

Kremlin Paranoia Cooks Up New Threats

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The May 23 to 24 Moscow Conference on International Security, sponsored by Russia's Defense Ministry, focused not on conflict zones or technology advances, but on the role of popular protest — specifically "color revolutions," in international security.

The speakers, among them top Russian military and diplomatic officials such as Sergei Shoigu and Sergei Lavrov, argued that color revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently minded national governments in favor of ones that are controlled by the West. They argued that this was part of a global strategy to force foreign values on a range of nations around the world that refuse to accept U.S. hegemony, and that Russia was a particular target of this strategy.

While the West considers color revolutions to be peaceful expressions of popular will opposing repressive authoritarian regimes, Russian officials argued that military force is an integral part of all aspects of color revolutions.

According to them, Western governments first attempt to topple opposing governments with peaceful protests. But military force is still an option.

If the protests turn out to be insufficient, military force is then used openly to ensure regime change. This includes the use of external pressure on the regime in question in order to prevent the use of force to restore order, followed by the provision of military and economic assistance to rebel forces.

If these measures are not sufficient, Western states organize a military operation to defeat government forces and allow the rebels to take power. Russian officials at the MCIS conference described color revolutions as a new technique of aggression pioneered by the U.S. and geared toward destroying a state from within by dividing its population. The advantage of this technique, compared to military intervention, is that it requires a relatively low expenditure of resources to achieve its goals.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu argued that this scheme has been used in a wide range of cases, including Serbia, Libya, and Syria — all cases where political interference by the West transitioned into military action. Now the same scheme is being followed in Ukraine, where anti-regime protests have over several months been transformed into a civil war, and in Venezuela, where the so-called democratic opposition is supposedly organized by the United States.

This perspective appears to be at the core of a new national security strategy that Russia is developing. Although Western readers may find it hard to swallow the lumping together of uprisings as disparate as those in Serbia in 2000, Syria in 2011, and Venezuela in 2014, from the Russian point of view they all share the common thread of occurring in countries that had governments that were opposed to the U.S.

Although uprisings in countries whose governments were closely allied to the U.S., such as Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Egypt and Bahrain in 2011 are harder to explain, such inconsistencies appear to not trouble the Russian government.

Listening to the speeches at the conference, I was left with one big question: Do the Russian officials actually believe this? Or is it just propaganda meant to convince the Russian population and leaders of other countries?

If it is merely propaganda, then perhaps Russian leaders are acting from a realist playbook. In that case, the West just needs to convince them that it is against their interests to try to create a bipolar world where countries are either with the West or against it.

But if the former is true, then the opposition to the U.S. and the West is about mindset and has nothing to do with interests. If this is true, it is not worth spending time to try to convince the current leadership to pursue more cooperative policies. If they truly believe that the U.S. is seeking to force them out of power and is simply waiting for an opportune moment to strike, then Russian policies will remain committed to ensuring that the U.S. does not get such an opportunity.

In this environment, Russia's current policy in Ukraine is not just about geopolitical calculations regarding Ukraine's economic ties with the EU versus the Eurasian Union, or even potential Ukrainian NATO membership. Instead, a main goal may be to strengthen President Vladimir Putin's regime domestically by increasing patriotic attitudes among the Russian population.

Patriotism would thus be the means by which the Russian government inoculates the population against anti-regime or pro-Western attitudes. This goal would explain the obsessive focus on building an anti-Ukrainian and anti-U.S. domestic media narrative from an early stage in the Ukraine conflict.

One thing that may strike observers is that the supposed U.S. strategy laid out by Russian officials very closely parallels Russia's actions in Ukraine in recent weeks. While Russian officials certainly did not organize the Maidan protests, NATO has accused Russia of backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The Kremlin has repeatedly used the threat of force to try to influence the actions of the new Ukrainian government, both by making statements in which they reserve the right to intervene in the conflict and by staging several military exercises on the Ukrainian border.

Is this a case of Russian officials giving the U.S. what they think is a taste of its own medicine? Perhaps the Kremlin thinks that U.S. policy is aimed at destabilizing opposing regimes because such activities are a standard part of their own policy toolkit.

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