

Russia's New Wars: Why Is Putin Picking a Fight?

The assertive Russian leader has laid out his intentions very clearly in his speeches. Will the world listen?

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The official [state seal](#) of the Russian Federation features a double-headed eagle. One head faces east while the other faces west, indicating Russia is a country with a split identity, both European and Asian. This ancient symbol is also an apt descriptor of recent Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria. After decades decrying U.S. military modernization and intervention overseas, Russian President Vladimir Putin is embarking duplicitously on his own modernization efforts during multiple foreign interventions.

Now the incoming [Chairman](#) and [Vice Chairman](#) of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Obama's top military advisers, have both called Russia the number one threat America faces. Policy analysts are debating whether further Obama-Putin summits would [help](#) or [hurt](#) relations.

But as any experienced diplomat knows, those who discern the most about their adversary's strategies and intentions will have an advantage. Before any more U.S.-Russia summits take place, U.S. diplomats need to know who they are dealing with.

Since the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began in early 2014, Putin's speeches on national security have emphasized three major repeating themes: the supremacy of Russia's national interests, an expectation of conflict, and the encirclement by foreign enemies.

By analyzing each theme in turn, we may gain a greater understanding of what Vladimir Putin believes, what motivates him, and what actions we can expect.

The Supremacy of Russia's National Interests

Winston Churchill's famous description of Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" still holds true today. But most people forget the possible solution to this vexing problem that Churchill proposed: "... but perhaps there is a key. The key is Russian national interest."

Indeed, Putin uses the language of Russian "national interests" throughout his speeches, often in an uncompromising and threatening manner. For example, "And we responded to this force [purported U.S. involvement in Ukraine]. Why? I told you why. Because [the interests of the Russian nation](#) and the Russian state were at stake. Those who started this should have thought of that." Speaking even more directly, Putin recently stated, "I make my decisions based on [only one principle](#), and that is the interests of Russia and its people."

International peace and stability are desirable goals to the Western mind, but these concepts are subservient to Russia's national interests according to Putin. [Compliance](#) with major arms

control treaties is extremely important in the West, but again, compliance in Russia serves only one master: the national interests of the fatherland.

What then are the supreme national interests that Putin believes are at stake? His speeches give us clear answers: “I think that our partners in the United States and Europe employed brutal and unlawful methods in Ukraine by prompting a government coup and thereby threatening our [fundamental national interests](#) in terms of security, as well as the economy.” Additionally, “There are certain [red lines](#) that we can’t allow to be crossed. Ukraine and Crimea are such a red line.”

Putin apparently considered placing his nuclear forces [on alert](#) during the Russian occupation of Crimea in order to protect both national security and economic interests. The Western mind understands using force to protect apparent national security interests, but who was the last European or American leader to consider using nuclear coercion to acquire new territory at a neighbor’s expense?

Yet before we declare Vladimir Putin an irrational actor who pursues vain national interests at great risk, we need to understand that rationality is in the eye of the beholder. To Putin and the Russian people, his “defense” of the “[Russian speaking population](#)” in Ukraine and Crimea is laudatory, as his [sky-high](#) approval ratings suggest. In fact, it appears disagreeing with President Putin is decidedly unfashionable in the upper-echelons of Moscow these days, as Putin said recently, “I discussed this problem with the Security Council members, and [no one](#) objected. In fact all of them supported my position.”

Putin knows that pursuing Russia’s national interests may conflict with other nations’ interests. While this knowledge induces caution in Europe and the United States, it appears to only embolden Putin.

The Expectation of Conflict

Conflict on the Eurasian continent has been a near-constant as students of history like Vladimir Putin well know. Leaders like Putin are therefore not surprised when national interests collide and conflict erupts: “As we analyze today’s situation, let us not forget [history’s lessons](#). First of all, changes in the world order – and what we are seeing today are events on this scale – have usually been accompanied by if not global war and conflict, then by chains of intensive local-level conflicts.”

Thus, conflict on the world stage is nothing new, nor something to be particularly feared since, as Putin recently stated, “As for the [power factor](#) in international relations, it has always existed and will always exist.”

Putin sees Russia as a counterbalance against U.S. “imperialism,” and stated, “The crisis in Ukraine is itself a result of a [misbalance](#) in international relations.”

Speaking of the Ukraine crisis before Russia’s legislative body, Putin said, “I’m sure that if [these events](#) had never happened ... they [foreign powers] would have come up with some other excuse to try to contain Russia’s growing capabilities, affect our country in some way, or even take advantage of it. The policy of containment was not invented yesterday. It has been carried out against our country for many years, always, for decades, if not centuries. In short, whenever

someone thinks that Russia has become too strong or independent, these tools are quickly put into use.”

In Putin’s mind, conflict is inevitable. It is to be expected, prepared for, and ultimately overcome.

The Encirclement by Foreign Enemies

A survey of Russian history confirms that Russians have good reason to be fearful of foreign invasions, yet Vladimir Putin is using this fear as justification for his own foreign invasions, noting that without forceful action enemies could advance to Moscow’s doorstep.

Although Putin rarely publicly names the United States and NATO as Russia’s primary adversaries, his speeches unmistakably point to them as sinister actors with plans to subjugate Russia: “There are enough forces in the world that are [afraid of our strength](#), ‘our hugeness,’ as one of our sovereigns said. So, they seek to divide us into parts, this is a well-known fact.”

Putin viewed the political tumult in Ukraine prior to the Russian intervention as a direct threat to Russia’s national interests because he feared Ukraine would become a member of NATO. “As I said earlier, [such an accession](#) could be followed by the deployment of missile strike systems in Ukraine, including Crimea. Should this happen, it would have serious geopolitical consequences for our country. In fact, Russia would be forced out of the Black Sea territory, a region for legitimate presence in which Russia has fought for centuries.”

Indeed, Putin recently said that the issue of U.S. missile defenses in Europe, “is no less, and probably [even more important](#), than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this.”

Putin’s perception of the world is clear: enemies on the borders seek to destroy Russia, conflict is inevitable, and Russia’s national interests must be defended at all costs.

Actions Have Consequences

What can the West do to counter someone who appears to expect conflict while defending Russia’s highest national interests?

The first thing we can do is to understand the threat. Various U.S. [officials](#) have expressed disbelief that a national leader such as Putin would be willing to act like a 19th century tyrant in the more “enlightened” 21st century world. Such incredulous statements by Western leaders only reinforces Putin’s perception of the West as full of weak-willed idealists.

Second, the West must make sure its counter-actions against Putin will cause him to rethink his commitment to the three themes described above. Vladimir Putin will continue to advance Russia’s national interests until he receives unified resistance. He will continue to perceive conflict as likely, even useful, until the risks associated with that conflict outweigh the potential benefits. He will continue to identify and act against alleged enemies surrounding the fatherland until they are overcome or surrender.

As a last instructive anecdote, Putin was recently asked what his favorite movie was. He responded, “[Chapayev](#), of course.” Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev was a common peasant who became a great military leader for the Red Army in the fight against the internationally-backed White Army in the Russian Civil War. In the 1934 Communist Party film, Chapayev sacrifices

his life for the sake of revolution, defiant to the end, and dies at the hands of international imperialists that surrounded his soldiers.

Chapayev's patriotism obviously resonates with Putin on multiple levels, but it appears he also absorbed Chapayev's ultimately fatal flaw: a belief he is invincible.

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