

The Background to Putin's Actions in Syria and the UN: Russia's New View of the U.S. and Western Strategy

Anthony H. Cordesman
October 2, 2015

Far too much of the commentary on Russian military intervention in Syria, Vladimir Putin's speech at the United Nations, and Putin's relations with Barack Obama reverts to the mindreading era of Kremlinology. It takes Putin's actions out of context and often says more about the author's prejudices than it does about Putin.

It is important to note that Russia formally introduced many of the views of the U.S. and Western "destabilizing" impact on the Middle East and the developing world well over a year ago at a formal military conference in Moscow.

Russian high-level officers and diplomats reacted strongly to the criticisms and sanctions resulting from Russia's actions in Ukraine. They shifted radically away from a past focus on improving military relations with Europe—and to a lesser degree the United States.

They instead focused on what they called the "color revolutions" and portrayed the instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the rise of Islamist terrorism as a mix of ill-judged U.S.-led interference that was destabilizing many developing states and part of something approaching a U.S.-led plot to dominate the states involved.

Russia's New View of the U.S. and Western Strategy: The Color Revolutions

A range of Russian and Belorussian military and civil experts presented a very different view of global security and the forces behind it at the Russian Ministry of Defense's third Moscow Conference on International Security on May 23, 2014.

The first session of the conference presented an overview of the security situation, focusing on what Russian experts called the color revolutions. Russian analysts have used this term since—the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2004, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

Russian military officers tied the term color revolution to the crisis in Ukraine and to what they saw as a new U.S. and European approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties. It was seen as posing a potential threat to Russia in the near term, to China and Asian states not aligned with the United States, and as a means of destabilizing states in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia.

The second session repeated these themes, focusing on the instability in the Middle East, and the final session addressed the war in Afghanistan and South Asia.

Many of the speakers at the meeting from other countries touched on very different themes, but the Russian and Belorussian military speakers provided a consistent and carefully orchestrated picture of the color revolutions—backed by detailed PowerPoint presentations.

Key Russian officers and officials presented a view of the United States and the West as deliberately destabilizing nations in North Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of the world for their own ends. They described such actions as having failed and been a key source of terrorism. They see the West as rejecting partnership and as threatening Russia along all of its borders with Europe.

Senior Russian officials also began using the term color revolutions in other forums that were far more critical than in the past. For example, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accused the United States and the European Union of an attempt to stage yet another color revolution in Ukraine and [said](#) during the conference that “Attempts to impose homemade recipes for internal changes on other nations, without taking into account their own traditions and national characteristics, to engage in the ‘export of democracy,’ have a destructive impact on international relations and result in an increase of the number of hot spots on the world map.”

The end result was a radically different Russian reading of modern history, of U.S. and European strategy and use of force, and of U.S. and European goals and actions from any issued in the West or in prior Russian literature.

Western experts can argue about the motives involved. They could range from:

- Putin’s personal goals and views,
- Broader Russian anger over the West’s reaction to events in Ukraine,
- Russian efforts at persuading developing nations and Asia to back Russia in a reassertion of its strategic role in the world,
- Propaganda to cloak the character of Russian actions in Ukraine and the near abroad,
- Efforts to justify Russian action in Syria and very real Russian concern over U.S. and European actions that have destabilized key MENA and Central Asian states, and
- A host of other possible motives and intentions.

What is critical is that the United States and Europe look beyond speculation about Putin and consider what Russian military leaders and strategists have been saying. These views about the color revolutions are not ones the United States and Europe can afford to ignore.

They are summarized in the presentation at the May 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security, which included presentation slides from the Russian presenters. It is all too clear from this material that many of Putin’s recent actions, and Russia’s intervention in Syria, have antecedents in the material presented at the conference.

The Burke Chair has prepared two versions of a briefing that presents the key points raised by Russian speakers in summary form. It should be stressed that these summaries had to be made by taking quick notes taken during the actual speeches and are not quotes. They may lack important nuances. Most speakers spoke in Russian, and the translator may sometimes have used wording the speakers did not fully intend.

These notes are, however, backed by photos of many of the “slides” used in the PowerPoints during the meeting—many of which were kindly provided to me by colleagues. These slides clearly present the views of the speakers in the form they chose.

The first brief presents only the key Russian statements and presentations focused on the color revolutions. It is entitled *Russia and the “Color Revolution”: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West (Key Briefs)*, and it is available on the Burke Chair website at http://csis.org/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Summary.pdf.

The second brief presents all Russian statements and presentations focused on the color revolutions, including detailed briefs and comments on the situation in the Middle East, a radically different Russian view of the war in Afghanistan, and a presentation on proliferation. It is entitled *Russia and the “Color Revolution”: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West (Full Report)*, and it is available on the Burke Chair website at http://csis.org/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Full.pdf.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2015 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.