



Putin just the nemesis we need: Column

Russian president could jar us from our complacency. Rivalry can force great things.

By Lionel Beehner
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In college I had a nemesis. Strong, smart, handsome, he got all the girls. But looking back, my nemesis made me a better human being. To get good grades — or a girlfriend — I had to be better than average. I rowed crew. I started writing for the newspaper. I volunteered whenever I could.

For nearly 50 years, we had a nemesis in the Soviet Union, a rivalry that led to us putting a man on the moon and other remarkable feats. After the breakup of the USSR, we lurked about looking for another nemesis. Absent an external enemy, we turned our gaze to ills such as globalization.

Now Moscow appears once again to be angling to become our archnemesis, [invading its neighbors](#), playing pipeline politics with its [vast energy reserves](#) and arming [our Middle East adversaries](#) with increasing ferocity. That should be cause for concern. But it is also a cause for hope.

It could force us, and Europe, to become more energy self-reliant. No one country should be able to hold a continent hostage by threatening to shut off the gas. It could also strengthen trans-Atlantic ties, as [Latvians](#) and [Poles](#) eye their Russian neighbors nervously. Poland is a poster boy for European integration. But there are real worries that Washington might not have its back, or the Baltics', were Russia to invade, NATO guarantees withstanding.

Interestingly, our need for nemeses might be rooted in human nature. As social animals, we are a tribal bunch, even as we identify with larger groupings (e.g. the U.S. or Catholic Church). Scientists find smaller groups can congeal and reach cooperation.

But because the U.S. is so large and unwieldy, and our identity as the top dog is being called into question, it could be helpful for social cohesion to fixate on an external enemy. "In order to harness our tribal nature on behalf of large organizations," [Arnold Kling of the Cato Institute](#)

[writes](#), "it seems necessary to have an enemy as part of the motivational structure (and) is important for group solidarity."

Maybe a good old-fashioned nemesis will help Americans feel better about their country. According to a recent [Pew survey](#), views of U.S. global power are at a 40-year low. Vladimir Putin might be just the symbol we need to inspire Americans.

To be sure, there is no shortage of U.S. hostility toward Russia, just as anti-Americanism is in no short supply in Moscow. Russia's land grab of Crimea, for example, seems to vitiate Moscow's sense of imperial grandeur, even as it violates our own sovereign sense of self. Paradoxically, the norm of fixed borders can make countries such as Ukraine weaker because leaders deprioritize state-building in the absence of external threats, according to American University's [Boaz Atzili](#).

The presence of [Russian troops](#) peering across Ukraine's eastern flank could provide a strong and more democratic state. Even so, the land grab by Russia confirms our own cognitive biases that it is a threatening country bent on reshaping the world, one that looks askance at Western values. It is clinging not only to 19th century norms of taking territory, but also to 20th century norms of [criminalizing homosexuality](#). If the rest of the Western world were to take up long toasts over vodka, Russia would probably outlaw that, too.

Maybe we should be thanking Putin for reawakening our tribal sense of American values, for waking us out of our complacent slumber and realizing the dangers of retrenchment. Putin is not a dictator in the Hitler or Stalin mold — he's too bland and boring. We should instead recognize him as what an astute caller into *The Diane Rehm Show* labeled him: a playground bully. A bully only responds to fear, not reason.

But not all nemeses are bad for us. Especially if they make those weak and unsure of themselves, an apt description of President Obama's America, that much stronger and more confident.

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