Keeping the New Tsar at Bay

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To cite this article: Michael Rubin (2016) Keeping the New Tsar at Bay, International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence, 29:4, 813-819, DOI: 10.1080/08850607.2016.1177405

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2016.1177405

Published online: 13 Jun 2016.
Meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin for the first time in June 2001, United States President George W. Bush was effusive: “We have a great moment during our tenures to cast aside the suspicion and doubts that used to plague our nations.” Bush added, “I’m convinced [Russia] can be a strong partner and friend—more so than people could imagine.” As for Bush’s assessment of Putin? “I looked the man in the eye,” he famously said. “I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of the people he leads.”

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of his country. Throughout Bush’s years in the White House, Putin consolidated control and, flush with oil revenue, undertook a military spending spree unseen since the Cold War. He also maneuvered to stymie U.S. strategic interests wherever possible, for example, forcing the U.S. military’s exit from the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan and, during the twilight years of the Bush administration, invading the Republic of Georgia, a U.S. ally which sought to shift its fortunes closer to those of Europe and perhaps even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Bush was not alone in falling for the Putin delusion. Like many Presidents, Barack Obama entered office blaming the failure of diplomacy more on his predecessors than on his adversaries. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took the lead in seeking to turn a new page with Moscow. Meeting her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov for the first time as Secretary, Clinton presented him with a (now much ridiculed) plastic “Reset” button. “We want to reset our relationship and so we will do it together,” she explained, adding, “We worked hard to get the right Russian word. Do you think we got it?” “You got it wrong,” Lavrov responded. Perhaps Lavrov was not simply referring to the translation, but rather the whole idea of an altruistic partnership. If the goal was to re-establish cooperative relations, it was undercut by the reality of Putin’s motivation, ambitions, and true goals, aided by the Obama’s administration’s naïve projection.

SOME GOT IT RIGHT

To say everyone got Putin wrong, though, is incorrect. Garry Kasparov, the former chess grandmaster turned Russian pro-democracy activist, voiced warnings to whoever would listen. Winter Is Coming is Kasparov’s compilation of those warnings and an explanation of how Putin has evolved from a former KGB lieutenant colonel into what Kasparov argues is the world’s greatest threat. That might sound like hyperbole, but Kasparov makes a persuasive case. “Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are (despite the latter’s name) stateless and without the vast resources and weapons of mass destruction Putin has at his fingertips,” he argues, adding, “The long-banished specter of nuclear annihilation has returned.” Yet, Russia is hardly the only such threat. Kasparov does not discuss China, North Korea, or Iran which could also pose the same theoretical threat. This may be largely because Kasparov separates the theoretical from the actual: China may bluster in the South China Sea, North Korea in the Sea of Japan, and Iran in the Persian Gulf, but through Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea, the first annexation by force attempted since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Putin appears willing to turn his bluster into reality.
WESTERN WEAKNESS

The irony of Putin’s rise is that he might never have become so powerful or consolidated such control had it not been for the naiveté, desperation, and greed of Western diplomats and their eagerness to put the Cold War behind them at any cost. “Putin, like other modern autocrats, had, and still has, an advantage the Soviet leadership could never have dreamed of: deep economic and political engagement with the free world,” Kasparov observes. And, he is right. Whether it was Europe’s willingness to become dependent on Russian gas or Western multinationals that sought to make their fortune with investments in Russia only to learn that when push came to shove, Putin’s interests trumped law. Here, Kasparov seeks to use Winter Is Coming to illustrate a greater lesson for Western policymakers from the rise of Putin, that is, “how two decades of Western retrenchment and retreat have encouraged autocrats like Putin and terrorist groups like ISIS to flourish around the world.” Given the knee-jerk embrace of engagement that has marked U.S. policy for the past decade and continues toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is a lesson that goes far beyond U.S. policy toward Russia.

Just as U.S. administrations often blame their predecessors for the failure of policy, the tendency among academics and diplomats is to attribute Russian behavior not to the Kremlin’s Manichean view of international relations but rather to an alleged lack of Western generosity upon the end of the Cold War. Kasparov counters this narrative too, noting: “The end of the Cold War presented an opportunity, not just for economic advancement but for a welcoming embrace among the world’s democratic powers.” Russia has remained powerful. It kept its nuclear arsenal, even as other former Soviet states forfeited theirs, and it inherited the Soviet Union’s permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council. President Bill Clinton diminished the U.S. military presence in Europe and, by encouraging the disarmament of other former Soviet states, ensured that Russia remained the dominant regional power. Kasparov speculates on this reality with what might have been had other approaches been taken. “Despite perpetual unfounded complaints about suffering humiliation at the hands of the victorious West, there was nothing in the way of reparations demanded by the winning side,” he notes, adding, “In fact, the United States and several other countries provided badly needed loan guarantees and other aid to Russia. . . . Russia was even paid for bringing its troops back from Germany.” Nor was there a purge of former Communist Party members akin to that which occurred with Nazi Party members following Germany’s World War II defeat or, more recently, the disqualification of
senior Baath Party members from participation in post-invasion Iraq as occurred after President Saddam Hussein’s fall and demise in 2003.

While the growing consensus in Washington (if not Baghdad) is that the de-Baathification process after Operation Iraqi Freedom was a mistake, Kasparov highlights what happens when little or no effort is undertaken to root out bureaucracies of repression. Indeed, he suggests, the problem may have been too much rather than too little reconciliation. “After decades of genocides, mass relocation and imprisonment, and totalitarian repression, it was decided to let bygones be bygones,” Kasparov observes. While diplomats can certainly suggest the logic to “avoiding witch hunts,” Kasparov notes that even that term is loaded, as it suggests unjust persecution rather than the meting out of justice based on evidence. Few officials considered how corrosive it might be to leave the Soviet security apparatus intact (albeit under a different name) if the goal was to encourage Russia’s political evolution or to facilitate its integration into a community of liberal Western democracies.

**HOW PUTIN GOT THERE**

*Winter Is Coming* provides an excellent history of Russia and, by extension, the former Soviet sphere, since the end of the Cold War. Kasparov is a fine writer, and the narrative flows, weaving a compelling discussion of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, diplomatic bargaining over the Ukraine, and the “invisible wars” in the Caucasus which went far beyond the Chechen conflict which, on occasion, erupted onto Western television screens. Beyond that, however, Kasparov presents a superior intellectual history, addressing the competition between the realism of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and those like the late U.S. Senator Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson (D-Washington) who sought a foreign policy grounded in the ideals of freedom, liberty, and democracy.

The core of *Winter Is Coming*, however, is the study of Boris Yeltsin’s fall followed by Putin’s rise. It is a tale less of ideology and more of greed. Vladimir Putin is essentially a corrupt man in a quest for power; his ideological underpinning is perhaps little more than hostility toward the West. Kasparov identifies no single turning point where Putin’s ascension to power became inevitable, but rather points to a confluence of events and policy decisions. President Ronald Reagan believed in the idea of “the moral superiority of individual freedom and the free market,” but President George H. W. Bush embraced “cautious pragmatism” that too often was willing to subvert liberty to shorter term convenience (hence, his famous 1 August 1991 “Chicken Kiev” speech in which he told Ukrainians that they should not push for independence from the Soviet Union). Putin’s power increased alongside the price of oil,
but Kasparov argues that his successful subjugation of the press really enabled his stranglehold. “Very early on in his first term as president,” Kasparov explains, “Putin learned that control of the Fourth Estate was essential to controlling the other three.” The Russian leader learned his lesson after Russian forces botched the rescue of the crew of the Kursk nuclear submarine after it sank during exercises in the Barents Sea, killing all 118 onboard. The accident had been preventable—it was caused by either faulty welding or poor training. Subsequent analysis showed that a couple of dozen submariners had survived the initial explosions and flooding, but had subsequently suffocated from a lack of oxygen. Rather than root out corruption and incompetence, Putin sought to silence those who would expose it.

While Kasparov focuses his narrative on Putin, policymakers might find in Winter Is Coming a cautionary tale not only about Russia but about other countries as well. After all, many other ambitious leaders have followed Putin’s basic strategy even as they maintained their own cultural or national patina. Putin’s evisceration of Russia’s nascent democracy was remarkably similar to the playbook used by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. In each case, the press became among the first but certainly not the last victims of the strongman’s ambition.6

While former Secretary of State Clinton defended the “Reset” in her 2014 memoir Hard Choices, many other officials grew to recognize Putin for what he was. In 2012, the U.S. Congress passed and President Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, imposing targeted financial and travel sanctions on human rights abusers within the Russian government. Named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who died in prison after exposing tax fraud within the Russian government, it replaced the 1974 Jackson–Vanik Amendment which had tied trade to respect for human rights and especially the right of emigration.7 But Kasparov argues that Washington’s attention to human rights in Russia was too little, too late, given the more than a decade of relative Western silence while Putin consolidated control. The same holds true for sanctions imposed in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Had the United States and Europe acted similarly after Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, Putin might have thought twice about attempting to retake Crimea.

A COMMON PROBLEM

Perhaps the only fault in Kasparov’s narrative is his omission of a solid assertion that the current noxious combination of greed and diplomatic naiveté is not confined to Russia, and runs even wider and deeper than he describes. Universities, think tanks, and perhaps even media outlets have become increasingly tempted by, if not reliant on, outside
funding. While each will deny a quid pro quo, both the Kurds (at the Center for a New American Security) and the Vietnamese (at the Center for Security and International Studies) have sought to leverage their largesse into sympathetic programming by the affected think tanks. The Chinese, meanwhile, sponsor a network of Confucius Institutes, and the Turkish religious thinker Fetullah Gülen has sponsored conferences and publications, if not broader programs, at universities ranging from Georgetown University to the University of North Texas. At the height of the oil boom, Saudi Arabia and Qatar spread around considerable sums of money to seed Islamic and Middle Eastern studies programs, most of which were sympathetic to their world view (Riyadh wasn’t known for funding professors studying Zionism, for example).

The Russians, too, have gotten in on the game. Ellen Tauscher, a former Democratic U.S. Representative from California who became Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security during President Obama’s first term, upon her exit from government service launched an initiative with former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov at the Atlantic Council, a prominent Washington think tank. In their 8 April 2013 press release announcing the program, Tauscher and Ivanov declared that they hoped to “help reframe U.S.–Russia relations and get past the Cold War-era nuclear legacy in our relationship, particularly the dominant paradigm of “mutual assured destruction.” The goal is to reconfigure the bilateral relationship towards “mutual assured stability” and refocus arms control and disarmament toward the development of reassuring measures, and thus help promote closer cooperation between Russia and the West.”

Neither Tauscher nor the Atlantic Council appeared to mind that the Kremlin had created their institutional partner—the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)—to serve as its representative in the non-governmental organization (NGO) world. The episode highlighted how the Kremlin has effectively used institutional proxies to influence Washington debates and deflect attention from Putin’s true agenda, which has been diametrically opposed to everything for which the “mutually assured stability” said it stood.

When Putin falls—and, many Russian activists beyond the scope of Winter Is Coming suggest that the realities of economic stagnation, declining oil prices, and an inability to co-opt as broadly in an era of tightening purse strings mean that the unthinkable could happen sooner than many diplomats acknowledge—and if he is not replaced by a deputy just as corrupt and megalomaniacal, the true extent of the Kremlin’s corruption of American academic and media institutions will become clear.
REFERENCES

1 Credit for making widespread such a designation can be given to Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).


5 For more on Putin’s move to control the media, see Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia’s Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).

