

Beware Putin's power games

Since the poisoning of the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English town of Salisbury last month, tensions have been escalating between Russia and the west. This has so far resulted in the expulsion of over a hundred Russian diplomats from the United States, Canada, Ukraine and the European Union, matched by corresponding diplomatic action from Russia. Intelligence analysts have been fairly impressed by the level of solidarity among western nations - especially considering the impact of Brexit, and the unpredictability of Donald Trump. This unified response is a payoff for the British government, which took a tough and remarkably unequivocal stance against Russia from the beginning, and has clearly been using every ounce of its diplomatic leverage behind the scenes.

The response to the poisoning has almost certainly taken the Russian government by surprise. It has a fairly low opinion of western powers, believing them to be weak and largely incapable of working together effectively, thanks to a history of poor decision-making. There is some justification for this view - the disastrous war in Iraq, the economic crash of 2008, the election of Trump, and Brexit all reinforce the idea that the west is essentially eating itself, and in terminal decline.

Naturally, Putin senses an opportunity for Russia to gain from this perceived malaise. He has demonstrated this militarily - most notably by getting involved in the Syrian civil war, towards the end of 2015. The understandable reluctance of western powers to wade into this nightmarish conflict - which is a direct legacy of Britain and America's decision to unleash Armageddon in the Middle East - left a power vacuum, which Russia was happy to fill. In so doing, it unleashed an alpha-numeric soup of so-called "precision-guided munitions", which resulted in the deaths of at least a thousand civilians, and a spike in arms sales for Russian defence contractors.

Despite his willingness to assert the Russian state internationally, Putin must be exceedingly selective, and cunning, about how he does this. That is because Russia is not in good shape economically. Wages have been falling for years, poverty is widespread, and there is simply not a lot of money available to the Russian government... for anything, really. Much of this is due to international sanctions, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Much of it is due to the falling oil price.

Take the historical view, and you can see that Russia's miserable economic condition owes a great deal to the fall of the Soviet Union - or, more accurately, the *handling* of that momentous event. All of the most valuable public assets were sold off, making a few individuals fantastically wealthy, at the expense of the state. This largely accounts for Russia's lamentable position in the economic league table: with a population size only slightly greater than Japan's, its GDP is less than one third the size of Japan's. Compare it to America, and you see that Russia's GDP is *one thirteenth* of the size.

This is important, because Putin has a Cold War-era mentality. Hardly surprising, when you consider he was a KGB officer during the last fifteen years of the Soviet Union. Contempt for democracy, and an authoritarian style of leadership, comes naturally to a man who spent the early part of his career as a shadowy executor of state control.

His success as a "strong leader" depends on him being able to pull off the seemingly impossible trick of positioning Russia as an equal to the world's great powers, with a fraction of the resources.

How does he do this? He has his own miniature "shock and awe" display in the Middle East. He meddles in foreign elections. He conducts cyber warfare. And he assassinates his enemies.

Almost exactly three years ago, in March 2015, I wrote about [the assassination of Boris Nemtsov](#). He was a vocal critic of Putin's, gunned down in Moscow. Prior to taking four bullets in the back, he warned that the Russian government under Putin was transforming "from authoritarian style to real corrupt dictatorship." Of course, Putin denied involvement in the murder. He said it was his political enemies, trying to frame him.

It should surprise no-one that Putin, an ex-KGB agent, and de facto Russian dictator, conducts targeted assassinations. What is important is that people do not allow Russian propaganda spouts - such as the "news" service Russia Today - to obscure the truth. Putin's assassination campaign is designed to cause his enemies - of which there are many - maximum disruption, at minimum outlay to the Russian state. In the case of the recent nerve toxin attack in Salisbury, he calculated that an already-weakened United Kingdom (thanks to Brexit) would be further isolated in trying to "frame" Russia on insubstantial evidence. He hadn't reckoned on the resolve of the British government, or on the strength of the international alliance.

What is crucial now is that the international pressure continues to ramp up against Putin. His use of a nerve agent on European soil - for the first time since World War II - is an act of extreme recklessness, which could be called an act of war. If he believes this action has had a desirable effect, he will do something equally reckless. It will be unexpected, and deadly, and the consequences will be impossible to predict.

I will give the final words to Boris Nemtsov, a brave Russian politician who publicly opposed Putin, and paid the ultimate price for doing so:

"If one does not punch Putin in the mouth he will continue to act like a thug."

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