

Policy Watch: Putin's Munich speech

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MARK N. KATZ

Russian President Vladimir Putin's Feb. 10 speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy received a lot of press coverage in the West for its criticism of U.S. foreign policy. Less noted in the United States, however, was that his speech was also critical of European governments.

Putin's unhappiness with American foreign policy was evident from his denunciation of the "unipolar world." Putin particularly objects to the "almost unrestrained, exaggerated use of force" and what he sees as America imposing its legal norms "on other states in all spheres."

He also stated his opposition to the deployment of American missile defense systems in Europe and the militarization of outer space. Putin said that while Russia will "strictly adhere to the obligation" that Washington and Moscow agreed upon to each reduce its deliverable strategic nuclear warhead inventory to 1,700-2,200 by the end of 2012, he expressed fear that the U.S. will not.

In all these matters, Putin appears to be appealing to European governments and publics to side with Russia against America. But there are matters on which he opposes Europe also. Putin declared that the decision to use force "can be regarded as legitimate only if" it is made within the United Nations framework (where Russia holds a veto in the Security Council). He specifically declared that neither NATO (which includes the United States) nor the European Union (which does not) should substitute for the U.N.

Putin's complaints about American forces and missile defense systems being deployed in Eastern Europe "closer to our state borders" not only expresses his objection to the U.S. decision to send its forces there, but to East European governments' decisions to accept them.

In addition, Putin's objection to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's "unwarranted interference in the ... internal affairs" of other countries (i.e., Russia) is a complaint not just about American, but also European concerns for Moscow's commitment to democracy and human rights.

Putin noted that "foreign capital accounts for up to 26 percent of oil extraction in Russia" and that there is fifteen times more foreign investment in Russia than there is Russian investment in other countries. His citing these statistics was meant to counter European as much or more than American complaints about the investment climate their firms face in Russia, the efforts of Russian businesses to expand their operations in Europe, and Russian energy policies.

In response to a question, Putin said that Russia will not support any decision on the status of Kosovo (where the Albanian majority seeks independence from Serbia) which "one party [i.e., Serbia -- which does not want to let go of Kosovo] is clearly dissatisfied with." This indicates Putin's opposition not just to American policy on this issue, but European policy as well.

Overall, the tone of Putin's speech was not so much belligerent as it was petulant. Putin's principal message seems to be that America and Europe have misunderstood Russia. Further, American and European complaints about Russia are illegitimate while Russian complaints about them are all legitimate. More than anything else, Putin is upset that Americans and Europeans are making decisions without consulting Russia on important matters which concern

it.

While undoubtedly heartfelt, Putin's speech is unlikely to persuade European or American leaders to change their policies toward Russia. Indeed, petulant statements like the one Putin made in Munich only encourage European governments to retain their alliance with the United States despite their objections to Bush administration policies.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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