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# RUSSIAN MOTIVES

An Essay Exploring Russia's Approach to  
Crimea and Eastern Ukraine

**By Benjamin F. Cumbo IV**

**Foreword By Robert Kaplan**



Center for a  
New American  
Security



### About the Author

At the time of writing, Benjamin F. Cumbo IV was a Joseph S. Nye, Jr. National Security Intern with the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). In his short life, Mr. Cumbo achieved much. He appeared in the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) telethon at the age of nine and soon thereafter graced the cover of *Parade* magazine. When he was 13 he testified before Congress and did so again as an intern at CNAS. He interned for then-Senator Barack Obama, participated in the White House internship program, and served as an MDA goodwill ambassador. Having just completed his master's degree in international affairs, Mr. Cumbo hoped to move from CNAS into the intelligence community. He was finalizing this essay during his last weeks.

## FOREWORD

By Robert Kaplan

The history of Russia's long and complex relationship with Ukraine is of urgent interest. It is only through an understanding of this relationship that effective policy to deal with Russia's aggressive moves toward undermining Ukrainian sovereignty – one of the pivotal international crises we face – can be forged. Benjamin Cumbo IV thought long and hard about the motives behind Russia's recent aggression and devoted the last weeks of his life to understanding and writing about them. He died in April at the age of 27 of muscular dystrophy. His understated character combined with a quiet determination allowed him to focus on these and other projects in the face of a knowledge that his time on earth would likely be short. He embraced his fate in a heroic manner. This paper not only speaks to the maturity of his thinking but signals his potential had he lived.

## INTRODUCTION

This draft essay proceeds in three parts: First, Mr. Cumbo describes how the current Russian government elites surrounding President Vladimir Putin perceive Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Second, he summarizes how Russian military strategies project power across multiple geographic fronts. Third, he offers concluding thoughts on how the West can respond to current Russian aggression. CNAS thanks Dr. Dafna Rand, Dr. Fiona Hill, Jacob Stokes, Kelsey Guyette, Maura McCarthy, Ellie Maruyama, and its 2014–2015 class of Military Fellows for their editorial input.

**Robert D. Kaplan** is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. He is the bestselling author of fifteen books on foreign affairs and travel, including *Asia's Cauldron*. He is also a contributing editor at *The Atlantic* and previously was chief geopolitical analyst at *Stratfor*, a visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy, and a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board. *Foreign Policy* magazine twice named him one of the world's "Top 100 Global Thinkers."

## PUTIN AND HIS INNER CIRCLE

The Russian government apparatus is led by President Vladimir Putin and an exclusive inner circle – collectively known as the *Siloviki*, which roughly translates into “mighty men” or “power guys.”<sup>1</sup> The *Siloviki* are best understood as being divided into various factions, such as Putin's personal friends, cabinet ministers, commercial bureaucrats, and security or defense professionals. This unique mixture of bureaucrats is loyal to Putin and often compete with one another to influence his decisions. Putin recognizes his role as arbitrator; he not only negotiates between the factions but also plays each faction off the other, both to disrupt the potential for united opposition against him and to reap the benefits of mutual reciprocation. In other words, Putin does a favor for certain factions within this circle who repay the kindness by promising not to undermine or oppose his decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Putin began his rule by drastically diminishing the representative powers of the Russian polity, gradually centralizing all major decision-making mechanisms within the Kremlin. Democracy, such as the kind embraced by the West, is viewed

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as an agent of chaos that would make it difficult for Russia to manage domestic affairs and assert itself on the global stage.<sup>3</sup> As Putin sees it, there is no room for disagreement. His central narrative regarding the West purports that it is a threat whose sole aim is to encircle and destroy the greatness his country had once enjoyed. For many Russians, the sense of Russian triumphalism, glory, and nationalist esteem embraced by Putin is invigorating and far preferable to the decade of instability endured under the chaotic and dysfunctional government of Yeltsin.<sup>4</sup> The current Russian approach to governance and outsiders stems from decades of a Russian sense of victimization, which precipitated the rise of a conspiratorial narrative that views external actors – particularly those in the West – with suspicion.<sup>5</sup> While many of these conspiratorial narratives are based more on hyperbole than actual facts, one can appreciate their popularity in Russian society by looking toward the past. In the view of Putin, his inner circle, and a number of everyday Russians, external actors committed nearly every deprivation their country has experienced. Having been attacked by a number of European powers throughout history, Russians are uniquely sensitive to any actions that would supposedly seek to limit or infringe upon Russian notions of sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> There is certainly a kernel of truth in this aforementioned narrative as Russia was in fact attacked and invaded by states including Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Germany, France, and the Ottoman Turks.

From the perspective of Putin and the Siloviki, the United States and NATO have been characterized as threatening foreign actors that wish to diminish the position of Russia on the global stage. This belief became particularly apparent for Putin and his inner circle in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. In recent years he has posited that nefarious agents in the West are attempting to topple his rule.<sup>7</sup> Whether such assertions are true is not as important as the impact such a statement has

on Russian strategic thinking. Putin and his inner circle have a strong suspicion of the West, which has grown especially fervent with the advent of renewed NATO enlargement and the issue of missile defense.

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In 2013 and early 2014, the prospect of Ukraine increasing its trade ties with the European Union angered and worried Putin and the Siloviki. Once again, it seemed as if the Western powers were attempting to encroach upon the traditional Russian Empire. For Putin, letting an area that historically belonged to Russia – arguably the birthplace of Russian society – slip into the orbit of an aggressive amalgamation of European states was unacceptable. One must recognize that Putin's desire to initiate conflict in Ukraine stems from a decade – 2004 to 2014 – of antagonistic relations between Russia and its Western neighbors. During this decade, the Ukrainian government vacillated between aligning with the West and placating Russia, much to the consternation of Moscow. A combination of a transition in Ukrainian leadership, fallout from the Orange Revolution, and the growth of divisive nationalist fervor greatly contributed to the Putin's decision to annex Crimea and invade five oblasts in eastern Ukraine, which seriously damaged relations between both countries.<sup>8</sup> To put it simply, Russian actions in Ukraine are merely used to bait Western policymakers into making the very choices that Russia uses to substantiate the conspiratorial narratives that inform their actions across the region.

## USING MILITARY FORCE TO PROJECT POWER

The most nationalist of Russian leaders, like their people, have an extensive historic memory, with a particular nostalgia for times when their state was strong and glorious. Russian leaders throughout history have continuously sought to act from a perceived position of power, using military force to project and signal its strength over vast geographic spaces near and abroad.

Russia uses military assets in a number of ways to do so. A common method is to fly military aircraft in areas close to or within another country's territorial waters – sometimes referred to as “buzzing.” Russian aircraft have engaged in such activities and, more typically, “stray” into international airspace. These Russian sorties are designed to demonstrate credible capability, test responses, and/or signal resolve. These activities often result in neighboring countries launching aircraft to intercept the approaching Russians. While these actions have yet to result in open conflict, the mere presence of foreign aircraft in the airspace of another country, or in international airspace nearby, is a means of demonstrating global reach. For Russia in particular, these flights are seen as a safe and inexpensive means of emphasizing strength abroad.<sup>9</sup>

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Another power projection tactic is submarine diplomacy, which the Russians employed heavily during the Cold War. The strategy remains useful today, albeit on a much more limited scale mainly because of an atrophied Russian Navy. During the Cold War, Russian submarines armed with nuclear missiles were used to project a policy of deterrence. Some suspect that Russia allowed its submarines occasionally to enter the territorial waters of potential adversaries, although these incursions remain unconfirmed unless the vessels collide with another or run ashore. While the intent was to enter such waters covertly, Russian leaders were content to have these vessels discovered, as the submarine's discovery demonstrates nuclear deterrence on a global scale.<sup>10</sup>

When use of the seas is not an option, Russia will engage in massive training exercises or mobilizations to demonstrate strength. However, whereas submarine diplomacy is used to maintain deterrence between large adversaries, troop mobilizations and training exercises are used to intimidate weaker adversaries. In recent years, many of these training exercises have been preludes to actual conflicts, such as the 2008 invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the relatively bloodless land grab in Crimea in 2014.

Putin has also been known to demonstrate strength through military force by way of a proxy. The use of a proxy involves the transfer of Russian arms to paramilitary allies in neighboring countries, who in turn use those arms to initiate conflict with the official government forces of those countries. These military forces likewise respond with counterattacks against said paramilitary forces. Putin and his inner circle cleverly use the situation as a *casus belli*, claiming that government attacks against paramilitary forces are actually attacks against Russian minorities.

This was precisely what happened in Georgia in 2008. Russia initially stayed out of Georgia but

offered Russian citizenship to the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as material support to South Ossetian and Abkhazian rebels fighting the government of Mikhail Shaakashvili. As the conflict continued, Russia claimed Georgian military forces were endangering Russian minorities and considered such endangerment as a *casus belli*. Russian military forces summarily invaded under the pretext of protecting Russian minorities abroad, when in actuality the main reason was Tblisi's decision pursue NATO membership.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's behavior in Crimea and eastern Ukraine can be viewed in the same light. As these areas are home to significant Russian populations, Russia has seemingly interpreted any threatening Ukrainian actions as a threat against Russian speaking civilians. Although Moscow still officially denies any involvement with the insurgent forces fighting Kiev in Ukraine,<sup>12</sup> Putin and his inner circle's worldview suggests that attacks on Russian-speakers are consonant with attacks against Russian civilians.

## HOW THE WEST SHOULD RESPOND

Putin will continue to justify his actions by championing the causes of Russian minorities living abroad. He will continue to launch grandiose adventures that augment the strategic position of Russia economically, politically, and militarily, even if they do not always end successfully. While Western policymakers may interpret his decisions simply as those of a megalomaniac, his actions in Ukraine are not wholly without reason. Western policymakers need to realize he is a leader whose actions are quite calculated and informed by a collective sense of history that is rife with conflict, both externally and internally.<sup>13</sup>

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Putin really seeks order, albeit an order according to his rules. He wants to permanently resolve the apparent sense of disorder accompanied by the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Putin is a student of the past who is well aware of the costs of disorder.<sup>14</sup> He also recognizes that his fear of disorder is shared by some of his compatriots. Through the use of rhetoric laced with conspiratorial narratives of a belligerent and encroaching West, Putin taps into a populist vein of Russian paranoia. The fear of an encroaching West is certainly overstated and for good reason. Hyperbole is an integral part

of Putin's strategy and is utilized to garner popular support for his gambits on the global stage. The support might be minimal, but it is enough to provide the semblance of political legitimacy. So long as Putin retains an aura of legitimacy he has the political capital to carry out actions deemed appropriate by the Russian public for keeping out the dangerous West.<sup>15</sup>

At first glance, Putin's strategy may seem foolproof. However, under closer scrutiny, one can discern certain flaws and weaknesses. By understanding these flaws, policymakers are better equipped to exploit vulnerabilities in the Russian system, and may, for example, implement policies – like economic sanctions – that would have a detrimental impact on the Russian energy sector. Putin recently acknowledged publicly that sanctions are hurting the Russian economy.<sup>16</sup> If the West can limit the number of Russia's energy customers, there is a possibility that the energy elites could pressure Putin to scale back efforts in Ukraine in exchange for sanctions relief. Western policymakers could also exploit the weaknesses of the general Russian economy. If the impact of low oil prices on the Russian economy is any indication of just how vulnerable Moscow is to shocks in the global marketplace, then the West should enact policies to exacerbate existing economic vulnerabilities. The Russian economy is extremely volatile, and the slightest changes to global markets can have detrimental consequences. If economic sanctions are expanded to target other sectors of the Russian economy, such as manufacturing or construction, commercial elites within Putin's inner circle may compete with one another for a share of limited economic resources.

Economic turmoil created by expanded sanctions can cause division between the commercial elites and those of the defense establishment. Faced with dwindling financial resources, Putin's inner circle is currently in the midst of choosing between modernizing the military and improving the economy.

At one end of the spectrum, Moscow wants to create a military apparatus that is equipped both technologically and materially to handle the defensive and offensive challenges of the current century. On the opposite end, Russia is very concerned about the worsening state of the economy. Any negative shocks to the Russian economy could also erode some of the popular support Putin and his inner circle possess, giving ground to opposition movements seeking to replace them.

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Another way to respond to Russian action is to maintain a presence of Western military forces, such as the U.S. Army, in areas Russia could potentially invade. This presence would not necessarily deter Russia but may reassure neighboring countries. The amount of force need not be large, but large enough to increase the cost of belligerent Russian action. The purpose of the force's presence is not to engage the Russians in combat but instead to force Russia to consider the ramifications of Western military personnel killed during a Russian military operation. The death of military personnel from either Europe or the United States not

actively engaged in combat against Russian forces could invite severe international condemnation in the form of expanded sanctions or result in a potentially damaging armed conflict for Russia.

If Russia were to mount a concerted military effort against either the Baltic States or greater Ukraine, then NATO would need to commit overwhelming military force quite quickly. NATO military assets already in place might be enough to endure a concerted military effort for a few days, it would be increasingly difficult to hold the line as time wears on. Furthermore, divergent interests among NATO member states do not guarantee the formation of a strong joint combat force that could adequately counter a Russian attack.

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Putin and the military elites in Moscow understand Russian forces can only do so much in Ukraine and have likely settled on using proxy forces to consolidate control of eastern Ukraine instead of utilizing the full force of the Russian military to conquer the entire country. Russia paid dearly for involvement in Chechnya, a conflict that ended up being significantly more difficult than Russian military

commanders anticipated. Throughout the conflict, Russian troops had to contend with the challenges of an asymmetric war, which tried the patience of Putin and the Russian public.

Russian military capabilities are not quite as resilient as those of their Western counterparts. Following extensive combat, Russian commanders would need to spend a significant amount of time and money to repair and replace valuable combat equipment, vehicles, and aircraft. Additionally, Russia would need to recruit and train additional soldiers to replenish the ranks of men lost in battle. The Russian military may be old, outdated, and poorly maintained, but the past decade has seen increased military modernization, although the amount of training Russian soldiers and pilots receive is nowhere near as comprehensive as the training regimens available to Western militaries.

In the beginning of a larger conflict with Ukraine, Russia would achieve small victories but would then likely meet stiff resistance from Ukrainian forces enjoying Western support.

Russia cannot withstand a prolonged engagement with NATO forces without incurring significant losses. While Russian forces may outnumber NATO forces already in place, Western policymakers need to realize that quality usually trumps quantity. It is unclear whether their superior technology, better training, and better tactics are force multipliers that would allow NATO forces already in place to hold the line against a Russian advance until reinforcements arrive. Additionally, forces needing to hold the line against an initial Russian assault could be easily supported by NATO naval assets, which could provide continuous close air support for ground forces.

While the Russians have much to lose, NATO is not without its share of difficulties. Despite the technological and organizational advantage Western military forces exercise over Russia, there are strong logistical and bureaucratic constraints in place that



would make a sustained armed conflict with Russia somewhat difficult. Moving military equipment across multiple national borders is a challenge, as regulations and laws that dictate the equipment's transfer differ from country to country. Additionally, it would take at least several weeks to move this equipment over thousands of miles to the front.

## CONCLUSION

The specter of a massive conventional conflict between the Russians and the United States and its European allies looms, but is less likely than in previous decades. In the post-Cold War environment, Russian behavior in places such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, eastern Ukraine, and Crimea suggests the Russians are satisfied to pilfer small geographic regions from countries once a part of the former Soviet Union but will stop just short of actions that would initiate an expansion of hostilities that would necessitate the significant use of Russian combat troops. Furthermore, Russian strength is not inexhaustible. And Putin, for all his flaws, is at least shrewd enough to recognize that any prolonged engagement against better trained and better equipped Western combat forces, however small their number, is not in his best interests.

The United States and NATO should work together to exploit the weaknesses of the Russian military. A good starting point is to augment the defensive capacity of Ukrainian military forces. This can be done through cooperative training programs and increasing the amount of non-lethal assistance, preferably in the form of unmanned drones, electronic countermeasures, medical support equipment, and armored Humvees.<sup>17</sup> While a number of Western policymakers might advocate for lethal defensive aid in the form of anti-tank missiles and armored vehicles, such additions to Ukraine's arsenal could make Putin act even more aggressively. Judging by the overwhelmingly negative response received from Russia from the placement of anti-ballistic missile forces in

Western Europe, even the deployment of defensive technologies can be interpreted as aggressive acts by Moscow. European members of NATO should also be encouraged to meet their obligatory defense spending requirements of two percent of annual GDP. Meeting these spending requirements will increase the capacity of NATO members in Europe to wield greater military force.

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Western policymakers should tread lightly with regards to the crisis in Ukraine. Any policy of mitigation should carefully consider Russian political attitudes and worldviews. However, policymakers need to make it clear to Putin and his cohorts that there are consequences for their actions. With a combination of strategies aimed at dividing Putin and his inner circle, the addition of greater sanctions, the placement of friendly military forces in areas of potential Russian interest, and increasing the defensive capacities of the Ukrainian military, the West can deliver a strong message. In sum, the main aim of Western policymakers should be to increase the costs for intervention in Ukraine and to deter Russian leaders from launching ambitious military gambits in the future.

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### **Center for a New American Security**

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)  
[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)

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1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
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