

opinion

Putin fails as a grand strategist

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Washington
THE GLOBALIST

Vladimir Putin has tied the West in knots over the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine. Those actions have won him great popularity in Russia for standing up to the West as the champion of Russian national greatness. Nevertheless, Putin is failing as a grand strategist.

After all, Russia's most serious geopolitical challenges do not lie to the West. The United States and Europe will never accept the annexation of Crimea de jure, but have already signaled their acceptance de facto.

The signature of an association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union may infuriate Putin. It may also undermine his pet project of creating a Eurasian Economic Union. It does not, however, threaten core Russian national interests.

Moreover, despite initial sanctions and a chilling of relations, both are anxious to maintain cooperation with Russia on issues such as arms control, Iran sanctions, space, the environment and governance of the Arctic. They would also like to restore more normal trade and investment relations if and when circumstances permit.

Most critically, neither the U.S. nor Europe has any interest in acquiring, occupying or exploiting sovereign territory of the Russian Federation. The same cannot be said about Russia's south and east, where Putin's real strategic challenges lie.

To the south, Moscow must deal with a rapidly growing Muslim population. Aspirations for greater autonomy and even independence have been crushed by brutal repression and rule by Russian puppets. The savagery with which Putin laid waste to Grozny and subdued the rest of Chechnya will not soon be forgotten. The psychological impact of this treatment in Muslim territories has been compounded by overt racism — the dark underside of Russian nationalism.

The civil disorder and terrorism that have resulted from Russia's actions do not yet pose a threat to Russian control of its Muslim population. However, they are bound to grow worse over time, consuming scarce resources and diverting the Kremlin's attention from other pressing problems.

The most serious challenge for Putin and Russia lies to the East. Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East contain a cornucopia of timber, oil, gas, minerals

and other valuable resources. Russia has neither the people nor the capital to develop these resources on its own.

Climate change is making these resources more accessible by opening up northern sea lanes and shortening the harsh winter season. The Russian population in this vast region is not just small, but also declining.

Moscow's strategy to control the region has relied on using centrally appointed governors — locally elected ones have shown dangerous separatist tendencies — and widely dispersed security forces.

When one compares these efforts and personnel resources to those of neighboring regions and countries, it is clear that there is a power vacuum. That vacuum will eventually be filled.

The natural candidate to fill it is China. There is already a growing Chinese population engaged in trade and agriculture on the Russian side of the Amur River.

As Chinese penetration of the region increases, local Chinese will increasingly look to Beijing for "protection." Clumsy Russian attempts to assert control will be met with ultimatums from China.

Throw in a few incidents, a few power-hungry local leaders under the sway of Chinese money, as well as tactical intervention by the Red Army to protect Chinese citizens — and you realize one thing quickly: The "People's Republic of Eastern Siberia" is a step away from being born. Moscow would attempt to retain control. It would not succeed in the face of Chinese military power and financial resources.

The details of how Chinese control over Eastern Russia might be achieved is less important than the recognition that the dynamic balance of forces in the region will organically lead to this result. Russia could prevent it with the introduction of a sufficient counterforce.

Putin has shown no sign that he recognizes what is happening, not to speak of identifying a sufficient counterforce.

The gain to China would be great and the loss to Russia equally great. China's government would gain privileged access to valuable resources. China's people would gain virgin territory into which tens of millions of Chinese confronted with polluted air, soil and water could move.

China would greatly enhance its position as the dominant power in East Asia and gain leverage in its geopolitical competition with the U.S. and its allies. Russia would be instantly reduced to a second-rank power, with greatly re-

duced national prospects and international influence.

Putin does have a geostrategic alternative. Russia could enter into a broad framework agreement with Japan. Such a deal would provide the financial resources, technology and expertise necessary for the economic development of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. A critical element of this agreement would be ironclad guarantees to respect Russia's sovereignty. The economic and geostrategic benefits of such an agreement to Japan would be great.

Russia could probably get Japan to pay for, or at least finance, critical infrastructure, provision of public services and even national security enhancements that Russia otherwise could not afford. The agreement would have to be implemented in stages over decades.

Still, a fast start would probably be enough to check any designs by China, particularly with the international support discussed below.

Such an agreement would not only serve Russia's core interests by protecting its sovereignty and strengthening its economy. It would also serve Japan's core interests by giving its economy and society a badly needed boost in growth and confidence.

At least equally critical is that such a Russia-Japan deal would check China's geopolitical ambitions. That, in turn, would take pressure off the South China Sea, to the benefit of the U.S. and its allies, particularly Australia.

Given its adversarial relationship with Japan and historical ties with China, South Korea's role in this new arrangement would have to be handled with delicacy and finesse.

The U.S. should be willing to use its influence in the region to provide the necessary international support for the agreement while avoiding an open conflict with China.

Unfortunately Putin is so obsessed with Russia gaining power and respect as an alternative civilization to the West that he is missing the big picture. Instead, he will be drawn further into a re-electionist alliance with Syria, Iran and China. He has already signed a natural gas export deal with China on terms favorable to China.

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U.S. policy triggered latest border crisis

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If you're reading this, you probably follow the news. So you've probably heard of the latest iteration of the "crisis at the border": tens of thousands of children, many of them unaccompanied by an adult, crossing the desert from Mexico into the United States, where they surrender to the Border Patrol in hope of being allowed to remain here permanently. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's detention and hearing system has been overwhelmed by the surge of children and, in some cases, their parents. The Obama administration has asked Congress to approve new funding to speed up processing and deportations of these illegal immigrants.

Even if you've followed this story closely, you probably haven't heard the depressing backstory — the reason so many Central Americans are sending their children on a dangerous thousand-mile journey up the spine of Mexico, where they ride atop freight trains, endure shakedowns by corrupt police and face rapists, bandits and other predators. (Check out the excellent 2004 film "Maria Full of Grace.")

NPR and other mainstream news outlets are parroting the White House, which blames unscrupulous "coyotes" (human smugglers) for "lying to parents, telling them if they put their kids in the hands of traffickers and get to the United States that they will be able to stay."

True: The coyotes are saying that in order to gin up business.

Also true: U.S. law has changed, and many of these kids have a strong legal case for asylum. Unfortunately U.S. officials are ignoring the law.

The sad truth is that this "crisis at the border" is yet another example of "blowback." Blowback is an unintended negative consequence of U.S. political, military and/or economic intervention overseas — when something we did in the past comes back to bite us in the ass.

9/11 is the classic example: arming and funding radical Islamists in the Mideast and South Asia who were less grateful for our help than angry at the U.S. simultaneous backing for oppressive governments (The House of Saud, Saddam, Assad, etc.) in the region.

The fact that Honduras is the biggest source of the exodus jumped out at me. That's because, in 2009, the U.S. government — under — tacitly supported a military coup that overthrew the democratically elected president of Honduras.

"Washington has a very close relationship with the Honduran military, which goes back decades," The Guardian noted at the time.

"During the 1980s, the U.S. used bases in Honduras to train and arm the Contras, Nicaraguan paramilitaries who became known for their atrocities in their war against the Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua."

Honduras wasn't paradise under President Manuel Zelaya. Since the coup, however, the country has entered

work. Instead, we're talking about people from Central American nations devastated by a century of American colonialism and imperialism, much of that intervention surprisingly recent. Central American refugees are merely transiting through Mexico.

"Zelaya's overthrow created a security vacuum. Military and police were now focused more on political protest. It led to a freeze in international aid that markedly worsened socio-economic conditions," Mark Ungar, professor of political science at Brooklyn College and the City University of New York, told The International Business Times.

"The 2009 coup, asserts [Tulane] professor Aaron Schneider, gave the Honduran military more political and economic leverage, at the same time as the state and political elites lost their legitimacy, resources and the capacity to govern large parts of the country."

El Salvador and Guatemala, also narco-states devastated by decades of U.S. support for oppressive, corrupt right-wing dictatorships, are suffering similar conditions.

Talk about brass! The U.S. does everything it can to screw up Central America — and then acts surprised when desperate people show up at its front gate trying to escape the (U.S.-caused) carnage.

Letting the kids stay — along with their families — is less than the least we could do.

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Kremlin's expensive trip down memory lane

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is preparing to spend billions of dollars on a bizarre trip into the Soviet past, restarting construction on the storied and ill-starred Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad. Sadly Putin's nostalgia will come at great cost to the country's future.

In the late 1990s, the American writer Fen Montaigne traveled across Russia for his fly-fishing book, "Hooked." Among other adventures, he rode on the BAM, a major railroad through the wilderness of Eastern Siberia and the Far East that was meant to unlock the area's vast natural resources.

BAM was conceived under Stalin in the 1930s but built in the 1970s and 1980s at a cost of \$25 billion, paid for mainly by oil exports.

By the time the BAM became fully functional in the late 1980s, "the party was over," Montaigne wrote. The Soviet Union's collapse meant there was no money to build mining towns and factories along the mainline.

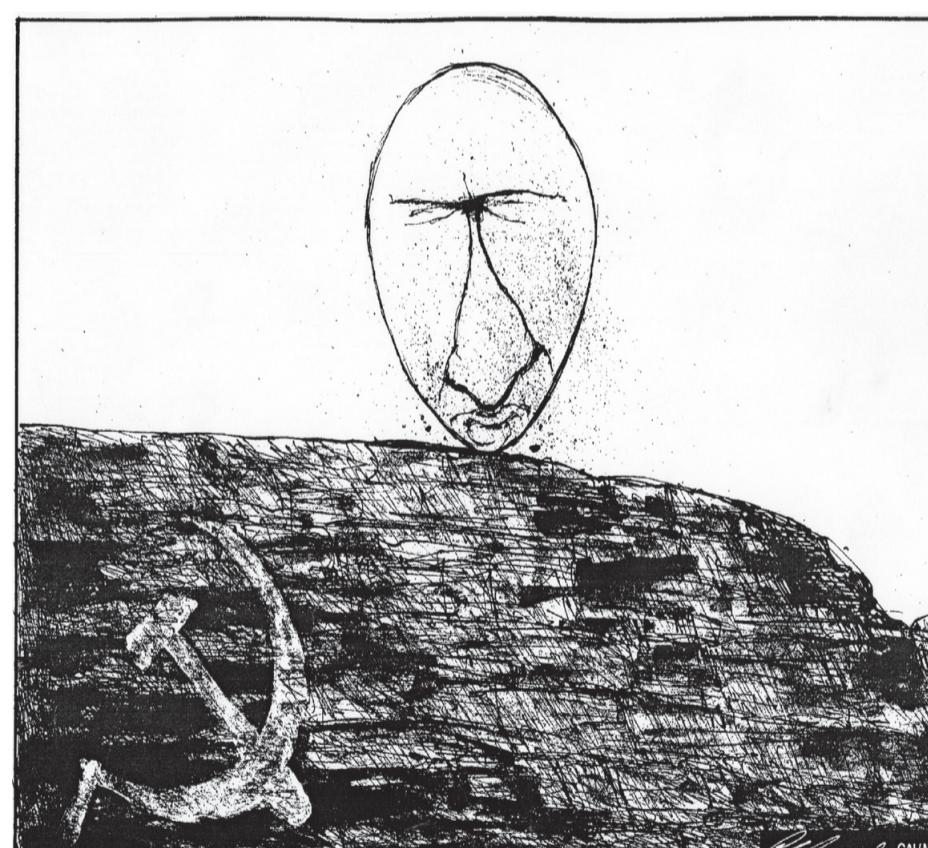
"Someday, no doubt, capitalist Russia would make use of the BAM," wrote Montaigne. "But as my train chugged along, I saw only a derailed Communist dream."

Now, as Montaigne predicted, the project is being revived, albeit not by capitalists. The Russian government will finance construction with oil revenue that was supposed to be locked up in the \$87.9 billion National Wellbeing Fund, whose primary purpose was to make sure the pension system had enough money to support an aging population.

The Russian Railroads monopoly will spend 150 billion rubles (\$4.4 billion) from the fund on increasing the capacity of BAM and the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

As much as 60 percent of the National Wellbeing Fund is now earmarked for infrastructure projects of this kind. Two other projects — the construction of a ring road around greater Moscow and a high-speed rail link between Moscow and Kazan — have been approved for an additional 300 billion rubles in financing from the fund.

Together with Russia's annexation of Crimea, with its history of World War II heroism and memories of cloudless holidays on Black Sea beaches, the BAM project illustrates Putin's growing nostalgia for the Soviet Union's might and



glory. Deep down, Putin appears convinced that Russia's past is also its future, so why not finance the Soviet revival with money stockpiled against a rainy day? The trip down memory lane can even be cloaked in modern rhetoric: "The National Wellbeing Fund is now seen as an instrument of stimulating economic growth, investment," Deputy Finance Minister Konstantin Vyskovsky recently told Bloomberg News.

True, Russia is having trouble with economic growth. The economics ministry expects investment to drop 2.4 percent this year, and capital flight may reach \$100 billion.

Putin's government sees public spending as its main recession-preventing tool: Foreign investors will shun Russia for a while because of its actions in Ukraine, and domestic ones are pessimistic because Putin's Soviet project is not business-friendly. Apart from milking the pension system, there are plans to raise the value-added tax and allow regions to introduce sales taxes.

The finance ministry says developing Crimea will require about 90 billion rubles a year in subsidies and a separate 100 billion ruble investment program

for the next three years. There are other Soviet-scale plans, too, like the 2018 soccer World Cup, which, according to recent estimates, requires 620 billion rubles. The state-controlled natural gas monopoly Gazprom intends to invest tens of billions of dollars in developing East Siberian gas fields and delivering the fuel to China. That project, too, may require direct state funding, though Gazprom says it can cope on its own.

Such enormous projects fuel both short-term growth and corruption. Spending on railroad or pipeline construction in East Siberia is not easy to control. Putin needs the growth to stay in power and retain his sky-high popularity as the remnants of Russia's capitalist economy shrink. His businessmen friends at Russian Railroads and Gazprom's pipeline-building companies need the government contracts. As for Russia, it is being told what it needs, just like in Soviet times.

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How World War I inspired independent India

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This month marks the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. Alongside the many interesting new views of the war that historiography and hindsight have made available a hundred years on, there's also a new awareness of aspects of the war's history that were under-researched at the time.

It's been almost forgotten that more than 1 million subjects of undivided colonial India (now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) fought in the Great War for the Allies, whisked into the battlefields of Flanders and Gallipoli by a massive recruitment drive in the east by their British masters. This was a force much bigger than Britain's own expeditionary army, and one that literally often served as cannon fodder in a conflict that horrific even its principal movers with its brutality and toll on both combatant and civilian life.

Indian troops carried out Allied commands in key battles in France, Belgium, Mesopotamia and East Africa, but when the history of the war came to be written, it was mainly that of its impact on European society and civilization, the "center" of the world.

Adrift in a strange land where few could speak his language, the often illiterate Indian sepoy, or soldier, could not speak back to his master or leave a private mark on his age.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

So wrote Wilfred Owen in his famous poem "Anthem For Doomed Youth." But one doubts he saw in this scene any sepoys or jawans. The asymmetries of race and empire were inevitably extended even to the profound experiences of shock and awe, sorrow and pity, on the battlefield and in the trenches.

To commemorate the centenary of the Great War, though, many new initiatives at historical reconstruction of the Indian war effort have started back

home. And many foreign archives are making available their newly digitized records of the war, allowing us to experience vicariously the life of the subcontinental soldier marvelling at the streets of London, arousing wonder in the small towns of France, holding to the rules of caste even when laid up in a hospital in Brighton, and trying to communicate with his loved ones back home.

In this last endeavor, he often faced considerable resistance from the very powers that had dropped him down into Europe, as several letters recently posted online by the British Library reveal. For fear that the Indian sepoy's letters might give away important information or stoke civilian unrest back in India, all letters from the front were subject to inspection by the Censor of Indian Mails, which commissioned a translation of random samples for inspection.

These snippets are for the most part what survives today of these fascinating letters. In one letter, a soldier recalls a tale suggesting that a woman whose husband is away at war, even if she loves him dearly, cannot remain chaste for more than three months — a worrying thought for him, as he has been away for a year and a half.

Soldiers became aware of the suspicious eye of the censor and devised elaborate strategies to convey meaning. In perhaps the most famous metaphor in this small archive, Khan Muhammad of the 40th Pathans regiment wrote that "the black pepper which has come from India is all used up," and more will therefore soon be requisitioned. "Otherwise there would be very little red pepper remaining." The red pepper refers to the British.

Other aspects of the Indian effort in Europe and the massive recruitment drive back in India — the numerical strength of the Indian Army increased fourfold from 1914 to 1918 — surprise even Indians today. For instance, a key figure in Britain's recruitment efforts in India was Mohandas Gandhi, later the greatest anti-colonial strategist of the 20th century. In his youth, Gandhi, who

had studied law in England and then supported the British in the Boer War in South Africa, was very much a loyal subject of the British Empire. By 1918, despite his already considered views on nonviolence, Gandhi was led by his assessment of the Great War to argue that the British were fighting for a just cause, and further that recruitment in the war efforts would improve India's own martial capabilities, long hobbled by the Raj.

The scholar Aravind Ganachari quotes a letter to Gandhi in December 1917 from E.L.L. Hammond, the chief recruiting officer in the backward Indian province of Bihar. This reveals much about economic incentives held out to poor Indian peasants to induce them to fight in a distant location for a king he had never seen and a cause about which he had no clue.

"We give an advance of Rs 30. The men get Rs 15 per month while in India, and Rs 20 in overseas. Rs 3 capitation fee for each man brought in," Hammond writes to Gandhi. "Cannot you in course of your tour point out the great economic opportunity now offered? If one man from a household goes he can remit Rs 8 per month to his family and still have Rs 100 or 200 according to the duration of the war as undisbursed pay to start him in life on his return."

Of course, there was to be no return to a life of greater economic security for many. About 75,000 Indians lost their lives in World War I; they are memorialized today at the India Gate in New Delhi.

One of the effects of the Great War was to break up the grand European empires of the 19th century and bring in a new age of nationalism. These winds of change would soon reach India, allowing for a new self-conception of India — and, eventually, a wider view of World War I — to come into being.

Chandras Choudhury, a novelist, is based in New Delhi. His novel "Arzee the Dwarf" is published by New York Review Books.