



PERSPECTIVES

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How Trump Should Counter Putin in Ukraine and Venezuela

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: If Nicolás Maduro is removed from office in Venezuela, Putin might act as he did when a popular revolution overthrew Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014. At that time, he launched a surprise invasion of Crimea. This time, he may launch a surprise naval and land attack on Mariupol, set up a land bridge from Crimea to Russia, and continue intensifying his attempt to strangle Ukraine's economy in order to subjugate that country to Russia. Trump must take immediate preemptive measures to prevent this by increasing naval aid to Kiev.

Russian president Vladimir Putin appears to be counting on a lack of American resolve regarding Venezuela. If Washington abdicates its role in Venezuela, Russia will eventually build intelligence facilities there. Moscow is already providing Nicaragua with “sophisticated weaponry,” including “T-72 tanks, war boats, warplanes, and powerful bombs.”

America is facing two dangerous crises. In Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, the illegitimate winner of a reportedly [sham](#) election, has, through his socialist policies, created a catastrophe. The [struggle](#) between his challenger, Juan Guaidó, and himself is reaching a crescendo. Millions of Venezuelans, suffering under Maduro's radical regime, have been flooding neighboring Brazil and Colombia. Yet, with the help of President Putin, Maduro is clinging to power, just as Fidel Castro did in the early 1960s with the aid of Nikita Khrushchev.

Putin, [seeking to rescue](#) his beleaguered client as well as his considerable [investments](#) in Venezuelan oil and gold, recently [deployed](#) two nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela. In addition, hundreds of “private military contractors who do secret missions for Russia” are [reportedly](#) deployed in Venezuela.

The Venezuelan crisis is linked to a second dangerous crisis: that of eastern Ukraine. There, even as US ships recently [sailed](#) through the Black Sea, Putin is undertaking a new [destabilization policy](#) directed at the strategically important eastern Ukrainian industrial city of Mariupol.

Why Mariupol? Putin's main objective seems to be to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and the EU. His strategy is also likely designed to weaken Ukraine, which depends on the export of coal, steel, and grain through Mariupol, which is the key export port for the whole Donbas region. A railroad hub and the key port on the Azov Sea, Mariupol could also serve as a land bridge to Crimea.

Putin appears to have become militarily involved in Venezuela partly to ensure that Ukraine, the most geopolitically significant country on its western borders, will not follow the path of the Baltic NATO countries. He apparently desires that Ukraine will become a weak nation that will eventually reach some sort of economic cooperation with Russia. A believer in warfare by proxies on land – separatists, “volunteers,” Chechens, and Special Forces – Putin is now using the Russian Navy and Special Forces by sea to [strangle](#) Mariupol.

Even if Russia does not have a master plan, it does appear to have strategic objectives: building a network of naval and air force facilities, as in [Syria](#); or renewing them, as in [Crimea](#) and occupied [Abkhazia](#). Russia would love to once again possess the port in Mariupol and dominate the Azov Sea.

What can President Trump do in the face of these two crises?

Putin's evolving strategy and the Venezuelan and Ukrainian crises

Vladimir Putin has never sought to recover the whole Soviet or Tsarist empires. Rather, for more than a decade, he has concentrated on strategically important slices of countries that were part of the former empire – primarily those with sizable populations of Russian speakers, Orthodox believers, or Shiite supporters of Christians.

More importantly, Putin's aims differ from those of former premiers Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, who conducted expensive full occupations of landlocked countries, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Afghanistan. Putin appears to be seeking littoral slices of countries with assets he considers [strategically valuable](#) for Russia. The slices he seems to favor are those linked to the south by strategic waterways and endowed with energy resources. Now, with ISIS helpfully [cleaned](#) out of Syria by the US, Russia has a warm water port on the Mediterranean, gas fields, and – ever since President Obama effectively abandoned Syria – the opportunity for Russia to displace or control Syrian leaders, such as Bashar Assad.

Putin also appears to wish to reacquire ports, coastlines, waterways, and littoral lands lost to Russia during the 1991 [collapse of the Soviet Union](#). Examples include Georgia's Abkhazia, in 2008, with its Black Sea coastline; and in 2014, Ukraine's

Crimean Peninsula, the site of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. Putin has also been [enlarging naval facilities](#) in Syria's port of Tartus, in the eastern Mediterranean, and has settled comfortably in an [airbase](#) in the Syrian province of Latakia.

How can Russia, a country with a GNP roughly equaling that of the Netherlands, engage effectively in strategic competition with the US, the largest technological and economic powerhouse in the world?

The answer appears to be this: Putin believes that in view of Russia's (and China's) nuclear capability, America is not interested in risking a large nuclear confrontation.

Putin's military strategists, given his lean circumstances since he came to power, seem to have pushed forward with the only military program that made sense: building a lethal, non-carrier-oriented naval fleet and killer Special Forces in each armed service with the objective of threatening, and prevailing in, local conflicts. They have also focused on the evolution of hybrid war scenarios to obtain land in countries that are not NATO members. Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria – and, perhaps in the future, Venezuela – are all examples. The key vital national security focus for Russia, however, is still Ukraine, with its crucial geopolitical position and technological and agricultural potential.

Building a [new US base in Poland](#) is critical for the US to ensure the security of NATO countries, Poland, and the Baltics. Meanwhile, the vulnerability of Mariupol on the Azov Sea and in the east was exposed by the Russian Navy's [attack on three Ukrainian ships](#) on November 25, 2018, in which several Ukrainian sailors were wounded and 24 captured and imprisoned. Russia claims they infringed on internal waters that others claim are international.

Putin's unsurprising aversion to regime change

Putin has learned a few lessons from the overthrow of two of his clients. The first was Libyan president [Muammar Qaddafi](#) in 2011. [Persuaded at the time](#) by then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Russia abstained at the UN rather than veto a NATO “humanitarian” intervention against the Libyan dictator. Putin not only lost valuable contracts; he was also possibly shaken by the murder in Tripoli of Qaddafi by US-armed “moderate” rebels after Qaddafi had complied with all US requests.

The second lesson came when the [corrupt](#) pro-Russian Ukrainian president [Viktor Yanukovich](#) was ousted in 2014 by a popular uprising in Kiev. Putin responded with a quick invasion of Crimea. To him, retaking Crimea with Sevastopol, the traditional home base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, must have seemed essential for linking his naval deployment between the Black Sea and Syria in the eastern Mediterranean.

Putin then – after first organizing a multilateral defense against Obama's 2013 [planned “red line” intervention](#) in Syria – went for direct intervention by military force from 2015 to 2018. The reason was purportedly to [preserve the rule](#) of Syrian president

Bashar Assad, but was really to expand Russian influence in the region even further – the traditional goal of Russian rulers.

Putin's strategy of linkages

What has not been understood in the West is that Putin has linked the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine by taking advantage of Russia's peculiar geography. A canal between the Volga and Don rivers allows Putin to [move elements](#) of his Black Sea Fleet to the Caspian Sea and his Caspian Sea Flotilla to the Black Sea, when necessary, to be used in either of the two conflicts.

The ongoing disputes in both Syria and Ukraine – combined with the [Minsk I and Minsk II](#) negotiations, in which Putin came out the [winner](#) – have enabled him to manage both conflicts to America's disadvantage. Forays into the city of Mariupol by Russian proxies had already begun in 2014, as well as into other eastern Ukrainian cities, such as Donetsk, Lugansk, and Kramatorsk.

Most Western observers and residents of Mariupol had apparently anticipated that the siege of this strategically important city would take place in 2015. Instead, to everyone's surprise, Putin froze the Mariupol conflict and redeployed some of his forces to intervene in Syria. His [objective](#) was ostensibly to defend his client, Assad, from a US-supported rebel uprising, but was likely more to defend Russia's newfound interests there – its upgraded navy and air force facilities in Tartus and Latakia, as well as future energy investment and energy transfer pipelines in Syria.

Putin's intervention helped to consolidate Assad's victory in late 2018 and Russia's entrenchment in Syria. With Trump's announcement of a withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Putin quickly defrosted the conflict in eastern Ukraine and returned with his apparent new strategy: the economic strangulation of Mariupol to weaken Ukraine by means of his navy on the Azov Sea.

How does Putin plan to accomplish this?

In 2015, even as he was engaged in Syria, Putin ordered the [building of a bridge](#) over the Kerch Strait, the bottleneck passage from the Black Sea into its tributary, the Azov Sea. The 18-kilometer-long bridge links Russia to the Crimean Peninsula. The bridge is so low, however – 115 feet from the water – that tall Ukrainian commercial ships cannot pass under it to the Black Sea. Many analysts ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) view the construction of the too-low bridge as a result not of poor engineering or stupidity but deliberate design. (The bridge might be short-lived, however, due to seismic movements in the Kerch Strait.)

For years, during Obama's tenure and ever since Trump took office, Putin skillfully batted away all US attempts to arm Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles. Initially, it appeared that Trump had been persuaded by Putin that Ukraine was not an area important enough for US engagement. After [negotiating](#) with Ukrainian president

Petro Poroshenko, however, Trump, in an about-face, [approved the sale](#) to Ukraine of 210 Javelin missiles and 37 launchers.

Ukraine's possession of the US-made missiles has had a tremendous [psychological impact](#) on Russian tank crews in Donbas, who reportedly now refuse to deploy and shell Ukrainian positions.

How should the US proceed?

Prior to the [Cuban missile crisis](#), President John F. Kennedy was viewed by Russia's Khrushchev as weak. Today, the Kremlin views Trump as weakened by "[Russiagate](#)" and by the possibility – lustily reported by the media for two years – of his either resigning or facing impeachment, as [Richard Nixon](#) did in 1974.

There is little Putin can do to save Maduro's regime in Venezuela; the cards are stacked in America's favor.

In Venezuela, there is a legitimate leader, Juan Guaidó, while Maduro's policies have alienated not only most of his people, but evidently most of his [neighbors](#) as well. Maduro is reportedly thought little of by leftists in [South America](#) and [Europe](#).

The large amounts of humanitarian aid that Maduro is refusing to release to the Venezuelan people, should, of course, be allowed into the country.

The US should try to avoid bloodshed by continuing to offer Maduro and his key supporters safe passage out of the country.

So far, Putin seems to have been counting on a lack of American resolve regarding Venezuela; he just succeeded in getting [China](#) to support him.

If Maduro is removed from office, Putin might act as he did when a popular revolution overthrew Yanukovych in Ukraine, in 2014. At that time, he conducted a surprise invasion of Crimea. This time, he may launch a surprise naval and land attack on Mariupol, set up a land bridge from Crimea to Russia, and continue intensifying his attempt to strangle Ukraine's economy in order to subjugate Ukraine to Russia. Trump needs to take immediate preemptive measures to prevent this by increasing naval aid to Kiev.

The US and Britain recently [conducted naval drills](#) in the Black Sea, but that alone is insufficient. While strictly following the [international convention](#) on deployment of foreign ships through the Turkish Straits in the Black Sea, more naval power needs to be brought into play. The Ukrainian Navy could be allowed to borrow dozens of small vessels from NATO countries while the US undertakes a rapid program of helping to rebuild and enlarge the minuscule Ukrainian Navy.

Above all, President Trump must continue to work towards liberating the Venezuelan people. Any hesitation would be counterproductive.

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