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TWENTY YEARS after the fall of the Berlin wall, Russia remains as Sir Winston Churchill described it: “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” Russia’s complexity has contributed to an American debate in which policy preferences too often shape analysis rather than analysis driving policy. It’s not a sound basis for decisions when key American interests and goals are at stake.

One doesn’t need to be a Russian domestic radical or a foreign Russophobe to see major flaws in the way Russia is ruled. The country’s president, Dmitri Medvedev, has catalogued its problems: “an inefficient economy, semi-Soviet social sphere, fragile democracy, negative demographic trends and unstable [North] Caucasus,” not to mention “endemic corruption” defended by “influential groups of corrupt officials and do-nothing ‘entrepreneurs’” who want to “squeeze the profits from the remnants of Soviet industry and squander the natural resources that belong to us all.”

Russia’s problems are fundamental to its political system, which, while officially democratic, is perhaps best understood as popularly supported semiauthoritarian state capitalism. Russia is clearly not a Western-style democracy, though its citizens enjoy considerable freedom of personal expression, with the level of liberty inversely proportional to the potential impact of criticism. The state dominates “strategic sectors” of the economy like energy and defense, but political-business clans have retained much space to pursue their parochial interests, including through the state’s administrative machinery. As throughout its history, Russia is dominated by a ruling class: originally aristocrats, then Communist Party *nomenklatura*, and now a combination of senior bureaucrats and business leaders, including former Soviet managers, ruthless-yet-effective younger entrepreneurs, and outright criminals who took advantage of the decay, collapse and anarchy of the 1980s and 1990s.

The question now is how long Russia’s current political arrangements can hold. Corruption is deeply embedded and pervasive, affecting state and private enterprises along with the media and the courts, severely limiting Russia’s modernization and sustainable economic growth. And with so much power concentrated at the top of the system, recent murmurs of a growing rift between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin raise serious concerns about stability.

Moscow's arbitrary rule affects the people and state of Russia most of all, but it also presents a challenge to the United States. Russia is vital to American interests, and if the Obama administration has any illusions about the nature of Russian politics or, alternatively, surrenders to the long-standing temptation to act as a self-appointed nursemaid, it could severely damage our ability to work pragmatically with Russia to advance important U.S. goals.

IT IS difficult to overstate the role of corruption in Russia, which in many ways is the glue that holds together the disparate groups dominating Russia's current political system. The Russian state is organically linked to Russian companies, both overtly—through stock ownership and officials' simultaneous service on corporate boards—and covertly, through family ties and secret deals. At the upper levels, Russia's corruption takes the form of private stakes in state firms and profound conflicts of interest; at lower levels, simple bribery is more common. And the scope of corruption is expanding: according to official statistics, Russia's bureaucracy has doubled in size in the last ten years.

Those at the top have a relatively free hand to enrich themselves through insider dealing. Thus, notwithstanding Russia's extensive privatization, it is often difficult to distinguish between government-owned companies and large private conglomerates. Officials are deeply involved with both and the government often acts to protect both, though it is not always clear whether government actions are a result of state or private interests.

Because of corruption, Russia's political system is simultaneously very resistant to change and remarkably fragile. Extensive overseas portfolios and property held by Russian officials and oligarchs are a clear indicator of their own limited confidence in Russia's stability. There is an exuberant Russian presence in London, New York and on Mediterranean beaches that is totally out of line with the size of Russia's economy. The reluctance of major Russian firms to make long-term capital investments in their own country is further evidence of this mindset. If those who hold power still feel the need to hedge their bets, it is all the more true of international investors.

In addition, the uninhibited power of huge government-owned or government-connected firms to act against their competitors discourages both foreign investment and the development of small- and medium-size businesses in Russia. Though Gazprom has legitimately wanted Ukraine to pay its bills on time and in full, the resulting disputes took on a very different character when Russian officials became involved. In the end, the repeated crises damaged Moscow's reputation as a reliable energy supplier and a responsible European power. The Alfa

Group's struggle with BP over control of their TNK-BP joint venture is another example in which well-connected Russian moguls allied with the state to apply pressure to their business partners. What would be routine commercial disagreements in other countries can rapidly trigger state intervention in Russia, usually to the disadvantage of foreign firms or others outside the system who lack effective protections or recourse.

Corruption and insider dealing can have tragic consequences in Russia, as they did in an August explosion at the Sayano-Shushenskaya dam in Siberia, when over seventy people were killed due to inadequate maintenance. Putin himself described as "irresponsible and criminal" an apparent maintenance contract with a fraudulent firm set up by top managers. Beyond limiting investments in safety and maintenance, however, irresponsibility and corruption have also strongly discouraged investment in other key areas. Russian firms happily squeeze out foreign investors but don't themselves put money into new equipment, training, or research and development. Despite recent increases, state investments in education, health, and science and technology are also inadequate for sustainable economic growth and to diversify beyond energy exports.

Here it is useful to compare Russia to China. China is less free than Russia according to Freedom House, and has a number of similar problems, but is considerably more attractive to foreign investors. The huge scale of China's market is a major inducement, but Beijing's greater willingness to accept international rules and its much more strategic approach to cultivating foreign investors—whose presence China's leaders view as essential to meeting their development goals but energy-rich Moscow has seen as easily replaceable—also make a big difference.

IT WILL not be possible to modernize Russia without a genuine effort to eliminate corruption—and this includes at the top. Corrupt conduct is not simply tolerated, but a way of life with profound political implications. Any opening in the political system that would allow corruption to be exposed could potentially decimate Russia's elites—and they know it. Everyone who is involved in corruption whether directly or indirectly (by failing to act on knowledge of corrupt acts) may be in legal jeopardy and is therefore a stakeholder in the current system. Russia's weak media and biddable court system and parliament prevent corrupt elite actions from coming to light and ensure few if any consequences.

The media face direct state interference and engage in constant self-censorship as well. The central government effectively controls television news broadcasting, with the exception of minor cable channels, and blocks critical reporting that questions official policy. Moscow newspapers enjoy wider freedom to debate policy, and papers like *Novaya Gazeta* and *Nezavis*

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regularly challenge government decisions. But they reach only a small audience, and regional papers are usually more cautious, especially in dealing with local officials. The internet is quite free, though also limited in reach because of its low penetration in Russia. Media that cross the government face harassment through tax inspections and lease problems, to name only a few of the potential consequences. More chilling are the fates of leading investigative journalists like Anna Politkovskaya, Yuri Shchekochikhin and others who have been murdered or died in suspicious circumstances after pursuing major corruption investigations or challenging senior officials. All of this creates a climate of intimidation.

What Dmitri Medvedev has frequently described as the easy manipulation of the judicial system makes impotent yet another potential check on elite power and corruption. Interference in the courts by the government and private companies is a common practice rather than an exception, and the weak judiciary helps to maintain Russia's political status quo by derailing serious efforts to change it. This creates an environment in which the Russian leadership lacks important information and independent analysis when making key decisions. Moscow's control mechanism blocks this critical input and feedback.

THE SUBSERVIENT political system merely adds another layer of top-down control. Russia's formal political system is built around the concept of the "power vertical" introduced by then-President Vladimir Putin and still in effect today. In brief, the power vertical concentrates power at the top by subordinating the country's entire government apparatus to its leaders and ensuring that any and all decisions are their prerogative. While the president and prime minister do not make every policy choice, they retain the right to make (or retroactively question) any particular decision.

Governors and other regional leaders are nominated locally but selected by the presidential administration in consultation with the prime minister's office; mayors are elected through processes that are easily manipulated, as demonstrated by the recent election in Sochi, where opposition candidates were marginalized or disqualified. Pro-government candidates at all levels routinely enjoy considerable advantages, including ready access to television, ease in getting permits for rallies and campaign donors recruited by the regime.

Local leaders—especially those in Russia's ethnically based regions, such as Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov—have what resembles feudal autonomy so long as they remain outwardly loyal to the federal government and can maintain control of their domains. Kadyrov in particular is a striking case, a former rebel turned minidictator who embraces polygamy and honor killings. Yet with his brutality Kadyrov has, at least until recently, maintained stability in

Chechnya—allowing Moscow to withdraw Russian troops and remove the issue as a domestic political irritant.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov is another interesting example. Luzhkov was attacked as corrupt by the pro-Kremlin media when he and former–Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov led a key challenge to Putin's ascension to power. Luzhkov subsequently failed to endear himself to the federal government's officials as the leader of a political-business clan that did not share the capital city's spoils sufficiently with federal bureaucrats. But Putin came to appreciate Luzhkov after his firm response to protests in the wake of a 2005 decision to reduce social benefits to retirees, veterans, the handicapped and, remarkably, even the police by providing regular benefit payments instead of free services. The Moscow mayor proved that he knew how to run his city when the chips were down. All this goes to show the conduct top officials are willing to tolerate from regional leaders so long as they deliver what counts.

WHILE IN theory a separate branch of government, Russia's legislature is in reality subordinate to its top leaders. The executive branch decides which parties hold what number of seats in the State Duma and the Federation Council and can ensure the passage of virtually any legislation. Members of parliament are permitted to lobby for their constituents by trying to secure federal-budget funds or other benefits, but have only a marginal role in policymaking.

The political parties themselves are created and destroyed from above rather than from below. There are only four parties represented in the State Duma, and three of them are creations of the Russian government. United Russia was established explicitly to serve as Russia's ruling party and a vehicle to bring Putin to power. After remaining aloof as president, Putin now leads the party, which holds a supermajority sufficient to amend the constitution. Whenever it matters, United Russia can count on the votes of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), which according to insider accounts was established in part by the Soviet KGB to serve as a nationalist pseudo-opposition.

The presidential administration openly served as the principal architect of Just Russia, a center-left party assembled as a social-democratic alternative to United Russia. Just Russia repackaged and expanded a previous government-inspired opposition party, Rodina (Motherland), itself created as a nationalist and populist alternative to the Communists, but ultimately destroyed when the party and its leader Dmitry Rogozin proved too successful for their own good. The regime's demonization and subsequent rehabilitation of Rogozin as Moscow's ambassador to NATO once he was no longer a threat illustrates Russia's political hardball.

Only the Communist Party—which traces its origins to the Soviet period—appears to be a genuine mass party with a degree of independence. Despite this, the Communists are well aware of the limits of their power and consequently they remain unambitious: they know that the party depends on the government for its national and local registration, for access to television and for relatively easy fund-raising. The Communist Party is not a toy of the Russian government, but neither is it an engine of regime change.

Parties outside the parliament have even less impact. Russia's democrats have failed to capture the public imagination—and not only because of government pressure and limits on their activities. Most pro-Western reformers were never able to successfully demonstrate that they represented the interests of ordinary people or to establish patriotic credentials with a population that remained proud and suspicious of the West. Radical Russian democrats ridiculed fear of NATO enlargement when most opposed it, dismissed concerns over U.S. missile defenses that others stoked, and in some cases supported Georgia's perspectives when Russia and Georgia were at war. More recently, democratic opposition politician and former–Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov supported the expulsion of Russia's delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe—a position with which very few of his fellow citizens could identify. Russian parties that appear insufficiently patriotic are marginalized, while those that embrace nationalism—like Eduard Limonov's rabidly xenophobic and anti-Western National Bolshevik Party—have greater appeal.

DESPITE ITS unattractiveness to outsiders, Russia's system of control from above and corruption throughout produces little discontent. Many feel a degree of comfort with strong leaders and a degree of discomfort with democratic freedoms. So long as Russia's citizens reap real benefits from the current arrangement, most see little need to question it.

At its deepest, this is a matter of history. There is less demand for an alternative in part because neither of Russia's two experiments with democracy was stable or successful in Russian eyes. The first experiment, between February and October of 1917, led rapidly to a "dual power" arrangement between Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government and the Communist-dominated Soviets that degenerated into revolution, collapse and totalitarianism. The second, which began with Gorbachev's perestroika, fell apart as Yeltsin turned democratization to his own purposes and allied himself with separatist elites in order to unseat Gorbachev, splintering the USSR in the process. Yeltsin's aggressive pursuit of radical economic reforms despite popular opposition led him to rely increasingly on revitalized security services, the oligarchs and oligarch-controlled media for political backing. After this, most Russians welcomed Putin's imposition of order.

Russia's present political system is also at least partially attributable to Vladimir Putin and his allies in the security services, who have displayed both a ruthless instinct to establish control and a suspicion of anything they do not control. As president, Putin demolished the national political pretensions of the oligarchs and out-of-control governors (which helped bring an end to the semianarchy of the 1990s), but he could not bring himself to encourage civil society or free markets or to establish alternative centers of influence. From this perspective, Russia's current semiauthoritarian system is not entirely the product of a deliberate process but also the result of a vigorous effort to rein in previous abuses unaccompanied by anything else. It is authoritarianism by default.

At the same time, Russia's democratic leaders have failed to unite and failed to excite. In private conversations, many of Russia's post-Soviet democrats acknowledge that their own limited appeal was a major factor in their failure to win continued representation in the Duma in 2003. Electoral manipulation and skewed media coverage made the task much harder, but the democratic parties themselves clearly also fell short.

Without strong and unified public pressure for change, and with few mechanisms to voice those concerns should they arise, a near-term move toward further openness can come only from the top. No polls thus far show widespread public dissatisfaction with how Russia is governed, nor do any suggest that democracy is a priority for a majority or even a sizable minority of average Russians. More important for most is the fact that real incomes in Russia doubled during Vladimir Putin's two terms as president and poverty dropped by half. Wages and pensions were paid on time, and grew faster than inflation. GDP rose by 70 percent, though Russia has since been hit hard by the current crisis.

Yet even the economic downturn has had a muted political impact. Unlike during the 1998 financial meltdown, Russia today holds considerable gold and hard-currency reserves that it has been able to spend to address emerging problems or potential sources of upheaval and to protect private interests, including by bailing out many of the country's business leaders. Revealingly, though Putin publicly humiliated metals magnate Oleg Deripaska and chastised the local leaders of Pikalevo, a one-factory town near Saint Petersburg, for failing to pay their employees, he ultimately resolved the dispute to Deripaska's advantage by providing state funds to help the plants at the center of the crisis. While the former oligarchs have been shut out of high politics, they remain quite capable of advancing their concrete interests. And Russia's government can thus far afford to satisfy both the economic elite and the public.

This relative wealth and public apathy produce a degree of political stability in Russia. And because those at the top of the power vertical clearly understand that maintaining everyone's well-being is a necessary precondition of avoiding upheaval, they tend to prefer maintaining calm by tolerating the financial-industrial barons and ensuring a decent standard of living for the rest of the population. So absent a continued and more serious financial crisis that drains Russia's reserves, the status quo is likely to hold.

That is, unless the talk of competition between Putin and Medvedev has some real heft. A genuine struggle could tear both the corrupt elite and the power vertical apart, with unpredictable consequences.

SINCE MOST power rests at the top, any uncertainty there shakes the entire system. How much influence and ambition Medvedev and Putin possess, and the intentions of each, will powerfully shape how Russia evolves.

But the Medvedev-Putin dynamic is less than clear. Medvedev, the one most challenging to the status quo, is sending mixed signals about his intentions while Putin appears somewhat ambivalent about protecting his primacy. So far, Medvedev seems to be more talk than action. Though he speaks graphically about Russia's challenges and failings, he seems unprepared to act on these sentiments.

This may mean that he enjoys less than full authority, as many have suspected. As one senior official who knows both well put it privately, Putin has a "higher potential" to persuade Medvedev when the two differ. Medvedev has so far been cautious and pragmatic, openly stating that he has no plans to replace the government, therefore minimizing the chances for any fight with Putin over the fate of particular ministers or, of course, over Putin's own role. Revealingly, he has also avoided making significant changes in his own senior Kremlin staff. Khrushchev and Gorbachev learned Stalin's lesson that "cadres decide everything" and moved very quickly to bring in their own people, like Gorbachev's liberal adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev. Medvedev has talked about personnel policy but has done little.

However, judging Medvedev on the basis of his current conduct may be unwise. Russia's still-new president has clearly grown, impressing his foreign counterparts with his confidence and command of the issues. Like many others who have met him, we also noted Medvedev's evolution before and after he became president. Moreover, his behavior in Russia makes sense—he is in no position to challenge Putin directly, and alienating the prime minister

prematurely would not advance his career or his agenda.

Thus it should be no surprise that Medvedev has signaled plans to move slowly in attempting to introduce change. He justifies this by referring to mistakes of the past rather than his current constraints: “not everyone is satisfied with the pace at which we are moving,” he wrote, adding that he will “disappoint the supporters of permanent revolution” because “hasty and ill-considered political reforms have led to tragic consequences more than once in our history.”

Yet despite Medvedev’s careful politics, he is clearly trying to establish both his authority and identity, demonstrating a degree of political courage and independence. After Putin declared “we’re people of the same blood, with the same political views,” the Russian president commented that “we’ll have a test to see whether we have the same blood type,” an obvious effort to define himself distinctly from his mentor and senior partner. While Putin remains publicly unperturbed, Medvedev’s growing assertiveness has clearly not gone unnoticed by the prime minister’s supporters. As one close Putin associate put it to us, “at a minimum Medvedev is allowing his ambitious advisers to play a very dangerous game. Vladimir Vladimirovich’s [Putin’s] patience is not unlimited.”

Still, Medvedev’s advisers seem optimistic about his prospects and apparently do not fear open retaliation. Igor Yurgens, who leads the Institute of Contemporary Development, which Medvedev chairs, has openly suggested that Putin has outlived his usefulness and should not run again for the presidency, lest he become a new Leonid Brezhnev, the ailing Soviet leader who presided over the country’s stagnation in the 1970s and early 1980s. The fact that Medvedev occasionally differs with Putin creates political space that did not previously exist. Medvedev must know this and, at a minimum, is allowing his advisers to criticize Putin and Putin’s team while signaling in his own public statements that the two have different views. According to Yurgens, there is now a full-blown “clash of interests” between “conservatives and statists on one side and liberals on the other.”

Medvedev’s constituency—“the liberals”—seems built around Russia’s educated, urban middle and upper classes. It includes some tamed oligarchs who made peace with Putin, but who still resent having been cut down to size, as well as Westernized elites and professionals. Many were educated or have a presence overseas and see integration into the global economy as among Russia’s important national interests. They also see themselves as part of a transnational elite—a few are a part of that coterie that have property and bank accounts overseas—and would suffer both financially and psychologically from Russian self-isolation.

PUTIN, FOR his part, enjoys considerable authority because of the strong support of the so-called "*siloviki*" (former KGB men and military types) in the security ministries, his economically driven popular legitimacy, his reputation for machismo and decisiveness, and a widespread sense of Russia's renewed stability and global influence. He has also grown. Appointed by Yeltsin's inner circle, including the unsavory tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who now lives in exile in London, Putin rapidly demonstrated that he was not the tool they sought and became a genuine leader. In the eyes of most Russians, he restored order, prosperity and dignity to their lives and their country, even if many outsiders believe he benefited from high energy prices and U.S. and Western distraction in Iraq and Afghanistan. Relatively few Russians are concerned about the gradual loss of freedom during his rule; Putin gave them what they wanted in exchange for what they didn't think they needed.

Importantly, most Russians believe that Putin cares about their country and cares what its people think. While no longer president, Putin continues to convey the image of a "good czar"—a national leader with clear power, charisma and a certain mystique. When polled, a majority or plurality of Russians regularly state that it is Putin who rules the country, with a smaller group saying that Putin and Medvedev share power, and only a slim share arguing that Medvedev alone is in charge. Strikingly, an August poll by the respected Moscow-based Levada Center found that some 52 percent of Russians credited Putin with leading Russia through the crisis relatively unharmed, compared to just 11 percent who praised Medvedev. When assigning responsibility for the economic hard times, 36 percent blamed "the government," 23 percent blamed Medvedev and only 17 percent blamed Putin.

Many Russian liberals recognize Putin's power and see no path toward reform without him. Yevgeny Gontmakher, who is also affiliated with the pro-Medvedev Institute of Contemporary Development, wrote that Russia needs "modernization with the prime minister" because "we do not have another person capable of somehow influencing the situation." Both Medvedev and his advisers also seem to fear moving too quickly and impulsively, reluctant to be crushed under the wheels of history like Kerensky and Gorbachev by unleashing a process that would develop its own momentum, not only bringing very different people to power (in today's case, possibly virulent left-leaning nationalists), but also creating considerably more upheaval than planned, and risking Russia's collapse or disintegration. Gontmakher writes that Russia has two options: "a ruthless mutiny" that he believes would not succeed or "some kind of modernization from above."

MUCH HINGES on the relationship between Medvedev and Putin, which is perhaps Russia's most carefully kept secret. Medvedev says that they meet only once per week, a fact his partisans share to dispel the notion that the president receives regular guidance from Putin. Both frequently cite Russia's constitutional division of labor, which puts the president firmly in charge of foreign and security policy and leaves the economy and social issues to the prime

minister. However, each routinely acts to blur the lines; Medvedev summons ministers who report to Putin to issue public instructions on the economy, while Putin often takes a visible role on security and foreign-policy issues, such as last year's war with Georgia, the decision to apply to the WTO as a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan (announced just days after Medvedev's advisers said Moscow would continue with its previous approach), and high-profile foreign trips, like a 2009 visit to Poland around the seventieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the German (and Soviet) invasion. Nevertheless, without knowing what understandings may exist between them, it is difficult to be certain what behavior and statements to ascribe to a good cop/bad cop routine, to personal ambitions or to real policy differences.

Both Medvedev's intentions and Putin's potential responses are unclear. After all, it was Putin who spent eight years systematically eliminating or weakening any potential rivals in Russian politics only to create just such a rival when he left the presidency to become prime minister. Medvedev's supporters clearly hope that the prime minister will be prepared to fade away after receiving appropriate assurances. Putin's confidants deride this as "daydreaming," arguing that their man is reenergized and sees a continuing mission for himself in Russian politics.

The big unknown is whether Putin has a sufficient lust for power to fight back if Medvedev appears successful and loyal at the same time. If so, Putin seems unlikely to be as inept as the Soviet Union's so-called "anti-party group" that tried to remove Khrushchev in the 1950s or the anti-Gorbachev coup plotters of 1991.

Some Russian pundits suggest this will all come to a head with Medvedev and Putin running against one another for president in 2012. This seems unlikely. Russian politics have so far been decided before rather than during its elections and this probably will not change in the next three years. There is also no clear institutional base for Medvedev in an electoral competition against Putin. Putin chairs the United Russia party, and among the other parties in the Duma, only Just Russia could conceivably be an appropriate home for Medvedev. But Just Russia remains loyal to Putin and is both fairly weak and less supportive than United Russia of the Western-style reforms that Medvedev's camp seems to want. Thus, for Medvedev to build an institutional base, he would more likely have to be a divider rather than a uniter, splitting apart Russia's elite, its government and the United Russia party—something many will resist and many others will fear. The steady approach of 2012 and the preelection decisions it will force only fuel the tension in the Medvedev-Putin relationship—and add to Russia's uncertainty. And while Putin remains dominant thus far, his power has never been seriously challenged.

POLITICAL AND economic liberalization in Russia would advance American interests and

improve U.S.-Russian cooperation. However, real political conflict or a stalemate in Russia will likely be a problem for the United States as well. This is not an argument for stability for the sake of convenience in U.S. policy; it is simply a statement of fact. Political competition in Russia creates pressures to take harder lines in defining Moscow's positions and goals and can even lead to dangerous Russian actions. U.S. officials, members of Congress and others will take note of these attitudes or actions and react. At the same time, domestic uncertainty in Russia only increases the difficulty that outsiders have in understanding its government decision making and predicting Moscow's conduct—which in turn undermines American policy.

This situation means that taking sides in Russia's internal political debates could come at a great cost. This is a central lesson of the 1990s, when American support for Boris Yeltsin—who many thought was a pro-Western democrat despite early signs to the contrary—in fact persuaded most Russians that Washington was more interested in ensuring that Moscow's leaders remained weak and compliant than in helping the country's citizens or preserving democracy.

Another reason to avoid taking sides is the murky relationship between domestic reforms and foreign policy in Russia. Russia's past is replete with rulers who supported both ambitious internal reforms and aggressive foreign policies, ranging from Czar Alexander II (who freed the serfs but pursued wars in the Balkans and the Caucasus) to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (who led the post-Stalin thaw but provoked the Cuban missile crisis). It also includes a few pragmatic autocrats like Alexander III, who reversed many of his father Alexander II's reforms but was careful to avoid reckless foreign pursuits.

With all the uncertainty about Russia, it may be helpful to focus on what the country is not. First and foremost, Russia is not a country governed by a messianic ideology and is neither intrinsically antidemocratic nor anti-Western. Secondly, however, Russia is not a nation of altruistic do-gooders upon whose support the United States can rely when its interests and priorities differ from Washington's. Here it is useful to recall Churchill's entire quote: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

Russia's domestic situation will be an obstacle to cooperation in some areas, but not in others. For example, Russia does not particularly seem to care how its foreign partners run their countries. Moscow has worked quite successfully with democracies such as Germany and Italy, demonstrating that Russia does not have a problem with democratic governments as such. In fact, Russia's leaders seem to have gotten along much better with German Chancellor Angela Merkel than Belarusian strongman President Alexander Lukashenko, with whom they have

frequent public spats. Conversely, contrary to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's assertions, Russia's problem with Georgia is not its democracy but its hostile conduct. When Saakashvili acted on his sometimes-authoritarian instincts in Georgia, he received no credit for it in Moscow.

Similarly, Russia's internal politics will not prevent its leaders from cooperating pragmatically with the United States on issues like arms control and nonproliferation when they view such efforts as promoting their interests. Nor will it prohibit Russia from becoming an American partner on some issues at some times, or from viewing partnership with the United States as sufficiently serving its national interests to influence other calculations.

Ultimately, of course, Russia's domestic practices present the greatest obstacles to Russia itself, which severely limits foreign investment, modernization and the country's integration into the international system without making real changes. This will in turn affect not only Moscow's hard power but also its soft power. So while Vice President Joseph Biden's recent blunt assessment of Russia's decline may have been exceedingly undiplomatic—and mistaken in its conclusion that Moscow would have no choice but to cooperate with Washington—it was not fundamentally incorrect if Russia does not alter its course. While Medvedev has promised to do this, he admits that little has happened even in the wake of Russia's dismal performance in the global financial crisis.

Russia has been a difficult interlocutor since its independence nearly two decades ago and is unlikely to become an easier one anytime soon. But for all of its faults—and they are many—Russia is not inherently an American foe. Russia's leaders may be ruthless, but they do not need foreign enemies. With care and determination, the United States can work with Moscow to advance important national interests.

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