

CZAR PUTIN?

Will President Vladimir Putin's muscle-flexing at home and abroad ignite a new Cold War between Russia and the U.S.? BY PATRICIA SMITH

Putin at the launch of a spy satellite, and (below) out for a shirtless horse ride

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been described as a ruthless dictator trampling on democracy and “the most dangerous man in the world.” His increasingly authoritarian rule has some calling him Czar Putin, suggesting he’s acting like the imperial rulers of Russia’s past.

To many Russians, however, Putin is a hero—a strongman who’s restored Russia to its former glory as a world power. He cultivates this macho image by posing with tigers, showing off his judo skills, and riding horses shirtless. Polls show that 87 percent of Russians support Putin and his policies. (President Obama’s approval rating is around 40 percent.)

“No one will ever attain military

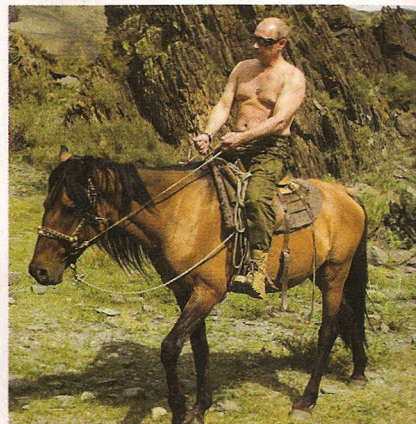
superiority over Russia,” Putin boasted in a recent speech. He added, “We are ready to take up any challenge and win.”

Love him or hate him, Putin casts an increasingly long shadow, even as Russia faces an economic crisis at home that could test his grip on power.

A New Cold War?

In the past few years, relations between Russia and the United States have deteriorated to their lowest point since the Cold War, which ended in 1991. That makes it harder for the U.S. and Russia to cooperate on many important global issues such as the civil war in Syria, fighting Islamic terrorism, and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Some of the tensions stem from



Russia’s slide back toward authoritarianism, which is deeply rooted in its history. For 350 years, the country was ruled by powerful czars. In 1917, the Russian Revolution ushered in seven decades of brutal Communist rule under the Soviet Union—America’s Cold War foe.

The years that followed the Soviet

Watch a video about the Cold War at www.upfrontmagazine.com



Eastern European countries like Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland are worried that Russia might threaten them too. To send a strong signal that aggression in Eastern Europe won't be tolerated, NATO has strengthened its military forces in the region.

"You lost your independence once before," President Obama said on a recent trip to Estonia. "With NATO, you will never lose it again."

U.S. Sanctions

Perhaps more significantly, the U.S. and Europe have also imposed tough economic sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea.

For Putin, the timing couldn't be worse. Russia is the world's third-largest oil producer, and it depends heavily on oil exports to finance the government. With the price of oil sinking, the Russian government suddenly has a lot less money to spend—on programs at home and adventures abroad.

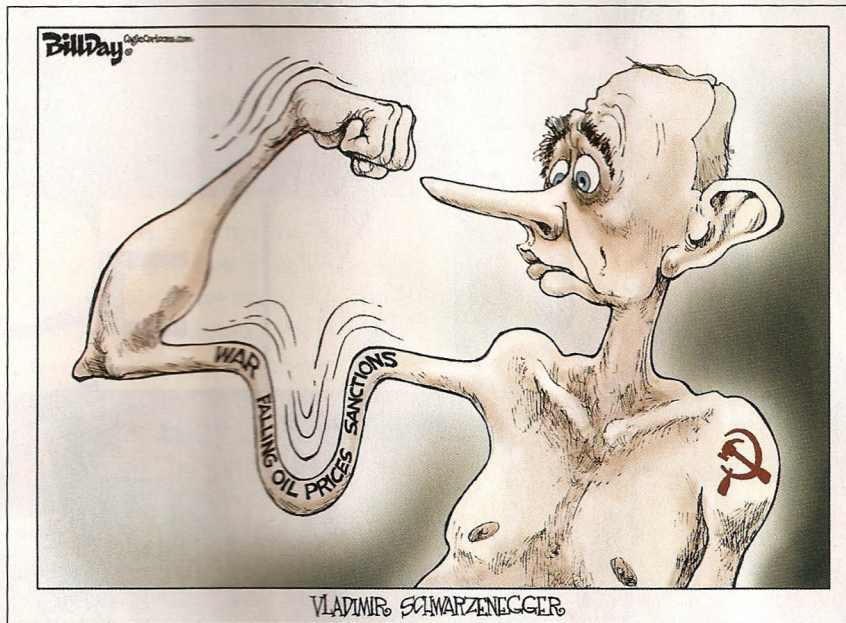
When the economy was thriving and most Russians could see their lives improving, it was easy for Putin to silence his opponents. But as Russians begin to feel the pinch of the economic crisis, that could be harder. It may explain why Putin signed a bill in July criminalizing repeated street protests.

The other question is whether Putin's mounting problems at home will force him to tone down his aggression against the West or do the opposite: become more belligerent in an effort to divert Russians' attention from the country's sagging economy.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, an opposition politician in Russia, predicts it will be the latter.

"If [Putin] prolongs the policy of greatness, of expansion, of confrontation with the West," Ryzhkov says, "he will be popular and supported by the people despite any economic crisis." •

With reporting by Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer of The New York Times.



collapse in 1991 were marked by chaos and economic upheaval. When Putin (a former agent in the KGB, the Soviet spy agency) became president in 1999, most Russians were relieved to have a strong leader.

Once in charge, however, Putin began gradually consolidating political power, tightening controls over the press, and passing laws that give authorities more power to crack down on anti-government street demonstrations. A few years ago, he even jailed members of an all-female punk band for singing anti-Putin songs.

At the same time, Russia's economy boomed, driven by a surge in the price of oil, Russia's biggest export. Most Russians seemed willing to give up some freedoms in exchange for prosperity.

In 2008, Putin found a way around the term-limit law that prevented him

from running for a third consecutive term: He handpicked a successor and had himself appointed prime minister, which allowed him to continue calling the shots from behind the scenes. Then in 2012, Putin won a third term as president in a disputed election. (If Putin wins re-election when his six-year term* expires in 2018, he could end up leading Russia for a total of 25 years—longer than anyone since Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.)

Since returning to the presidency, Putin has become more aggressive on the world stage, bringing to mind Soviet tactics during the Cold War. Last March, amid political upheaval in neighboring Ukraine, Putin alarmed the world by annexing the territory of Crimea by force.

How will Putin react to Russia's economic crisis?

*In 2008, presidential terms were extended from four to six years.