Returning to Relevance: the Russian Challenge to Geopolitical Stability

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On Feb. 22, 1946, the deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Moscow, George Kennan, sent a lengthy telegram to US Secretary of State James Byrnes providing policy prescriptions for dealing with the Soviet Union under the brutal communist dictatorship of Josef Stalin after World War II. As concern began to grow in some quarters of Washington regarding the aggressive behavior of its former ally, the now famous "Long Telegram", as it came to be known, identified the sources of growing Soviet antagonism toward the West and "the Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs". Moreover, it addressed the methods of Soviet power projection both at the official level and at the "unofficial level", as well as the ramifications of what this meant for US foreign policy. In time, Kennan's Long Telegram became the cornerstone of US containment policy from the beginning of the Cold War until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 *(Photo 1)*.

Photo 1: US Embassy, Moscow

US diplomat George F. Kennan. His "Long Telegram" was responsible for identifying the Soviet Union as a threat to the US and global stability and became the founding document of the US policy of containment which lasted throughout the Cold War.

Today, aggressive Russian behavior on the world stage and a similar neurotic worldview poses serious risks to the geopolitical stability of the United States and Europe. As a former KGB intelligence officer in East Germany who saw firsthand the decline of Soviet influence within the Warsaw Pact, since coming to power in late 1999 Russian President Vladimir Putin has been a strong proponent of restoring Russian power and prestige in the world and diminishing the political, economic, and geostrategic foundations of the transatlantic partnership. Over the past few years, however, the Russian president has shown himself to be increasingly like some of his predecessors as the US and Europe have been preoccupied with costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of international terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis it created, the eurozone debt crisis, and the rise of China as a geostrategic competitor. Under Putin's direction, Russia has engaged in a series of important actions that have not only advanced Russian interests worldwide, but have also threatened to undermine the foundations of the geopolitical order that have existed since the end of World War II.

Putin's "Strong Man" Politics

From its origins as the Grand Duchy of Moscow that grew to become the Russian Empire, evolved into the Soviet Union, and finally into today's modern authoritarian state, Russia has depended on strong, centralized government control to preside over its vast geographic territory and its multi-ethnic population. Over the centuries, Russian nationalism and cold-blooded rule from Moscow or St. Petersburg became ingrained in the leadership of Russian political calculation and combined with what Kennan called the "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity … [because] Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form, fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of western countries."

Indeed, Putin has followed in varying degrees the blueprints of previous strong men who have led Russia such as Peter the Great, Emperor Nicholas I, and of course, Stalin. Whenever opportunities presented themselves, Moscow advanced its geopolitical position either directly through military aggression or, as Kennan wrote, Russian diplomacy would focus on "inhibiting or diluting the power of others". As such, Putin's two overarching geostrategic goals since coming to power have been the restoration of Russia's previous status as a global superpower, to include rebuilding the Russian armed forces and regaining or controlling some of the territories in Russia's "near abroad" in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region lost after the end of the Cold War, and distancing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries from Eastern Europe and from each other.

Russian history has shown that callous and ruthless control of Russia's domestic politics is a prerequisite for any successful Russian foreign and national security policy. From 2000 until 2008, Putin radically amended the 1993 Russian constitution to make an already strong presidency even stronger. Overall, Putin's time in office so far has been marked by the growth of authoritarian rule coupled with a corrupt bureaucracy that favors a few oligarchs who control the country's critical infrastructure and key industries and who primarily answer only to the Russian president. Initially limited to two four-year terms as president, Putin then served as prime

minister from 2008 until 2012, only to return as president to begin a six-year term in March 2012 through what were widely perceived to be unfair elections.

In addition, Putin has been responsible for significantly curbing democratic freedoms and for the repression of domestic political dissent. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has also implemented several restrictive laws against minority groups, harassed, intimidated, and imprisoned political activists, and cracked down on critics in the Russian media who contradict or oppose the government's line. The international watchdog group Freedom House rates Russia very poorly in terms of government openness and political liberty, noting especially that "Decisions are adopted behind closed doors by a small group of individuals — led by Putin — whose identities are not often clear, and announced to the population after the fact. Corruption in the government and business world is pervasive, and a growing lack of accountability enables bureaucrats to act with impunity." Putin will be up for re-election in 2018 for another six-year term while his United Russia party has strongly benefited from recent changes to national, regional, and local election laws to ensure continuity of Putin's political control of Russia for some time to come.

Russia's Military Buildup under Putin

One of the primary ways in which Russia is trying to elevate its geopolitical power is with respect to the Russian armed forces, where Putin has prioritized the country's largest military buildup since the Cold War. According to SIPRI's Military Expenditure Database, Russia's total military spending in current US dollars grew from approximately $11.7 billion in 2001 and peaked at $88.4 billion in 2014, representing over a seven-fold increase in military spending. In addition, many news outlets have claimed that this does not include a significant number of unreported programs, making the growth of Russia's military spending higher still. Some organizations such as the International Monetary Fund have even estimated that the unreported share of Russia's military budget in 2016 may be nearly 25% more than what the Russian government has officially claimed.

In 2010, Russia embarked on a 10-year program to increase the size of its military as well as modernize, update, or replace approximately 70% of its aging and obsolete military equipment by 2020. The number of Russians serving active duty in its military has also significantly grown to an estimated 850,000 in 2014 at a time when the number of troops in almost every Western country has been dropping *(Photo 2)*.

At the same time, the Russian government's rearmament program is seeing a technologically much improved force taking shape, which according to IHS Jane's includes plans calling for more than 600 fixed-wing aircraft, more than 1,000 helicopters, over 4,600 heavily armored tracked vehicles and 17,000 lighter military vehicles, 50 surface ships, 28 ballistic missile and attack submarines, as well as improvements to various short-, medium-, and long-range missiles and mobile missile systems. Russia is currently positioning its upgraded military force in various key geostrategic locations around the country and its near abroad to potentially challenge NATO forces in Eastern Europe, to consolidate its existing military gains in Ukraine, and to project Russian power in the Black Sea region and beyond in the Middle East.

Nowhere is Russia's growing military capability on full display to NATO and the rest of the world than in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, located on the Baltic Sea and nestled between Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad is the home of Russia's Baltic Fleet *(Photo 3)*, which according to publicly available data comprises approximately 50 different vessels, including diesel-powered submarines, one Sovremenny-class destroyer, eight Steregushchy- and Nanuchka-class missile corvettes, two Neustrashimy-class

Photo 2: Kremlin.ru

Russian President Vladimir Putin celebrates Navy Day on the historic Aurora cruiser in St. Petersburg, July 31, 2016.

Photo 3: REUTERS / Maxim Shemetov

(L-R) Russian navy corvette Steregushchy, destroyer Nastoichivy and frigate Admiral Gorshkov are seen anchored in a bay of the Russian fleet base in Baltiysk in the Kaliningrad region on July 19, 2015.

Photo 4: Copyright Alexei Danichev / Sputnik

Russia's Iskander high-precision mobile missile system

guided missile frigates, six Paschim-class anti-submarine warfare vessels, and a few dozen smaller vessels and landing ships, together with one brigade of naval infantry and two regiments of coastal defense artillery, along with a garrison with an estimated 200,000 military personnel — despite official Russian numbers claiming only 100,000. Other significant upgrades to Kaliningrad's military infrastructure have occurred in the past couple of years, including the reconstruction and enlargement of the airfield at Chkalovsk to accommodate large military aircraft, as well as the refurbishment of an abandoned Soviet-era airfield for hydroplanes on the Baltic Spit.

In early October 2016, significant East-West tensions were raised when Moscow deployed Iskander-M mobile systems to Kaliningrad *(Photo 4)*. First introduced to the Russian military in 2013, the Iskander-M is able to target enemy missile systems, rocket launchers, long-range artillery, and command posts, as well as aircraft and helicopters at a distance of up to 320 miles — threatening much of eastern Poland and all of Lithuania. Tensions were further raised later in the month when Russia sent to the Baltic Sea two Buyan-M class corvettes armed with nuclear-capable Kalibr cruise missiles which have a range of 930 miles. According to Russian news sources, there are also plans for Russia's Baltic Fleet to receive three additional such warships armed with Kalibr missiles by the end of 2020 along with enhanced coastal defenses including Bastion and Bal land-based anti-ship missile systems. Russia's current and planned military buildup of Kaliningrad is protected by its existing long-range radar and its S-400 Triumf air defense system which has a 250-mile range and provides the surrounding region with a fairly sophisticated anti-access/area denial capability for the Russian military.

Hybrid Warfare & Power Projection

As highlighted in a previous issue of this magazine (July/August 2014), a resurgent Russia under Putin has also seen Russian aggression successfully used to secure Russia's "near abroad" — most notably against Ukraine. Beginning in March 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and its key naval base at Sevastopol. Russia then divided the eastern, ethnically Russian, and highly industrialized areas of its neighbor from the western, ethnically Ukrainian, and mostly agricultural areas. Moscow not only accomplished this by arming and supplying local separatists, but also by utilizing a provocative propaganda campaign to create political unrest with hacked information that included the broadcast of an intercepted February 2014 telephone call between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt describing US brokering of a political deal among Ukrainian government officials who were then negotiating the formation of a new Western-leaning government. The disclosure of this conversation seemed to prove American involvement in the local politics of a country bordering Russia and that the US was working directly against Russian interests.

Other Russian actions in Ukraine included spreading "fake news" stories, interrupting energy flows, and even sending in Spetsnaz special forces units, the masked and unmarked camouflage-wearing "Little Green Men", whose mission was to take control of key strategic locations in the country such as military bases, airports, and government buildings in eastern Ukraine *(Photo 5)*. Out of the success of Russia's barely disguised aggression against its neighbor, experts have come up with the term "hybrid warfare" which has come to describe these "gray areas" of Russian military and paramilitary activities to support favorable political outcomes. Indeed, recent Russian activities with respect to Ukraine harken back to the early Cold War period when Stalin's government was similarly able to pressure, undermine, and ultimately control most of Eastern Europe.

Beyond its immediate border regions, Russia has also actively supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. As longtime allies dating to the early Cold War period, Russia initially resisted Western calls in the United Nations Security Council for Assad to step down from power or to

Photo 5: Wikimedia Commons

Unmarked Russian soldiers — the so-called "Little Green Men" — at a military base in Perevalne, Ukraine, during the Crimean crisis, March 9, 2014

implement UN sanctions against Syria. As the crisis intensified, Russia provided Syrian government forces with military aid to suppress the rebel opposition, specifically the US-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) trying to overthrow the government in Damascus. Since September 2015, however, Russia has engaged in direct military operations to not only secure Assad's regime and to defeat the FSA and other rebel forces, but also to overthrow the self-declared Islamic State straddling northwestern Syria and northern Iraq.

Russian forces have been primarily operating out of the airbase near Latakia and the port of Tartus, as well as from an aircraft carrier battlegroup in the Eastern Mediterranean, conducting significant and sustained Russian airstrikes on key rebel towns and villages (up to 60 per day) for the better part of two years. It should be highlighted, however, that the Russian military involvement in Syria has not been completely void of international incident. In November 2015, Turkey's air force shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 strike aircraft for allegedly violating Turkish airspace, temporarily resulting in increased regional tensions. Moreover, Russia has come under strong political condemnation from the international community for airstrikes that are believed to have deliberately struck civilian targets such as hospitals, schools, and homes, especially in and around the destroyed city of Aleppo — the epicenter of the Syrian crisis. From a military perspective, however, the projection of Russian military power in support of the regime in Damascus is widely seen to have successfully turned the tide of the Syrian civil war in Assad's favor and helped Syrian government forces recapture large areas of lost territory. It is the first time since the Cold War that Russia has engaged in sustained military operations beyond its immediate borders, and is another sign of Russia's intent to overturn the post-1991 geopolitical order.

Hybrid Politics & *Kompromat*

The famous dictum by the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz that "war is a mere continuation of politics by other means" certainly holds true today. In today's technologically advanced global environment, however, Putin also appears to be turning this famous line on its head — that influencing politics may also be a mere continuation of war by other means. In this era dominated by mass communication through smartphones and social media, along with the relative ease and low cost of cyberwarfare, democratic political processes — particularly those of open, Western societies whose governments do not restrict their citizens' access to the Internet — are vulnerable to Russian influence campaigns. Indeed, as much as Russia's hybrid warfare can be seen as a success in destabilizing Ukraine and annexing Crimea, this era may also be one characterized by *hybrid politics*, whereby democratic institutions or processes can be manipulated or undermined through the release of intelligence, disinformation, or compromising information (known in Russian as *kompromat*) that has been hacked or otherwise acquired to tarnish the reputation, or question the legitimacy, of an intended political target, and thus used to achieve a political outcome favorable to the Kremlin. The main idea behind *kompromat* is to create plausible truths about intended political victims, while also allowing Russian leadership plausible denial regarding the origin of the leaked information.

Certainly, Putin's background, training, and experiences in intelligence, deception, and misinformation for the KGB and its successor, the FSB, are important puzzle pieces in the development of Russian hybrid politics. First, as a young major in the Soviet secret police who spent the late 1980s working closely with the East German Stasi in Dresden and recruiting people trained in "wireless communications" to steal Western technology and NATO secrets, and then in the late 1990s as FSB director, Putin reportedly became not only expert in blatant disregard for the truth about Russian military activities and casualty rates during the war in Chechnya, but also more than capable of inventing and distributing self-serving lies and inaccurate information to sow confusion among political opponents and ultimately to control them.

Another reason for the growth of Russian hybrid politics is the current environment in which Western governments operate. With vast amounts of government documents and data now being stored electronically, the ease with which this information can be transferred almost instantaneously is greater than ever. Moreover, the increased use over the past two decades of private sector firms that support key national security organizations such as the Department of Defense, the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and others presents a security challenge which in some respects is unique to the US. Outside contractors — private US citizens who work alongside government employees with many of the same clearances and therefore access to the same classified government information — today provide countless additional potential exit points for government information to be leaked.

Indeed, Russia appears to be connected to a massive information-gathering effort on potential political targets focused on the US and Europe. Most famously, in June 2013 the outside contractor Edward Snowden who was working for the NSA released classified documents to various journalists and newspapers around the world revealing information on US government surveillance programs against other countries, including US allies. Snowden fled the US and eventually sought political asylum in the waiting arms of Moscow *(Photo 6)*. The US, UK, and French intelligence services also all believe there is a direct connection between the Russian government and the international open government organization Wikileaks, whose founder Julian Assange has been responsible over the past several years for releasing compromising documents about both the US government and the Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Finally, Russian hybrid politics is to some extent dependent upon willing political targets. The Kremlin's attempt to influence the 2016

Photo 6: Wikimedia Commons

Former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden has been living in Russia since mid-2013. Here he is speaking about NSA programs in the US at the Sam Adams award presentation in Moscow on Oct. 9, 2013.

Photo 7: WhiteHouse.gov

President Donald Trump's messages to "Make America Great Again" and "America First" struck a chord with a large segment of the US population.

US presidential election as alleged by the US intelligence community involved the acquisition and release of compromising information on Clinton, the opponent of Russia's preferred candidate Donald Trump. For his part, both on the campaign trail and following his election, Trump expressed an unusually strong affinity for Putin and Russia, at various times taking to Twitter to praise the Russian leader as "very smart", to call upon Russia to release damaging information on Clinton (which some claimed was treasonous), and even to deflect public attention on himself, claiming that "*Clinton's* close ties to Putin deserve scrutiny."

As was the case, Trump won the election in one of the largest upsets in US political history. Although it is impossible to measure the effect of Russia's influence on the 2016 US election, Trump cannot condemn Russia too strongly without casting doubt on the legitimacy of his own electoral success. Nevertheless, he has been reluctant to assign *any* blame to Russia and has dismissed the US intelligence community's post-election analysis despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary — going so far as to fault US intelligence for leaking an unverified political report alleging financial improprieties and embarrassing salacious personal behavior about himself *(Photo 7)*. "If Putin likes Donald Trump," he told a crowd of journalists at a January 2017 press conference, "guess what, folks, that's called an asset not a liability."

Putin's *Annus Mirabilis*

Today it is worth remembering that Kennan's Long Telegram concluded with a stark warning: "We must have the courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of [Russia], is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."

The year 2016 may be considered an *annus mirabilis* for Putin's long-held plan to restore Russia — challenging not only the global order created by the end of the Cold War, but perhaps also overturning the very foundations of the postwar international security structure. Under President Barak Obama, the US largely only took symbolic gestures to confront the buildup of Russia's military capabilities and its aggression in Ukraine, sending token forces to the region and imposing sanctions, albeit in coordination with its European allies and with some economically crippling effects. From the Russian point of view, however, the election of Trump has already had its intended effect — to create political confusion and generate divisions within the US and among the members of the Western Alliance, to divert Washington's attention away from Russia's growing military and intelligence capabilities, and to sow doubt in the US political system and its democratic institutions.

The year 2017 looks even brighter for Russia and Putin. It appears he may be gaining a useful political ally in Trump, who indicated he might even be willing to lift the sanctions on Russia in exchange for Russian help in the fight against terrorism. In an unmistakable reference to Russia in his inaugural address, Trump noted that the US would "reinforce old alliances and form new ones — and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism." Moreover, Trump's enthusiasm for NATO is low. Just prior to assuming office, he labeled the organization "obsolete" and is likely to approach European capitals early in his term with a demand they pay more towards their own security. As the United Kingdom appears set to trigger negotiations to exit the European Union, while both France and Germany are facing national elections with rightwing parties rising in popularity, and as the new era in Washington begins with strong mutual distrust between Trump and his own intelligence community, Russia is in a strong position to shape the geopolitical environment to more closely align with its core national interests and continue its return to great power status and growing global relevance. JS

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