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## Brezhnev and Putin

Vladislav Zubok

Vladimir Putin's announcement to run for another term makes him the most durable leader in Russia's recent history. Some think of Putin as "the new Brezhnev" who may die in office many years from now. But is it fair to compare Putin to Leonid Brezhnev? Can the Soviet past provide any lessons for Russia's present and future? What should the United States expect of Putin?

The comparison between Brezhnev and Putin reveals more differences than similarities. Brezhnev, who stayed in power for eighteen years, owed his whole political career to the ruling communist party. He had lived through the age of revolution and war, and perhaps for this reason yearned for stability, order and relaxation. His foreign policy was conservative. His personal insecurity and experience of the Second World War made Brezhnev feel that the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers, was a major stakeholder in global stability, and should seek to prevent a major war.

Brezhnev inherited the giant territorial empire and the bloc of allied socialist countries. He knew that Soviet empire was vulnerable and feared a domino-effect. He said after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968: "If we had not disrupted the plans of counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia, NATO troops would soon end up immediately on our Western borders."<sup>1</sup> Brezhnev believed that the accumulation of military power was a precondition for Soviet role and place in the world. At the same time, he realized that the Soviet Union could not win a race against the United States, and loathed Khrushchev's brinkmanship, that had led to the

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<sup>1</sup> L. Brezhnev, speech at the Plenary Meeting, December 15, 1969, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/almanah/inside/almanah-doc/1014781>, accessed February 5, 2018,

crises over Berlin and Cuba. Instead of continuing with the Cold War, Brezhnev wanted to reach a grand bargain with the United States, another major stakeholder of global stability. The US-Soviet detente, Brezhnev hoped, would solve many problems, including access to Western technology, economic development and better living standards for Soviet people. Brezhnev's vision of peace was not Kantian and liberal, but quite genuine.

Brezhnev's view of the United States was more pragmatic than ideological. The parity of nuclear forces, in this view, would make the US leaders recognize the Soviet Union as equal; then a new world order could be constructed jointly by the two superpowers. The diplomacy of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger seemed to validate Brezhnev's view. Yet, détente peaked after just a few good years and began to decline. Brezhnev's vision revealed itself as a naïve illusion. Instead of cooperating, the superpowers skirmished in the Third World and over human rights. And instead of an alliance with the Soviet Union, the United States preferred an alliance with the communist China. The mirage of the US-Soviet rapprochement faded just as Brezhnev's health failed. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan can be considered more an effect, rather than a cause of the end of détente.

Vladimir Putin was a young KGB officer during that era, but his real formative political experience came with the collapse of communism and Soviet statehood. Putin fully accepted the failure of communism as an economic and ideological doctrine. In contrast to Brezhnev, who believed in the status quo, Putin learned to survive in an era of high volatility, in the new world that emerged after 1991. He saw his mission above all to restore the Russian state. He is succeeding only in part: instead of the mighty communist party, he runs a rickety and conflicting coalition of corrupt and greedy security forces, sprawling bureaucracies, export-oriented oligarchic capitalists, xenophobic Orthodox Church leaders, Russian nationalists, and Chechnya

strongmen. Putin is an autocrat on a tightrope. His credibility and leadership strongly depend on popular approval, and he is paranoid about Western interference into Russian presidential elections.

Putin acknowledges that the old Soviet empire cannot and should not be rebuilt. Russia is simply too weak for this: the Russian economy is ten times smaller than the U.S. economy, and so are Russian military expenditures. In Putin's vision, Russia should remain an autonomous power between the European Union and China. To maintain this position and compensate for its weakness, Russia needs a strong authoritarian regime. It is Putin's firm conviction that experiments with liberalization and democracy would only lead to Russia's destabilization and possible collapse.

Putin recognized the central role of the United States in the post-1991 order. His tenure began with a Brezhnev-like attempt to cultivate a special relationship with the U.S. leaders. After the 9/11 attacks in New York, Putin offered the Bush administration cooperation in the war on terror. In the following decade, however, Putin became antagonized by the expansion of NATO and the European Union. He – and an increasingly large segment of Russian political elites - viewed Western assistance to “colour revolutions,” above all in Ukraine in 2005 and 2014, as the policy of encirclement of Russia with the U.S.-dependent states and clients. The Russian leader also concluded that if Russia retreated it would be doomed to occupy a subservient role. Putin's goal is not to undermine the U.S.-led world order per se. It is beyond his capabilities, and, besides, Russia is embedded in this order. Rather, Putin's actions since 2007 are aimed at checking growing American encroachments on ex-Soviet territory, where Russian economic and political interests remain very strong. As Russia has risen from its prostrate position, Moscow's actions ~~reflected are natural, considering~~ Russian geography, history, and security interests.

Therefore, Putin's actions from 2007-2017 should be considered defensive, a reaction to the advancement of the U.S. zone of influence in Russia's own backyard.

Brezhnev sanctioned the invasion of Afghanistan after his advisers convinced him that the United States wanted to turn that country into American satellite. Today, Putin is quite content with US military presence in Afghanistan. Yet, for him, the U.S. pledge of 2008 to accept Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was a security threat that required a pre-emptive and harsh rebuff. American sanctions after the annexation of Crimea did not surprise him; he just concluded that the United States now wanted to topple his regime and push Russia back into the time of troubles. He responded by raising the stakes in Syria and by meddling in the U.S. presidential election. This resembles the risk-taking of Nikita Khrushchev more than the cautious Brezhnev.

Russia looms large in the American security imagination, but the opposite is also true: the sizable part ~~majority~~ of Russian elites and public consider the United States as a threat to Russian statehood and security. On both sides, mutual insecurity becomes a matter of hysterical domestic politics, which precludes pragmatism and is laced with anger and fear. Against this background, Trump's quest for a grand deal with Putin is naïve. Putin's goals and Russian insecurity, as well as the American concept of world order, make such a deal improbable.

At the same time, the United States should recognize that, however troubling Putin's actions in Ukraine and Syria are, they still do not bear on vital U.S. or Western interests. Certainly, electoral meddling is a problem, yet American retaliation can only launch another tit-for-tat cycle between the United States and Russia. American sanctions can hurt Russia, but they actually help Putin's consolidation of power. Should sanctions tighten, the Russian leader would certainly retaliate, and in unpredictable and possibly more dangerous ways. U.S. leaders should

not be tempted to exaggerate Putin's vulnerabilities nor underestimate those of the United States. In comparison with Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders, Putin holds weaker cards, but he is more flexible and cunning, and can exploit Western internal divisions, especially the anti-liberal movements. Putin's propaganda tools far surpass those of Soviet propaganda. The Russian economy is smaller than Soviet economy, but more resilient and adapted to global capitalism.

Some American analysts now believe that Putin's problem will fade in the future, and that his actions will only leave Russia more isolated and weakened, just as Brezhnev's invasion of Afghanistan had weakened the Soviet Union. Some observers even believe that after another period of confrontation the United States will emerge victorious again, just as it did in the 1980s. To draw these lessons from the past would be misleading. It is dangerous to expect that things with Russia will get better after they get worse. It is also wrong to assume that another arms race would force Putin's Russia to succumb and yield to the American agenda. This did not happen during the Cold War, and there is no indication that this may occur today.

Instead, responsible American leaders must not shut diplomatic channels to the Kremlin; they must remain ready to talk. There are a few things with regard to Russia that U.S. leaders can do better. First, they should educate the American public about the complexity of the U.S.-Russian relations. Second, they must avoid escalating tensions further. Third, they should clearly abandon the rhetoric of regime change in Russia, rhetoric that could only provoke a dangerous Russian response. Fourth, they should refrain from inserting American military power directly and indirectly into the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and they should seek more ways to cooperate with Russia in Syria. Fifth, U.S. leaders should support transactional agreements of mutual interest with the Kremlin, such as in nuclear security, cyberwarfare, and measures against international terrorism.

It was a great fluke that soon after Brezhnev's death Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union. It is unlikely to happen today in Russia. It is much more probable that Putin's successors will continue to defend Russia's interests against U.S. influence in the Russian near abroad. With this in mind, U.S. policy faces a strategic choice: either prepare for a regional geostrategie tug-of-war against Russia in its own geographical area or choose a more global approach~~moderate course~~, a mixture of mild containment and engagement. The latter approach appears to be ~~If the latter becomes~~ the more prudent choice, as it, ~~then U.S. policies towards Russia cannot be only punitive and vindictive; they cannot be fixated on Putin and the demonization of his power.~~ takes into account the rise of China, the only real strategic challenge to the United States. The continuing confrontation with Putin is likely to induce Russia to side with China against US interests. Conversely, diplomatic dialogue and discussions of Russia's role in Europe help to keep other options open. With this in mind, ~~then U.S. policies towards Russia cannot be only punitive and vindictive; they cannot be fixated on Putin and the demonization of his power.~~ Ultimately, Russia is going to remain ~~as~~ a crucial partner in the global order. U.S. leaders should strongly signal to the Kremlin that Russia's legitimate interests in this order will be respected.

