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BOOK REVIEWS

Putin's World. Russia against the West and with the Rest, by Angela Stent. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019, pp.433.

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Vladimir Putin's Russia is a source of both admiration and concern because of its renewed assertiveness in the post-soviet era as far as international affairs are concerned. More recent developments in the Kremlin's foreign policy, as well as that of Beijing, are indicative of an ongoing shift in the world order toward a new path of multipolarity. Whereas most of the West perceives Russia's increasing challenges to the liberal international order as a threat, other regions in the world look at it as an alternative model to emulate. Why is President Putin acting in this way? Which are the historical and political dynamics that may explain such an evolution in the external attitude of the once main actor within the USSR?

Angela Stent's book offers interesting answers to these questions by dealing with a plurality of aspects related to the evolution of Moscow's foreign policy with Putin. Main topics range primarily from the renewed prominent role of Russia in its "near abroad" to the effects of the Kremlin's balancing policy in the Middle East, from Moscow's conception of its relationship with European states and the UE to its interaction with the most important actors of the Far East, namely China

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and Japan. The book also takes into account the controversial relationship between Moscow and Washington over the last three decades. The search for a comprehensive new order in the post-soviet space and beyond is the underlying theme that guides the reader throughout the chapters of this book. In order to understand Putin's "world" the reader should primarily take into consideration the exceptional situation in which the greatest country of the globe has found itself in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse (1991), internally and most of all externally. The author highlights how this event represents a quite unique case in history, not only because it is not the outcome of a major war directly fought by the two superpowers but also for the symbolic value it enshrines. Indeed for many Russians the dissolution of the Soviet Union was effectively "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century" (p.185), as Putin once said, because of its far reaching implications. At once, Moscow suddenly ceased to be a primary actor at the international level and found itself out of the new international security architecture. Putin came into power at the end of 1999, in a situation characterized by general disorientation and uncertainty for Russia. During his tenure in office as President a new idea concerning Russia's identity and its global role has progressively got ahead. Apart from the renewed alliance and convergence between the State and the Orthodox Church, which has produced a new conservative ideology, this new pattern was essentially based on three elements according to the author: the *Eurasianism*, the *Primakov Doctrine* and the *Judo Factor*. First, Eurasianism affirms that Russia is a unique civilization, a bridge and at the same time a synthesis between East and West. Underlying assumption is that Moscow has the right to rule over adjacent territories which belonged to the Russian Empire. As a consequence, the Russian influence in its "near abroad", the Eurasian space, should progressively grow also through the indirect exploitation of "frozen" conflicts like in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014). Fur-

thermore, the Eurasian vision involves the development of new forms of economic partnership along with the nearby regions. Second, the Doctrine of the former Foreign and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov advocates for the pursuit of alternative diplomacy together with raising great powers like China and India aimed to counterbalance the hegemony of the United States and, more generally, to provide an alternative to the West. A concrete example in that sense is the importance given to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes Russia, China and India, among others. Third, the “Judo Factor” refers to the sport played by Putin since he was a boy, a source of fundamental teachings for him as “in Judo a seemingly weaker practitioner can rely on inner strength and force of will to defeat a larger, more aggressive foe.” (p.4) Moreover, like in a judo match before striking a winning blow, Putin has proved to be particularly skilful in taking advantage of his competitors’ temporary disorientation and indecisiveness. This partly explains not only recent Russia’s political gains in the Middle East, due primarily to its intervention in Syria, but also the preference for bilateral diplomacy to maximize its leverage, notwithstanding limited economic resources at disposal. Conversely to that of the West, such diplomacy is mainly characterized by a pragmatic and realistic posture in which the balance of power and the quest for absolute sovereignty play a crucial role. This is particularly evident when looking at “the gas diplomacy” of Moscow in Europe, or at the negotiations with other countries for selling nuclear technology and weapons like the S-400 system.

Stent’s book has the particular and quite rare value to apply a comprehensive temporal and geographical perspective. It offers a clear explanation of Putin’s strategy to restore the Great Power status of Russia and its right to be treated as an equal by the West, especially by the USA, all this being the true driver of current Russian foreign policy. There are nevertheless some main shortcomings, namely the

lack of a deeper reference to Russia's approach toward the South America and Africa, which will be increasingly important in the future, as well as toward the political evolution in the Korean peninsula as for the fundamental issue of the balance of power in the Far East. Apart from that, Stent's book is a polyhedral source of valuable insights.

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