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Drexel GPS: Geopolitical Update

Alexei Navalny - Anti-Corruption Activist and Putin Critic Dies in Siberian Prison **02/16/24**

This week's geopolitical backdrop closes out with news of the death of one of Vladimir Putin's most vocal critics - Alexei Navalny.

Navalny, a prominent Russian opposition leader and vocal anti-Putin critic has died according to reports from officials at the Siberian prison where he was being held. According to the officials, Navalny felt unwell after a walk and lost consciousness shortly thereafter.

Navalny had been serving a 19-year sentence since 2021 on charges of extremism, which many believe were fabricated to silence him as a direct result of his critical views of Vladimir Putin.

As an anti-corruption activist, Navalny played a pivotal role in opposing Putin's regime in Russia. His activism included organizing anti-Kremlin protests and enduring multiple jail terms.

Initially gaining prominence as a blogger in 2010, Navalny published investigations into corruption within Russia, amassing millions of views through his online videos.

Drexel GPS Assessment:

- Alexei Navalny's effective use of online platforms and digital media was unique in many ways. His ability to promote his message and highly critical stance against corruption in Russia in a cohesive manner across the eleven time zones under which Russia operates made him a threat to Putin's regime.
- Navalny's speeches, brazen remarks, and activities were particularly glaring in a Russian political system where "political freedom" is just window dressing for what is essentially an autocracy run by Putin. Navalny was never hesitant to explicitly target and name Putin and his allies in Russia as corrupt. This, combined with his growing popularity among the Russian public as well as on the international stage, made him a threat to the Putin's regime.
- Navalny's 2020 nerve agent poisoning and its connection to Vladimir Putin has been identified as a key indicator of how much the Russian president considered him a threat.
- All of the charges brought against Navalny are considered to be fabricated and a direct result of Putin's desire to silence him and limit his activities.
- The geo-strategic implications of the timing of Navalny's death lead many to believe he was actually killed by Putin. The timing of Navalny's death could indicate that Putin is feeling emboldened by both the U.S. political discourse resulting in a delay of renewing military aid to Ukraine as well as recent Russian military successes on the battlefield in Ukraine.

What is Novichok?

- After the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, scientists who claim to have worked on its chemical weapons program spoke publicly about a nerve agent they had named Novichok - Russian for "new guy" or "newcomer."
- Russia has never officially confirmed its existence, but those same scientists said Novichok nerve agents are the deadliest ever made, with some variants possibly five to eight times more potent than VX.
- It can be delivered as a liquid, powder, or aerosol.

Novichok Poisoning Incident

- In 2020, Alexei Navalny survived an assassination attempt by poisoning.
- That August, he fell critically ill after collapsing on a flight.
- Traces of the nerve agent Novichok were later found on water bottles at the hotel where he had stayed the previous night.
- Navalny described the experience as feeling no pain but knowing he was dying.
- His survival was attributed to the fortunate timing and location of his collapse which allowed him to receive urgent medical care.

Putin's Alleged Involvement

- Navalny directly accused President Vladimir Putin of orchestrating the poisoning.
- He asserted that Putin was the only plausible explanation for the attack, given the use of Novichok.
- According to Navalny, the order to employ Novichok could have come only from the heads of three of Russia's intelligence services, all of whom operate under Putin's authority.

Political Context

- Navalny's poisoning occurred during unrest in the far eastern province of Khabarovsk.
- The Kremlin, fearing a situation similar to the mass anti-government protests in Belarus, allegedly took extreme measures to prevent dissent.
- Navalny's activism and vocal opposition to Putin's regime made him a target, as the system fought to maintain its grip on power.

International Confirmation of Nerve Agent

- Germany, where Navalny was recovering, confirmed that he was poisoned with Novichok.
- Independent labs in France and Sweden corroborated these findings.
- However, the Kremlin steadfastly denied any involvement in the poisoning.

Navalny's Role

- Navalny, an anti-corruption activist, gained prominence as a blogger in 2010.
- His investigations into corruption within Russia garnered millions of views online.
- He became a leading figurehead for the opposition against Putin, organizing protests and enduring multiple jail terms.
- Despite the danger, Navalny expressed his determination to return to Russia, even after his release from the hospital in Berlin.
- Navalny returned to Russia in 2021 and was arrested at the airport by Russian authorities on corruption charges.

Drexel GPS will continue to monitor this situation as it develops.

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