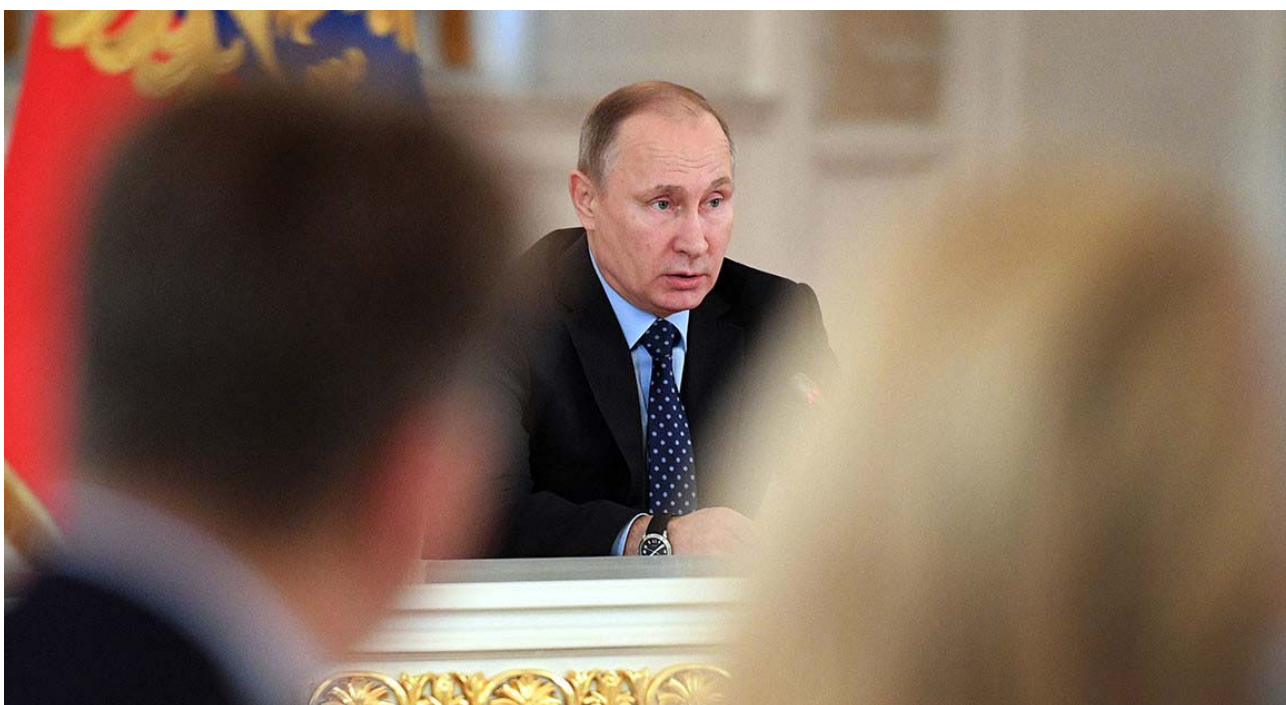


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WASHINGTON AND THE WORLD

Putin's Real Long Game

The world order we know is already over, and Russia is moving fast to grab the advantage. Can Trump figure out the new war in time to win it?

By MOLLY K. MCKEW | January 01, 2017

A little over a year ago, on a pleasant late fall evening, I was sitting on my front porch with a friend best described as a Ukrainian freedom fighter. He was smoking a cigarette while we watched Southeast DC hipsters bustle by and talked about ‘the war’ — the big war, being waged by Russia against all of us, which from this porch felt very far away. I can’t remember what prompted it — some discussion of whether the government in Kyiv was doing something that would piss off the EU — but he took a long drag off his cigarette and said, offhand: “Russia. The EU. It's all just more Molotov-Ribbentrop shit.”

His casual reference to the Hitler-Stalin pact dividing Eastern Europe before WWII was meant as a reminder that Ukraine must decide its future for itself, rather than let it be negotiated between great powers. But it haunted me, this idea that modern revolutionaries no longer felt some special affinity with the West. Was it the belief in collective defense that was weakening, or the underlying certitude that Western values would prevail?

Months later, on a different porch thousands of miles away, an Estonian filmmaker casually explained to me that he was buying a boat to get his family out when the Russians came, so he could focus on the resistance. In between were a hundred other exchanges — with Balts and Ukrainians, Georgians and Moldovans — that answered my question and exposed the new reality on the Russian frontier: the belief that, ultimately, everyone would be left to fend for themselves. Increasingly, people in Russia's sphere of influence were deciding that the values that were supposed to bind the West together could no longer hold. That the world order Americans depend on had already come apart.

From Moscow, Vladimir Putin has seized the momentum of this unraveling, exacting critical damage to the underpinnings of the liberal world order in a shockingly short time. As he builds a new system to replace the one we know, attempts by America and its allies to repair the damage have been limited and slow. Even this week, as Barack Obama tries to confront Russia's open and unprecedented interference in our political process, the outgoing White House is so far responding to 21st century hybrid information warfare with last century's diplomatic toolkit: the expulsion of spies, targeted sanctions, potential asset seizure. The incoming administration, while promising a new approach, has betrayed a similar lack of vision. Their promised attempt at another "reset" with Russia is a rehash of a policy that has utterly failed the past two American administrations.

What both administrations fail to realize is that the West is already at war, whether it wants to be or not. It may not be a war we recognize, but it is a war. This war seeks, at home and abroad, to erode our values, our democracy, and our institutional strength; to dilute our ability to sort fact from fiction, or moral right from wrong; and to convince us to make decisions against our own best interests.

Those on the Russian frontier, like my friends from Ukraine and Estonia, have already seen the Kremlin's new toolkit at work. The most visible example may be "green men," the unlabeled Russian-backed forces that suddenly popped up to seize the Crimean peninsula and occupy eastern Ukraine. But the wider battle is more subtle, a war of subversion rather than domination. The recent interference in the American elections means that these shadow tactics have now been deployed — with surprising effectiveness — not just against American allies, but against America itself. And the only way forward for America and the

West is to embrace the spirit of the age that Putin has created, plow through the chaos, and focus on building what comes next.

President-elect Trump has characteristics that can aid him in defining what comes next. He is, first and foremost, a rule-breaker, not quantifiable by metrics we know. In a time of inconceivable change, that can be an incredible asset. He comes across as a straight talker, and he can be blunt with the American people about the threats we face. He is a man of many narratives, and can find a way to sell these decisions to the American people. He believes in strength, and knows hard power is necessary.

So far, Trump seems far more likely than any of his predecessors to accelerate, rather than resist, the unwinding of the postwar order. And that could be a very bad — or an unexpectedly good — thing. So far, he has chosen to act as if the West no longer matters, seemingly blind to the danger that Putin's Russia presents to American security and American society. The question ahead of us is whether Trump will aid the Kremlin's goals with his anti-globalist, anti-NATO rhetoric— or whether he'll clearly see the end of the old order, grasp the nature of the war we are in, and have the vision and the confrontational spirit to win it.

To understand the shift underway in the world, and to stop being outmaneuvered, we first need to see the Russian state for what it really is. Twenty-five years ago, the Soviet Union collapsed. This freed the Russian security state from its last constraints. In 1991, there were around 800,000 *official* KGB agents in Russia. They spent a decade reorganizing themselves into the newly-minted FSB, expanding and absorbing other instruments of power, including criminal networks, other security services, economic interests, and parts of the political elite. They rejected the liberal, democratic Russia that President Boris Yeltsin was trying to build.

Following the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings that the FSB almost certainly planned, former FSB director Vladimir Putin was installed as President. We should not ignore the significance of these events. An internal operation planned by the security services killed hundreds of Russian citizens. It was used as the pretext to re-launch a bloody, devastating internal war led by emergent strongman Putin. Tens of thousands of Chechen civilians and fighters and Russian conscripts died. The narrative was controlled to make the enemy clear and Putin victorious. This information environment forced a specific political objective: Yeltsin resigned and handed power to Putin on New Year's Eve 1999.

From beginning to end, the operation took three months. This is how the Russian security state shook off the controls of political councils or representative democracy. This is how it thinks and how it acts — then, and now. Blood or war might be required, but controlling information and the national response to that information is what matters. Many Russians, scarred by the unrelenting economic, social, and security hardship of the 1990s, welcomed the rise of the security state, and still widely support it, even as it has hollowed out the Russian economy and civic institutions. Today, as a result, Russia is little more than a ghastly hybrid of an overblown police state and a criminal network with an economy the size of Italy — and the world's largest nuclear arsenal.

Even Russian policy hands, raised on the Western understanding of traditional power dynamics, find the implications of this hard to understand. This Russia does not aspire to be like us, or to make itself stronger than we are. Rather, its leaders want the West—and specifically NATO and America — to become weaker and more fractured until we are as broken as they perceive themselves to be. No reset can be successful, regardless the personality driving it, because Putin's Russia requires the United States of America as its enemy.

We can only confront this by fully understanding how the Kremlin sees the world. Its worldview and objectives are made abundantly clear in speeches, op-eds, official policy and national strategy documents, journal articles, interviews, and, in some cases, fiction writing of Russian officials and ideologues. We should understand several things from this material.

First, it is a war. A thing to be won, decisively — not a thing to be negotiated or bargained. It's all one war: Ukraine, Turkey, Syria, the Baltics, Georgia. It's what Vladislav Surkov, Putin's 'grey cardinal' and lead propagandist, dubbed "non-linear war" in his science fiction story "Without Sky," in 2014.

Second, it's all one war machine. Military, technological, information, diplomatic, economic, cultural, criminal, and other tools are all controlled by the state and deployed toward one set of strategic objectives. This is the Gerasimov doctrine, penned by Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, in 2013. Political warfare is meant to achieve specific political outcomes favorable to the Kremlin: it is preferred to physical conflict because it is cheap and easy. The Kremlin has many notches in its belt in this category, some of which have been attributed, many likely not. It's a mistake to see this campaign in the traditional terms of political alliances: rarely has the goal been to install overtly pro-Russian governments. Far more often, the goal is simply to replace Western-style democratic regimes with illiberal, populist, or nationalist ones.

Third, information warfare is not about creating an alternate truth, but eroding our basic ability to distinguish truth at all. It is not “propaganda” as we’ve come to think of it, but the less obvious techniques known in Russia as “active measures” and “reflexive control”. Both are designed to make us, the targets, act against our own best interests.

Fourth, the diplomatic side of this non-linear war isn’t a foreign policy aimed at building a new pro-Russian bloc. Instead, it’s what the Kremlin calls a “multi-vector” foreign policy, undermining the strength of Western institutions by coalescing alternate — ideally temporary and limited — centers of power. Rather than a stable world order undergirded by the U.S. and its allies, the goal is an unstable new world order of “all against all.” The Kremlin has tried to accelerate this process by both inflaming crises that overwhelm the Western response (for example, the migration crisis in Europe, and the war in eastern Ukraine) and by showing superiority in ‘solving’ crises the West could not (for example, bombing Syria into submission, regardless of the cost, to show Russia can impose stability in the Middle East when the West cannot).

This leads to the final point: hard power matters. Russia maintains the second most powerful military in the world, and spends more than 5 percent of its weakened GDP on defense. Russia used military force to invade and occupy Georgian territory in 2008 to disrupt the expansion of NATO, and in 2013 in Ukraine to disrupt the expansion of the EU. They have invested heavily in military reform, new generations of hardware and weapons, and expansive special operations training, much of which debuted in the wars in Ukraine and Syria. There is no denying that Russia is willing to back up its rhetoric and policy with deployed force, and that the rest of the world notices.

The West must accept that Putin has transformed what we see as tremendous weakness into considerable strength. If Russia were a strong economy closely linked to the global system, it would have vulnerabilities to more traditional diplomacy. But in the emerging world order, it is a significant actor – and in the current Russian political landscape, no new sanctions can overcome the defensive, insular war-economy mentality that the Kremlin has built.

How did we reach this point? After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western security and political alliances expanded to fill the zone of instability left behind. The emerging Russian security state could only define this as the strategic advance of an enemy. The 9/11 attacks shattered Western concepts of security and conflict and expanded NATO’s new mission of projecting security. When Putin offered his assistance, we effectively responded “no

thanks,” thinking in particular of his bloody, ongoing, scorched-earth war against the Chechens. We did it for the right reasons. Nonetheless, it infuriated Putin. This was the last moment when any real rapprochement with Putin’s Russia was possible.

Since that time, physical warfare has changed in ways that create a new kind of space for Putin to intervene globally. The Obama administration has a deep distaste for official overseas deployments of US troops and the associated political costs. ‘No new wars’ was the oft-repeated mantra — which altered America’s toolbox for, if not the frequency of, foreign interventions. Drone warfare was greatly expanded, as was the reliance on special forces — a politically easy choice due to their diverse capabilities and voluntary career commitment to service. But the actual number of special forces operators is exceedingly small and increasingly exhausted; soldiers deployed in shadow wars and shadow missions have far less protection than troops in traditional ground combat.

As the definitions of war and peace have blurred, creating impossibly vast front lines and impossibly vague boundaries of conflict, Putin has launched a kind of global imperialist insurgency. The Kremlin aggressively promotes an alternate ideological base to expand an illiberal world order in which the rights and freedoms that most Americans feel are essential to democracy don’t necessarily exist. It backs this up with military, economic, cultural and diplomatic resources. Through a combination of leveraging hard power and embracing the role of permanent disruptor — hacker, mercenary, rule-breaker, liar, thief — Putin works to ensure that Russia cannot be excluded from global power.

Putin tries to define recent history as an anomaly — where the world built with American sweat and ingenuity and blood and sacrifice, by the society founded on American exceptionalism, is a thing to be erased and corrected. The Russian version of exceptionalism is not a reflection of aspirational character, but a requirement that Russia remain distinct and apart from the world. Until we understand this, and that America is defined as the *glavny protivnik* (the ‘main enemy’) of Russia, we will never speak to Putin’s Russia in a language it can understand.

There is less and less to stand against Putin’s campaign of destabilization. It’s been 99 years since America began investing in European security with blood, and sweat, and gold. Two world wars and a long, cold conflict later, we felt secure with the institutional framework of NATO and the EU — secure in the idea that these institutions projected our security and our interests far beyond our shores. The post-WWII liberal world order and its accompanying security architecture ushered in an unparalleled period of growth and peace and prosperity for the US and other transatlantic countries.

I spend most of my time near the Russian frontier, and today that architecture seems like a Kodachrome snapshot from yesteryear. We joke that we yearn for a fight we can win with a gun, because the idea of a physical invasion is actually preferable to the constant uncertainty of economic, information, and political shadow warfare from the Kremlin.

Combatants in these shadow wars bear no designations, and protections against these methods are few. From the front lines, in the absence of the fabric of reassurance woven from our values and principles and shared sacrifice — and in the absence of the moral clarity of purpose derived from “us and them” — civil society is left naked, unarmored. Putin has dictated the mood of the unfolding era — an era of upheaval. This past year marks the arrival of this mood in American politics, whether Americans deny it or not. The example of Eastern Europe suggests that without renewed vision and purpose, and without strong alliances to amplify our defense and preserve our legacy, America too will find itself unanchored, adrift in currents stirred and guided by the Kremlin.

President-elect Trump harnessed this energy of upheaval to win the American presidency — a victory that itself was a symptom of the breakdown of the post-WWII order, in which institutional trust has eroded and unexpected outcomes have become the order of the day. Now it is his responsibility to define what comes next — or else explain to Americans, who want to be great again, why everything they’ve invested in and sacrificed for over the past century was ultimately for nothing.

As Obama did, Trump has already made the first mistake in negotiating with the Russians: telling them that there is anything to negotiate. Trump likes to discuss Putin’s strengths. He should also understand that much of it is smoke and mirrors. A renewed approach to dealing with Putin’s Russia should begin by addressing the tactics of Russia’s new warfare from the perspective of strength.

We have to accept we’re in a war and that we have a lot to lose. We need to look at this war differently, both geographically and strategically. For example, it’s hard to understand Ukraine and Syria as two fronts in the same conflict when we never evaluate them together with Moscow in the center of the map, as Russia does. We also need a new national security concept that adds a new strategic framework, connects all our resources, and allows us to better evaluate and respond to Gerasimov-style warfare: we have to learn to fight their one war machine with a unified machine of our own. This will also strengthen and quicken decisionmaking on critical issues in the US — something we will also need to replicate within NATO.

Exposing how the Kremlin’s political and information warfare works is a critical

component of this strategy, as is acting to constrain it. We must (re)accept the notion that hard power is the guarantor of any international system: security is a precondition for anything (everything) else. That the projection of our values has tracked with and been amplified by force projection is no accident. Human freedom requires security. NATO has been the force projection of our values. It hasn't just moved the theoretical line of conflict further forward: the force multiplication and value transference has enhanced our security. This is far cheaper, and far stronger, than trying to do this ourselves.

It's also important to acknowledge that a more isolated, more nationalist America helps Putin in his objectives even while it compromises our own. We need to accept that America was part of, and needs to be part of, a global system — and that this system is better, cheaper, and more powerful than any imagined alternatives. For many years, the United States has been the steel in the framework that holds everything together; this is what we mean by 'world order' and 'security architecture,' two concepts that few politicians try to discuss seriously with the electorate.

Taken together, these steps would be a critical realignment to our strategic thinking and internal operations, and would allow us to plow through this era of upheaval with greater certainty and for greater benefit to the American people.

In an era increasingly cynical about American ideals, and skeptical about intervention abroad, how can the US build support for a new, more muscular global resistance to what Russia is trying to do?

We already have one model: the Cold War. Putin and his minions have spent the past 15 years ranting about how the West (specifically NATO) wants a new Cold War. By doing so, they have been conditioning us to deny it, and made us do it so continually that we have convinced ourselves it is true. This is classic reflexive control.

The truth is that fighting a new Cold War would be in America's interest. Russia teaches us a very important lesson: losing an ideological war without a fight will ruin you as a nation. *The fight* is the American way. When we stop fighting for our ideals abroad, we stop fighting for them at home. We won the last Cold War. We will win the next one too. When it's us against them, they were, and are, never going to be the winner. But when it's "all against all" — a "multipolar" world with "multi-vector" policy, a state of shifting alliances and permanent instability — Russia, with a centrally controlled, tiny command structure unaccountable for its actions in any way, still has a chance for a seat at the table. They

pursue the multipolar world not because it is right or just, but because it is the only world in which they can continue to matter without pushing a nuclear launch sequence.

We must understand this, and focus now, as Putin does, on shaping the world that comes next and defining what our place is in it. Trump has shown willingness to reevaluate his positions and change course — except on issues relating to Russia, and strengthening alliances with the Kremlin's global illiberal allies. By doing so, he is making himself a footnote to Putin's chapter of history — little more than another of Putin's hollow men.

Trump should understand, regardless of what the Russians did in our elections, he already won the prize. It won't be taken away just because he admits the Russians intervened. Taking away the secrecy of Russian actions — exposing whatever it was they did, to everyone — is the only way to take away their power over the US political system and to free himself from their strings, as well. Whatever Putin's gambit was, Trump is the one who can make sure that Putin doesn't win.

Trump should set the unpredictable course and become the champion against the most toxic, ambitious regime of the modern world. Rebuilding American power — based on the values of liberal democracy — is the only escape from Putin's corrosive vision of a world at permanent war. We need a new united front. But we must be the center of it. It matters deeply that the current generation of global revolutionaries and reformers, like my Ukrainian friend, no longer see themselves as fighting for us or our ideals.

In a strange way, Trump could be just crazy enough — enough of an outlier and a rogue — to expose what Putin's Russia is and end the current cycle of upheaval and decline. This requires non-standard thinking and leadership — but also purpose, and commitment, and values. It requires faith — for and from the American people and American institutions. And it requires the existence of truth.

The alternative is accepting that our history and our nation were, in fact, not the beginning of a better — greater — world, but the long anomaly in a tyrannous and dark one.