Afghanistan's Strategic Priorities, Viewed from Within

By: Carl Bildt

W hen the European Union gives up for new leadership, will Afghans feel that Donald Trump has contributed to their misery? Or when will the US begin to launch its 2020 re-election campaign, Russian President Putin shall have achieved his goal of taking the saddle of the leadership and stretching to 2024. But what, exactly, does Putin intend to do with his next five years in office? Leaders of all major powers, Russia’s elite must regularly try to define the country’s strategic priorities and positions in a way that anticipates likely challenges. The United States conducts such assessments every four years under the direction of the National Intelligence Council. This does so every five years and has just published a semi-independent study of likely global trends between 2015 and 2025. In Russia’s case, geostategic forecasting is one of the activities of the semi-official Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), which has published a global outlook for 2015. Generally, the absence of an element of futurism to forecasts is quite similar to that of the US and the EU. Where the report gets interesting is in its appraisal of the implications for the Russians. The authors identify several strategic dilemmas the country will face.

For example, according to the report, Russia’s top priority is “preserving and improving its position in the world hierarchy of powers and responsibilities.” But achieving that will require a “structural reorientation of the Russian economy.” That is, without far-reaching economic reforms—or what the authors describe as “radical changes,” Russia’s international standing will not improve and may decline. The same point is made with great force in Anders Åslund’s scathing book Russia’s Capitalism.

Following the discussion of Russia’s economic plight, it is no small matter, the report addresses a number of emerging strategic issues. The authors expect an “inevitably long political conflict with the West in connection with Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space, first of all in defining the future of Ukraine and neighboring territories.” In the near term, they conclude that such tensions will make it difficult for Putin to turn his attention to China, the Middle East and Africa.

The implication is that the authors see no possible resolution to the conflicts that Russia has created in its attempts to undermine its immediate neighbors’ sovereignty. The study simply grants that the Kremlin will continue to pursue revisionist policies abroad, despite the international criticism it has faced. The conclusion is that these policies have had on Russia’s international standing and domestic economy. It is as though Russia’s illegal incursions into Georgia and Ukraine are mere historical matters, admitting of no solution in the present.

As for moving closer to China, this has been a hallmark of the Kremlin’s foreign policy. According to Carl Bildt, the EU has met with Putin in Moscow and St. Petersburg, while the US has met with Putin in China and in Moscow, and China has paid a visit to Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, and Xi has met with Putin in Moscow. It is揭晓 that “cooperation and China is not really a viable option for ensuring Russia’s economic prosperity.” The Western powers, however, have not put their finger on it, “cooperation with China and other Asia-Pacific countries cannot become a strategic alternative to cooperation with the West.” Accordingly, the authors believe the Kremlin should be directing its efforts toward “working out its own agenda for possible cooperation with the West.

The upshot, then, is that Russia has not only failed to modernize as desired by the Kremlin, but that it has also failed to establish a competitive economy, precipitated a crisis with the powers upon which its own development critically depends. It is because most of the authors believe that even though it knows that becoming a junior partner to its eastern neighbors and a manageable way forward. One or another Russian or another Western power must find a way to restore relations with the West. This cannot happen immediately, given that the conflict in Ukraine remains a live issue; but it must be on the long-term agenda. The obvious solution to the dilemma—conflict with the West—or Ukraine was a huge strategic mistake, and we must not forget how close we came to a major war; that AllGhans put Afghanistan’s national interests first to their own interests.

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