POLICY BRIEF
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Sigur Center
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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

U.S.-Russia Relations Back from the Brink

In 2012, the Rising Powers Initiative published an edited volume entitled *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia*, edited by Henry R. Nau and Deepa M. Ollapally. The *Worldviews* volume identifies the most important domestic schools of thought within each country and connects them to the history and institutional development of each nation. In this Policy Brief, Russia chapter author Andrew Kuchins examines how Russia's foreign policy has evolved over the past two years from the lens of President Vladimir Putin's leadership, conflict in the Middle East, and U.S.-Russia relations.

When the *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers* volume was going to press in late 2011, Russian domestic politics and foreign policy were taking dramatic turns. The fabled Reset of U.S.-Russia relations that began in 2009 under Presidents Obama and Medvedev was self-destructing at just about the time in September when Vladimir Putin announced he was essentially returning as Russian President. Russia's rhetoric on missile defense, Syria, Iran, and other issues grew tougher. Coincidentally or not, within two weeks of Putin's announcement came the first of three double vetoes by Russia and China at the UN Security Council on resolutions dealing with Syria. In response to the emergence of large opposition demonstrations contesting the falsification of Duma elections in December, Putin launched his presidential campaign by playing identity politics, virtually accusing the demonstrators of being paid agents of the CIA and U.S. State Department. In the conclusion of our chapter – co-written with Igor Zevelev – during this very fluid moment in Russian politics, we ended with a question as to whether Russian foreign policy would move towards a more nationalist mode or be characterized by a combination of great power balancers and pro-Western liberals as the Medvedev tenure appeared, at least from 2009-2011.

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Our question was soon answered in 2012. Any expectations that President Putin would take a more accommodating stance towards the first socially mobilized opposition since his appearance on the national stage in 1999 were quickly dashed as the Duma, at the instigation of the Kremlin of course, passed a series of repressive measures in the spring/summer of 2012. Putin dramatically demonstrated his disdain for the G-8, NATO, President Obama, and the United States by cancelling his participation at the NATO summit in Chicago in May, followed by the G-8 in Washington as well as a major bilateral meeting with President Obama. The one positive note in U.S.-Russia relations at the end of the year, Senate ratification of Russia's WTO accession, was shattered by the linkage of this legislation with the Magnitsky Act that called for creating a list of Russian government human rights abusers who would be denied U.S. visas. The Russian Duma reciprocated with the passage of the Dima Yakovlev Act that, among other measures, prohibited the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens. Russian government rhetoric as well as policies strongly emphasized traditional, conservative interpretations of Russian nationalism with little influence of great power balancers, let alone pro-Western liberals. The jailing of the post-modern performance artists/punk rock band Pussy Riot accented the increased influence of the conservative and nationalist Russian Orthodox Church in Russian politics.

Russia's adamant position to prevent the unseating of the Assad government in Syria resonated with 19th century Tsarist Russia's Holy Alliance with Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to prevent revolutionary movements throughout Europe from unseating sitting autocrats. This was a defensive effort to preserve the ancien regime Putin's plan for a Eurasian Union of post-Soviet states echoes somewhat previous Soviet and Russian imperial efforts to expand Russian influence and hegemony to its neighbors. As so often in the past, this Russian effort at integration appears far more heavily weighted with sticks rather than carrots, and ultimately that will be its downfall.

But it was really the U.S./Western confrontation with Russia over Syria for more than two years that best captured the essence of Russian foreign policy and its perception of its role in the world. Russia's position on Syria, however, does not fall neatly into the categories of nationalists, great power balancers, and pro-Western liberals (the three main schools of thought in our chapter). Moscow has defended the Assad government not because they are particularly enamored of him as a leader, friend, and ally; not because of their arms supply relationship with Damascus; and not because of the strategic value of their naval presence (it is not really a "base") at the port of Tartus. On one level, Russia's position, along with China's, reflects a very conservative Westphalian interpretation of international law that strongly prioritizes national sovereignty over the rights of the "international community" to intervene. This is especially designed to prevent regime change carried out by U.S./Western-led military intervention not sanctioned by international law—which in most cases means the United Nations. Putin's strongly held view, which is shared widely in the Russian political elite, was clearly stated in his *New York Times* editorial in September : not only are many of these interventions illegal, but in most cases they lead to greater instability and do not even serve U.S. interests. The widely shared American view that democratization in the Middle East will serve the interests of regional stability and prosperity are viewed in Moscow, to put it nicely, as deeply misguided naiveté.

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The Russian view of the Arab Spring in general was of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies against Iranian interests. The Russians always viewed that the most effective fighters on the ground in the Syrian opposition were the most radicalized Islamists, including those tied with Al Qaeda, and that they would never find common cause with the more moderate Syrian opposition. For Putin, he saw many of the same individuals and groups financed by the same sources that Russia had fought in the Northern Caucasus as well as Afghanistan and Central Asia; many similar groups that the Chinese have concerns about infiltrating their Muslim populations in Xinjiang Province. Rightly or wrongly, the prism through which Putin views these civil conflicts in Islamic societies puts much more emphasis on the role of foreign jihadis than national liberationists. This is similar to how he emphasizes the role of foreigners in the so-called color revolutions of Eurasia over the role of indigenous social and political forces, and this explains his hypersensitivities to perceived foreign intervention in Russian politics.

Watching the U.S.-Russia relationship from the fall of 2011 to the summer of 2013 is best likened to viewing a slow-moving train wreck. With the Snowden affair coupled with Obama's cancellation of the scheduled summit on the sidelines of the Russia-hosted APEC meeting in September, the relationship had pretty much undone any of the good will and trust established by the agreements during the heyday of the *Reset*. And then the gruesome chemical weapons attack of August 21, 2012 in Syria. President Obama had put himself in a box with his "red line" comments in August 2012, but the administration was fumbling badly over the existential question of an American military strike essentially to uphold the norm against the use of chemical weapons. Literally at the darkest moment as Obama seemed on the precipice of an embarrassing defeat in Congress over the strike that would still leave him the brutal decision of possibly carrying out the strike with little international and domestic support, suddenly the Russians delivered a "deus ex machina" in the proposal for Assad to turn over his chemical weapons arsenal. The how and why Russia decided to and was able to convince Assad to do this is a story that awaits another day, but this proposal and so far its successful implementation has turned around the U.S.-Russia relationship as well as possibly contributed to a more dramatic shift in the strategic landscape of the Middle East.

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Not only does it dramatically reduce the likelihood chemical weapons will be used again in Syria, but it opens the door to re-engage broader negotiations to find some kind of resolution to the horrendous carnage of the Syrian Civil War. Essentially the United States has tacitly accepted the Russian position that perhaps Assad need not go so fast, since minimally his cooperation and that of his military and special forces is essential for the chemical weapons to be removed, and that will not be a rapid process. Nevertheless, the fact that the United States is not at loggerheads for now with Russia, and thus Iran, over Syria certainly creates a more propitious environment to engage a seemingly more accommodating Iran over the future of its nuclear weapons program. Essentially the norms of the non-proliferation regime have been upheld through diplomacy rather than threatened with all the uncertainties of a military strike. Might we imagine the possibility of finally normalizing U.S.-Iranian relations 34 years after breaking off diplomatic ties, virtually my entire adult lifetime?

If the Syrian chemical weapons initiative continues to work; if we can achieve some success in broader negotiations over the political future of Syria; if this helps us in untying the Iranian nuclear Gordian knot—granted a lot of huge "ifs"—relations between Moscow and Washington will certainly improve and some degree of trust be restored. This could then move the dominant position away from anti-Western nationalists in Russian foreign policy and closer towards pragmatic great power balancers, effectively moving Russian foreign policy into a more balanced position with a little more leverage as it faces the impact of rapidly growing Chinese economic and political power to its East. For now at least, the pro-Western liberalizers will remain marginalized as their return to a more prominent position in Russian foreign policy is more closely linked to significant change in Russia's domestic political-economic order, something that would look to have at best a 3-5 year outlook rather than the next 6-12 months.

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About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia and America's role. The Policy Brief series is sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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