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The New Putin Doctrine

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The annexation of Crimea highlights not only a sharp change in Russian foreign policy, but also the emergence of a new Putin Doctrine. President Vladimir Putin's successful Crimean land grab might signal the start of a broader trend in which Moscow will annex other regions.

In his historic speech in the Kremlin on March 18, Putin formulated the seven main points of his new doctrine.

Under Putin, Russia has become a powerful country once again and now has the right to flaunt its own double standards, just like the U.S.

1. Russia no longer views the West as a credible partner. He believes that the West dismissed his legitimate complaints against U.S. unilateralism and double standards that he articulated

in his 2007 Munich speech. Despite claims that the Cold War has ended, the West continues to pursue a Cold War-like containment policy against Russia, Putin says.

In reality, the West's policy has been to lie to Russia, make decisions behind its back and to try to weaken the country's influence on the global arena. "Russia feels that it has been not just robbed, but plundered," Putin said in his March 18 speech. From now on, Russia will be forced to base its actions on this harsh reality.

2. Russia no longer considers itself part of European — much less Euro-Atlantic — civilization. Russia is a democracy, but of a special type. The country has rejected communist and "pseudo-democratic" dogmas. If more than 90 percent of Russians support the annexation of Crimea, it means the move had a strong backing and legitimacy based on the fundamental democratic principal of vox populi.

At the same time, however, Russia does not believe in the universal value of Western-style democracy and human rights, although it will remain — at least for time being — a member of the Council of Europe.

3. International law is no longer a system of rules or set of reference points. Putin argues that international law has been reduced to a menu of options from which every powerful state is free to choose whatever suits its interests. To put down the uprising in Chechnya, for example, Moscow cited the international principle of upholding territorial integrity. But in annexing Crimea, it cited the fundamental right to self-determination.

This is a classical double standard, something Russia has always loved criticizing the U.S. for. But under Putin, Russia is now a powerful country and thus has the right to flaunt its own double standards, just like the U.S., and create its own "sovereign democracy." Meanwhile, a weak Ukraine does not have these rights and privileges.

4. The new Putin Doctrine applies to the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. Putin justifies the right to oversee this expanse by relying on a vague notion of "Russia's historical heritage" and the need to ensure the country's security in its rightful sphere of influence. As it turns out, from now on the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics will depend on how the Kremlin views its strategic interests. The only exceptions are the three former Baltic republics, which are NATO members.

Moscow has drawn its own red line: Russia will take action if any of the former Soviet republics attempt to join NATO or the European Union or agree to host Western military bases on their territory. The Kremlin has a couple of tools to undermine any country that shifts too far to the West. It reserves the right to send in troops, install a government loyal to Moscow and hold a referendum, as it did in Crimea.

The new Putin Doctrine tacitly invites all of the world's powerful states to revise the rules of the game. In his 2012 article titled "Russia Focuses," Putin wrote that Russia would not just follow, but also shape the rules of the game in the world. We are now seeing that strategy applied in practice.

5. The main Westphalian principle upholding state sovereignty and territorial integrity now applies only to the strongest countries that protect their borders with their own armies or

the armies of military blocs such as NATO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The sovereignty and integrity of weak and especially failed states becomes open game for powerful states and their blocs. States now fall into two categories: the big leagues, with security and other guarantees for its members, and the little leagues, with far fewer guarantees.

According to this logic, if any powerful and strong-willed country believes that its military, strategic, economic or political interests are at risk, it is free to intervene in the internal affairs of weaker countries — and even seize parts of their territory.

6. International organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe now play a greatly diminished role. It is only necessary to adhere to their rules and frameworks as long as they do not compromise a powerful country's ability to defend its national interests. If they do, strong states should simply ignore these organizations. This is how the U.S. and its allies behaved when they bypassed the UN Security Council to conduct several military operations over the past 20 years.

The new Putin Doctrine is based on a fundamentally new balance of power in the world. The West's combined military and economic influence has fallen dramatically and continues to decline. At the same time, Asia, South America and Africa are gaining in influence, and the major non-Western member states of BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and others would like to see new rules of the game devised so that they can also advance their interests.

This new playing field for international affairs will make the world dangerously volatile and increase the risks for more military conflicts. But the problem is that each country believes it will come out the winner in this global wrestling match, while there are few rules, regulations or umpires to help limit the losses and number of innocent victims.

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