

Moscow's Mendacious Move

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It is now clear that what is going on in Crimea and eastern Ukraine is an elaborate show, planned and directed by the Kremlin. The reasons President Vladimir Putin is taking such provocative actions in Ukraine portend not just Moscow's subjugation of Crimea but likely of eastern Ukraine as well.

The wording in a resolution passed by the Federation Council on Saturday did not limit Putin's ability to use Russian troops in Crimea. Ostensibly popular, pro-Russian forces are beginning to cause unrest in southern and eastern Ukraine. Putin told United Nations General Secretary Ban Ki-moon on Sunday that Russia would respond to any escalation of the situation in Ukraine with "whatever measures are necessary." Each day Moscow's rhetoric is growing sharper, divorced from reality and entirely mendacious.

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would be irreparably damaged.

Western logic tells us what Russia is doing is irrational. For one, Moscow has consistently preached sovereignty as its essential foreign policy principle. Then there is the \$50 billion the Kremlin spent in the last seven years on bettering its image in the West. Russia successfully lobbied to host the 2014 Olympics and the 2018 World Cup as well. Had Putin simply waited, the painful reforms that the West was likely to demand undertaken in exchange for any financial assistance to Kiev would have been extremely unpopular, leaving the back door open for Moscow. Sure, Russia has its Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, but Russia's lease is not up until 2042, and Ukraine needs the money anyway. Yet, there is a method to Putin's madness.

Ukraine has been a zero-sum game for Putin from the beginning. When it became clear that events in Ukraine had turned against Moscow's interests, it instinctively attributed it to Western interference and pronounced the interim government illegitimate. It is inconceivable to Moscow that Ukrainians could revolt against their rulers without foreign instigation. We must remember that decisions are being made currently by a Kremlin emboldened by the success of the Sochi Games.

Secondly, Putin correctly observed that the West did not think of Ukraine the same way he did. Putin also realized that the West could do little but shun his regime internationally and possibly slap economic sanctions on Russian officials. So far, the West is far from united on the this issue. Europe, unlike the U.S., is dependent on Russian money and energy. In any case, Russian pressure, if properly applied, can break their unity. At the same time, however, limiting Russian officials from keeping money or traveling abroad may actually be desirable considering that it is the middle bureaucracy that is sabotaging Putin's anti-corruption efforts. "Deoffshorizing" them would give Putin a powerful populist tool to wield. Importantly, Putin and his cronies are betting the West will not touch them.

Thirdly, sensing Russia's impending economic slowdown, the Kremlin is attempting to completely consolidate the political space. They figure that a 21st-century "gathering of the Russian lands" will do just that. The Kremlin's aggressive response to and rhetoric toward the protests is meant to marginalize Putin's domestic opposition, associating them with fascism and the "gay" West, while simultaneously making it clear that Putin will stand firmly against all challenges to established power. The recent conviction of Alexei Navalny and the sentencing of the Bolotnoye protesters raised the stakes. Indeed, the final nails in the coffin of Russian democracy are being hammered, including a war on independent media.

Finally, Ukraine is central to Putin's Eurasian Customs Union project. Putin has created a system whose most salient features are cronyism and corruption which is becoming more difficult to control. The results are stagnation and rising inflation, necessitating more oppression and government spending.

The Customs Union is not just an attempt to make Russia a more influential player internationally but an admission that the current system is unfixable. Not ready to accept his failure, Putin is looking to the Customs Union. He calculated that without this project and Ukrainian participation in it, his legacy as Russia's leader would be irreparably damaged. Plus, if Ukraine leaves Russia's orbit, what would stop others from doing the same?

No one truly knows where all of this will end. Russia has not come this far to back down — and certainly not in the face of Western pressure. Besides, if Putin has reconciled himself with the idea of an authoritarian "greater Russia," where does Moscow's aggression end?

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