



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 412

September 28, 2016

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### What is Putin Up To?

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Scarcely a week has passed recently without new evidence of aggressive Russian opportunism, as best could be characterized by Vladimir Putin's misbehavior. With its highly reliable 'Information Series' of short papers, the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP) has kept a close and careful eye on the state of the strategic balance. The detail of that 'balance' remains vitally important – we dare not risk living with any contrary competing assumption. This short paper strives to answer just one question about recent Russian military modernization: so what? It is often forgotten that the familiarity with which the concept of strategy tends to be deployed, is only rarely troubled by careful thought concerning its proper meaning. It is vitally important to remember that strategy is all about consequences. Behavior is guided by intentions as to hoped for results. Putin has been fortunate to be faced by an exceptionally untalented bevy of Western politicians in Obama, Merkel, May, and Hollande – men and a woman who may be politically adequate for quiet and unchallenging times, but not for a period more demanding than that.

So, what does Putin want to achieve? With vital thanks still due to an improperly, unfairly, overburdened United States in the realm of defense effort, Russia continues to lack serious geopolitical temptation abroad. The almost wholly strategic nuclear forces of the United States, assuming the current modernization plans hold, will continue to pose what promises long to remain a very adequate secure deterrent to the prospect of large scale war. This conclusion rests on the negative evidence of Russian misbehavior not perpetrated and the contemporary narrative of deeds and misdeeds in the 'no significant warfare' column. Of course, political and strategic misjudgements can and occasionally do happen, as well as quite genuine accidents. It is entirely possible, and may even be politically desirable, for NATO to so maneuver itself politically, and even militarily, that it looks to be more effectively prepared for warfare with Russia than it does at present. It is particularly important for Russia to have this perception! NATO must not constantly appear to be on the defensive (e.g. asking itself 'what will Putin dare to do next?'). This image and political reality of Western strategic weakness simply invites



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further Russian disrespect. What is needed is for Putin to be worried about our possible response to his political and strategic misbehavior, let alone – dare one mention it? - about NATO initiatives.

From time to time in most deterrence systems, a largely ambiguous would-be/could-be deterrence will be needed to remind a deterree just why it is that he should feel deterred. This is particularly so for Putin because it is quite normal for a challenging party to push outward in order to see if the military and political deterrence barriers are still working effectively in place. A short, sharp shock must be administered to a Russia that misbehaves, lest Putin mistakes the limits of prudent behavior and strays into faulty and therefore dangerous ways. Western leaders should take heed of this brief advice. They otherwise risk Putin concluding that he can safely tempt fate.

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