

Why Pussy Riot Is Scarier Than a Nuclear Attack

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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The Pussy Riot case undoubtedly marks a new stage in Russia's degradation. It is obvious that President Vladimir Putin is attempting to strengthen his authoritarian rule with Russian Orthodox fundamentalism and repression. As a result, Russia's already poor global reputation will only get worse.

The Pussy Riot trial and sentencing demonstrated the weakness of the ruling regime as well as its willingness to isolate Russia further from the rest of the world. Recall how during the Cold War, the Soviet Union's relationship with leading foreign countries — and especially with the United States — was based on nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction.

But as Moscow and Washington have presumably moved away from nuclear deterrence as a dominant security doctrine over the past 20 years, it has become increasingly difficult to justify maintaining large nuclear arsenals on both sides. Now, the argument goes, the two countries should gradually reduce their enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

In reality, though, Moscow has stubbornly clung to its long-outdated nuclear deterrence doctrine. In every way possible, it has tried to leverage its huge nuclear arsenal that it inherited from the Soviet Union into a source of greater influence in international affairs. Yet that effort has failed miserably. In a rare moment of frankness after NATO initiated its military operations against Yugoslavia in the late 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin hastily convened a meeting of his Security Council and reportedly asked, "Why aren't they afraid of us anymore?"

The answer to his question is clear: With the process of globalization accelerating and Russia integrated into the global economic system, any talk of the Kremlin launching a nuclear attack against the United States has become completely absurd. How could the political elite in Moscow seriously consider waging a nuclear attack against the United States when many officials have family members living there and most keep money in U.S. accounts? What's more, how could Russia destroy a country in which it has long held a major portion of its gold and foreign currency reserves?

For its part, the West excludes the possibility of Russia launching a first nuclear strike against the United States or against one of its NATO allies. The fact that Russia's arsenal is the world's second-largest plays no role. In fact, the United States is much more concerned about an attack from North Korea, even though Pyongyang has only two or three nuclear devices and its delivery vehicles are far more primitive. Until recently, the West was never particularly concerned in the post-Soviet period that the Kremlin could act irrationally in the international arena.

Indeed, Russia has done its best to try to convince the West that it is unpredictable and unbalanced. Take, for example, the artificial confrontation that the Kremlin has provoked over the U.S. missile defense system being deployed in Europe. Russia's generals have on several occasions threatened to launch first strikes against U.S. missile defense installations if the Kremlin considers them a threat to its nuclear deterrence. The only problem is that nearly every military and political leader in the West saw right through this bluff and didn't treat it seriously.

But what the generals failed to accomplish in terms of scaring the United States may have been accomplished by the Pussy Riot trial and sentence, which showed how reactionary Russia's leadership really is. This will not be lost on the leaders in the Pentagon and White House. Although on the surface Pussy Riot appears to be only a domestic issue, Russia's reactionary and fundamentalist behavior in the case is viewed more broadly by many Western leaders, who are drawing conclusions about the overall sanity and stability of the Kremlin leadership. This inevitably raises security issues. If the Kremlin shows instability and radicalism in domestic issues, it could show similar radicalism and unpredictably in global security and military issues as well.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress will most likely pass the Magnitsky Act in the next few months, which, if signed by President Barack Obama, will cast all of Putin's ruling elite as a band of criminals. That, in turn, could prompt Putin to crack down on many members of his own inner circle whom he considers political liabilities. Political analyst Georgy Saratov believes that a "cultural revolution" is possible, which would enable Putin to replace the current elite with a "red guard" of loyal, pro-government youth, similar to the one Chinese leader Mao

Zedung formed in the 1960s during that country's Cultural Revolution.

Indeed, the Kremlin is clearly becoming more radicalized. The Pussy Riot case suggests that Putin is prepared to do absolutely anything to remain in power.

If this trend toward radicalization continues, we could see an increase in U.S. sanctions against Russian officials who are implicated in corruption and human rights abuses. What will Russia's reaction be to these sanctions? Since Russia is unable to enact a symmetric response, the Kremlin will have to revert to the only asymmetric response it is capable of developing: military threats. This will clearly heighten the confrontation between Russia and the United States.

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