

A Kopek for Your Thoughts

The logic of Russian voting on Syria at the United Nations

I work in the embassy circuit, and a few days ago I bumped into my Russian policy friend at a social event. We touched on Russia's recent posturing over Syria at the UN Security Council and he broadly confirmed my understanding of Russia's strategic calculus: Moscow has geopolitical interests in Syria and environs which need safeguarding, and in the process of said safeguarding it has propitiously regained some lost leverage in the international political arena - a variable asset that the Kremlin would like to spend leisurely, thriftily, and in doses meant to amplify its whittling influence and prestige. If true, then this contradicts Fareed Zakaria's opinion this week that Russia has no clear strategy on Syria.

Or does it? Yes and no. Moscow may rightly relish the Western media's recycling of the historically exercised question "What is Russia thinking?" as of late. Nostalgia, evoking Khrushchevian vintage, of Soviet brinkmanship and shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East may also be galvanizing officials in Moscow.

Alternatively, Moscow may simply be riding its luck on the back of (Russian ambassador to the UN) Vitaly Churkin's veteran statesmanship, and picking up the winnings as it goes along. The appearance of a well thought-out strategy may just be theater, a piece of choreography to keep us in the foreign audience flummoxed by the legerdemain that goes on within the Kremlin walls. If so, then advantage Zakaria.

But this sort of reasoning would assume that Russia is just some foreign policy maverick, which it is not. Plan or no plan, Russia is no causeless rebel. Baseless bravado and careless chutzpah are, at least in the postwar epoch, not Moscow's style. Foreign policy latitude is deeply and proudly woven into Russia's historical tapestry, which then begs the question: is there a jingoist agenda here?

Some knowledge of Russian history and the Russian psyche would suggest so.

The philosopher Petr Chaadaev wrote of his country in 1837, "I have a deep conviction that we are called upon to resolve the greater part of the social problems, to perfect the greater part of the ideas which have arisen in older societies, pronounce judgment on the most serious questions which trouble the human race". Fyodor Dostoevsky panegyricized the "thinking Russian" as the world's most independent individual, while the nationalist thinker Ivan Asakov boasted of marching to Constantinople to form an empire "under the Russian eagle". Were these three around today, it is doubtless that they would have joined the Kremlin chorus in feigning and crediting to Russia a higher wisdom in international relations than that being practised at the UN.

Fortunately, such nationalistic grandiloquence has no place in the plenary halls of modern world politics. The last Russian attempt to assert global influence in this fashion did not go down well – it caused a war in the Caucasus, sullied Russia's image with neo-imperialist epithets, and spurred the United States into installing a missile shield in Russia's European hinterland. Russia's WTO entry was substantively delayed, while China decided to sidestep it in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Moscow would not want to go down this path again, especially not at the price of permanently alienating the Arab partners its Soviet antecedents worked so hard to court.

Which is why this time, in this latest installment of Russian foreign policy theater, we in the foreign audience may not be the ones sitting up front in the stalls, as we are rather accustomed to doing.

And here's why. Russia goes to the polls next month in a presidential election that, far from threatening to displace leading candidate Vladimir Putin, is expected to be the political debut for Russia's *noviy grazhdanin*: the politically discerning and politically active 'new citizen'. We have seen him on our television screens and his mobilizations in Moscow and other Russian cities over the winter contributed to *Time* naming The Protester its Person of 2011. Above the potential loss of \$4.5 billion in arms contracts to Syria and Moscow's naval base in Tartus, Russian policymakers fear that the *noviy grazhdanin* movement may use next month's election to formally assert itself, under the gaze of the world's media, as a material, influential force in Russian politics and a counterweight to unchecked executive prerogative.

At a time when the ruling United Russia party is unable to use a burgeoning economy nor accelerating social reforms as sales pitches for Mr Putin's re-election campaign, it can, and certainly seems to be, invoking patriotism in an effort to dilute *noviy grazhdanin* calls for changes to Russia's tired political status quo. In short, Russia's posturing over Syria may be more about shoring up its domestic politics than addressing any pressing foreign policy exigency. Last month Turkey, a resolute critic of the Assad regime, did Russia a huge favor when it permitted Moscow's South Stream gas pipeline to traverse Turkish territory, all but killing the European Union's rival Nabucco project. Moscow must not betray Ankara's trust by appearing too implacable on Syria, yet the longevity of the Putin-Medvedev diarchy may require it to graze perilously close.

Thus in Mr Churkin's post-veto remonstrations about Western media propaganda and Foreign Minister Lavrov's grand reception in Damascus, the Kremlin may very well be putting on a show for the benefit of its own electorate. The message: vote for the man who's fighting for Russia and Russia's allies, or don't call yourself a Russian.

Is this then Russia's strategy? It's still hard to say. But the telltale signs are there: in January, Mr Putin penned two separate articles for the newspapers *Izvestiya* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in which he extolled the virtues of Russianness and berated the apparent hypocrisy of countries that use "military force to "export democracy"" – pieces that would have done Chaadaev and Dostoevsky proud. On 29 January Mr Lavrov irked his Japanese hosts by calling for a referendum to decide sovereignty over the Kuril Islands – co-claimed by Japan. And earlier this month an editorial carried by Russia's state news agency touched on rising anti-American sentiment among Russians.

In the end, much about Moscow's game in Syria remains a mystery. To us in the foreign audience, Russia's strategy, if it has one at all, seems to be one of improvised muddling-through, tempered by a cautious but liberally construed diplomacy. The domestic arena in contrast seems to present a contrasting picture of purpose amid hushed talk of regime survival. Chaadaev and Dostoevsky may be confined to sitting outside the Security Council chamber in New York, but they resonate rather comfortably among the Kremlin's dreamy cloisters.