAN and Russia conducted their first naval exercise in 2021. Russia enjoys a warm relationship with India, as Putin visited New Delhi in December and signed agreements. Russia holds dialogue with the Taliban over peaceful transformation and conducted a military exercise with Pakistan.

Russia in Latin America

Russia sent greeting to Cuba's Miguel Diaz Canel who succeed Raul Castro, however in July, a massive protest was staged against Diaz Canel, and Russia extended its support by warning outsiders' (US) influence in the region. Russia reassured long-term engagement with Venezuela, backed its oil industry despite US sanctions, and exhibited solidarity with President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Russia's vaccine diplomacy was successful in Latin America due to the failure of other global players. Russia is expected to intervene in the upcoming 2022 election due to its substantial presence in regional media.

Russia in Africa

Russia signed military cooperation with Nigeria and Ethiopia, providing direct military assistance to Libya and the Central African Republic. It also remained an Election observer in Ethiopia and toiled for proper transfer of civilian rule in Sudan. Russia's Rosatom is building a nuclear facility worth \$60 billion in Egypt, also negotiated a nuclear pact with Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Zambia. Russia had maintained the balance between all parties of Libya, primarily supporting Khalif Haftar, to get uninterrupted access to the Mediterranean Sea. Russia is trying to facilitate to remove embargo in the Libyan oil sector and block extension of UN mission. Russia and Namibian has trade agreements worth \$29.5 million based on exchange of grain and diamonds predominately. Russia failed in vaccine diplomacy to Africa. However, Putin is preparing for the 2nd Russia – Africa Summit in 2022, for a solid economic and military alliance.

III Forecast

Ukraine and Russia Relationship – Compellingly, Putin penned an Article titled "On the Historical Unity of Russian and Ukrainians, where Putin claims that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are common descendants of Ancient Rus and dominated as Slavic heartland during Soviet era, it is inalienably attached to Russia historically, which

is geopolitically and personally important to Putin. Russia refused to accept Ukraine as an independent country and aims at dissolving its statehood.

Donbas region in Ukraine, is in crisis since 2014 and faced regular crossing of Russian armed forces across the border. Russia re-invaded Ukraine in March 2021, and Putin allowed nearly half a million people from the Donbas region to vote in State elections as part of a strategic incursion. Real estate sector of Donbas was re-shuffled allowing Russian Government to purchase its enterprises and halted coal supplies to Ukraine. In October 2021, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website claims that Russian special operation forces seized control over the region, dismantling the state's local authorities, police departments, and military facilities.

In November, Ukrainian Defense Minister met American counterpart in Pentagon for advanced and more weapon supply. The US responded by parking an Unsinkable aircraft carrier near Russian borders as a warning and stockpiling weapon through NATO apart from direct supplies. Subsequently, Biden's administration wanted to waive sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, not welcomed by all EU and NATO participants, which Russia views as a sign of US weakness.

Russian claims negotiating the peace process between the rebels groups and the Ukrainian Government. In reality, Russia needs Ukraine to function as a buffer and provide a strategic depth, between NATO countries. Therefore, the most anticipated events of 2022 is how Russia will contest Ukraine, either through total or proxy war, covert operation, or coercive diplomacy, but pursue its interest.

US and Russia – Joe Biden Presidency had to handle multiply issues with Russia such as Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, nuclear proliferation, cyber governance, Middle East talks (Iran's JCPOA), yet Ukraine crisis will be game changer. Conversely, Russia is ready to negotiate in terms of INF in the NEW START on controversial 9M729 systems if the West considers removing the Aegis Ashore system with its Mark 14 vertical launching system deployed at US and NATO military bases in Europe.

US intelligence had warned that Russia could possible invade Ukraine on multiple fronts in early 2022. Satellite images show that the 41st Combined Arms Army stationed in Siberia is transferred to the Ukraine border. Winter in January is harsh, leaving Ukraine terrain frozen, making it easy for Russia to march. The US and NATO limitation in the region was noted in the Kerch Strait incident of 2018, therefore, it arrives at a significant question of how much the West risks war or ties with Russia.

Russia and Europe- after the Georgian crisis, Russia built alternative gas pipelines through the sea, excluding Ukraine territorial passage and second subsea Nord Stream pipeline, which was part of US-imposed sanctions in 2014. Nevertheless, Germany allowed the pipeline to be completed in 2021. Analysts believe Russia created an artificial gas crisis to speedy approval from the Germans to operate and the EU to accept the new pipeline. The crisis was caused due to multiple reasons such as shutting down of Algeria pipeline to Spain and Portugal, repeated earthquakes in the Netherlands gas fields, and the exhaustion of North Sea gas, which increased demand for Russian gas. On the contrary, in October, the EU proposed Law to ban the tapping of new oil, coal and gas deposits in the Arctic as part of the climate change initiative. The Proposed Carbon Tax in the EU might curtail 40 per cent of Russian hydrocarbon exports. Consequently,

Putin had created a resilient economy prepared for sanctions and its turmoil over the years. In 2022, Russia will be prepared to face sanctions, but the question is will Europe survive without Russian gas.

The Arctic, NATO and Military Affairs - The Arctic is rich in hydrocarbon, nonferrous, precious metals, stones, and other raw materials, the coastline contributes to 12 to 15 per cent of Russia GDP and 20 per cent of exports, and 1/3rd Russia's fish resources. In 2020, American rerouted the Polar Star ice breaker from the Antarctic to the Arctic, made Putin draft an ambitious Arctic Policy 2020, through which the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will be created to give Arctic waters a new perspective of national passage for the International Market, and Russia aspires to transport 20 % LNG share by 2035. Putin presumes that uncovering more land area due to melting ice could bring economic fortune, despite Climate Change challenges.

The Russian's naval Doctrine includes safeguarding the remote areas of the Arctic and Far – East due to possible future border issues. Russia had reopened nearly 50 Cold War-era airfields, bases, early warning radar and missiles near Alaska, and Russian Anti – Satellite Missile test-fire, which is considered dangerous to the West. Russia might counter the other Arctic player such as Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the US, who are also part of NATO in the near future.

Russia also faced a skirmish incident with British Warship HMS Defender, that navigated near the Crimean coast, while returning from Georgia through the Black Sea (amidst Russia's Gunnery Exercises), while Russia claims firing warning shots and later dropped jet bombs in the path of HMS defender. In the following year, the major powers might use Eastern Europe as a conflicting area in projecting their military bullying.

Conclusion

West needs to cooperate with Russia apart from imposing sanctions, as Russia could thrive economic crisis and create a counter-west polarity. Restoration of NATO – Russian Council (NRC), which was suspended in 2014, is mandatory to negotiate and green technology could also be a new area of focus. However, Russia primary trade is based on hydrocarbon and arms sales, and it has to focus on creating commercial trade and soft power.

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