

Paul Richter

Ukraine crisis upends West's view of Russian President Vladimir Putin

With Crimea, Putin has shown that he is willing to make far riskier moves than officials in Europe and the U.S. believed.

The Ukraine crisis has forced Western leaders to reassess what they thought they knew about Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has shown that he is willing to make far riskier moves to achieve his security goals and that his hostility to the U.S. and its allies runs much deeper than many wanted to believe.

That reappraisal has caused U.S. national security officials to take Putin more seriously as a threat. The possibility that he might also send troops into eastern Ukraine, which could spark a war, or that he might use force against other neighboring countries, including the Baltic nations, no longer seems as unlikely as the foreign policy establishment thought.

"We're seeing that he has the ability and will do things that ... we were sure they wouldn't do," said Eugene Rumer, a Russia specialist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "We are being forced by events to reappraise Putin, Russia policy and our relationship."

Putin alarmed Western governments in 2008 when his troops and tanks moved into two pro-Russia breakaway regions of Georgia to stop a military advance by the central government. But his use of troops to seize control of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula without any provocation is a far more ominous threat, breaking more international norms and involving a nation that is far more consequential to the security of Europe, officials and analysts say.

This week, Putin has also shown the depth of his personal antagonism to the West, describing U.S. officials in a disjointed news conference as mad scientists "doing experiments on Ukraine like on rats." His denunciations have raised questions about whether the Russian leader, smarting from Ukraine's turn to the West, might try to undermine Western governments on vital collaborations, such as the talks to resolve the Iran nuclear issue.

His claims during the Ukraine crisis have drawn worried reactions from the United States and Europe. Putin is "in many ways delusional about this," former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told CNN.

Sen. Christopher S. Murphy (D-Conn.), chairman of the Senate's Europe subcommittee, told the Senate that it was a mistake to "impute rationality" to Putin's statements. German Chancellor Angela Merkel told President Obama in a call that Putin was "living in another world."

Obama administration officials say they believe Putin is rational. But the depth of their concern about what he might do next has been clear as they have denounced him in harsh personal terms they've never used before. The State Department on Wednesday mocked his justifications for the takeover of Crimea as "the most startling Russian fiction since Dostoyevsky."

Many, though not all, U.S. government experts were caught by surprise when thousands of Russian troops moved into Ukraine. Although CIA officials told senior administration officials and lawmakers that some signs had pointed to a Russian seizure of Crimea, a separate analysis by the Defense Intelligence Agency did not predict it, officials said.

Now officials say they remain worried that Putin could take the much more dangerous step of advancing into eastern Ukraine, which would require a massive military presence. Such a move would probably trigger a war and an exodus of refugees. The possibility has terrified the country's immediate neighbors, including several NATO members.

Putin gave a general warning to the West about his goals seven years ago, when, at an annual meeting of diplomats and defense ministers in Munich, he denounced the United States for "overstepping its boundaries in every sphere" and said he was determined to halt its advance. The speech was viewed as a Cold War relic, and his threats were largely dismissed.

Since then, Putin has not resisted strongly as the West has sought to knit Russia's neighbors, such as Moldova, into closer alliances. Russia has also peacefully settled some disputes with Western governments, such as Norway's claims to waters near Russia and long-standing disagreements with Estonia over their mutual border.

In several of these cases, which had gone unresolved for decades, "the Russians were taking a constructive approach," said Andrew Weiss, who was a Russia and Ukraine advisor in the Clinton White House.

But now, with the overthrow of a Ukrainian government allied with Russia, "something seems to have snapped ... in Russia's view of its neighbors," said Weiss, who is now the vice president for research at Carnegie. "And now we're all going to deal with the consequences."

Not long ago, Putin referred to Western governments as "partners." He's stopped that now.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment has been skeptical that Russia might reemerge as a serious threat to security in Central Europe. When Mitt Romney, as the Republican presidential nominee in 2012, described Russia as America's foremost geopolitical threat, his comment was widely ridiculed.

Russia specialist Rumer said only weeks ago that an invasion of Crimea seemed unlikely because it was simply too heavy-handed a move and had too many downsides for Putin, who has been shaping his image as a responsible world leader.

Yet Putin ordered the move "in a very direct way, without a lot of finesse, and apparently not too worried about the reputational risks," he said. "I'll hesitate, from now on, to make any prediction about what he's going to do."

In his emotional news conference, Putin reeled off a string of accusations against the United States. He blamed U.S. officials for the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and accused Western intelligence services of organizing the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, including by training the armed groups that defied the government.

Lee Feinstein, a senior advisor to former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, said the closer one reads Putin's comments "the more worrisome they are." Russian officials could get back at the administration by, for example, undermining the Iran nuclear negotiations, said Feinstein, who is now with the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

"They have the ability to throw a spanner in the works," he said.