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RUSSIA REVERTING TO TYPE

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has tightened up his diplomatic stance even more conspicuously in the past year. It is as if Russia had abandoned its goal since Mikhail Gorbachev of joining the Western club and sharing the common values of mankind. Unilateral Russian opposition has emerged in such places as the NATO-Russia Council and international conferences in Asia. The Russian political analyst Dmitri Trenin has stated that Russia has left the orbit of the Western solar system entirely. Similarly, former US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, who had been an

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active supporter of Russia's reform policy, has said admitting Russia to the G8 was a mistake. What should we make of this change in Russian foreign policy?

Until the end of Leonid Brezhnev's administration, the Soviet leadership had found sources of crises and threats abroad. Perceiving as hostile the outer world has been the traditional psyche of Russian peasants since the days of the Russian empire and Stalinist Russia. In contrast, President Gorbachev, who advocated a return to the common civilization of mankind and accepted such universal values as human rights and democracy, declared at the 1989 Malta summit that his country no longer considered the United States an enemy. He saw political crisis and threats within his own country. His successor, Boris Yeltsin, also pursued Western-style democratization and market-oriented economic reform. To the democratic-minded intellectuals and burgeoning entrepreneurs who backed the reforms of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin administrations, the West was a target that they wanted their country to achieve, not a hostile world. Moscow was aiming to join the Western club and both Russian and Western leaders believed that this would happen some day.

In the middle of the Yeltsin administration, Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov, who became foreign minister in 1996, transformed the country's Western-oriented diplomacy into a more omnidirectional Eurasia-oriented one. When Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, it was anticipated that he would continue in this same direction. The pragmatic president soon realized the importance of maintaining good relations with Western countries and Japan in order to keep the Russian economy growing, and started pursuing a pro-US stance in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. However, Washington never treated Moscow as an equal partner. Frustrated Russians grew increasingly critical of their president; he appeared to be making too many concessions to the United States, as evidenced by the US military presence in Central Asia. Such was the domestic element behind Putin's harsh opposition to Washington at the time of the Iraq war. Nonetheless, in criticizing the US war on Iraq, the Russian president carefully avoided a showdown with

Washington.

Russia's foreign policy has made a qualitative change in Putin's second term, with the Russian economy making a rapid recovery thanks to high energy prices. An increasingly confident Russia, in which nationalism has reared its head, has developed an ambition for great-power status as if to compensate for the "humiliating decade of the 1990s." Democracy has receded and the Kremlin is strengthening authoritarian rule. Distrust of Europe and the United States has deepened because of NATO expansion, the handling of Kosovo, the domino phenomenon of political change in Central Asia, and more recently the missile defense problem. The West for its part has been increasingly disappointed with Moscow, which is going into reverse on democratization and economic reform. In short, both Russia and the West are growing distrustful of and disappointed with each other.

Putin's Russia does not care about its reputation in the West, for the president is now aware that Europe and the United States can no longer ignore the economically powerful Russia. The former Soviet republics, which moved away from Moscow in the economically difficult 1990s, are reviewing and placing greater emphasis on their relations with Russia, while the Kremlin is nurturing the ambition of extending its influence over them. The chilled relationship with the West has driven Moscow to deepen ties with Beijing. Such was the backdrop against which Putin in Munich unleashed his strongest criticisms ever of Washington in February 2007.

Has Russia changed? When viewed from a long-term historical perspective, the Gorbachev–Yeltsin era, during which Russia sought integration into the West, was rather exceptional. Today's Russia can be seen as reverting to the "original Russia" or revealing some of its true face. Those democrats and reformists in the West and Russia who had optimistically expected that a Western-style democracy and a market economy would take root in Russia in a short period and that political and economic integration into the West would easily be achieved did not fully

understand the history and social reality of Russia. If Russia as a whole is to make a qualitative change, a stable middle class will need to take root in society at large and the international-minded business elite and the young generation will need to occupy the center stage of Russian society. It would take at least several generations for this to happen, although certain Russian businesses are likely to reach the world-class level soon.

How should the international community and Japan respond to this Russia? What is needed is a double approach. We must not attempt to transform Russia into a Western-style democratic polity and a market economy in a short period of time. We must respect Russia's own process for reform. Yet when it comes to the issues of international rules and human rights violations, we need to take a firm stand. Moscow is now trying to move beyond being simply an energy exporting state, and Russian leaders consider this their greatest challenge for now. They have recently recognized that Japan possesses all the know-how they want, and thus they are increasingly interested in cooperating with Japan. Moscow also prefers Tokyo's presence in Siberia and the Far East to that of Beijing. Japan should pursue a double approach of enhancing cooperation with Russia in economic and international strategic affairs on one hand while insisting that the country abide by international rules on the other, i.e., continue serious negotiations on resolving the territorial problem to conclude a peace pact. 

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