Intensified sanctions may work to Putin’s advantage

Sir, Garry Kasparov’s Winter is Coming, reviewed by John Thornhill in “A grandmaster calls on the west to rein in Russia” (November 9), is only part of an increased clamour for intensified sanctions against Moscow by many US presidential candidates and prominent figures such as Michael McFaul, the former US ambassador to Russia (New York Times, October 23).

In this view, increased sanctions are seen as a necessary response to Vladimir Putin’s foreign political adventures, such as the annexation of Crimea and support for the Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The aim would be to punish Mr Putin by further weakening the Russian economy, already buffeted by falling oil prices, and so bring Mr Putin to his senses.

However, it is too optimistic to believe that additional punitive measures will work to push Mr Putin into more accommodating policies. To date, the sanctions and the collapse of oil revenues have indeed sent the Russian economy into a sharp decline. Consumer goods are scarce. Inflation has risen close to 11 per cent. Yet, Mr Putin enjoys the patriotic support of the people, with his approval rating having risen recently to 89 per cent.

It is therefore likely that additional sanctions will only create a further backlash and turn him into an embattled saviour of Russia among his countrymen. Paradoxically, Mr Putin may be encouraged to carry out more foreign policy manoeuvres.

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