

# Israeli-Saudi Tandem Adjusts to Syria Loss

Facing defeat in the proxy war in Syria, the Israeli-Saudi tandem is planning a new front against Hezbollah, presaged by Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's sudden resignation, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

It seems that matters are coming to a head in the Middle East. For many states, the coming period will likely prove to be the moment in which they determine their futures – as well as that for the region as a whole.

The immediate peg for “crunch time” is Russia's fast-track proposal of a conference to be held in Sochi, with the near-full kaleidoscope of Syrian opposition invited, which, if all goes as planned, might mean 1,000 delegates arriving in Sochi as soon as Nov. 18.

The Syrian government has agreed to attend. Of course, when one hears of attendance in these numbers, it suggests that this is not intended as a “sleeves rolled-up” working session, but rather as a meeting in which Russian thoughts will be mooted on the constitution, the system of government, and the place of “minorities” – with a chaser that Russia wants fresh elections pretty darned quick: which is to say, in six months' time. In short, this is to be the “last chance saloon” for opposition figures: come aboard now, or be shut out, in the cold.

This initiative has plenty of push behind it, including President Putin's personal endorsement, but no guarantee of success. Both Iran and Turkey (the co-guarantors of Astana) privately may have reservations, not knowing precisely what Moscow might unveil. Iran is insistent on Syria retaining a strong centralized government, and Turkey is likely to worry about whether the Kurds might receive too much from Moscow; it will also have reservations about sitting down with the YPD (Syrian Kurds), which it views to be little more than a re-branded PKK, which Turkey regards as a terrorist organization. If Turkey does pull out, it will take an important slice of the opposition with it.

Critical moments in history, however, do have a habit of proving to be less critical than first imagined, but this one effectively marks the beginning of the winding up process of the Syrian war and of the 20-year “New Middle East” project (as devised by the U.S. and Israeli governments). How each state responds, will determine the Middle East landscape for the next years.

## **Military Mop-up**

Late last week, the Syrian army took the rest of Deir Ezzor city, and with it its rear now secure, the Syrian army is free to continue the 30 or so kilometers to reach Abu Kamal (al-Bukamal) – the last ISIS urban outpost – and the vital border crossing on the Euphrates with Iraq. It is estimated that there may be 3,500 Da'esh (another name for the Islamic State or ISIS) in Abu Kamal. But Abu Kamal's "twin" (on the Iraqi side of the border), al-Qaim, was taken by the Iraqi government's PMU militia forces on Friday. The Iraqi forces are now clearing the city of its estimated 1,500 Da'esh fighters.

The Syrian army, backed up by several thousand recently injected Hezbollah forces, is poised to enter Abu Kamal in the coming days from two directions – and from the south, a co-ordinated thrust north up and into Abu Kamal by the Iraqi Hash'd a- Sha'abi (PMU) militia, will form a pincer.

American-supported SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), however, are also trying to reach Abu Kamal from the east (the U.S., pressured by Israel, would like to seal and close the border crossing). U.S. allied forces can move more quickly, as U.S. officers are seeking to bribe local tribal leaders who formerly had sworn allegiance to ISIS (with Saudi money), to switch sides, or at least to allow the SDF forces to advance unhindered by ISIS (as happened in the environs of Deir Ezzor).

In short, the military outcome in Syria is done (after six years of war), and now comes the political bargaining. How this plays out will determine the relative strengths of the forces that will shape the Middle East in the coming years. The outcome will likely see whether Turkey can be bullied back towards NATO (by threats such as that by General Petr Pavel, head of NATO's military committee, warning of "consequences" for Turkey's attempts to buy Russian air defenses), or whether Turkey's determination to limit Kurdish aspirations will see Turkey position itself alongside Iran and Iraq (who share a common interest).

Turkey's role in Idlib, in overseeing the de-escalation zone there, remains opaque. Effectively, its forces are positioned more to control the Afrin Kurdish "canton" (rather than monitor the Idlib de-escalation zone). It is possible that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hoping to use Turkish troops to carve out a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border – in contravention to the Astana understandings. If so, this will place him at odds with both Moscow and Damascus (but will not necessarily imply a return to the NATO camp, either).

## **Syria's Future**

The bargaining at Sochi will also make clearer whether Syria will be a strong centralized state (as Iran prefers), or a looser federal state as America (and perhaps Russia) would prefer. Sochi will be something of a litmus for the extent to which American influence can shape outcomes in today's Middle East. At present, it looks as if there is co-ordination between Moscow and Washington for a speedy political settlement in Syria, a U.S. declaration of victory over ISIS, Syrian elections, and an American exit from the Syrian theatre.

The outcome of the conference will also perhaps clarify whether the Syrian Kurds finally will remain with the U.S. CentCom project for retaining a permanent U.S. presence in northeast Syria (as Israel wants), or whether the Syrian Kurds will cut a deal with Damascus (after witnessing the crushing of the Barzani Kurdish independence project by neighboring powers).

If the latter occurs, the argument for retaining a longer-term U.S. presence in northeast Syria would lose force. The Saudis will have either to accept defeat in Syria, or act the party-pooper (by trying to re-ignite the remaining proxy forces in Idlib) – but, for that, the kingdom would need Turkey's compliance, and that may not be forthcoming.

Iraq too, irked by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's comments suggesting that the PMU are Iranian – and must “go home” – has already shown signs of re-orientating towards Russia. (It has recently signed an expansive energy and economic protocol with Russia – after having reclaimed control of its borders and of Iraq's energy resources – and is procuring Russian arms). Evidence of Iraq's close connections with Syria, Turkey and Iran was very manifest in the quick execution of the put-down to the Kurdish independence gambit.

But the state facing the biggest dilemma in respect to the Syrian outcome is Israel. Alex Fishman, the doyen of Israeli defense columnists, has written that Israel simply has failed to adjust to strategic change, and is locked in a narrow “cold war” mentality:

“The Syrians fire rockets at open areas: Israel destroys Syrian cannons in response; the Iranians threaten to deploy Shiite forces in Syria: Israel announces ‘red lines’ and threatens a military conflict; Fatah and Hamas hold futile talks on a unity government: the prime minister declares Israel is suspending talks with the Palestinians – and everyone here applauds the security and political echelons: – ‘there, we showed them the meaning of deterrence’, [the Israeli leadership repeats].

“But what we are seeing here is a provincial defense policy, a false representation of a leadership that barely sees beyond the tip of its nose, and is busy putting out fires day and night.

“It’s a leadership that sees national security through a narrow regional viewpoint. It’s as if everything beyond Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran doesn’t exist. It’s as if the world around us hasn’t changed in the past decades, and we are stuck in the era of aggressive solutions in the form of reward and punishment as the main political-security activity. The current political-security echelon isn’t solving problems, isn’t dealing with problems, but simply postponing them, passing them on to the next generation”

### **Missing the Strategic Picture**

What Fishman is pointing to is profound: Israel has gained some tactical victories in the neighborhood (i.e. over the Palestinians generally, and in weakening Hamas), but it has lost sight of the wider strategic picture. In effect, Israel has lost its ability to dominate the region. It had wanted a weakened and fragmented Syria; it had wanted a Hezbollah mired in the Syrian mud, and an Iran circumscribed by Sunni sectarian antipathy towards the Shi’a generally. It is unlikely to get any of these.

Rather, Israel finds *itself being deterred* (rather than doing the deterring) by the knowledge that it cannot now overturn its strategic weakness (i.e. risk a three-front war) – unless, and only if, America will fully enter into any conflict, in support of Israel. And this is what worries the security and intelligence echelon: Would America now contemplate a decisive intervention on behalf of Israel – unless the latter’s very survival was at risk?

In 2006, Israeli officials recall, the U.S. did not enter Israel’s war against Hizbullah in Lebanon, and after 33 days, it was Israel that sought a ceasefire.

Fishman is right too that attacking Syrian factories and radar positions “out of old habit” solves nothing. It may be sold to the Israeli public as “deterrence,” but rather it is playing with fire. Syria has started to fire back with aged surface-to-air missiles (S200s) at Israeli aircraft. These missiles may not have hit an Israeli jet yet, and maybe were not even intended so to do. The Syrian message however, is clear: these missiles may be old, but they have a longer range than the newer S300: Potentially, their range is sufficient to reach Ben Gurion Airport outside Tel Aviv.

Are the Israelis sure that Syria and Hezbollah don’t have more modern missiles? Are they certain that Iran or Russia will not provide them such? The Russian defense minister was very angry on his visit to Tel Aviv to have been faced with an Israeli retaliatory air attack on a Syrian radar and missile position – as a welcome gift on landing in Israel. To his protests, his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Lieberman condescendingly said that Israel needed nobody’s advice in respect to Israel’s security. General Sergey Shoygu reportedly was not

amused.

Can Israel come to terms with its new strategic situation? It seems not. Ibrahim Karagul, a Turkish political commentator and an authoritative voice of President Erdogan, writing in *Yeni Safak*, notes that “the foundations of a new disintegration [and] division are being laid in our region. Saudi Arabia’s ‘We are switching to moderate Islam’ announcement contains a dangerous game. The U.S.-Israel axis is forming a new regional front line.”

Karagul continues: “We have been watching the strange developments in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Israel and the U.S. for some time now. There is a new situation in the region, which we know is [principally aimed] against Iran; but has recently taken an open anti-Turkey state, aimed at limiting Turkey’s influence in the region ... You will see, the ‘moderate Islam’ announcement will be immediately followed by a sudden and unexpected strengthening of Arab nationalism. This wave will not differentiate between Shiite or Sunni Arabs, but it will isolate the Muslim Arab world from the entire Muslim world.

“This separation will be felt most by the Shiite Arabs in Iraq. With this new block, Iraq and Iran are going to stage a new power showdown [i.e. will react forcefully to counter it]. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s future in power is also most likely going to [become contingent on the outcome to] this showdown.”

### **An American ‘Buy-in’**

To give this project American “buy-in,” Israel and Saudi Arabia are focusing it on Lebanese Hezbollah, which the U.S. has declared to be a terrorist entity though the movement was part of Lebanon’s government, which was headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri until he ominously resigned today in an announcement made in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Hariri is a dual Saudi-Lebanese national.)

Saudi State Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan (in Beirut last week) called for “toppling Hezbollah” and promised “astonishing” developments in “the coming days. Those who believe that my tweets are a personal stance, are delusional ... the coming developments will definitely be astonishing.”

Al-Sabhan added that the kingdom’s escalation against Hezbollah could take several forms that would “definitely affect Lebanon. Politically, it might target the government’s relations with the world. At the economic and financial levels, it could target commercial exchange and funds, and militarily it might involve the possibility of a strike on Hizbullah by the U.S.-led coalition, which labels Hizbullah a terrorist organization.” (Comment: this latter point

probably was made more in hope, than in expectation. Europe and the U.S. set considerable store on maintaining Lebanon as stable).

Karagul reflects further on this U.S.-Gulf-Israeli initiative:

“The moderate Islam project was tried the most in Turkey. We always said this is ‘American Islam’ and opposed it. The February 28 military intervention is the product of such a project. It was implemented by the U.S./Israel extreme right-wing and their partners on the inside. The Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) is the product of such a project, and the Dec. 17/25 and July 15 attacks were made for this very reason. They were all aimed at trapping Turkey within the U.S./Israel axis.

“But Turkey’s local and national resistance has overcome them all. Now they are burdening Saudi Arabia with the same mission. That is how they are making it appear. I do not think that it is possible for Saudi Arabia to undertake such a mission. This is impossible both in terms of the regime’s character and its social structure. This is impossible because of the ‘Israel/U.S. sauce’.

“The discourse of making the switch to moderate Islam will cause serious confusion in the Saudi administration and grave social reactions. The actual conflict is going to take place within Saudi Arabia. Also, the Riyadh administration has no chance of exporting something to the region or setting an example.

“Especially once it is further revealed that the project is security-based, that a new front line has been formed, that it is all planned by the U.S.-Israel, it will result in a fiasco. This project is suicide for Saudi Arabia, it is a destruction plan; it is a plan that will destroy it unless it comes to its senses.”

Karagul makes the point well: the attempt to make Islam in the Christian “Westphalian” image has a disastrous history. The metaphysics of Islam are not those of Christianity. And Saudi Arabia cannot be made “moderate” by Mohammad bin Salman just ordering it. It would entail a veritable cultural revolution to shift the basis of the kingdom, away from the rigors of Wahhabism to some secularized Islam.

### **More War?**

Where is this taking the Middle East: to conflict? Maybe. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not noted for his audacity: he is noted more for rhetoric which often has proved empty; and Israeli security officials are being cautious, but both sides *are* preparing against the possibility of what Karagul calls a “great power showdown.” It looks, though – from this and other Turkish

statements – as if Turkey will be with Iran and Iraq, and standing against America and Saudi Arabia.

And President Trump? He is wholly (and understandably) preoccupied with the low-intensity war being waged against him at home. He probably tells Netanyahu whatever it is that might advance his domestic battles (in Congress, where Netanyahu has influence). If Bibi wants a fiery speech at the U.N. berating Iran, then, why not? Trump can then call on the trifecta of White House generals to “fix it” (just as he did with JCPOA, passing it to Congress “to fix”), knowing that the generals do not want a war with Iran.

The danger is a “black swan.” What happens if Israel goes on attacking the Syrian army and industrial premises in Syria (which is happening almost daily) – and Syria *does* shoot down an Israeli jet?

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## Trump Follows Well-Worn Mideast Trail

Despite the chaotic appearance of President Trump’s Mideast policies, they actually represent a troubling consistency in U.S. subservience to Israel and Saudi Arabia, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

Washington media, think tanks, various commentators and now Sen. John McCain continue hammering on an old theme – that the U.S. has “no policy towards the Middle East.” This is fake analysis. In fact the U.S. very much does have a long-standing policy towards the Middle East. It’s just the wrong one.

What, then, is U.S. policy in the Middle East – under Trump, Obama, Bush and Clinton (and even earlier)? When all the rhetoric has been stripped away, we can identify quite clear, precise, and fairly consistent major strategic policy positions.

–First, Washington accedes to almost anything that Israel wants. This is an untouchable posture, a third rail, beyond any debate or discussion lest we anger the powerful Zionist lobby of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and end up being labeled “anti-Semitic.”

The New York Times does not even allow us to know that In Israel itself these issues are indeed seriously debated – but never in the U.S. Small tactical issues aside, there is zero American discussion about whether the far-right government of Israel should be the lode-star of U.S. policy-making in the Middle East.

–Second, we oppose all Iranian actions and seek to weaken that state. Not surprisingly this reflects a key Israeli position on the Middle East as well. Admittedly the U.S. has its own grudges against Iran going back a long way, while the Iranians bear grudges against the U.S. going back well before that.

–Oppose almost anything that Russia does in the Middle East and routinely seek to weaken the Russian position in the region.

–Destroy armed radical jihadi groups anywhere – unilaterally or via proxy.

–Support Saudi Arabia on nearly all issues. Never mind that the Saudi state is responsible for the export of the most radical, dangerous and ugly interpretations of Islam anywhere and is the prime promoter of extremist Islamist ideas across the Muslim world.

–Maintain a U.S. military presence (and as many U.S. military bases as possible) across the Middle East and Eurasia.

–Maximize U.S. arms sales across the region for profit and influence. (There is of course a lot of competition here from the U.K., Russia, France, China, and Israel.)

–Support any regime in the Middle East – regardless of how authoritarian or reactionary it may be – as long as it supports these U.S. goals and policies in the region.

–“Protect the free flow of oil.” Yet that free flow of Middle East oil has almost never been threatened and its chief consumers – China, Japan, Korea – should bear whatever burden that might be. But the U.S. wants to bear that “burden” to justify permanent U.S. military forces in the Gulf.

But what about “American values” that are often invoked as goals – such as support for democracy and human rights? Yes, these values are worthy, but they receive support in practice only as long as they do not conflict with the paramount hierarchy of the main goals stated above. And they usually do conflict with those goals.

Far from a “lack of Middle East policy,” all this sounds to me like a very clear set of U.S. policy positions. Washington has consistently followed them for long



decades. They largely represent a solid “Washington consensus” that varies only slightly as the think-tankers of one party or the other rotate in and out of government.

### **Trump in Line**

Donald Trump has typically upset the apple cart somewhat on all of this – mostly in matters of style in his spontaneous policy lurchings of the moment. But Official Washington is pretty good in keeping the range of foreign policy choices fairly narrowly focused within these parameters. Indeed, some might say that this policy mix is just about right. Yet these U.S. aspirations have fairly consistently failed.

The most prominent U.S. policy failures are familiar and proceed from the goals.

–If unquestioning support to Israel is the top priority, Washington has not failed here. But Israel remains about as truculent as ever in maintaining its own priority of extending territorial control and creeping takeover of all Palestinian lands and people. Washington has not been able to protect Israel from itself; Israel has never been more of an international pariah than now in the eyes of most of the world, including large numbers of Jews.

Actually it would serve American interests to officially abandon the absurd theater of the “peace process” which has always served as Israeli cover for ever greater annexation of Palestinian land. Instead the U.S. should let the international community assume the major voice, yes, including the United Nations, in holding Israel to international norms.

By now the “two-state solution” is unreachable; the issue is how to manage the very difficult and painful transition to an inevitable “one-state solution” for Palestinians and Israelis – in a democratic and binational secular state.

–Russia is today stronger and more important in the Middle East than since Soviet days. Moscow has been outplaying the U.S. in nearly every respect of the policy game since 9/11. U.S. influence meanwhile has declined in both relative and absolute terms. Yet Washington’s determination to maintain its own absolute primacy across the world firmly excludes any significant Russian role in global issues.

However, if Washington can bring itself to abandon the zero-sum game mindset and work towards a win-win approach with Moscow, it will find much to cooperate with Russia about. As it stands, persistent confrontational policies guarantee unending rivalry, a never-ending self-fulfilling prophesy.

–Contrary to stated U.S. policy goals, Iran has emerged the massive winner from

nearly all U.S. policies in the region over two decades. Yet Turkey and Iran represent the only two serious, developed, advanced, stable states in the region, with broadly developed economies, serious “soft power,” and a flexible policies that have gained the respect of most Middle Eastern peoples, even if not of their governments.

Yes, Erdogan’s Turkey is at the moment a loose cannon; but Turkish political institutions will certainly survive him even as the clock is ticking on his power grip. Iran’s elections are more real than virtually any other Muslim state in the area. It may be convenient for some to lay virtually all U.S. troubles in the region at Iran’s door, but such analysis upon serious examination is quite deliberately skewed.

–U.S. policies and actions against radical and violent Islamist movements in the Muslim world represent a serious task. Sadly, it is the ongoing U.S. military actions themselves that help explain much of the continued existence and growth of radical movements, starting with major U.S. military support to Islamist mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Later the U.S. destruction of state and societal structures in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, to some extent even in Syria and Yemen, have further stirred up anger and radical jihadism.

### **Another Way?**

What can be done? Withdrawal of U.S. boots on the ground and the chain of military bases across the region and into Asia would represent a start, but only a start, in allowing the region to calm down. The region must work out its own problems and not be the object of incessant self-serving U.S. helicopter interventions.

Yes, ISIS is a target deserving of destruction, and U.S. policies have been a bit wiser in at least allowing many international forces to play a role in that campaign. But radicalism invariably emerges from radical conditions. There are few military solutions to radical social, political, economic and identity problems. And autocratic rulers will always greet a U.S. presence that helps maintain them in power.

Saudi policies that view Iran as the source of all Middle Eastern problems are erroneous and self-serving, and ignore the real roots of the region’s problems: unceasing war (primarily launched by the U.S.), vast human and economic dislocations, self-serving monarchs and presidents for life, and the absence of any voice by the people over the way they are ruled.

The militarization of U.S. foreign policy everywhere is ill-designed to solve

regional problems that call for diplomacy and close cooperation with *all* regional powers – not their exclusion. Yet these U.S. policies increasingly resemble the late days of the Roman Empire as it found itself up to its neck in barbarians.

Most of the world would welcome shifts in U.S. policies away from the heavy focus on the military option. One reason the U.S. has been losing respect, clout and influence in the region is due to this failing military focus.

The rest of the world is now simply trying to work around U.S. fixations. Donald Trump is exacerbating the problem but he is in many ways the logical culmination of decades of failed American policies. Even a kinder gentler Trump cannot solve systemic U.S. foreign policy failures that are now deeply institutionalized.

So repeating the mantra that the U.S. lacks a Middle East policy serves only to conceal the problem. The U.S. very much does have a clear policy. It's just been dead wrong.

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## Blaming the Afghan War Failure on – Russia

**Exclusive:** Another part of the U.S. mainstream media's rash of Russia-bashing is to claim that Moscow is arming Afghanistan's Taliban, but again the evidence doesn't match the accusations, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

News flash: The United States is supplying spiffy new Humvees and Ford Ranger pickup trucks to the Taliban, who brazenly parade their troops in those vehicles "without fear of being targeted by Afghan or Coalition forces," according to a senior fellow at the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

As Bill Poggio observed in the foundation's *Long War Journal*, "The Taliban displayed their military power in the contested district of Bakwa in a newly

released video titled *From the Fronts of Farah*. The video which was released on the Taliban's propaganda website, Voice of Jihad, 'is dedicated to . . . showcasing the strength, control and advances of the Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate,' according to an accompanying statement."

Poggio concluded, more reasonably than I suggest in my opening sentence, that the trucks displayed in the Taliban video were "captured from Afghan Army and police units," not ordered directly by the Afghan insurgents out of a Pentagon catalog.

But U.S. officials have not shown the same good sense in their continued, but unsupported, denunciations of Russia for supplying the Taliban with assault rifles and other small arms.

I demolished that canard in a [May 29 article](#). I pointed out that, contrary to a raft of news stories based on Pentagon leaks about Russian backstabbing, the director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency admitted in a Senate hearing, "I have not seen real physical evidence of weapons or money being transferred" by Russia to the Taliban.

The chairman of NATO's military committee restated that conclusion in almost the same words just a few days ago. He told reporters in Washington, "I don't have and I haven't seen any hard evidence on the delivery of weapons from the Russians to the Taliban."

Despite such authoritative denials, leading U.S. national security reporters – and government officials – have been keeping the story alive, as it fits the larger Washington narrative about Russia's threat to U.S. security and Western values.

In late August, following President Trump's address to the nation committing to a long-term battle in Afghanistan, Andrea Mitchell of NBC [asked](#) Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, "why didn't the President mention Russia's rearming of the Taliban, which General [John] Nicholson has been talking about very openly? He seemed to be letting Russia off the hook in his speech."

(Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, has long complained of Russia's "malign influence" in Afghanistan, and said in April that he was "[not refuting](#)" claims of Russian help to the Taliban.)

In response, Secretary Tillerson also chose not to refute such claims. "To the extent Russia is supplying arms to the Taliban, that is a violation, obviously, of international norms and it's a violation of UN Security Council norms," he said. "We certainly would object to that and call Russia's attention to that."

Russia vigorously denies doing any such thing. Of course it may be lying – providing arms to bog down the United States in war, or to curry favor with the Taliban as it racks up military gains across the country.

### **Dated Weapons**

But many of the Russian weapons in the hands of the Taliban date back to Russia's own misadventure in Afghanistan in the 1980s, according to one small arms expert interviewed by an editor at *The Atlantic*. Other weapons in Taliban hands are Chinese or Pakistani knock-offs.

"Russian-made weapons of those calibers can be obtained in many places," said Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

As I documented previously, Moscow has been shipping assault weapons and providing flight training to Afghan *government* forces, not the Taliban. The insurgents don't need to buy their weapons from abroad when they can simply take them from the Afghan army or police. "It's simple and cheaper," one Taliban commander told an American reporter.

As a result, U.S. taxpayers are going to great expense to arm the very people who are killing U.S. soldiers and their allies in Afghanistan.

The Taliban don't just use those captured Humvees and trucks for show. In a stunning operation in mid-October, insurgents drove explosives-laden vehicles "captured from security forces" into an Afghan Army base in the southern province of Kandahar, killing most of its 60 members and leaving only two unhurt.

A day or two earlier, Taliban forces used the same tactic in two southeastern provinces, killing more than 40 police officers by detonating explosives in "Humvees paid for by the United States military," according to the *New York Times*.

After 16 years of failed war in Afghanistan, U.S. officials may find it convenient to look for scapegoats like Russia. But the fault, with apologies to the Bard, is not in Moscow but in ourselves.

**Jonathan Marshall's previous articles on Afghanistan include "Alleged Russia-Taliban Arms Link Disputed," "The Goal of 'Not Losing' in Afghanistan," "Afghanistan: President Obama's Vietnam," and "Why Washington's War on Drugs in Afghanistan Isn't Working."**

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# Sorting Out the Russia Mess

**Exclusive:** The U.S. mainstream media finally has its “smoking gun” on Russia-gate – incriminating information from a junior Trump campaign adviser – but a closer look reveals serious problems with the “evidence,” writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller has turned up the heat on President Trump with the indictment of Trump’s former campaign manager for unrelated financial crimes and the disclosure of a guilty plea from a low-level foreign policy adviser for lying to the FBI.

While longtime Republican fixer Paul Manafort, who helped guide Trump’s campaign to the GOP nomination in summer 2016, was the big name in the news on Monday, the mainstream media focused more on court documents related to George Papadopoulos, a 30-year-old campaign aide who claims to have heard about Russia possessing Hillary Clinton’s emails before they became public on the Internet, mostly via WikiLeaks.

While that would seem to bolster the Russia-gate narrative – that Russian intelligence “hacked” Democratic emails and President Vladimir Putin ordered the emails be made public to undermine Clinton’s campaign – the evidentiary thread that runs through Papadopoulos’s account remains tenuous.

That’s in part because his credibility has already been undermined by his guilty plea for lying to the FBI and by the fact that he now has a motive to provide something the prosecutors might want in exchange for leniency. Plus, there is the hearsay and contested quality of Papadopoulos’s supposed information, some of which already has turned out to be false.

According to the court documents, Papadopoulos got to know a professor of international relations who claimed to have “substantial connections with Russian government officials,” with the professor identified in press reports as Joseph Mifsud, a little-known academic associated with the University of Stirling in Scotland.

The first contact supposedly occurred in mid-March 2016 in Italy, with a second meeting in London on March 24 when the professor purportedly introduced Papadopoulos to a Russian woman whom the young campaign aide believed to be Putin’s niece, an assertion that Mueller’s investigators determined wasn’t true.

Trump, who then was under pressure for not having a foreign policy team,

included Papadopoulos as part of a list drawn up to fill that gap, and Papadopoulos participated in a campaign meeting on March 31 in Washington at which he suggested a meeting between Trump and Putin, a prospect that other senior aides reportedly slapped down.

### **The 'Email' Breakfast**

But Papadopoulos continued his outreach to Russia, according to the court documents, which depict the most explosive meeting as an April 26 breakfast in London with the professor (Mifsud) supposedly saying he had been in Moscow and "learned that the Russians had obtained 'dirt' on then-candidate Clinton" and possessed "thousands of emails." Mainstream press accounts concluded that Mifsud must have been referring to the later-released emails.

However, Mifsud told The Washington Post in an email last August that he had "absolutely no contact with the Russian government" and described his ties to Russia as strictly in academic fields.

In an interview with the U.K. Daily Telegraph after Monday's disclosures, Mifsud acknowledged meeting with Papadopoulos but disputed the contents of the conversations as cited in the court papers. Specifically, he denied knowing anything about emails containing "dirt" on Clinton and called the claim that he introduced Papadopoulos to a "female Russian national" as a "laughingstock."

According to the Telegraph interview, Mifsud said he tried to put Papadopoulos in touch with experts on the European Union and introduced him to the director of a Russian think tank, the Russian International Affairs Council.

It was the latter contact that the court papers presumably referred to in saying that on May 4, the Russian contact with ties to the foreign ministry wrote to Papadopoulos and Mifsud, reporting that ministry officials were "open for cooperation," a message that Papadopoulos forwarded to a senior campaign official, asking whether the contacts were "something we want to move forward with."

However, even an article in The New York Times, which has aggressively pushed the Russia-gate "scandal" from the beginning, noted the evidentiary holes that followed from that point.

The Times' Scott Shane wrote: "A crucial detail is still missing: Whether and when Mr. Papadopoulos told senior Trump campaign officials about Russia's possession of hacked emails. And it appears that the young aide's quest for a deeper connection with Russian officials, while he aggressively pursued it, led nowhere."

Shane added, “the court documents describe in detail how Mr. Papadopoulos continued to report to senior campaign officials on his efforts to arrange meetings with Russian officials, ... the documents do not say explicitly whether, and to whom, he passed on his most explosive discovery – that the Russians had what they considered compromising emails on Mr. Trump’s opponent.

“J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon official who worked for the Trump campaign as a national security adviser and helped arrange the March 31 foreign policy meeting, said he had known nothing about Mr. Papadopoulos’ discovery that Russia had obtained Democratic emails or of his prolonged pursuit of meetings with Russians.”

### **Reasons to Doubt**

If prosecutor Mueller had direct evidence that Papadopoulos had informed the Trump campaign about the Clinton emails, you would assume that the proof would have been included in Monday’s disclosures. Further, since Papadopoulos was flooding the campaign with news about his Russian outreach, you might have expected that he would say something about how helpful the Russians had been in publicizing the Democratic emails.

The absence of supporting evidence that Papadopoulos conveyed his hot news on the emails to campaign officials and Mifsud’s insistence that he knew nothing about the emails would normally raise serious questions about Papadopoulos’s credibility on this most crucial point.

At least for now, those gaps represent major holes in the storyline. But Official Washington has been so desperate for “proof” about the alleged Russian “election meddling” for so long, that professional skepticism has been unwelcome in most media outlets.

There is also another side of the story that rarely gets mentioned in the U.S. mainstream media: that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has repeatedly denied that he received the two batches of purloined Democratic emails – one about the Democratic National Committee and one about Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta – from the Russians. While it is surely possible that the Russians might have used cutouts to pass on the emails, Assange and associates have suggested that at least the DNC emails came from a disgruntled insider.

Also, former U.S. intelligence experts have questioned whether at least one batch of disclosed emails could have come from an overseas “hack” because the rapid download speed is more typical of copying files locally onto a memory stick or thumb drive.

What I was told by an intelligence source several months ago was that Russian



intelligence did engage in hacking efforts to uncover sensitive information, much as U.S. and other nations' intelligence services do, and that Democratic targets were included in the Russian effort.

But the source said the more perplexing question was whether the Kremlin then ordered release of the data, something that Russian intelligence is usually loath to do and something that in this case would have risked retaliation from the expected winner of the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton.

But such questions and doubts are clearly not welcome in the U.S. mainstream media, most of which has embraced Mueller's acceptance of Papadopoulos's story as the long-awaited "smoking gun" of Russia-gate.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## The Democratic Money Behind Russia-gate

As Russia-gate continues to buffet the Trump administration, we now know that the "scandal" started with Democrats funding the original dubious allegations of Russian interference, notes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

The two sources that originated the allegations claiming that Russia meddled in the 2016 election – without providing convincing evidence – were both *paid for* by the Democratic National Committee, and in one instance also by the Clinton campaign: the Steele dossier and the CrowdStrike analysis of the DNC servers. Think about that for a minute.

We have long known that the DNC did not allow the FBI to examine its computer server for clues about who may have hacked it – or even if it was hacked – and instead turned to CrowdStrike, a private company co-founded by a virulently anti-Putin Russian. Within a day, CrowdStrike blamed Russia on dubious evidence.

And, it has now been disclosed that the Clinton campaign and the DNC [paid for](#) opposition research memos written by former British MI6 intelligence agent Christopher Steele using hearsay accusations from anonymous Russian sources to claim that the Russian government was blackmailing and bribing Donald Trump in a

scheme that presupposed that Russian President Vladimir Putin foresaw Trump's presidency years ago when no one else did.

Since then, the U.S. intelligence community has struggled to corroborate Steele's allegations, but those suspicions still colored the thinking of President Obama's intelligence chiefs who, according to Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, "hand-picked" the analysts who produced the Jan. 6 "assessment" claiming that Russia interfered in the U.S. election.

In other words, possibly all of the Russia-gate allegations, which have been taken on faith by Democratic partisans and members of the anti-Trump Resistance, trace back to claims paid for or generated by Democrats.

If for a moment one could remove the sometimes justified hatred that many people feel toward Trump, it would be impossible to avoid the impression that the scandal may have been cooked up by the DNC and the Clinton camp in league with Obama's intelligence chiefs to serve political and geopolitical aims.

Absent new evidence based on forensic or documentary proof, we could be looking at a partisan concoction devised in the midst of a bitter general election campaign, a manufactured "scandal" that also has fueled a dangerous New Cold War against Russia; a case of a dirty political "oppo" serving American ruling interests in reestablishing the dominance over Russia that they enjoyed in the 1990s, as well as feeding the voracious budgetary appetite of the Military-Industrial Complex.

Though lacking independent evidence of the core Russia-gate allegations, the "scandal" continues to expand into wild exaggerations about the impact of a tiny number of social media pages suspected of having links to Russia but that apparently carried very few specific campaign messages. (Some pages reportedly were devoted to photos of puppies.)

### **'Cash for Trash'**

Based on what is now known, Wall Street buccaneer Paul Singer paid for GPS Fusion, a Washington-based research firm, to do opposition research on Trump during the Republican primaries, but dropped the effort in May 2016 when it became clear Trump would be the GOP nominee. GPS Fusion has strongly denied that it hired Steele for this work or that the research had anything to do with Russia.

Then, in April 2016 the DNC and the Clinton campaign paid its Washington lawyer Marc Elias to hire Fusion GPS to unearth dirt connecting Trump to Russia. This was three months before the DNC blamed Russia for hacking its computers and supposedly giving its stolen emails to WikiLeaks to help Trump win the election.

"The Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee retained Fusion GPS to research any possible connections between Mr. Trump, his businesses, his campaign team and Russia, court filings revealed this week," The New York Times reported on Friday night.

So, linking Trump to Moscow as a way to bring Russia into the election story was the Democrats' aim from the start.

Fusion GPS then hired ex-MI6 intelligence agent Steele, it says for the first time, to dig up that dirt in Russia for the Democrats. Steele produced classic opposition research, not an intelligence assessment or conclusion, although it was written in a style and formatted to look like one.

It's important to realize that Steele was no longer working for an official intelligence agency, which would have imposed strict standards on his work and possibly disciplined him for injecting false information into the government's decision-making. Instead, he was working for a political party and a presidential candidate looking for dirt that would hurt their opponent, what the Clintons used to call "cash for trash" when they were the targets.

Had Steele been doing legitimate intelligence work for his government, he would have taken a far different approach. Intelligence professionals are not supposed to just give their bosses what their bosses want to hear. So, Steele would have verified his information. And it would have gone through a process of further verification by other intelligence analysts in his and perhaps other intelligence agencies. For instance, in the U.S., a National Intelligence Estimate requires vetting by all 17 intelligence agencies and incorporates dissenting opinions.

Instead Steele was producing a piece of purely political research and had different motivations. The first might well have been money, as he was being paid specifically for this project, not as part of his work on a government salary presumably serving all of society. Secondly, to continue being paid for each subsequent memo that he produced he would have been incentivized to please his clients or at least give them enough so they would come back for more.

### **Dubious Stuff**

Opposition research is about getting dirt to be used in a mud-slinging political campaign, in which wild charges against candidates are the norm. This "oppo" is full of unvetted rumor and innuendo with enough facts mixed in to make it seem credible. There was so much dubious stuff in Steele's memos that the FBI was unable to confirm its most salacious allegations and apparently refuted several key points.

Perhaps more significantly, the corporate news media, which was largely partial to Clinton, did not report the fantastic allegations after people close to the Clinton campaign began circulating the lurid stories before the election with the hope that the material would pop up in the news. To their credit, established media outlets recognized this as ammunition against a political opponent, not a serious document.

Despite this circumspection, the Steele dossier was shared with the FBI at some point in the summer of 2016 and apparently became the basis for the FBI to seek Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrants against members of Trump's campaign. More alarmingly, it may have formed the basis for much of the Jan. 6 intelligence "assessment" by those "hand-picked" analysts from three U.S. intelligence agencies – the CIA, the FBI and the NSA – not all 17 agencies that Hillary Clinton continues to insist were involved. (Obama's intelligence chiefs, DNI Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan, publicly admitted that only three agencies took part and The New York Times printed a correction saying so.)

If in fact the Steele memos were a primary basis for the Russia collusion allegations against Trump, then there may be no credible evidence at all. It could be that because the three agencies knew the dossier was dodgy that there was no substantive proof in the Jan. 6 "assessment." Even so, a summary of the Steele allegations were included in a secret appendix that then-FBI Director James Comey described to then-President-elect Trump just two weeks before his inauguration.

Five days later, after the fact of Comey's briefing was leaked to the press, the Steele dossier was published in full by the sensationalist website BuzzFeed behind the excuse that the allegations' inclusion in the classified annex of a U.S. intelligence report justified the dossier's publication regardless of doubts about its accuracy.

### **Russian Fingerprints**

The other source of blame about Russian meddling came from the private company CrowdStrike because the DNC blocked the FBI from examining its server after a suspected hack. Within a day, CrowdStrike claimed to find Russian "fingerprints" in the metadata of a DNC opposition research document, which had been revealed by an Internet site called DCLeaks, showing Cyrillic letters and the name of the first Soviet intelligence chief. That supposedly implicated Russia.

CrowdStrike also claimed that the alleged Russian intelligence operation was extremely sophisticated and skilled in concealing its external penetration of the server. But CrowdStrike's conclusion about Russian "fingerprints" resulted from clues that would have been left behind by extremely sloppy hackers or

inserted intentionally to implicate the Russians.

CrowdStrike's credibility was further undermined when *Voice of America* reported on March 23, 2017, that the same software the company says it used to blame Russia for the hack wrongly concluded that Moscow also had hacked Ukrainian government howitzers on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine.

"An influential British think tank and Ukraine's military are disputing a report that the U.S. cyber-security firm CrowdStrike has used to buttress its claims of Russian hacking in the presidential election," VOA reported. Dimitri Alperovitch, a CrowdStrike co-founder, is also a senior fellow at the anti-Russian Atlantic Council think tank in Washington.

More speculation about the alleged election hack was raised with WikiLeaks' Vault 7 release, which revealed that the CIA is not beyond covering up its own hacks by leaving clues implicating others. Plus, there's the fact that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has declared again and again that WikiLeaks did not get the Democratic emails from the Russians. Buttressing Assange's denials of a Russian role, WikiLeaks associate Craig Murray, a former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, said he met a person connected to the leak during a trip to Washington last year.

And, William Binney, maybe the best mathematician to ever work at the National Security Agency, and former CIA analyst Ray McGovern have published a technical analysis of one set of Democratic email metadata showing that a transatlantic "hack" would have been impossible and that the evidence points to a likely leak by a disgruntled Democratic insider. Binney has further stated that if it were a "hack," the NSA would have been able to detect it and make the evidence known.

### **Fueling Neo-McCarthyism**

Despite these doubts, which the U.S. mainstream media has largely ignored, Russia-gate has grown into something much more than an election story. It has unleashed a neo-McCarthyite attack on Americans who are accused of being dupes of Russia if they dare question the evidence of the Kremlin's guilt.

Just weeks after last November's election, The Washington Post published a front-page story touting a blacklist from an anonymous group, called PropOrNot, that alleged that 200 news sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other leading independent news sources, were either willful Russian propagandists or "useful idiots."

Last week, a new list emerged with the names of over 2,000 people, mostly Westerners, who have appeared on RT, the Russian government-financed English-language news channel. The list was part of a report entitled, "The Kremlin's

Platform for 'Useful Idiots' in the West," put out by an outfit called European Values, with a long list of European funders.

Included on the list of "useful idiots" absurdly are CIA-friendly Washington Post columnist David Ignatius; David Brock, Hillary Clinton's opposition research chief; and U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

The report stated: "Many people in Europe and the US, including politicians and other persons of influence, continue to exhibit troubling naïveté about RT's political agenda, buying into the network's marketing ploy that it is simply an outlet for independent voices marginalised by the mainstream Western press. These 'useful idiots' remain oblivious to RT's intentions and boost its legitimacy by granting interviews on its shows and newscasts."

The intent of these lists is clear: to shut down dissenting voices who question Western foreign policy and who are usually excluded from Western corporate media. RT is often willing to provide a platform for a wider range of viewpoints, both from the left and right. American ruling interests fend off critical viewpoints by first suppressing them in corporate media and now condemning them as propaganda when they emerge on RT.

### **Geopolitical Risks**

More ominously, the anti-Russia mania has increased chances of direct conflict between the two nuclear superpowers. The Russia-bashing rhetoric not only served the Clinton campaign, though ultimately to ill effect, but it has pushed a longstanding U.S.-led geopolitical agenda to regain control over Russia, an advantage that the U.S. enjoyed during the Yeltsin years in the 1990s.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Wall Street rushed in behind Boris Yeltsin and Russian oligarchs to asset strip virtually the entire country, impoverishing the population. Amid widespread accounts of this grotesque corruption, Washington intervened in Russian politics to help get Yeltsin re-elected in 1996. The political rise of Vladimir Putin after Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve 1999 reversed this course, restoring Russian sovereignty over its economy and politics.

That inflamed Hillary Clinton and other American hawks whose desire was to install another Yeltsin-like figure and resume U.S. exploitation of Russia's vast natural and financial resources. To advance that cause, U.S. presidents have supported the eastward expansion of NATO and have deployed 30,000 troops on Russia's border.

In 2014, the Obama administration helped orchestrate a coup that toppled the elected government of Ukraine and installed a fiercely anti-Russian regime. The

U.S. also undertook the risky policy of aiding jihadists to overthrow a secular Russian ally in Syria. The consequences have brought the world closer to nuclear annihilation than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

In this context, the Democratic Party-led Russia-gate offensive was intended not only to explain away Clinton's defeat but to stop Trump – possibly via impeachment or by inflicting severe political damage – because he had talked, insincerely it is turning out, about detente with Russia. That did not fit in well with the plan at all.

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## Guardians of the Magnitsky Myth

**Exclusive:** In pursuit of Russia-gate, the U.S. mainstream media embraces any attack on Russia and works to ensure that Americans don't hear the other side of the story, as with the Magnitsky myth, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As Russia-gate becomes the go-to excuse to marginalize and suppress independent and dissident media in the United States, a warning of what the future holds is the blacklisting of a documentary that debunks the so-called Magnitsky case.

The emerging outlines of the broader suppression are now apparent in moves by major technology companies – under intense political pressure – to unleash algorithms that will hunt down what major media outlets and mainstream “fact-checkers” (with their own checkered histories of getting facts wrong) deem to be “false” and then stigmatize that information with pop-up “warnings” or simply make finding it difficult for readers using major search engines.

For those who believe in a meaningful democracy, those tactics may be troubling enough, but the Magnitsky case, an opening shot in the New Cold War with Russia, has demonstrated how aggressively the Western powers-that-be behave toward even well-reported investigative projects that unearth inconvenient truth.

Throughout the U.S. and Europe, there has been determined effort to prevent the

American and European publics from seeing this detailed documentary that dissects the fraudulent claims at the heart of the Magnitsky story.

The documentary – “The Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes” – was produced by filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov, who is known as a fierce critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin but who in this instance found the West’s widely accepted, anti-Russian Magnitsky storyline to be a lie.

However, instead of welcoming Nekrasov’s discoveries as an important part of the debate over the West’s policies toward Russia, the European Parliament pulled the plug on a premiere in Brussels and – except for a one-time showing at the Newseum in Washington – very few Americans have been allowed to see the documentary.

Instead, we’re fed a steady diet of the frothy myth whipped up by hedge-fund investor William Browder and sold to the U.S. and European governments as the basis for sanctioning Russian officials. For years now, Browder has been given a free hand to spin his dog-ate-my-homework explanation about how some of his firms got involved a \$230 million tax fraud in Russia.

Browder insists that some “corrupt” Russian police officers stole his companies’ corporate seals and masterminded a convoluted conspiracy. But why anyone would trust a hedge-fund operator who got rich exploiting Russia’s loose business standards is hard to comprehend.

The answer is that Browder has used his money and political influence to scare off and silence anyone who dares point to the glaring contradictions and logical gaps in his elaborate confection.

So, the hedge-fund guy who renounced his U.S. citizenship in favor of a British passport gets the royal treatment whenever he runs to Congress. His narrative just fits so neatly into the demonization of Russia and the frenzy over stopping “Russian propaganda and disinformation” by whatever means necessary.

This summer, Browder testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and argued that people involved in arranging the one-time showing of Nekrasov’s documentary should be prosecuted for violating the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), which carries a five-year prison term.

Meanwhile, the U.S. mainstream media helps reinforce Browder’s dubious tale by smearing anyone who dares question it as a “Moscow stooge” or a “useful idiot.”

### **Magnitsky and Russia-gate**

The Magnitsky controversy now has merged with the Russia-gate affair because



Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, who traveled to America to challenge Browder's account, arranged a meeting with Donald Trump Jr. and other Trump campaign advisers in June 2016 to present this other side of the story.

Though nothing apparently came from that meeting, The New York Times, which always treats Browder's account as flat fact, led its Saturday editions with a breathless story entitled, "A Kremlin Link to a Memo Taken to Trump Tower," citing similarities between Veselnitskaya's memo on the Magnitsky case and an account prepared by "one of Russia's most powerful officials, the prosecutor general Yuri Y. Chaika." Cue the spooky music as the Times challenges Veselnitskaya's honesty.

Yet, the Times article bows to Browder as the ultimate truth-teller, including repetition of his assertion that Sergei Magnitsky was a whistleblowing "tax lawyer," rather than one of Browder's accountants implicated in the tax fraud.

While Magnitsky's profession may seem like a small detail, it gets to the heart of the mainstream media's acceptance of Browder's depiction of Magnitsky – as a crusading lawyer who died of medical neglect in a Russian prison – despite overwhelming evidence that Magnitsky was really a clever accountant caught up in the scheme.

The "lawyer" falsehood – so eagerly swallowed by the Times and other mainstream outlets – also bears on Browder's overall credibility: If he is lying about Magnitsky's profession, why should anyone believe his other self-serving claims?

As investigative reporter Lucy Komisar noted in a recent article on the case, Browder offered a different description when he testified under oath in a New York court deposition in a related federal civil case.

In that adversarial setting, when Browder was asked if Magnitsky had a law degree, Browder said, "I'm not aware that he did." When asked if Magnitsky had gone to law school, Browder answered: "No."

Yet, the Times and the rest of the mainstream media accept that Magnitsky was a "lawyer," all the better to mislead the American public regarding his alleged role as a whistleblower.

The rest of Browder's story stretches credulity even more as he offers a convoluted explanation of how he wasn't responsible for bogus claims made by his companies to fraudulently sneak away with \$230 million in refunded taxes.

Rather than show any skepticism toward this smarmy hedge-fund operator and his claims of victimhood, the U.S. Congress and mainstream media just take him at his word because, of course, his story fits the ever-present "Russia bad"

narrative.

Plus, these influential people have repeated the falsehoods so often and suppressed contrary evidence with such arrogance that they apparently feel that they get to define reality, which – in many ways – is what they want to do in the future by exploiting the Russia-gate hysteria to restore their undisputed role as the “gatekeepers” on “approved” information.

Which is why Americans and Europeans should demand the right to see the Nekrasov documentary and make their own judgments, possibly with Browder given a chance after the show to rebut the overwhelming evidence of his deceptions.

Instead, Browder has used his wealth and connections to make sure that almost no one gets to see the deconstruction of his fable. And The New York Times is okay with that.

[For details on the Nekrasov documentary, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Blacklisted Film and the New Cold War.](#)”]

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## Russia-gate Breeds ‘Establishment McCarthyism’

**Exclusive:** As Russia-gate gives cover for an Establishment attack on Internet freedom and independent news, traditional defenders of a free press and civil liberties are joining the assault or staying on the sidelines, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the past, America has witnessed “McCarthyism” from the Right and even complaints from the Right about “McCarthyism of the Left.” But what we are witnessing now amid the Russia-gate frenzy is what might be called “[Establishment McCarthyism](#),” traditional media/political powers demonizing and silencing dissent that questions mainstream narratives.

This extraordinary assault on civil liberties is cloaked in [fright-filled](#)

stories about “Russian propaganda” and wildly exaggerated tales of the Kremlin’s “hordes of Twitter bots,” but its underlying goal is to enforce Washington’s “groupthinks” by creating a permanent system that shuts down or marginalizes dissident opinions and labels contrary information – no matter how reasonable and well-researched – as “disputed” or “rated false” by mainstream “fact-checking” organizations like PolitiFact.

It doesn’t seem to matter that the paragons of this new structure – such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and, indeed, PolitiFact – have a checkered record of getting facts straight.

For instance, PolitiFact still rates as “true” Hillary Clinton’s false claim that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” agreed that Russia was behind the release of Democratic emails last year. Even the Times and The Associated Press belatedly ran corrections after President Obama’s intelligence chiefs admitted that the assessment came from what Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called “hand-picked” analysts from only three agencies: CIA, FBI and NSA.

And, the larger truth was that these “hand-picked” analysts were sequestered away from other analysts even from their own agencies and produced “stove-piped intelligence,” i.e., analysis that escapes the back-and-forth that should occur inside the intelligence community.

Even then, what these analysts published last Jan. 6 was an “assessment,” which they specifically warned was “not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact.” In other words, they didn’t have any conclusive proof of Russian “hacking.”

Yet, the Times and other leading newspaper routinely treat these findings as flat fact or the unassailable “consensus” of the “intelligence community.” Contrary information, including WikiLeaks’ denials of a Russian role in supplying the emails, and contrary judgments from former senior U.S. intelligence officials are ignored.

The Jan. 6 report also tacked on a seven-page addendum smearing the Russian television network, RT, for such offenses as sponsoring a 2012 debate among U.S. third-party presidential candidates who had been excluded from the Republican-Democratic debates. RT also was slammed for reporting on the Occupy Wall Street protests and the environmental dangers from “fracking.”

How the idea of giving Americans access to divergent political opinions and information about valid issues such as income inequality and environmental dangers constitutes threats to American “democracy” is hard to comprehend.

However, rather than address the Jan. 6 report's admitted uncertainties about Russian "hacking" and the troubling implications of its attacks on RT, the Times and other U.S. mainstream publications treat the report as some kind of holy scripture that can't be questioned or challenged.

## **Silencing RT**

For instance, on Tuesday, the Times published a front-page story entitled "YouTube Gave Russians Outlet Portal Into U.S." that essentially cried out for the purging of RT from YouTube. The article began by holding YouTube's vice president Robert Kyncki up to ridicule and opprobrium for his praising "RT for bonding with viewers by providing 'authentic' content instead of 'agendas or propaganda.'" "

The article by Daisuke Wakabayashi and Nicholas Confessore swallowed whole the Jan. 6 report's conclusion that RT is "the Kremlin's 'principal international propaganda outlet' and a key player in Russia's information warfare operations around the world." In other words, the Times portrayed Kyncki as essentially a "useful idiot."

Yet, the article doesn't actually dissect any RT article that could be labeled false or propagandistic. It simply alludes generally to news items that contained information critical of Hillary Clinton as if any negative reporting on the Democratic presidential contender – no matter how accurate or how similar to stories appearing in the U.S. press – was somehow proof of "information warfare."

As Daniel Lazare wrote at Consortiumnews.com on Wednesday, "The web version [of the Times article] links to an RT interview with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange that ran shortly before the 2016 election. The topic is a September 2014 email obtained by Wikileaks in which Clinton acknowledges that 'the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia ... are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region.'" "

In other words, the Times cited a documented and newsworthy RT story as its evidence that RT was a propaganda shop threatening American democracy and deserving ostracism if not removal from YouTube.

## **A Dangerous Pattern**

Not to say that I share every news judgment of RT – or for that matter The New York Times – but there is a grave issue of press freedom when the Times essentially calls for the shutting down of access to a news organization that may highlight or report on stories that the Times and other mainstream outlets downplay or ignore.

And this was not a stand-alone story. Previously, the Times has run favorable articles about plans to deploy aggressive algorithms to hunt down and then remove or marginalize information that the Times and other mainstream outlets deem false.

Nor is it just the Times. Last Thanksgiving, The Washington Post ran a fawning front-page article about an anonymous group PropOrNot that had created a blacklist of 200 Internet sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other independent news sources, that were deemed guilty of dispensing “Russian propaganda,” which basically amounted to our showing any skepticism toward the State Department’s narratives on the crises in Syria or Ukraine.

So, if any media outlet dares to question the U.S. government’s version of events – once that storyline has been embraced by the big media – the dissidents risk being awarded the media equivalent of a yellow star and having their readership dramatically reduced by getting downgraded on search engines and punished on social media.

Meanwhile, Congress has authorized \$160 million to combat alleged Russian “propaganda and disinformation,” a gilded invitation for “scholars” and “experts” to gear up “studies” that will continue to prove what is supposed to be proved – “Russia bad” – with credulous mainstream reporters eagerly gobbling up the latest “evidence” of Russian perfidy.

There is also a more coercive element to what’s going on. RT is facing demands from the Justice Department that it register as a “foreign agent” or face prosecution. Clearly, the point is to chill the journalism done by RT’s American reporters, hosts and staff who now fear being stigmatized as something akin to traitors.

You might wonder: where are the defenders of press freedom and civil liberties? Doesn’t anyone in the mainstream media or national politics recognize the danger to a democracy coming from enforced groupthinks? Is American democracy so fragile that letting Americans hear “another side of the story” must be prevented?

### **A Dangerous ‘Cure’**

I agree that there is a limited problem with jerks who knowingly make up fake stories or who disseminate crazy conspiracy theories – and no one finds such behavior more offensive than I do. But does no one recall the lies about Iraq’s WMD and other U.S. government falsehoods and deceptions over the years?

Often, it is the few dissenters who alert the American people to the truth, even as the Times, Post, CNN and other big outlets are serving as the real propaganda

agents, accepting what the “important people” say and showing little or no professional skepticism.

And, given the risk of thermo-nuclear war with Russia, why aren’t liberals and progressives demanding at least a critical examination of what’s coming from the U.S. intelligence agencies and the mainstream press?

The answer seems to be that many liberals and progressives are so blinded by their fury over Donald Trump’s election that they don’t care what lines are crossed to destroy or neutralize him. Plus, for some liberal entities, there’s lots of money to be made.

For instance, the American Civil Liberties Union has made its “resistance” to the Trump administration an important part of its fundraising. So, the ACLU is doing nothing to defend the rights of news organizations and journalists under attack.

When I asked ACLU about the Justice Department’s move against RT and other encroachments on press freedom, I was told by ACLU spokesman Thomas Dresslar: “Thanks for reaching out to us. Unfortunately, I’ve been informed that we do not have anyone able to speak to you about this.”

Meanwhile, the Times and other traditional “defenders of a free press” are now part of the attack machine against a free press. While much of this attitude comes from the big media’s high-profile leadership of the anti-Trump Resistance and anger at any resisters to the Resistance, mainstream news outlets have chafed for years over the Internet undermining their privileged role as the gatekeepers of what Americans get to see and hear.

For a long time, the big media has wanted an excuse to rein in the Internet and break the small news outlets that have challenged the power – and the profitability – of the Times, Post, CNN, etc. Russia-gate and Trump have become the cover for that restoration of mainstream authority.

So, as we have moved into this dangerous New Cold War, we are living in what could be called “Establishment McCarthyism,” a hysterical but methodical strategy for silencing dissent and making sure that future mainstream groupthinks don’t get challenged.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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# NYT's Assault on Press Freedom

**Exclusive:** The New York Times, which once postured as the champion of a free press, now is seeking crackdowns on news that the public gets from the Internet under the guise of combatting "Russian propaganda," explains Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Once upon a time the danger to a free press came from the right. But since Russia-gate, liberals have been busy playing catch-up.

The latest example is [a front-page article](#) in Tuesday's New York Times. Entitled "YouTube Gave Russian Outlet Portal Into U.S.," it offers the usual blah-blah-blah about Kremlin agents engaging in the political black arts. But it goes a step farther by attempting to discredit a perfectly legitimate news organization.

Reporters Daisuke Wakabayashi and Nicholas Confessore begin by noting that RT, the Moscow-funded TV channel formerly known as "Russia Today," is now an Internet powerhouse and then observes that when it became the first YouTube news channel to surpass one million views, YouTube Vice President Robert Kyncl "joined an RT anchor in a studio, where he praised RT for ... providing 'authentic' content instead of 'agendas or propaganda.'"

Cue the ominous background music. "But now," the article continues, "as investigators in Washington examine the scope and reach of Russian interference in United States policy, the once-cozy relationship between RT and YouTube is drawing closer scrutiny."

Why? Because RT took advantage of its "prominent presence on YouTube's search results" to pepper viewers with negative videos about Hillary Clinton. According to Wakabayashi and Confessore:

"As the presidential election heated up in the spring of 2016, RT consistently featured negative stories about Mrs. Clinton, according to United States intelligence officials. That included claims of corruption at her family foundation and ties to Islamic extremism, frequent coverage of emails stolen by Russian operatives from Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, and accusations that she was in poor physical and mental health."

The story quotes "the American intelligence community" describing RT as the Kremlin's "principal international propaganda outlet" and Democratic Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia calling YouTube "a target-rich environment for any

disinformation campaign.”

Then comes the kicker: “Much like the Russian-controlled pages on Facebook, RT’s YouTube videos comply with YouTube’s community guidelines, which cover things like nudity, copyright violations and promoting violence against a group based on race or religion. But not propaganda.”

Bottom line: disinformation and propaganda are what RT is all about. But there’s a problem: the Times article is less than clear about what RT actually got wrong.

### **Making Real News into ‘Fake News’**

The web version, for example, links to an RT interview with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange that ran shortly before the 2016 election. The topic is a [September 2014 email](#) obtained by Wikileaks in which Clinton acknowledges that “the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia ... are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region.”

“I think this is the most significant email in the whole collection,” Assange states as interviewer John Pilger murmurs in agreement. “As analysts know, and even the US government has mentioned ... some Saudi figures have been supporting ISIS, funding ISIS. But the dodge has always been that it’s just some rogue princes using their cut of the oil to do what they like and – but actually – the government disapproves. But that email says no, it is the government of Saudi and the government of Qatar that have been funding the ISIS.”

The exchange resumes with Pilger saying: “And, of course, the consequence of that is that this notorious terrorist, jihadist group called ISIL or ISIS is created largely with money from the very people who are giving money to the Clinton Foundation.”

Assange: “Yes.”

Pilger: “That’s extraordinary.”

Is this *dezinformatsiya*, as the Russians call disinformation? The Times implies that is, yet in fact Assange’s statement is perfectly correct. The email’s authenticity is unchallenged while there is also no question that Arab Gulf interests have contributed massively to the Clinton Foundation.

As the foundation’s own records [show](#), Saudi Arabia has given anywhere from \$10 million to \$25 million over the years, Qatar has contributed between \$1 million and \$5 million, while other Gulf governments, corporations, and individuals have kicked in anywhere from \$13 million to \$50 million more.



This is not fake news, but the plain truth. Moreover, it's the *scandalous* truth because it shows Clinton taking money from people funding the same terror organizations she was professing to fight.

It's as if Jesse Jackson had been found taking payoffs from South Africa's white supremacist government during apartheid. If that had occurred, the Times would have been up in arms. Yet not only has it never said a word about the 2014 Clinton email, it is now going after RT for putting out news that it has sat on for months.

What's going on here? Is the Times suggesting that truth is irrelevant and that the only thing that counts is where it originates? Is it arguing that what's said matters less than who's saying it – and that if it's RT, WikiLeaks, or whomever, we must all stop up our ears so that the message will be blocked?

### **Barring Foreign Information**

The article goes on to suggest that "RT's embrace of YouTube shows how difficult it could be to limit foreign influence." Calling for foreign influence to be rolled back for no other reason than the fact that it's foreign is very dangerous. Indeed, it's nothing more than a liberal echo of the isolationist, America-First politics practiced by Donald Trump except that where Trump wants to bar immigrants and imports, the Times wants to bar foreign information, no matter how pertinent or how truthful. Instead of reporting news, it is seeking to block it.

While the Times was chasing after RT, The Washington Post was going public with the truly sensational news that the Clinton campaign's law firm had paid for the notorious Christopher Steele dossier, famous for charging that Trump had paid for a couple of prostitutes to urinate on a Moscow hotel bed once occupied by Barack and Michelle Obama.

After accusing the Trump campaign of collaborating with foreign agents to influence an American election, it turns out that the Democrats, or at least their lawyers, not only collaborated with, but *hired* a foreign agent – Steele formerly worked for MI6, Britain's version of the CIA – to do the same (and Steele claimed to have gotten Russian officials to supply unsubstantiated allegations designed to hurt Trump's campaign).

The result of all this has been nonsense piled on top of nonsense. More than a year after the Democratic National Committee's massive email dump, there is still no evidence that the Kremlin was responsible or even that it was a hack at all. (Wikileaks, with its 100-percent record for veracity, continues to maintain that the emails were leaked by an insider.)

Indeed, the sole basis for the charge is a report by CrowdStrike, a California-based cyber-security firm whose chief technical officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, is known both for his anti-Kremlin bias and his close ties to the Clinton camp. (See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Scandal Hidden Behind Russia-gate.](#)")

The FBI never inspected the DNC's computer servers to see for itself if they were truly hacked while a major CrowdStrike foul-up – it subsequently accused pro-Russian separatists of using similar malware to target Ukrainian artillery units – has gone largely unreported even though the firm was forced to issue a [retraction](#). Certainly, the Times has never breathed a word about the blunder.

### **The NYT's Motives**

What's the goal here? One aim, of course, is to drive Trump out of office – not by opposing him from the left, however, but from the right on the basis of anti-Russian xenophobia. But another is what might be described as an exercise in induced mass conformity.

If, thanks to Russia-gate, the Times succeeds in scaring Americans into believing that the country is being hit with an epidemic of "fake news" even though no one knows what the term even means; if it can persuade readers that news is "disinformation" simply because it comes from a Russian outlet; if it can convince them that "Kremlin-aligned agents secretly built fake Facebook groups to foment political division" even though "Kremlin-aligned" can mean just about anything under the sun – if it can do all those things, then it can persuade them to turn their critical faculties off and believe whatever the U.S. intelligence agencies (and The New York Times) tell them to believe.

The integration of the corporate media and the so-called "intelligence community" will thus be complete. Instead of information, the result will be a steady stream of CIA propaganda aimed at dulling critical faculties and preparing the public for one imperial misadventure after another

The Times, to paraphrase [Chico Marx](#), is essentially asking readers, "Who you gonna believe, the CIA or your own critical faculties?" The correct answer, it seems to think, is the former. Rather than a force for enlightenment, the "newspaper of record," is turning into the opposite.

**Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).**

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# What Did Hillary Clinton Know?

**Exclusive:** With the disclosure that Hillary Clinton's campaign helped pay for the original Russia-gate allegations against Donald Trump, a new question arises: what did Clinton know and when did she know it, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The revelation that Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Democratic National Committee helped pay for the notorious "Steele Dossier" of hearsay claims about Donald Trump's relations with Russia is not surprising but is noteworthy given how long the mystery about the funding was allowed to linger.

Another mild surprise is that the Clinton campaign would have had a direct hand in the financing rather than maintaining an arm's length relationship to the dossier by having some "friend of the campaign" make the payments and giving Clinton more deniability.

Instead, the campaign appears to have relied on its lawyer, Marc E. Elias of Perkins Coie, and a confidentiality agreement to provide some insulation between Clinton and the dossier's startling claims which presumably helped inform Clinton's charge in the final presidential debate that Trump was Russian President Vladimir Putin's "puppet." Indeed, how much Clinton personally knew about the dossier and its financing remains an intriguing question for investigators.

Ultimately, the facts about who commissioned the dossier were forced out by a congressional Republican subpoena seeking the bank records of Fusion GPS, the opposition research firm that hired former British intelligence operative Christopher Steele to compile the opposition research, known as "oppo," against Trump.

As part of the legal wrangling over that subpoena, the Clinton/DNC law firm, Perkins Coie, wrote a letter releasing Fusion GPS from its confidentiality agreement.

After that letter, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday night that the Clinton campaign and the DNC had helped fund the Steele effort with attorney Elias retaining Fusion GPS in April 2016 and with Fusion GPS then hiring Steele.

The Post reported that "people familiar with the matter" disclosed that outline of the arrangement but still would not divulge how much the Clinton campaign and the DNC paid to Fusion GPS. One source told me that the total amount came to about \$1 million.

## **'Trash for Cash'**

An irony about Hillary Clinton's role in funding allegations about Trump's connection to the Russians, including claims that he cavorted with prostitutes in a five-star Moscow hotel while Russian intelligence operatives secretly filmed him, is that the Clinton camp bristled when Bill Clinton was the subject of Republican "oppo" that surfaced salacious charges against him. The Clintons dismissed such accusations as "cash for trash."

Nevertheless, just as conspiratorial accusations about the Clintons gave rise to the Whitewater investigation and a rash of other alleged "scandals," which bedeviled Bill Clinton's presidency, the Steele Dossier – also known as the "Dirty Dossier" – provided a map that investigators have followed for the ongoing Russia-gate investigation into President Trump.

Much like those Clinton allegations, Steele's accusations have had a dubious track record for accuracy, with U.S. government investigators unable to corroborate some key claims but, I'm told, believing that some are true nonetheless.

In the 1990s, even though the core allegations of wrongdoing about the Clintons and their Whitewater land deal collapsed, the drawn-out investigation eventually unearthed Bill Clinton's sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and led to his impeachment in the House although he was acquitted in a Senate trial.

Some Democrats have openly hoped for the impeachment of President Trump, too, and they have hitched many of those hopes to the Russia-gate bandwagon.

There is also no doubt about the significance of the Steele Dossier in spurring the Russia-gate scandal forward.

When Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee, offered what amounted to a prosecutor's opening statement in March, his seamless 15-minute narrative of the Trump campaign's alleged collaboration with Russia followed the trail blazed by Steele, who had worked for Britain's MI-6 in Russia and tapped into ex-colleagues and unnamed sources inside Russia, including supposedly leadership figures in the Kremlin.

## **Steele's Methods**

Since Steele could not reenter Russia himself, he based his reports on multiple hearsay from these anonymous Russians who claim to have heard some information from their government contacts before passing it on to Steele's associates who then gave it to Steele who compiled this mix of rumors and alleged inside dope

into "raw" intelligence reports.

Besides the anonymous sourcing and the sources' financial incentives to dig up dirt, Steele's reports had other problems, including the inability of FBI investigators to confirm key elements, such as the claim that several years ago Russian intelligence operatives secretly videotaped Trump having prostitutes urinate on him while he lay in the same bed at Moscow's Ritz-Carlton used by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

That tantalizing tidbit was included in Steele's opening report to his new clients, dated June 20, 2016. Apparently, it proved irresistible in whetting the appetite of Clinton insiders. Also in that first report were the basic outlines of Russia-gate.

But Steele's June report also reflected the telephone-tag aspects of these allegations: "Speaking to a trusted compatriot in June 2016 sources A and B, a senior Russian Foreign Ministry figure and a former top level Russian intelligence officer still active inside the Kremlin respectively, the Russian authorities had been cultivating and supporting US Republican presidential candidate, Donald TRUMP for a least 5 years.

"Source B asserted that the TRUMP operation was both supported and directed by Russian President Vladimir PUTIN. Its aim was to sow discord and disunity both within the US itself, but more especially within the Transatlantic alliance which was viewed as inimical to Russia's interests. ... In terms of specifics, Source A confided that the Kremlin had been feeding TRUMP and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents, including Democratic presidential candidate Hillary CLINTON, for several years. ...

"The Kremlin's cultivation operation on TRUMP also had comprised offering him various lucrative real estate development business deals in Russia, especially in relation to the ongoing 2018 World Cup soccer tournament. However, so far, for reasons unknown, TRUMP had not taken up any of these."

Besides the anonymous and hearsay quality of the allegations, there are obvious logical problems, especially the point that five years before the 2016 campaign, virtually no one would have thought that Trump had any chance of becoming President of the United States.

There also may have been a more mundane reason why Trump's hotel deal fell through. A source familiar with those negotiations told me that Trump had hoped to get a half interest in the \$2 billion project but that Russian-Israeli investor Mikhail Fridman, a founder of Russia's Alfa Bank, balked because Trump was unwilling to commit a significant investment beyond the branding value of

the Trump name.

Yet, one would assume that if the supposedly all-powerful Putin wanted to give a \$1 billion or so payoff to his golden boy, Donald Trump, whom Putin anticipated would become President in five years, the deal would have happened, but it didn't.

Despite the dubious quality of Steele's second- and third-hand information, the June 2016 report appears to have impressed Team Clinton. And once the bait was taken, Steele continued to produce his conspiracy-laden reports, totaling at least 17 through Dec. 13, 2016.

### **Framing the Investigation**

The reports not only captivated the Clinton political operatives but influenced the assessments of President Obama's appointees in the U.S. intelligence community regarding alleged Russian "meddling" in the presidential election.

Still, a careful analysis of Steele's reports would have discovered not only apparent factual inaccuracies, such as putting Trump lawyer Michael Cohen at a meeting with a Russian official in Prague (when Cohen says he's never been to Prague), but also the sort of broad conspiracy-mongering that the mainstream U.S. news media usually loves to ridicule.

For instance, Steele's reports pin a range of U.S. political attitudes on Russian manipulation rather than the notion that Americans can reach reasonable conclusions on their own. In one report dated Sept. 14, 2016, Steele claimed that an unnamed senior official in Putin's Presidential Administration (or PA) explained how Putin used the alleged Russian influence operation to generate opposition to Obama's Pacific trade deals.

Steele wrote that Putin's intention was "pushing candidate CLINTON away from President OBAMA's policies. The best example of this was that both candidates [Clinton and Trump] now openly opposed the draft trade agreements, TPP and TTIP, which were assessed by Moscow as detrimental to Russian interests."

In other words, the Russians supposedly intervened in the U.S. presidential campaign to turn the leading candidates against Obama's trade deals. But how credible is that? Are we to believe that American politicians – running the gamut from Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren through former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to President Donald Trump – have all been tricked by the Kremlin to oppose those controversial trade deals, which are also broadly unpopular with the American people who are sick and tired of trade agreements that cost them jobs?

Of course, the disclosure that the Clinton campaign and the DNC helped pay for Steele's opposition research doesn't necessarily discredit the information, but it does suggest a possible financial incentive for Steele and his collaborators to sex-up the reports to keep Clinton's camp coming back for more.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## Russia-China Tandem Changes the World

The West's persistent demonization of Russia over the past decade has pushed Moscow into a de facto alliance with China, changing the geopolitical landscape in ways that U.S. pundits still won't admit, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Much of what Western "experts" assert about Russia – especially its supposed economic and political fragility and its allegedly unsustainable partnership with China – is wrong, resulting not only from the limited knowledge of the real situation on the ground but from a prejudicial mindset that does not want to get at the facts, i.e. from wishful thinking.

Russia may not be experiencing dynamic growth, but over the past two years it has survived a crisis of circumstance in depressed oil prices and economic warfare against it by the West that would have felled less competently managed governments enjoying less robust popularity than is the case in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Moreover, as stagnant of Russia's GNP has been, the numbers have been on a par with Western Europe's very slow growth.

Meanwhile, Russian agriculture is booming, with the 2017 grain harvest the best in 100 years despite very adverse climatic conditions from early spring. In parallel, domestically produced farm machinery has been going from strength to strength. Other major Industrial sectors like civil aircraft production have revived with the launch of new and credible models for both domestic and export markets.

Major infrastructure projects representing phenomenal engineering feats like the bridge across the Kerch straits to Crimea are proceeding on schedule to successful termination in the full glare of regular television broadcasts. So

where is this decrepit Russia that our Western commentators describe daily?

The chief reason for the many wrongheaded observations is not so hard to discover. The ongoing rampant conformism in American and Western thinking about Russia has taken control not only of our journalists and commentators but also of our academic specialists who serve up to their students and to the general public what is expected and demanded: proof of the viciousness of the “Putin regime” and celebration of the brave souls in Russia who go up against this regime, such as the blogger-turned-politician Alexander Navalny or Russia’s own Paris Hilton, the socialite-turned-political-activist Ksenia Sochak.

Although vast amounts of information are available about Russia in open sources, meaning the Russian press and commercial as well as state television, these are largely ignored. The sour grapes Russian opposition personalities who have settled in the United States are instead given the microphone to sound off about their former homeland. Meanwhile, anyone taking care to read, hear and analyze the words of Vladimir Putin becomes in these circles a “stooge.” All of this limits greatly the accuracy and usefulness of what passes for expertise about Russia.

In short, the field of Russia studies suffers, as it also did during the heyday of the Cold War, from a narrow ideological perspective and from the failure to put information about Russia in some factually anchored framework of how Russia fits in a comparative international setting.

Just what this means was brought into perspective last week by a rare moment of erudition regarding Russia when professor emeritus of the London School of Economics Dominic Lieven delivered a lecture in Sochi at the latest Valdai Club annual meeting summarizing his take on the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Lieven, arguably the greatest living historian of imperial Russia, is one of the very rare birds who brought to his Russian studies a profound knowledge of the rest of the world and in particular of the other imperial powers of the Nineteenth Century with which Russia was competing. This knowledge takes in both hard and soft power, meaning on the one hand, military and diplomatic prowess and, on the other, the intellectual processes which are used to justify imperial domination and constitute a world view if not a full-fledged ideology.

### **Self-blinded ‘Experts’**

By contrast, today’s international relations “experts” lack the in-depth knowledge of Russia to say something serious and valuable for policy formulation. The whole field of area studies has atrophied in the United States over the past 20 years, with actual knowledge of history, languages, cultures



being largely scuttled in favor of numerical skills that will provide sure employment in banks and NGOs upon graduation. The diplomas have been systematically depreciated.

The result of the foregoing is that there are very few academics who can put the emerging Russian-Chinese alliance into a comparative context. And those who do exist are systematically excluded from establishment publications and roundtable public discussions in the United States for not being sufficiently hostile to Russia.

If that were not the case, one could look at the Russian-Chinese partnership as it compares firstly with the American-Chinese partnership created by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, which is now being replaced by the emerging Russian-Chinese relationship. Kissinger was fully capable of doing this when he wrote his book *On China* in 2011, but Kissinger chose to ignore the Russian-Chinese partnership though its existence was perfectly clear when he was writing his text. Perhaps he did not want to face the reality of how his legacy from the 1970s had been squandered.

What we find in Kissinger's description of his accomplishments in the 1970s is that the American-Chinese partnership was all done at arm's length. There was no alliance properly speaking, no treaty, in keeping with China's firm commitment not to accept entanglement in mutual obligations with other powers. The relationship was two sovereign states conferring regularly on international developments of mutual interest and pursuing policies that in practice proceeded in parallel to influence global affairs in a coherent manner.

This bare minimum of a relationship was overtaken and surpassed by Russia and China some time ago. The relationship has moved on to ever larger joint investments in major infrastructure projects having great importance to both parties, none more so than the gas pipelines that will bring very large volumes of Siberian gas to Chinese markets in a deal valued at \$400 billion.

Meanwhile, in parallel, Russia has displaced Saudi Arabia as China's biggest supplier of crude oil, and trading is now being done in yuan rather than petrodollars. There is also a good deal of joint investment in high technology civilian and military projects. And there are joint military exercises in areas ever farther from the home bases of both countries.

I think it is helpful to look at this partnership as resembling the French-German partnership that steered the creation and development of what is now the European Union. From the very beginning, Germany was the stronger partner economically with France's economy experiencing relative stagnation. Indeed, one might well have wondered why the two countries remained in this partnership as

nominal equals.

The answer was never hard to find: with its historical burden from the Nazi epoch, Germany was, and to this day remains, incapable of taking responsibility in its own name for the European Union. The French served as the smokescreen for German power. Since the 1990s, that role has largely been transferred to the E.U. central bodies in Brussels, where key decision-making positions are in fact appointed by Berlin. Yet, France remains an important junior partner in the German-driven process.

### **The Russian-Chinese Tandem**

One may say much the same about the Russian-Chinese tandem. Russia is essential to China because of Moscow's long experience managing global relations going back to the period of the Cold War and because of its willingness and ability today to stand up directly to the American hegemon, whereas China, with its heavy dependence on its vast exports to the U.S., cannot do so without endangering vital interests. Moreover, since the Western establishment sees China as the long-term challenge to its supremacy, it is best for Beijing to exercise its influence through another power, which today is Russia.

Of course, in light of the E.U.'s Brexit troubles and Trump's abandonment of world leadership, it is undeniably possible that China will step out of the shadows and seek to assume direction of global governance. But that would be problematic. China faces major domestic challenges including the transition of its economy from being led by exports to relying more on domestic consumption. That will absorb the attention of its political leadership for some time.

Kissinger, who has been an adviser to Trump, whispers in Trump's ear about the importance of separating Russia from China, but Kissinger's limited and outdated knowledge of Russia has caused him to underestimate the powerful motives behind the Russian-Chinese relationship. America's less gifted and informed pundits are even more clueless.

For one thing, given the sustained hostility directed at Russia from the West in general and from Washington in particular, it is inconceivable that Putin would be wooed away from Beijing by some flirtatious "come hither" gestures from the Trump administration even if that were politically possible for Trump to do. One of Putin's outstanding features is his loyalty to his friends and his principles as well as to his nation's interests.

As Putin revealed during his address and Q&A at the Valdai Club gathering this past week, he now bears a deep distrust of the West in light of its having taken crude advantage of Russia's weakness in the 1990s and by its expansion of NATO

to Russian borders and other threatening actions. Whatever hopes Putin once may have held for warmer relations with the West, those hopes have been dashed over the past several years.

Putting personalities aside, Russian foreign policy has a commonality that is rare to see on the world stage: actions first, diplomatic charters later. Russia's political relations with China come on top of massive mutual investments that have taken many years to agree on and execute.

In the same way, Russia is proceeding with Japan to work towards a formal peace treaty by first putting in place massive trade and investment projects. It is entirely foreseeable that the first step to the treaty will be the start of construction in 2018 of a railway bridge in the Far East linking the Russian island of Sakhalin with the mainland. The general contractor and engineering team is also in place: Arkady Rotenberg and his SGM Group. That bridge is the prerequisite for Japan and Russia signing a \$50 billion deal to build a railway bridge linking Sakhalin and Hokkaido. This bridge will draw the attention of the whole region to Russian-Japanese cooperation. It could be the foundation for a durable and not merely paper peace treaty resolving the territorial dispute over the Kurile Islands.

### **Lost Opportunities**

In light of these realities, it is puerile to speak of detaching Russia from China with the promise of normalized relations with the West. The opportunity to do that existed in the 1990s, when President Boris Yeltsin and his "Mr. Yes" Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev did everything possible to win U.S. agreement to Russian accession to NATO immediately following accession by Poland. To no avail.

Then again early in Putin's presidency, the Russians made a determined effort to win admission to the Western alliance. Again to no avail. Russia was excluded, and measures were taken to contain it, to place it in a small box as just another European regional power.

Finally, following the confrontation with the United States and Europe over their backing of the 2014 coup in Ukraine, followed by the Russian annexation/merger with Crimea, and Russian support for the insurgency in Ukraine's Donbas region, Russia openly was cast as the enemy. It was compelled to mobilize all of its friendships internationally to stay afloat. No state was more helpful in this regard than China. Such moments are not forgotten or betrayed.

The Kremlin understands full well that the West has nothing substantial to offer

Russia as long as the U.S. elites insist on maintaining global hegemony at all costs. The only thing that could get the Kremlin's attention would be consultations to revise the security architecture of Europe with a view to bringing Russia in from the cold. This was the proposal of then President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, but his initiative was met by stony silence from the West. Bringing in Russia would mean according it influence proportionate to its military weight, and that is something NATO has opposed tooth and nail to this day.

It is for this reason, the failure to seek solutions to the big issue of Russia's place in overall security, that the re-set initiative under Barack Obama failed. It is for this reason that Henry Kissinger's advice to Donald Trump at the start of his presidency to offer relief from sanctions in return for progress on disarmament rather than implementation of the Minsk accords regarding the Ukraine crisis also failed, with Vladimir Putin giving a firm "nyet."

Implicit in the few American "carrots" being extended to Russia these days is its acceptance of the anti-Russian regime in Ukraine and its authority over the heavily ethnic Russian areas of the Donbas and Crimea, concessions that would be politically devastating to Putin inside Russia. Yet, that "normalization" would still leave the much milder but still nasty "human rights" sanctions that the U.S. imposed in 2012 through the Magnitsky Act, driven by what the Kremlin regards as false propaganda surrounding the criminal case and death of accountant Sergei Magnitsky.

The sting of the Magnitsky Act was to discredit Russia and prepare the way for it being designated a pariah state. It came amidst an already longstanding campaign of demonization of the Russian president in the U.S. media. In fact, to begin to find a halfway normal period of bilateral relations, you would have to go back to before George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, which Russia denounced along with Germany and France. The latter two powers got a tap on the wrist from Washington. For Russia, it was the start of a period of reckoning for its uncooperativeness with American global domination.

### **Demonizing Russia**

As for Europe and Russia, the question is very similar. To find mention of a strategic relationship, firstly from the German Foreign Ministry, you have to go back to before 2012. And what constituted normality then? At the time, renewal of the E.U.-Russia cooperation agreement was already being held up for years, nominally over a difference of views on the provisions of E.U. law governing gas deliveries through Russian-owned pipelines. Behind this difference was the total opposition of the Baltic States and Poland to anything resembling normal

relations with Russia, for which they received full encouragement from the U.S.

The rallying cry was to put a stop to Russia's status as "monopoly supplier" to Europe as regards gas, but also oil. Of course, no monopoly ever existed, nor does it exist today, but determined geopolitical actors never let such details stand in the way of policy formulation.

This hostility also played out in the contest of wills between the E.U. and Russia over introduction of a visa-free regime for travel by their respective citizens. Here the opposition of Germany's Angela Merkel, justified by her vicious characterization of Russia as a mafia state, doomed the visa-free regime and by the same token doomed normal relations.

All of this unfinished business has to be addressed and put right for there to be any possibility of the U.S. and the E.U. ending their hostility toward Russia and for the Kremlin to regain any trust toward the West. Even then, however, Russia would not surrender its valued relationship with China.

In my view, the de facto Russian-Chinese alliance matches the de jure US-West European alliance. The net result of both is the partition of the world into two camps. We now have, in effect, a bipolar world that broadly resembles that of the Cold War, though still in a formative stage since many countries have not signed on definitively to one side or another.

Of course, more-or-less neutral states were also a feature of the Cold War, creating what was called the group of Nonaligned Nations, led back then by India and Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia no longer exists, but India has continued its tradition of let both poles court it, trying to eke out the greatest benefit to itself.

To be sure, a great many political scientists in the U.S., in Europe and in Russia as well, insist that we already have a multipolar world, saying that power is too diffuse in the world today, especially considering the rise of non-state actors after 1991. But the reality is that very few states or non-states can project power outside their own region. Only the two big blocs can do that.

The theoreticians defending multipolarity speak of a return to the balance of power of the Nineteenth Century, invoking the Congress of Vienna as a possible model for today's world governance. This is an approach that Henry Kissinger laid out in 1994 in his book *Diplomacy*.

Within Russia, this concept has found support in some influential think tanks and is most notably associated with Sergei Karaganov, head of the Council of Foreign and Defense Policy. Nonetheless, I maintain that everyday realities of power will decide this question. And is there anything inherently wrong with

this de facto bipolar world, assuming the tensions can be managed and a major war averted?

In my view, two large blocs are more likely to keep global order because the scope of activities by proxies can be reined in – as often happened during the Cold War – by big powers not wanting their various clients to disrupt a functioning world order. The tails are less likely to wag the dog.

Moreover, as regards the Russia-China strategic partnership or alliance, Western observers should take comfort and not take alarm. The rise of China is a given whatever the constellation of great powers may wish. The close embrace of Russia and China also can serve as a moderating influence on China, given Russia's greater experience in world leadership.

For all of the above positive and negative reasons, the Russia-China relationship should be viewed with equanimity in Western capitals

**Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was just published.**

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