

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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August 13, 2016

Vladimir Putin: A New “Cold War?”

An interesting dimension of the current US presidential campaign is Vladimir Putin. The nation he leads is in economic and financial freefall. In many ways it is a third-world nation, with deep problems including significant corruption, pervasive bureaucratic inefficiencies and inept financial managers. Yet, it is an intensely nationalistic nation, with a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church and a determination to be recognized as a world power. Despite its shortcomings, it remains a nuclear power, with a capable military evidencing cutting edge military technology. Putin is diverting massive amounts of national wealth to building a 21st century military capable of restoring the glory of mother Russia. Putin is a cold, calculating autocrat determined to fulfill his mission of reestablishing Russia’s greatness in the world. He functions more like a czar than a totalitarian communist. He is not a friend of the United States and is a genuine threat to the European order and to stability in Central and Eastern Europe. It is not much of a stretch to argue he is fomenting a new “Cold War” with the West, especially with the United States. Two focal points for this argument:

- First are Putin’s actions in the troubled Middle East. Last year, Putin involved Russia militarily in the civil war in Syria, fulfilling a goal long held by the Russian czars (e.g., Peter the Great and Catherine the Great) and sending a strong message to the Middle Eastern world: “We are more serious in settling the region’s problems than the Americans are,” concluded Salim al-Jabouri, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament and the country’s leading Sunni politician, when speaking of Russia’s actions in the region. As the United States has disengaged from the Middle East during President Obama’s administration, Putin has filled that gap, engaging in military operations deep in the Middle East, “a deployment unprecedented in Russian history.” Henry Kissinger correctly observes that “Russian forces in the region—and their participation in combat operations—produce a challenge that American Middle East policy has not encountered in at least four decades.” Because of US disengagement, Russia, Iran, ISIS and various terrorist organizations have filled this vacuum: Russia and Iran to sustain Assad in Syria; Iran to foster imperial and jihadist designs; and ISIS to create a Muslim caliphate. The Sunni states of the region (e.g., Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) are horrified by these developments and are pursuing alternative policies and strategies. A new world order is emerging in the 21st century and the US seems unprepared for this. We are rapidly losing our ability to shape events, not only the Middle East but also in the world. I just finished reading Ian Kershaw’s magnificent new book, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949*. One of the conclusions of this book is the disastrous effects of the United States drawing back into an isolationist foreign policy after World War I. We lost our ability to influence developments in Europe and in Asia. It took the slaughter of World War II and the inhumane policies of Hitler and imperial Japan to awaken us from our slumber. The

policies of Vladimir Putin in annexing Crimea and in establishing military bases in Syria cannot be ignored by the United States. The world leadership of the United States since 1945 has been one of moral leadership, as well as a military and financial leadership. We must not buy the lie that an isolationist foreign policy will be good for the United States. History shows us it will not, and the danger of Vladimir Putin must alert us once again to this danger. He seeks to discredit America's stewardship of the international order. He must not be permitted to do so. He is not a friend of the US or of the world.

- Second is the bizarre case of Russia hacking into the records and data files of the Democratic National Committee. Such actions are standard in the world of Russian intrigue and politics. The Russian word for this is “kompromat,” a coined term from the two Russian words for “compromising” and “material.” It reflects the timeworn tradition in Russia of obtaining information and using it to smear or influence public officials. As Amanda Taub of the *New York Times* reports, “Kremlin insiders or other powerful individuals buy, steal or manufacture information about an opponent, an enemy, or any other person who poses a threat to powerful interests. Then, they publish it, destroying the target's reputation in order to settle public scores or manipulate public events.” Obviously, such a practice is damaging to democracy and to rule of law. Vladimir Putin grew up in a KGB culture on which such practices were standard, and he is now using them to his advantage. Additionally, the United States has evidence that Russian intelligence has secretly funded right-wing political parties in Europe, sponsored covert propaganda channels, hacked the electrical grid of Ukraine, cyber-sabotaged other neighboring states, and created networks of “trolls” to attack enemies online. Columnist George Will argues that “Vladimir Putin's regime is saturating Europe with anti-Americanism, buying print and broadcast media, pliable journalists and other opinion leaders, and funding fringe political parties, think tanks and cultural institutions . . . Putin is etching with acid a picture of America as ignorant, narcissistic and, especially, unreliable. [And] Trump validates every component of this indictment, even saying that the US commitment to NATO's foundational principle—an attack on one member is an attack on all—is not categorical.” Donald Trump has encouraged Russia to release embarrassing Clinton emails. Trump may see this as politically advantageous to him, but it encourages a foreign power to directly intervene and manipulate the outcome of a presidential election. David Ignatius persuasively demonstrates that “Trump is what Russian intelligence officers sometimes describe as a ‘useful idiot’—a person who unintentionally fosters Moscow's campaign of instability.”

Putin may be Trump's friend but he is no friend of the United States. He is a threat to world order and a threat to the US democratic system. He must not go unchallenged.

See David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (20 October 2015 and 29 July 2016); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (22 October 2015); *The Economist* (17 October 2015), pp. 15, 51; Henry Kissinger in the *Wall Street Journal* (17-18 October 2015); Yaroslav Trofimov in the *Wall Street Journal* (28-29 May 2016); George Will in the *Washington Post* (29 July 2016); and Amanda Taub in the *New York Times* (29 July 2016).