

67 VALDAI PAPERS

June 2017



TRUMPERY AND KNAVERY: LOOKING FOR THE VIRTUOUS

Richard Sakwa

About the author:

Richard Sakwa

Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury; Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House)

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The Trump Challenge

Donald J. Trump is an outsider to the political establishment, having never served in an elected office before his unexpected victory in November 2016. His populist insurgency is grounded in his long experience as a maverick business tycoon. His unorthodox views raised hopes in Moscow that he would bring some new ideas to the table, although Russian elites were well aware that he was unstable in his views and unpredictable in his behaviour. His Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, represented policy continuity and intensified hostility towards Russia. By contrast, Trump expressed the view that ‘NATO is obsolete and it’s extremely expensive for the United States, disproportionately so’, and ‘it should be readjusted to deal with terrorism’.¹ He later warned that he would only assist European nations during a Russian invasion if they first ‘fulfilled their obligations to us’. He also noted that the US had ‘to fix our own mess before trying to alter the behaviour of other nations’: ‘I don’t think we have the right to lecture’. He also insisted that ‘America first’ was a ‘brand-new, modern term’, and did not signal isolationism of the sort advocated by Charles Lindbergh’s America First Committee before the US entered the Second World War.² Above all, candidate Trump adopted a radical position:

*We desire to live peacefully and in friendship with Russia. ... We have serious differences ... But we are not bound to be adversaries. We should seek common ground based on shared interests. Russia, for instance, has also seen the horror of Islamic terrorism. I believe an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia – from a position of strength – are possible. Common sense says this cycle of hostility must end. Some say the Russians won’t be reasonable. I intend to find out. If we can’t make a good deal for America, then we will quickly walk from the table.*³

In light of such comments, we can characterise American foreign policy in the Trump era as divided between globalists and nationalists. The globalists defend traditional Atlanticist positions, and in various ways insist on the retention of US ‘leadership’, its traditional alliance system, and defence of the ‘US-led liberal international order’. The nationalists, in their turn, pursue an ‘America first’ policy. Trump’s neo-isolationist strategy downplays the promotion of American values through democracy promotion, and places less emphasis on multilateral institutions.⁴ New thinking was in the air, raising hopes in Moscow for some sort of rapprochement, and in the rest of the world for a less hegemonic and more transactional model of international relations. The shift in emphasis from US ‘leadership’ to American ‘greatness’, represented a fundamental challenge not to the liberal international order, but to the power system on which it was based.

The shift from globalism to nationalism, from leadership to greatness, however, provoked an almost unprecedented counter-mobilisation to Trump’s policy shift and to his presidency in its entirety. While the two leaders are not commensurate, Trump’s path to the presidency

¹ Interview on ABC’s ‘This Week’, 27 March 2016, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/27/trump_europe_is_not_safe_lots_of_the_free_world_has_become_weak.html.

² David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, ‘Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies against Attack’, *New York Times*, 20 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html?_r=0.

³ ‘Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech’, *New York Times*, 27 April 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html?_r=0.

⁴ For example, Shawn Donnan and Demetri Sevastopolu, ‘US Looks to Bypass WTO Disputes System’, *Financial Times*, 27 February 2017, p. 6.

and then entry to the White House on 20 January 2017 provoked a rage of hostility comparable to the opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt's accession in 1933. In his first 100 days Roosevelt launched a blizzard of reforms that came to be known as the 'New Deal', whereas in his first 100 days Trump was mired in one scandal after another. The focus in particular was on 'Russia-gate', an extraordinary form of counter-mobilisation in which the alleged interference of a country assumed almost demonic proportions in the minds of the defenders of the globalist order. In other words, the alleged Russian interference in the American electoral processes assumed a dual aspect: first, as an instrument to weaken, if not destroy, Trump's presidency, preferably even before it had begun amidst an artificially inflated scandal that never was; and second to divert the course of US foreign policy back on to the globalist path.

In this, the neo-conservative wing of the Republican Party, keen to ensure American military primacy and the country's status at the centre of the unipolar system, allied with Democratic liberal internationalists, advocating humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion and a values-based foreign policy (which, not surprisingly, happened to require US leadership). This unholy alliance had been forged in the Bill Clinton years, and then reinforced in the Bush-Obama presidencies. Thus Trump potentially represented a rupture with the post-War Cold bipartisan policy to maintain American leadership. Indeed, with his campaign talk of protectionism, condemnation of regional trade pacts (such as NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP), and scorn for traditional alliances, Trump potentially represented a break with the whole post-war order.

The immediate issue of concern for the unholy alliance is Russia's alleged interference in the American democratic process (of particular concern to the Republicans) and for the Democrats Vladimir Putin's alleged links with the Trump campaign, and his alleged actions which led to Clinton losing the election. In other words, Russia became an all-purpose scapegoat for disparate groups, whose agendas did not always coincide except when it came to excoriating Russia. Running through the whole saga is the story of leaks, alleged hacking, the unwonted interference of security agencies (also accompanied by selective and strategic leaking), and a Washington establishment deeply alarmed by what the Trumpian insurgency would mean for good governance, the rule of law, bureaucratic proceduralism, political accountability and moral propriety.

Given Trump's chequered business background, they had good cause to be alarmed. However, the struggle against Trumpian arbitrariness and disorder (what in this paper is called trumpery), and against Trump himself, was also too often motivated by partisan infighting, ideological prejudices, personal ambition and lack of accountability. Above all, the 'resistance' to Trump mimicked his cavalier disregard for facts and deployed a range of ideologically driven political tricks to discredit him and his administration. In this, Russia was employed as a stick to beat Trump even as a candidate, and was then used to discipline him in office. At the same time, Clinton and the Democratic establishment used Russia as an excuse for their catastrophic performance in the presidential, legislative and state-wide elections. This amounts to a form of knavery that is barely distinguishable from trumpery. Irresponsible leaks, 'fake news' and neo-McCarthyite denunciations are deployed against each other. Once great American institutions of democracy and personal probity are thereby undermined. The two forms of political opportunism and populism – trumpery and knavery – feed off each other to degrade American political institutions and the quality of American democracy as a whole.

Russia-Gate: Fact or Fiction?

Russia took centre stage in the 2016 presidential campaign. The alleged break-in by Russian hackers of the emails of Clinton campaign manager John Podesta (the founder of the Centre for American Progress) revealed the contents of her speeches to Wall Street bankers and the financing of the Clinton Foundation. The second batch, uploaded to WikiLeaks from the Democratic National Committee's server, exposed how the Democratic establishment had been biased against Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries in favour of Clinton. By shifting the focus of the revelations from their substance – the bias of the Democratic leadership against Sanders, and Clinton's cynical subservience to Wall Street while shifting to increasingly populist campaign promises as Sanders captured the political imagination of a surprisingly large part of the Democratic Party.

Convincing evidence of a Russian cyber-attack is missing.⁵ Indeed, to this day no substantive evidence has been put into the public domain that Russia had untoward influence on the Trump team, was able to influence the course of the election in any way, or was responsible for the hacks. The Department of Homeland Security and the FBI issued a threadbare report on the matter on 6 January 2017. A large part of the document was devoted to the programming of RT in 2012, and lacked elementary information about the IPs or other signatures of the Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) 29 (which began in summer 2015) and APT 28 (from spring 2016) hacks of Democrat emails. The document accused the least likely Russian security bodies (the GRU and FSB) of being responsible.⁶ Excessive reliance was placed on assessments of the 'cybersecurity complex', notably CrowdStrike, which came up with the names of Cozy Bear (the FSB) and Fancy Bear (the GRU), when in fact no groups as such existed – these were fictional personifications of the APTs.⁷ Julian Assange, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, vigorously denied that Russia was the source of the two batches of material published on his site. In his view, there was no hack of the DNC servers, only leaks.⁸

The leaks exposed misconduct by Clinton and the Democrats, and were thus not 'fake news'. In the end attention focused less on the substance than on how the material entered the public domain. The expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats on 29 December 2016 and the confiscation of two properties used by Russian diplomats as punishment for Russia's alleged interference in the US election campaign was reminiscent of the worst periods of the Cold War. In fact, matters were even worse, since it appears that in its dying days the Obama administration was doing everything in its power to poison the well to such an extent that it would be impossible for the US and Russia to restore normal international relations. Putin's refusal to reciprocate by

⁵ *I am sceptical, but the key point is the extraordinary level of rhetorical violence. While the Trump administration may have been prone to advancing 'alternative facts' (in Kellyanne Conway's famous formulation), the defenders of traditional Atlanticism were equally prone to make up 'facts' when necessary, asserting apodictic opinions and unverified claims about Russia.*

⁶ *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution, 6 January 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf. For a critique, see Ronald Deibert, 'The DHS/FBI Report on Russian Hacking was a Predictable Failure', *Just Security*, 4 January 2017, <https://www.justsecurity.org/35989/dhsfbi-report-russian-hacking-predictable-failure/>.*

⁷ *There is a vast literature on this, but for a good analysis of the 'cybersecurity complex', see Yasha Levine, 'From Russia, with Panic', *The Baffler*, No. 34, 2017, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/from-russia-with-panic-levine>.*

⁸ *'Assange: Russian Government not the Source of WikiLeaks Emails', 3 January 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/01/03/assange-russian-government-not-source-wikileaks-emails.html>.*

expelling the equivalent number of US diplomats made Obama look petty and vindictive. Trump tweeted 'Let us move on to bigger and better things'.

Instead, politicians across the board lined up to denounce Putin and to present Russia as a hostile state, with constructive engagement denounced as weakness and appeasement. The Clinton campaign sought to pin the blame for losing the election on Russia, while Republicans used Kremlin-bashing as a way of disciplining Trump and bringing him back into the fold of Atlanticist orthodoxy. The national security establishment used allegations of Russian interference in the US election campaign to impede Trump's attempt to normalise relations with Russia.⁹ Although Russia's challenge to American global leadership was nothing like as systemic as during the Cold War, anti-Russian rhetoric exceeded earlier levels.¹⁰ The 'golden showers' report published on BuzzFeed on 10 January 2017 sought to demonstrate that Russia had somehow gained a hold on Trump during his visit to Moscow in 2013. Prepared by a former British security official, Christopher Steele, the report hit a new a low in its puerile collection of unsubstantiated allegations.¹¹

Making Sense of Madness

How can we make sense of all of this? As suggested above, the first and immediate explanation is that the globalists in the Democratic establishment and among Republicans opposed to Trump (notably John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio and a host of others) used Russia as a stick both to beat Trump and to constrain his policy options. Trump made no secret of his desire for the normalisation of relations with Russia. This was part of his broader review of American foreign priorities. For the knaves, Russia was the wedge issue that would allow a pushback against Trump going 'off message' more broadly. The ferocity of the attack against Trump's revisionism is unprecedented in recent years, and reveals just how high the stakes are.

This brings us to the second explanation. Trump's unexpected victory is a paradigmatic case of the role that contingency and personality play in international affairs. Trump represented a populist version of the 'America first' tradition, reviving Patrick Buchanan's critique of Bush senior's vision of an American-centred new world order. Buchanan later endorsed Russia's critique of western 'exceptionalism' and the West's claims to have won the Cold War. He warned that 'this

⁹ Katrina vanden Heuvel, 'Neo-McCarthyite Furore Around Russia is Counterproductive', *Washington Post*, 21 February 2017.

¹⁰ Dmitry Suslov, 'The US Elections and the Cold War 2.0: Implications and Prospects for Russia', *Valdai Discussion Club*, 9 September 2016, <http://valdaiclub.com/news/the-us-elections-and-the-cold-war-2-0-implications-and-prospects-for-russia/>.

¹¹ Unable to travel to Moscow, Steele paid Russian informants for the material. 'US Presidential Election: Republican Candidate Donald Trump's Activities in Russia and Compromising Relationship with the Kremlin', *BuzzFeed*, 10 January 2017, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3259984-Trump-Intelligence-Allegations.html>.

will inevitably result in war, as more and more nations resist America's moral imperialism'.¹² This is a tradition that adopts a narrower definition of American interests, and is reluctant to intervene in world affairs except in defence of these narrow interests. Obama remained a firm globalist, 'which puts the emphasis on the world system that runs out of Washington – a modern version of an empire – rather than on the US itself'.¹³ Obama's presidency nevertheless moderated US hegemony, encouraging its allies in Europe and the Middle East to take more responsibility for their security. By contrast, Trump sought to reshape the US alliance system and America's place in the world. As Robert English notes, Trump sought Russian cooperation on global issues, recognised that Washington bore some responsibility for the deterioration in relations, and acknowledged 'the right of all nations to put their own interests first' and that the US does 'not seek to impose our way of life on anyone'.¹⁴

Trump's insurgency questioned America's commitment to its position as self-proclaimed guardian of the liberal international order. In effect, Trump sought to return to offshore balancing, an approach long advocated by American realists. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt describe the consequences of America's ill-considered interventions, which had plunged large parts of the world into chaos, and argued that these 'costly debacles' were 'the natural consequences of the misguided grand strategy of liberal hegemony' pursued by both the Democrats and Republicans. Based on the logic of 'the indispensable nation', this approach 'holds that the United States must use its power not only to solve global problems but also to promote a world order based on international institutions, representative governments, open markets, and respect for human rights'. In short, 'liberal hegemony is a revisionist grand strategy', intended not merely to uphold the balance of power but to promote democracy and human rights.¹⁵ Instead, US policy in their view should focus on checking the emergence of regional hegemons and intervene only when necessary. The argument leads to a critique of the whole trend of US policy after 1989:

In Europe, once the Soviet Union collapsed, the region no longer had a dominant power. The United States should have steadily reduced its military presence, cultivated amicable relations with Russia, and turned European security over to the Europeans. Instead, it expanded NATO and ignored Russian interests, helping spark the conflict over Ukraine and driving Moscow closer to China.¹⁶

For neo-conservatives and liberal internationalists alike, Trump's victory represented the end of the US as the 'indispensable nation'. Robert Kagan stresses US 'responsibility for global order', noting how Europe took for granted the American willingness to act in its defence

¹² Patrick J. Buchanan, 'The Mind of Mr. Putin', 2 October 2015, <http://buchanan.org/blog/the-mind-of-mr-putin-124130>.

¹³ Dmitri Trenin, 'National Interest, the Same Language of Beijing, Washington and Moscow', Moscow Carnegie Centre, 29 December 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/12/29/national-interest-same-language-of-beijing-washington-and-moscow-pub-67631>.

¹⁴ Robert David English, 'Russia, Trump, and a New Detente', *Foreign Affairs*, 10 March 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2017-03-10/russia-trump-and-new-d-tente>.

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, Vol. 4, July-August 2016, p. 71.

¹⁶ Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', p. 76.

and in support of the open economic order, and forgot 'how abnormally unselfish American behaviour has been since the Second world war'. The US, according to Kagan, was 'no longer in the reassurance business. For decades an abnormal US foreign policy has aimed at denying Russia and China spheres of interest'. This made sense, in his view, when defending an order that prevented a breakdown like that of the first half of the twentieth century, but a narrow reading of US interests did not require it. He argued that almost every American intervention over the last 70 years had been to defend some principle of global order, rendering them 'wars of choice'; but for a more 'normal' US policy, it did not matter 'who exercises hegemony in east Asia and in Eastern and Central Europe'.¹⁷

Robin Niblett, the director of Chatham House, agrees, arguing that the US 'provided the security umbrella under which the liberal international system has flourished'. Already under Obama European allies were encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own security, but with a more inward-looking America and transactional foreign policy, this assumed a 'mercenary' twist as Trump would protect 'only those countries that pay, so that it can focus on making itself great again at home'.¹⁸ Coming hard on the heels of the Brexit vote in the UK, other commentators were less ambiguous and talked simply of 'the end of the Anglo-American order'.¹⁹ Kagan went further, and called on the new US administration to confront 'the two great revisionist powers, Russia and China': 'The further accommodation of Russia can only embolden Vladimir Putin, and the tough talk with China will likely lead Beijing to test the new administration's resolve militarily'. For Kagan, 'China and Russia are classic revisionist powers', seeking to restore 'the hegemonic dominance they once enjoyed in their respective regions'.²⁰ This is a greatly simplified representation, and all the more dangerous for that.

Russia had long chafed at the American struggle to deprive it a 'sphere of interest' in the name of the American-dominated open global order. Russian statisticians argued that this order was not so open if it meant that Russia's access was dependent on the country's renunciation not only of great power interests but also of defined independent strategic concerns. This Russian neo-revisionist position asserts that the rules-based order is a patrimony of all of humanity and should be located at the level of international society and not within a specific power system. While American interventions may have been benign in intent (and that is highly questionable), they ultimately served to maintain American national interests and to reinforce its hegemonic position.²¹

In the post-Cold War years the neo-conservative and liberal interventionist positions effectively fused, although the rhetoric differed, in defence of liberal order and American power. Obama's attempt to transfer greater responsibility for regional security to its allies and to forge

¹⁷ Robert Kagan, 'An End to the Indispensable Nation', *Financial Times*, 21 November 2016, p. 13. For his broader analysis, see Robert Kagan, 'The Twilight of the Liberal World Order', *Brookings*, 24 January 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order/>.

¹⁸ Robin Niblett, 'Liberalism in Retreat: The Demise of a Dream', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 2017, p. 20.

¹⁹ Ian Buruma, 'The End of the Anglo-American Order', *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 November 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/magazine/the-end-of-the-anglo-american-order.html?_r=1.

²⁰ Robert Kagan, 'Backing into World War III', *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/06/backing-into-world-war-iii-russia-china-trump-obama/>.

²¹ This is a classic postulate of offensive realism.

agreements with adversaries through diplomacy signalled a new realism in American policy that recognised the limits of American power.²² Even before Trump's election, this politics of 'retreat' and the underlying logic of a shift towards 'offshore balancing' was the subject of withering critique.²³ The 'bipartisan' foreign policy consensus in defence of liberal hegemony and interventionism remained in place, but was challenged from the other flank by the emergence of Trump's brand of conservative neo-isolationism and overt nationalism. Not surprisingly, it was attacked with equal ferocity by the Democrat liberal interventionists and Republican neoconservative hegemonists. The nationalist shift did, however, open up the possibility of a more pluralistic international system. As Niblett recognises, the liberal international economic order could evolve into a 'less ambitious project ... that encompasses states with diverse domestic political systems'.²⁴

The third view of the madness in Washington gives Russia agency, but not necessarily in the way described by the knaves. For the latter, Russia is a malign force intent not only on advancing Trump to the presidency but also on subverting American democracy as a whole. Indeed, Russia is accused of a proliferating multitude of sins, including interference in the UK's Brexit vote on 23 June 2016, and in various elections and other votes in Europe. The evidence for this is either thin or non-existent, but this has not prevented a whole industry emerging designed to combat the 'Russian disinformation threat'.²⁵ Vast sums were pumped into the Atlantic propaganda machine, reminiscent of the worst periods of the Cold War. In Washington, the think tank industry went into overdrive to expose Russia's alleged malfeasance, issuing endless reports on the Kremlin's evil plot to destroy the West. More worryingly, those who tried to stand up to the knavery were denounced as the Kremlin's fellow travellers. Even worse, they were even condemned as unwitting trumpists.

The informational war was accompanied by complaints about the declining standards of journalism and the revival of McCarthyism.²⁶ Non-mainstream views on Russia and its activities were condemned as 'Kremlin propaganda' and 'fake news'. This had a chilling effect on the quality of public debate, with those advancing what had become 'dissident' views condemned as 'Putin apologists', 'Moscow stooges' or 'agents of Russian influence'. A flood of reports sought to expose the way that 'The Kremlin uses these Trojan horses to destabilize European politics so efficiently, that even Russia's limited might could become a decisive factor in matters of European and international security', and urged western governments to fund civil society groups and the media 'to shed light on the Kremlin's dark networks'.²⁷

²² This comes out in Obama's interview with Goldberg in *The Atlantic*.

²³ Robert J. Lieber, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁴ Niblett, 'Liberalism in Retreat', p. 17.

²⁵ For example, the 'Stratcom 2017' summit in Prague on 15-19 May 2017. For a typically shrill account, see Nicholas Watson, 'Europe Slowly Wakes up to Russian Disinformation Threat', *Intellinews.com*, 19 May 2017, <http://www.intellinews.com/conference-call-europe-slowly-wakes-up-to-russian-disinformation-threat-121789/?source=blogs>.

²⁶ Robert Parry, 'New York Times and the New McCarthyism', *Consortium News*, 7 September 2016, <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/09/07/new-york-times-and-the-new-mccarthyism/>.

²⁷ Radosław Sikorski, *Foreword to Atlantic Council, The Kremlin's Trojan Horses* (Washington, DC, November 2016), p. 1.

The Kremlin's alleged subversive tactics were described in the report *The Kremlin Playbook*.²⁸ In its report on *Britain's Useful Idiots*, the Henry Jackson Society noted that European populists from both left and right sought to establish connections with Putin's Russia, the former in defence of 'traditional values', and the latter out of traditional admiration for Russia and 'in part out of ideological folly: they see anybody who opposes Western imperialism as a strategic bedfellow'. Recommendations included pointing out 'pro-Russia connections of individuals and parties across the political spectrum', and legislation across Europe should be amended or adopted 'that forces politicians to declare all media appearances they make, whether they receive money for them or not'.²⁹ Of more concern, Russia's alleged military threat to Europe was played up for all it was worth.³⁰ A new European war can no longer be discounted, although no one has explained quite why Russia would want to acquire yet more territory and reproduce the problems of the old Soviet bloc.

The other view of Russian agency locates its actions within the framework of the broader failure to establish an inclusive security order in post-Cold War Europe and the world as a whole.³¹ This is not the place to go into detail, but this 'realist' perspective considers Russia as no more and no less than a normal power, pursuing a rational (although that does not mean uncontested) foreign policy to maintain its position in the world and its neighbourhood. In that context, Moscow welcomed the conciliatory tweets from Trump, although harsh strictures continued to emanate from Congress and the Washington media and political establishment as a whole (although the *Wall Street Journal* became a rare beacon of rational trumpism). His administration can hardly be considered pro-Russian.

This brings us to the fourth explanation for what Patrick Armstrong aptly calls 'America hysterica', namely the radicalisation of Atlanticist positions when challenged by global power shifts and Russia's politics of resistance. The post-Cold War attempt to maintain the 'unipolar' moment and blunt the emergence of a more pluralistic international system meant that a dynamic of hostility with Russia became constitutive of the liberal international order, thus denying its drive towards universality and repudiating its essential liberalism and pluralism. The insurgent Trump soon discovered how hard it would be to overcome the anti-Russian hostility that had become constitutive of the new Atlanticism. He could take heart from Franklin Roosevelt's no less controversial re-establishment of relations with the Soviet Union in 1933, which established a platform for joint efforts in the Second World War.

The discursive shift from 'leadership' to 'greatness' potentially allowed the restoration of normal diplomatic intercourse. Trump clearly sought a rapprochement with Russia, but he was trapped by the inertia of Cold War institutions and thinking. By now, Russia, too, had abandoned hope of joining a transformed Greater West, and major steps have been taken

²⁸ Center for Strategic and International Studies, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, DC, CSIS, October 2016).

²⁹ Andrew Foxall, *Britain's Useful Idiots: Britain's Left, Right and Russia* (London, Henry Jackson Society, October 2016), p. 2.

³⁰ For example, Steven Pifer, 'The Growing Russia Military Threat in Europe', *Brookings Institution*, 17 May 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-growing-russian-military-threat-in-europe/>.

³¹ This is analysed in my forthcoming book, Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Crisis of Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2017), from which this paper in part draws.

towards the creation of Greater Eurasia. Nevertheless, alarmed by the emergence of ‘Kissinger’s worst nightmare’, a Russo-Chinese alignment, Trump sought to drive a wedge between the two by reversing the anti-Putin animus of the previous administration and favouring Russia while making demands on China. Russia had always balanced its deepening ties with China by ensuring a diversity of good relations with other Asian states, notably with Japan, South Korea, India and Vietnam, but Russia was in no mood to renege on the nascent politics of trust with China. To do so would mean irreparable damage to its reputation as a partner on which other states could rely. The same logic also applies to relations with Iran, where Russian neutrality in any future attack would be essential. Equally, China signalled that it would not be party to attempts by the US to weaken its alignment with Russia. Beijing and Moscow understood that such strategies were simple knavery, and there is little evidence that it is constitutive of trumpian foreign policy today. It is hard to see what the US can offer Russia in any putative ‘big deal’. The Russo-US relationship will remain at best transactional (if the trumpians have their way), and at worst openly confrontational (if the knaves come out on top).

Back to Normal in Abnormal Times

During the presidential campaign, the Clinton team ‘decided that it would play the Russia card and accuse Donald Trump of being at best a Kremlin stooge, at worst a Russian agent’. It now seems clear that following her defeat, her advisors ‘decided that the best option was to blame it on the Russian’.³² The first decision exposed the Clinton’s campaign’s ‘lack of connection with ordinary American voters’, as Paul Robinson puts it; while the second only demonstrated why Clinton was unfit to be president. Her dangerous warmongering had already been visible when she was Secretary of State in Obama’s first term, and now the decision to goad one of the world’s two major nuclear powers, on the basis of exaggerated or entirely false charges, shows quite how dangerous the ‘US-led liberal international order’ can be. This sort of knavery also inflicted massive damage on America itself. As Vladimir Putin put it in his press conference with the Italian Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, on 17 May 2017:

*They are shaking up the political situation in the USA using anti-Russian slogans. Either they do not understand what harm they are doing to their own country, in which case they are simply dim-witted; or they understand fully, in which case they are simply dangerous and unscrupulous.*³³

Of course, it could be that they are both.

³² Paul Robinson, ‘Dimwitted and Dangerous’, *Irrussianality*, 17 May 2017, <https://irussianality.wordpress.com/author/paulfrobinson/>.

³³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam rossiisko-ital’yanskikh peregovorov’, 17 May 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54511>.

The American 'deep state' reasserted itself, and the fifth post-Cold War reset ended before it had begun. In keeping with his promise to 'make America great again', Trump proposed a \$54 billion increase in US defence spending, which was 80 per cent of Russia's total defence spending for 2016, while signalling his intention of expanding the \$1 trillion programme for the modernisation of US nuclear weapons launched by Obama. Trump's initial instinct to improve relations with Russia was never going to be at the price of American military and economic supremacy. The anti-Russian fervour only legitimated 'the kind of nationalist assertiveness that, in normal times, liberals try to tamp down'.³⁴ In his 16 February 2017 news conference Trump defended his policy, arguing 'If we have a good relationship with Russia, believe me, that's a good thing, not a bad thing'.³⁵ However, in conditions of rampant Russophobia, even small moves by Trump to improve relations are interpreted as appeasement, if not some form of collusive relationship with the master-player of the Kremlin.

The one redeeming feature of a Trump presidency had been its promise of repairing relations with Russia and working together to resolve issues of mutual concern. Instead, Trump was forced to prove his toughness on Russia, reducing the scope for deal-making and heightening the risk of a miscalculation leading to war. Nevertheless, the tension between the globalists and the nationalists continues. As noted, the globalists defend traditional Atlanticist positions, and in various ways insist on the retention of US 'leadership', its traditional alliance system, and defence of the 'US-led liberal international order'. The nationalists, on the other hand, pursue an 'America first' policy. This does not mean isolationism. Even if 'greatness' has replaced 'leadership' as the maxim of US policy, greatness still requires some muscular diplomacy and readiness to wield the big stick.

The storm of criticism of Trump's putative links with Russia and that of some of his nominated officials forced the resignation of Michael Flynn on 13 February 2017 after just 24 days in his post as national security adviser. This limited Trump's scope for action when it came to Russia. Flynn had planned to work with Russia against what he considered the greater enemy, Islamic terrorism, but his downfall – at the hands, some thought, of the US security establishment – revealed the deep hostility towards Russia. Flynn's replacement, lieutenant general Herbert McMaster, is strongly supportive of NATO and he repeatedly talked of the need for the advanced containment of Russia in the Baltic region, Ukraine and in cyberspace. These views were shared by the defence secretary, James Mattis and vice president Mike Pence. The American alliance system in Europe and Asia (to contain Russia and China) would be preserved and strengthened.

The Trump administration initially signalled a tougher line against China. The strategy appeared to be to peel Russia away from its alignment with China (and Iran) as part of a 'big deal' that would offer Russia a path back to the West. However, the idea of 'doing a deal' was as insubstantial as Obama's 'reset' earlier. Both failed to address Russia's underlying insecurities and concerns, which can only be allayed by membership of some sort of overarching security

³⁴ Walter Russell Mead, 'Manchurian Candidate? Trump isn't Sounding Like a Russian Mole', *The American Interest*, 24 February 2017, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/02/24/trump-isnt-sounding-like-a-russian-mole/>.

³⁵ 'Full Transcript and Video: Trump News Conference', *New York Times*, 16 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/us/politics/donald-trump-press-conference-transcript.html?_r=0.

and political community. Even then, as Gaullist France demonstrates, identity issues are not so easily resolved. Nevertheless, Trump's accession appeared to offer an opportunity to recalibrate relations. Trump's abandonment of the TPP as part of his broader critique of regional trade blocs signalled a broader reassessment of US leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Moscow now found itself in the unusual position of potentially being courted by both Atlantic and Asian powers. This renewed triangular politics, reminiscent of the Kissinger years, is anachronistic. Russia's position (along with China's) is anti-hegemonic, decrying the existence of blocs and calling for all states to interact in a sovereign manner and to subordinate themselves to international society. Trump's election signalled the weakening of Cold War-style bloc politics, and to that extent was welcomed by Russia and China. He was clear that America's relationship with NATO would change and there would have to be greater burden-sharing with European partners. The priority would be America's security and needs, and the concerns of a globalist Europe still mired in the old Atlantic model would come second. These issues were far from new, since the rise of Asia obviously raised questions about the future of the transatlantic relationship.³⁶ A rethinking of American strategic priorities was long overdue.

A Trumpian Foreign Policy

The rudiments of the Trump policy style and content are beginning to emerge, although part of the style is to ensure unpredictability and surprise announcements. Some things, though, are clear, and represent a sharp break from his predecessors. First, the State Department is a much-diminished body, enduring 30% budget cuts (along with its Agency for International Development, USAID), and sharp cuts in personnel, reported to be in the region of 6,500 job losses in total. Many of the posts usually assigned to political appointees remain vacant, and are currently filled on a caretaker basis by career foreign service officers.

Second, the appointment of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state was a bold move. Tillerson had joined Exxon Mobil in 1975, and following successes in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, in the late 1990s he saved the \$17bn Sakhalin I project, which in 2005 started producing millions of barrels of oil. He became chief executive in 2006, and thereafter Exxon Mobil forged strong ties with Rosneft and its head, Igor Sechin. In 2011 they signed a multibillion dollar deal to drill Russia's vast Arctic, shale and deep-water fields, which in 2014 led to the discovery of a vast oil field in the Kara Sea. The project was shortly afterwards halted as sanctions were imposed, much to Tillerson's displeasure. Putin awarded Tillerson the 'Order of Friendship' in 2013. Exxon Mobil represented a type of parallel quasi-state in the US, forging relations with foreign leaders that were not always aligned with official US policy. He had cut a deal with the Kurdish Regional

³⁶ Luis Simón, 'Europe, The Rise of Asia and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship', *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 5, 2015, pp. 969–89.

Government that undermined the central government in Baghdad. At the same time, he had ended Exxon Mobil's long history of financing right-wing groups that denied anthropomorphic climate change.³⁷ Tillerson represented a sharp break from Clinton-style liberal messianism, and it is already clear that he understands that diplomacy means talking to people with whom you may not necessarily agree.

Third, in his speech to State Department officials on 3 May 2017, Tillerson outlined US policies on some of the most pressing issues of the day, including Syria and Korea. His comments were as important for what they left out as much as for what he said. There was a stark break with his two predecessors, George W Bush and Barack Obama. Under their leadership there had been a convergence of neocon internationalists and liberal interventionism – to the degree, that they had effectively become indistinguishable. This merged policy was the one adumbrated by Hillary Clinton when she was Secretary of State, expressed in her appointment of Dick Cheney 'weeds' to the State Department (such as Victoria Nuland). Tillerson's made no reference, however oblique, to 'humanitarian interventionism' or even to Bush-like 'unipolar world' ideas. Instead, Tillerson, and Trump, recognise the world as plural, with different actors with different and occasionally competing interests. The goal for a 'deal-maker' is somehow to reconcile these different interests. The word traditionally used to achieve that is 'diplomacy'; a concept that appeared alien to some in previous administrations, and which is still difficult for some in the US foreign policy establishment to understand. As Tillerson put it, Trump's 'America first' policy 'doesn't have to come at the expense of others, but it does have to come at [sic] an engagement with others'. Existing alliances would be respected, but Tillerson argued that they needed to be 'rebalanced' to make them work. He called for greater burden-sharing by European allies in NATO, given as an example of how the Trump administration was not rejecting old alliances but demanding full and equal responsibility within them.

When it came to the major issues of the day, such as Syria and Korea, he stressed the need for close co-operation with China and Russia. Both could contribute towards the shared policy goal of the 'denuclearisation' of the peninsula. At the same time, Tillerson insisted that he was not looking for regime change in Pyongyang, let alone accelerated unification of the two countries. He spoke warmly of China's recent achievements, since the Olympics in 2008. As for Russia, he noted that the Obama administration had left US-Russia relations in the worst state since the Cold War. Tillerson revealed that when he noted the dangerous situation to Putin, 'He [Putin] shrugged his shoulders and nodded in agreement. And I said it's spiralling down, it's getting worse. And my comment to him was [that] the two greatest nuclear powers in the world cannot have this kind of relationship. We have to change it'.³⁸

Fourth, this reformulation of US foreign policy allowed the re-establishment of elements of great power dialogue. When Trump met Xi Jinping in Mar-a-Lago on 6 April 2017, they were flanked by five top Chinese Politburo members, and six members of the Trump cabinet. The two leaders agreed that they would personally lead the dialogue, rather than delegate it

³⁷ *The Editorial Board, 'Flawed Choices for the State Department', New York Times, 12 December 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/opinion/flawed-choices-for-the-state-department.html?_r=0.*

³⁸ *Rex W. Tillerson, 'Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees', 3 May 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm>.*

to subordinates. The relationship with Russia is rather more difficult, and while the leaders are due to meet for the first time at the G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2017, there have been significant meetings between Lavrov and Tillerson, Tillerson and Putin, and the US Chief of Staff General Joseph Dunford and the head of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valeri Gerasimov. The US was invited to participate in the Syrian peace talks in Astana, and a senior US diplomat, Stuart Jones (Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs) attended the talks on 3-4 May.

In general, this means that in theoretical terms the 'America first' policy entails engagement with China and Russia, and the abandonment of the 'bipartisan' liberal/neocon post-Cold War unipolar imperial world view (couched as defence of the liberal international order). This could allow the US to return to its traditional role to lead by example in a community of sovereign nation-states. We are certainly not there yet, but a repudiation of the 'exceptionalist' ideology, whether in liberal or neocon guise, is certainly something to be welcomed. It makes possible a more rational foreign policy, and thus increases the chances for world peace. This paradoxically positive outcome, from a man with no serious foreign policy experience and with a fluid understanding of facts, only demonstrates the bankruptcy of the policy of previous administrations. It takes a maverick to break the chains of convention. Nevertheless, we are still looking for the virtuous.

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valdaiclub.com

valdai@valdaiclub.com



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