

# Why Putin Emulates North Korea

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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As I have written before, U.S. and Russian diplomats have little to say to one another these days. The problem is that President Vladimir Putin sincerely believes that Washington organized the mass protests in Moscow in late 2011 and early 2012 to carry out an Orange-like revolution. That conviction makes U.S.-Russian dialogue virtually impossible. After all, how can Putin cooperate on a serious level with a U.S. administration that he believes is planning his overthrow?

Last week, for example, newly appointed U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was unable to reach Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for days when he needed to discuss an important matter: the nuclear test that North Korea had just conducted, which caused nervous jitters all across the world. Yet Lavrov found plenty of time to talk to Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi.

Even though the Foreign Ministry condemned North Korea for its nuclear test, the Kremlin's own position on nuclear weapons is not much different. Coincidentally, North Korea conducted its nuclear test at the same moment that U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller was presenting her Russian counterparts with Washington's new proposal

for further reductions in both strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons.

Based on a report prepared jointly by the Pentagon, State Department and CIA, the White House proposed reducing the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,000–1,100 from the current limit of 1,550 set by the New START treaty. U.S. strategists believe that this lower number is sufficient to provide a reliable nuclear deterrent for several reasons. First, Washington has also dropped Syria and Iraq from its list of possible targets for a nuclear attack as it is now fairly certain that neither country possesses nuclear weapons. Second, since the number of Russia's nuclear weapons has steadily decreased over the past 20 years because of attrition, the U.S. needs fewer warheads to target Russian missile silos. Third, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama is keen on saving billions of dollars on military spending. If Washington's proposed reductions in nuclear weapons were made, the U.S. could retire 300 land-based, strategic missiles at an annual savings of \$720 million and forego construction of two nuclear submarines at a savings of \$16 billion.

U.S. officials believe that these proposals should be attractive for Moscow. After all, U.S. reductions would only narrow the advantage that Washington has over Moscow in terms of strategic nuclear forces, both in quality and quantity. While the U.S. is in the process of reducing its number of deployed strategic arsenal to reach the New START limit of 1,550 warheads, Russia hasn't had to make any cuts for the simple reason that its number of warheads — 1,492 — was below the START limit even before the treaty was signed. As defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov reported to the State Duma in 2010 that Russia would be able to reach 1,550 warheads only in 2018 and will reach the New START's permitted number of delivery vehicles, 700, no sooner than 2028.

The U.S. is clearly interested in saving billions of dollars by further reducing its nuclear arsenal, but the Kremlin has little interest in cost-cutting if it believes it will negatively affect its Russia's nuclear deterrent. This may explain why Lavrov reacted coldly to U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden's proposal in Munich several weeks ago to further reduce each side's nuclear arsenal.

Washington's nuclear-reduction proposal is clearly a huge gift to Russia on silver platter, yet it is all but certain that the Kremlin will ignore it. The problem is that Russian leaders see nuclear weapons as more than just a security guarantee through the threat of mutually assured destruction. The Kremlin and military brass realize that Russia's huge nuclear arsenal is the only remaining symbol of its superpower status, a trump card that they will protect at all costs. This is the main reason Moscow is opposed to cutting any further than the New START limits. Trying to convince Russia to reduce its nonstrategic nuclear weapons will be an even harder sell.

Thus, Moscow's approach is remarkably similar to that of Pyongyang. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who represents the third generation of the country's despots, has condemned his people to famine so that the country can become a nuclear power. Just like the Kremlin leadership, Pyongyang officials see nuclear weapons as a genie from Aladdin's lamp that is capable of magically solving all their problems. North Korean officials believe that the world will be obliged to feed and clothe North Koreans and cater to the leader's every whim in the hope that North Korea doesn't do something foolish with its nuclear weapons. In other words, North Korea employs nuclear blackmail on the world, yet by and large this trick has worked

for Pyongyang.

Up until now, the same approach has never worked for Russia because nobody believed that Putin is as reckless as the North Korean leadership. But over the past year, the Duma has adopted irrational, provocative anti-U.S. laws under Putin's sponsorship. This raises two serious questions: Is Putin trying to emulate Kim Jong-un and his father, Kim Jong-il, and how far is Putin willing to take his reckless policy?

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