

Don't Prop up Putin by Giving Him an Enemy

Kimberly Marten, Columbia University, November 2014

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Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to provoke a military confrontation with the West. His military jets have repeatedly buzzed NATO facilities, coming close to causing a crash with a Swedish civilian airliner. He has vowed to extend the range of those patrols to the Gulf of Mexico. After he took credit for initiating the September 5 ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, the rebels he supports have done everything they can to undermine it. Monitoring drones from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (a neutral group where Russia is a member) have been repeatedly shot at or jammed on the Russian border. Recently Putin broke the truce definitively, sending columns of unmarked military trucks, heavy weapons, and “little green men” into Donetsk, according to NATO.

Putin's actions have gone beyond simply reasserting Russia's great power status. He is goading the United States to take a more militarized approach to the crisis — much as in 2008 his threatening actions provoked Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to directly enter the conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. His timing coincides with the return of hardline Republicans to majority control in the U.S. Senate, where they can push through pending legislation to send lethal weapons to Ukraine.

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While some pundits portray the Ukraine crisis as a victory for Putin, all he has really gained is impoverished and destroyed territory, and the responsibility for feeding and supporting its largely unemployed residents. The truth is that Putin has nothing left to lose. U.S. and European support for the sanctions regime is rock-solid, defying predictions that sanctions wouldn't hold. Sanctions are already taking a bite out of the Russian oil industry, the engine that drives Putin's regime. Rosneft, Russia's largest oil producer headed by Putin's close associate Igor Sechin, can't get western bank financing or the technical assistance it needs for further Arctic oil exploration and development. It has asked Putin for a \$49 billion bailout — a striking request from a company that bragged in 2012 that it was the biggest taxpayer in Russia. And that was before crude oil prices fell below \$80 a couple of weeks ago.

On top of this, the October 26 elections in Ukraine demonstrated that Putin has lost the influence Russia used to have in Kiev's politics. Pro-Russian political parties did abysmally, with only one clearing the threshold needed for representation in the parliament. This severely limits Putin's ability to strike a deal favorable to himself with the Ukrainian leadership. Military action is one of the few tools he has left in Ukraine.

Putin needs to rile up ever more patriotic fervor to keep his support levels high as the Russian economy tanks. And the best way to do that is to provoke Washington into taking some kind of military step against Russia. Putin needs an enemy to divert Russian attention from what is happening at home.

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The worst thing the U.S. could do in these circumstances is to give Putin what he wants. If identifiably U.S.-supplied weapons were to be used in a fight against Russian “volunteers” in eastern Ukraine, that would give Putin an excuse for direct escalation against Washington — perhaps by targeting U.S. allies in the Baltics, or U.S. industrial cyber-resources, or even U.S. citizens located in Russia. The more desperate Putin feels about his historical legacy, the less likely he is to care about the dangerous consequences that could result. Putin is like a gambler on a losing streak: the more his losses pile up, the more risks he will take to try to win.

Additional military support from the U.S. is not going to save Ukraine from Russia. Kiev’s military organization is riddled by corruption, and by Russian agents. Ukraine lacks the strength as a state to stop the Russian military machine from marching forward if that’s what Putin wants to do. Weapons won’t change that, especially as Putin takes bigger and bigger risks every day.

Many decades ago the dean of U.S. Cold War diplomats, George F. Kennan, argued that the best way to defeat the Soviet regime was to take away its enemy image of the United States. When authoritarian regimes have no external threat to fight against, they have a hard time justifying their existence to their people. Eventually they fall from their own weight. Kennan regretted that the U.S. unnecessarily militarized the Cold War, which in his view prolonged the Soviet regime.

Putin’s post-Soviet regime may be approaching a crucial tipping point in its level of domestic support. Let’s hope that the United States doesn’t take his bait, and inadvertently prop him back up by giving him a military enemy to fight against.



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