

The Times

## Squaring Up Leaves Putin No Way to Save Face

**clare foges**

The Russian leader's insecurities mean that quiet diplomacy will be more effective than humiliating him on the world stage



A superbly sinister Reagan campaign ad from 1984 shows a bear stalking through undergrowth. Over the drum of a heartbeat a gravelly voice warns: "There is a bear in the woods. For some people the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear?"

In recent days the West has decided to approach the bear and flex its muscles. Over the weekend the foreign secretary Boris Johnson pulled out of a long-planned meeting with the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and called for more punitive economic sanctions. Sir Michael Fallon, the defence secretary, made the statement that Russia was "by proxy... responsible for every civilian death last week". Yesterday the foreign ministers of the G7 met to agree a demand that President Putin withdraw military support from Assad. Tomorrow Rex Tillerson, the US secretary of state, goes to Moscow to deliver a "clear and co-ordinated message" that the Kremlin must toe the line.

The new approach is to square up to the bear: challenge Russia explicitly; demand a climbdown. Given that Moscow has failed to oversee the elimination of President Assad's chemical weapons this is, of course, perfectly reasonable. Whether it will be successful is another thing. I fear this approach won't work, because it does not pay due care to the critical thing: the psychology of the man who is Russia.

To talk of psychology in the field of international relations may seem lightweight to some. Experts in foreign affairs prefer the hard-edged lexicon of strategic interests to the fluffy language of feelings. But thinking on geopolitics too often forgets the human beings at its heart: their fears, insecurities and vanities. In a country where there are checks on power, the psychology of the leader matters less. Their emotional edges will be blunted by layers of process. In a system like the Kremlin, however, where the leadership is absolute, the mindset of the man matters profoundly. It should be factored more carefully into the western approach.

Humiliation, pride and status anxiety are central themes of the Putin story. A telling detail: as a teenager he was disturbed to see his peers developing faster, growing taller — so he took up judo to keep his “place in the pack”. Anything to avoid the humiliation of being slight, small, pushed around. Give me the boy and I’ll show you the man: the one who joins deep dives into Lake Baikal, discovers “ancient Greek urns” in the Black Sea, shoots an endangered tiger with a tranquilliser dart, rides bare-chested on horseback. Every adventure is staged to assert status, to keep his place at the top of the pack. Meetings with other leaders reek of power play and status anxiety, such as the notorious bilateral with Angela Merkel in which he introduced his labrador to a German chancellor known to fear dogs. Afterwards Merkel remarked: “I understand why he has to do this — to prove he’s a man. He’s afraid of his own weakness.” These absolutes emanate from Putin: nothing is less bearable than humiliation, nothing more important than pride.

The character of the man has shaped his narrative of the nation. For Putin the collapse of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century, the chaotic Nineties a time of national humiliation in which Russia had to swallow the insult of reduced status, mocked by the Germans as being “Upper Volta with missiles”. His obsessive drive to restore Russian pride is a reaction to this bristling sense of humiliation. At the beginning of his presidency he declared: “Unfortunately not everyone in western nations understands this. But we will not tolerate any humiliation to the national pride of Russians . . .” Countless aggressive or outlandish moves since then can be seen as desperate attempts to restore Russian pride, from the annexation of Crimea to the Sochi Olympics, at \$50 billion the most expensive ever held. It is all, to coin a phrase, about making Russia great again.

These are Putin’s lodestars, his driving motivations: avenging national humiliation, restoring national pride. How, then, could this new approach of confronting Russia so explicitly work? If you back such a man into a corner in which the only options are a humiliating climbdown or a doubling-down on hostility, which will he choose? Such a man won’t be threatened with more economic sanctions. For him, practical considerations matter much, much less than national pride. To capitulate to the orders of the West would be a repeat humiliation, something that a leader with his temperament and history will never bear. The public condemnations and goading of Putin might play well to home crowds in the West but they can only harden Kremlin resolve. Already the bear has its claws out, with the Russian foreign ministry reacting to Boris Johnson’s cancellation by saying that the UK has no “real influence” and the Russian embassy tweeting of the threat of “real war”.

This is not to suggest that the West should stand back. But a more emotionally intelligent approach would recognise Putin’s thin skin, his ego, his obsession with restoring pride. It would see that the only successful engagement will be one that allows the Russian leader to save face. As the military strategist Sun Tzu suggested, you must build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across. This golden bridge must be built as privately as possible, not in the full glare of the global media. Why must G7 ministers make their challenges to the Kremlin so public? Why do we need pronouncements in the press in which western politicians trumpet how tough they plan to be? Better, surely, for diplomacy to be dealt with behind firmly closed doors. We need to take the heat out of this situation, not turn it up.

In 1939 Winston Churchill said that the actions of Russia were “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”, and that the key to understanding them was Russian national interest. The key today is Russian national pride. To challenge it would be folly. If the choice for Putin is only between humiliating retreat or an escalation in tension with the West, I dread to think which option he will choose. As a character in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* exclaims: “Why, you are so eaten up with pride and vanity that you’ll end by eating up one another, that’s what I prophecy.”



