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The Surprising Resurgence of Russia as a Great Power

Jonathan Adelman

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In a world full of surprises -- the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the weakness in the Chinese economy, the battles within the European Union, the making of the Iran deal, the slide in the American stock market -- one of the greatest surprises of all has been the sudden rebirth of Russian power under Vladimir Putin.

This even as Russia has withdrawn from Eastern Europe, lost half its population, lacked in modern consumer, agricultural and high-tech sectors and suffered a 50 percent drop in the price of its main oil export. Russia's economy is smaller than that of England, France or Germany and has not moved towards Western democratic capitalism.

Too, Putin is repeatedly pilloried by Western leaders. President Obama, denigrating Russia as only a regional power, proclaimed that Putin resembled a bored kid slouching in the back of the classroom. German Chancellor Angela Merkel scathingly derided Putin's machismo, saying that "I understand why he has to do this -- to prove he's a man. He's afraid of his own weakness. Russia has nothing..."

Yet, Russia has re-established itself as a great power courting authoritarian and often corrupt regimes all over the world. Its reacquiring Crimea, Southern Ossetia, Abkhazia and part of Left Bank Ukraine in the last decade is secretly welcomed by conservative nationalist leaders with their own aspirations. With its strong military capabilities, Eurasian geographic location, capable leadership, conservative nationalism and resuscitation of old Cold War relationships, Russia has become a major player in the world.

Alone among the major global powers, Russia is on the offensive and willing to intervene to help its allies. The Europeans are no longer the great powers they were before World War II. Japan and Germany found their power in Europe and Asia seriously reduced by their defeats in World War II. China is still decades away from becoming a superpower. The United States under President Obama is staging a semi-withdrawal from key areas of the world.

The Sunni Arab leaders of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE are all going to Moscow this year. Saudi King Salman will even welcome Vladimir Putin to Riyadh! Retired Saudi Major General Anwar Eshki said recently, "Saudi Arabia needs Russia in the Middle East, not to destabilize countries but to be a friend."

Even democratic Israel, edging away from its close relationship with the United States, increasingly looks to Russia for help. Israel and Russia have two billion dollars in trade while Israel sells drones to the Russians. Whether Russia finally will or once again won't sell its S-300 surface to air missile system to Iran is of vital interest to Israel.

Syrian President Bashar Assad owes his survival to \$4-5 billion of Russian military aid as well as Iranian help. Russia played a key role in ensuring a lenient nuclear deal for Iran. Russia is the main weapons supplier to Iran and will build more nuclear power plants like Busheir.

In Latin America Russia has good relations with Argentina and Brazil. This year Cristina Kirchner has visited Moscow to discuss a multi-billion dollar energy deal and defense cooperation. Russia is backing up Dilma Rousseff's fading Brazilian regime with talk of trade, weapons deals and technical cooperation.

In Europe Russia has allied itself with Viktor Orban's Hungary. The Russian Union Party in Latvia last year won the parliamentary elections, while in Romania pro-Russian sentiment has surfaced. Germany, with a large trade relationship with Russia and its past invasions of Russia, has been cautious in dealing with Putin beyond sanctions. The Greek leftist Syriza ruling party leans towards Russia. France, with a long history of friendly relations with Russia, seems to be thinking of ways to repair its relationship with Russia after cancelling the Mistral warship deal.

In Asia Russia has good relations with China, India and Japan. Russia, China's biggest arms supplier, has signed a \$400 billion pipeline agreement to export Russian gas to China. China's leader Xi Jinping recently predicted that the Sino-Russian relationship could become the number-one relationship in the world. India, despite Narendra Modi's Western leanings, continues a strong strategic, political and military relationship with annual visits exchanged between New Delhi and Moscow. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sees Russia as a potential ally against a rising China.

Clearly, Putin is not that slouched bored kid in the back of the class but a smart, tough realist moving Russia towards great power status.