



By: John Sipher

Bully Culture Goes Global



Statesmen facing today's multiple crises on the international stage need to consider a wide variety of geopolitical concerns, from balance of power, international law, stability, deterrence, credibility, public support and economic impact.

Sometimes however, the most effective political or military response depends on understanding the psychology of your adversary. Politics is a game of personalities, and many of the key players in today's crises are glorified schoolyard bullies.

As the Biden White House develops its strategy, an intuitive understanding of street gang culture might be more valuable than loftier diplomatic theorising. Vladimir Putin can be simultaneously characterised as an autocrat, a kleptocrat, a mafia boss or a KGB operative.

However, in many ways the best way to understand Putin is as a playground bully. Putin doesn't react to subtlety. If Putin senses weakness, he always takes as much as he can. To Putin, win-win means I beat you twice.

Dangerous neighbourhood

Likewise, the notion that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu would show restraint and adherence to international norms in battling Hamas was always unlikely. Israel's strategy with its neighbours has been a form of street gang culture translated to the international stage.

In its dangerous neighbourhood where enemies seek Israel's demise, deterrence depends on a willingness to escalate and respond in a brutal and disproportionate manner. Similarly, Iran and its proxies are using this opportunity as the US is focused on Ukraine and Israel to strike US troops in Syria and Iraq.

In Ukraine, the Biden Administration has sometimes seemed like it is more interested in signaling to Putin what the US won't do, than making clear that Putin will be defeated unless

he withdraws from Ukraine.

This hesitancy reinforces Putin's ingrained sense that the West is weak and not committed to victory. The Kremlin believes that its patience and willingness to suffer will eventually pay dividends as soft western governments back down.

In his autobiography, Putin described himself as a punk who fought in the streets of his hometown. He learned to despise weakness, assert dominance and use force in order to avoid becoming a victim. His experience as a KGB officer in East Germany as the Soviet Union fell apart only reinforced this view.

The skills and traits Putin developed as a hoodlum in the courtyards of Leningrad have played out in how he acts on the international stage

He vowed that if he ever had the chance, he would never let Russia again show vulnerability, and wouldn't hesitate to use the state's monopoly of force to keep the leadership in power. In many ways, Putin's instincts matches Russia's historical attitude that a great power must dominate its neighbours.

Over more than 20 years in power, Putin has shown that his personal instincts drive his leadership style. Russian-born American journalist Julia Ioffe **recently produced** an excellent podcast ("About a Boy") that explores how Putin's background and personality influences his actions in the Kremlin.



John Sipher: Appeals to values, restraint, stability and economic common sense are of little importance to a bully

The skills and traits he developed as a hoodlum in the courtyards of Leningrad have played out in how he acts on the international stage. Power and control are everything, and weakness is held in contempt. Intimidation and subversion are more important tools than cooperation and diplomacy.

As Putin commented following the terrorist attack in Beslan, “We showed weakness. And the weak get beaten”. Putin’s closest advisor, Security Council Chair Nikolai Patrushev verbalised this “zero mercy” view of national security when he recently quoted Tsarist General Mikhail Skobolev: “The duration of the peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict on your enemy. The harder you hit, longer they remain quiet”.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel famously confronted Putin’s personality head-on when she was forced to sit through a private meeting with him in Sochi. Aware that Merkel had a long-held fear of dogs. Putin nonetheless had his unbridled dog sniff and sit next to Merkel throughout the session in an effort to distract and intimidate her. When asked later about Putin’s blatant attempt to bully her, Merkel commented, “I understand why he has to do this. To prove he’s a man”.

Strongest kid on the block

Similarly, following the October 7 Hamas attack, Benjamin Netanyahu was never likely to limit the scope of Israel’s military retaliation to accommodate western pleas. Israeli bombing of Gaza has been devastating despite appeals to avoid civilian targets. Israeli leaders have long believed that the only way to deter enemies and survive in their dangerous neighbourhood is to be the strongest kid on the block.

In a 14 October New York Times **opinion piece**, Thomas Friedman compared Netanyahu’s plan to inflict pain on Hamas to the Israel’s response to Hezbollah’s 2006 raid from Lebanon: “You think you can just do crazy stuff like kidnap our people and we will treat this as a little border dispute. We may look Western, but the modern Jewish state has survived as ‘a villa in the jungle’...because if push comes to shove, we are willing to play by the local rules. Have no illusions about that. You will not outcrazy us out of this neighbourhood”.

Translating the tactic to today, Friedman continued, “Yes, if you think Israel is now crazy, it is because Hamas punched it in the face, humiliated it and then poked out one eye. So now Israel believes it must restore its deterrence by proving that it can outcrazy Hamas’s latest craziness”.

Engaging in a civilised fashion with a terrorist organisation like Hamas which is committed to the absolute annihilation of Israel is impossible

Of course, there is no comparison between democratic Israel and terrorist Hamas. Engaging in a civilised fashion with a terrorist organisation like Hamas which is committed to the absolute annihilation of Israel is impossible.

Likewise, Iran’s actions also display a gangster mindset. As Thomas Friedman noted in a 29 November opinion piece, “Iran’s goal is to drive the United States out of the Middle East, to destroy Israel and to intimidate America’s Sunni Arab allies and bend them to its will”.

Appeals to values, restraint, stability and economic common sense are of little importance to a bully. Following the twenty-year U.S. debacle in Afghanistan, the Biden Administration needs to rebuild its reputation on the global playground.

Russia, Israel, Iran, China and others are watching closely. If the U.S. does not assert its power and remind the others who is the strongest person in the neighbourhood, bullies like Putin will continue to think they can get their way. Sometimes a punch in the face works better than appealing to one's better instincts.

John Sipher worked for the CIA's clandestine service for 28 years. He is now a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a co-founder of Spycraft Entertainment