

Putin Is Playing With Fire and We All May Get Burned

By Hal Brands

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The tactics that worked in Ukraine and Syria would bring spectacular consequences if Russia takes them too far against the U.S. or Europe.

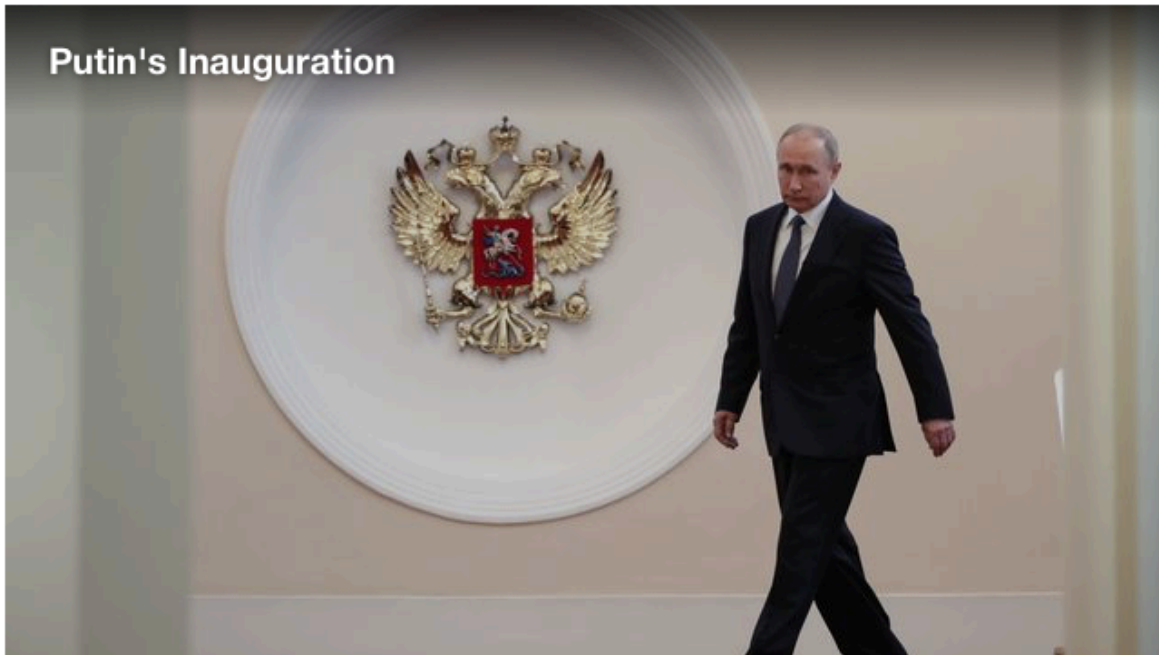
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Have gun, will travel.

Photographer: Dmitri Astakhov/AFP/Getty Images

When the U.S., U.K. and France launched airstrikes against Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons facilities last month, the world watched anxiously to see how Russia's Vladimir Putin would respond to this attack against his Syrian ally. While his response was muted, at least for the time being, that apprehension was a testament to how much Putin has raised Russia's geopolitical profile over the past decade — and to the penchant for risk-taking that has been simultaneously his foremost strength and greatest strategic weakness.



Putin's Inauguration

That characteristic has allowed Russia to score a series of geopolitical victories under Putin. Yet it has also provoked international hostility that has taken a toll on the Kremlin, and raised the prospect of escalation that could end badly for everyone. In the nearly two decades that Putin has formally or informally ruled Russia, one of his top priorities has been reestablishing the country as a respected and feared actor on the world stage. That goal has been translated into an array of activities that U.S. and Western observers find highly threatening.

There is the conventional military buildup that has focused on neutralizing key U.S. and Western advantages, and which has now given Russia a significant military edge on NATO's exposed eastern flank. There is the thoroughgoing nuclear modernization program, combined with a nuclear doctrine — “[escalate to de-escalate](#)” — that envisions using limited nuclear strikes to end a conventional war against NATO on terms favorable to Russia. There have been the two wars launched to bring wayward former Soviet republics — Georgia and Ukraine — to heel as well as the military intervention in Syria to shore up Assad's regime. Not least, there is the use of information warfare and cyber capabilities to interfere in elections in the U.S., Europe and beyond.

Through all these initiatives, Russia is pushing back — hard — against the influence of the U.S. and its Western allies. Yet tying all of these endeavors together have been two more intangible factors: Putin's penchant for hitting his rivals where they are weak, and his willingness to run risks that take those rivals by surprise.

On the first count, Putin has displayed a knack for the asymmetrical approach that pits Russian strengths against an adversary's vulnerabilities. In Syria, Putin gauged

that the U.S. was in an awkward position because the Barack Obama administration had declared its opposition to Assad but not acted decisively to remove him from power — either by providing more significant support to anti-Assad rebels or enforcing the infamous red line on chemical weapons use.

Moscow could thus use a relatively small investment of military muscle to checkmate U.S. policy in Syria and alter perceptions of power and influence throughout the broader Middle East.

Likewise, Putin's gambit to influence the U.S. presidential election in 2016 used Russian expertise in cyberattacks and digital propagandizing to exploit the openness of American society and the echo-chamber created by social media and the 24-hour news cycle. The upshot was to create an epic political disruption which continues to this day. By hitting enemies where they are exposed, Putin has been able to achieve a lot with a little.

Equally important is a second characteristic of Putin's statecraft: his attraction to the bold, unexpected stroke that catches the opponent off-guard. In case after case — invading Georgia and Ukraine, intervening in Syria, meddling in foreign elections — Putin has shown a higher-than-expected tolerance for risk. He has used the advantages of authoritarian rule — secrecy, speed, centralized decision-making — to take his adversaries by surprise. The result, when combined with Washington's own comparative risk-aversion, has been an impressive ability to seize the tactical initiative in ways that the U.S. and its allies have found difficult to counter.

So what does this mean for the future? For one thing, Western observers would be foolish simply to dismiss some of the scarier scenarios involving Russia that are often discussed today. Yes, it would quite a provocation for Russian operatives to tamper with U.S. voter rolls or actual vote counts in 2018 or 2020 (or in any number of European elections between now and then). But who imagined that Putin would run the risks he did in interfering with the U.S. democratic process in 2016?

Likewise, it would be incredibly dangerous for Russia to launch a limited war in the Baltics in hopes of fracturing NATO. Yet such a gambit might nonetheless appeal to a leader who loathes that alliance, relies on the hostility of the West for political purposes, and believes he has a temporary military advantage in the region.

To think seriously about these scenarios is not to engage in reckless fear-mongering. It is simply to recognize that America has underestimated Putin's appetite for risk before.

The irony, however, is that this very tendency could prove equally dangerous for Putin himself. The Russian president has been adept at identifying and taking advantage of geopolitical opportunities, yet he has also been prone to provoking stronger-than-expected blowback. The invasion of Ukraine secured Russian influence in Crimea and the Donbass area, but it also pushed the rest of Ukraine toward the West and made Moscow an international pariah.

Likewise, Russian influence operations in 2016 may have helped Donald Trump win the presidency, and they certainly threw American politics into disarray. But the resulting outrage made it impossible for the new administration to lift economic sanctions on Russia, and it earned a bipartisan U.S. hostility to Moscow that will probably outlast Trump's presidency.

In the same way, the poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal in the U.K. produced a raft of diplomatic sanctions and still-greater isolation.

Looking ahead, then, the best scenario for the West is that Putin will have learned from these experiences and will dial back his risk-taking in the future. Yet an equally plausible and more dangerous scenario is that the Russian leader might eventually play with fire in a way that leads to everyone getting burned.

At some point, we may see a bold Russian gambit — whether an expanded cyber-offensive against the U.S. political system or other critical infrastructure, an effort to stoke upheaval in the Eastern Europe, or some move that Western officials are not even yet considering — that pushes America and its allies to respond far more forcefully than Putin anticipates.

The question then will be whether the risk-taker in the Kremlin realizes that he has finally gone too far and rein himself in, or responds in a way that brings us to the brink of the first major-power conflict in decades.

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