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# **Washington and Moscow: Confrontation or Cooperation?**

Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 135

**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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# Washington and Moscow: Confrontation or Cooperation?

*Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Behind the ongoing media frenzy, America seems deeply divided over whether to pursue a hard line with Russia or to cooperate with it. With Donald Trump favoring the latter course, Moscow “voted” for him in the 2016 elections. But the Kremlin’s cybernetic interference in the election has led to ongoing Russo-gate and efforts by President Trump’s foes to paint him as a Manchurian candidate.

As Trump replaces Obama’s misconceived policy of strategic patience with proactive strategic savvy, the question of US future policies remains open. Seeking answers requires a fundamental reexamination of Washington’s 21st century Middle East wars, where at every turn Russian-American relations formed the hidden context.

The story began in 2001-2002, when new presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin formed a successful partnership during the post 9/11 war against Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan – only to see it unravel over the course of the two superpowers’ interventions in the Middle East and Russia’s interference in Georgia and Ukraine.

Personality has played a key role in the vicissitudes of US-Russian relations. Contrary to his common image as a KGB “stone cold killer,” Putin has shown himself to be “a cold calculator of Russian national interests” (to use Henry Kissinger’s words), a Christian autocrat who, like the tsars earlier, uses terror selectively against enemies of the state. By contrast, Presidents Bush and Obama were primarily ideologically



driven in their Middle East wars, seeking democratic regime change for people living under oppressive dictatorships. Unfortunately, the fall of dictatorships in Iraq and Libya generated jihadist chaos and political disintegration and worsened Washington's relations with Moscow, which felt misled into supporting the Libyan intervention. The result was the intensification of Russian support for Bashar Assad's beleaguered regime in Syria.

In 2013, when Obama reneged on his chemical weapon red line in Syria, Putin got a first-hand indication of what "strategic patience" really meant. Thus, when Moscow's corrupt client, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, was overthrown by popular revolt, Putin responded with the 2014 bloodless invasion of Crimea. A year later he saved Assad with an unprecedented military intervention.

Given this less than exemplary record of US foreign policy, one can only hope that President Trump and his seasoned national security team can establish fruitful deal-making with Putin. Should Russo-gate lead to impeachment, however, American power will be dangerously weakened (as happened with Richard Nixon). This would significantly increase the likelihood of future confrontation with Moscow.

# Washington and Moscow: Confrontation or Cooperation?

*Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta*

“It is only one who is thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war who can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on.”

– *Sun Tzu*

## INTRODUCTION

On April 6, 2017, US President Donald J. Trump took the unprecedented step of launching a cruise missile strike against a Syrian air base in retaliation for Bashar Assad’s use of poison gas against civilians, including children and infants.

The strike came after a small US task force landed in eastern Syria with the stated goal of smashing Islamic State (ISIS). Until that point, Moscow believed Trump was amenable to leaving Assad temporarily in place, unlike his predecessor, whose nominal priority was regime change. After the missile strike, the Russians were left to wonder what Trump’s foreign policy really was.

Trump’s action was not just a response to Assad’s use of chemical weapons. It must be situated within the domestic controversy over

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Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election, including the theft and release of Democratic Party emails, and connections between the Trump campaign and Russian entities. The fierce post-election debate over Syria is also linked to the unprecedentedly harsh debate over whether America's policies towards Russia and Syria should involve confrontation or cooperation. The missile strike did not answer that question for either Moscow or Washington, but in March 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that American strategic patience was over with regard to both North Korea and Iran.<sup>1</sup>

On May 19, 2017, Trump's Secretary of Defense, Ret. General James Mattis, declared a new strategy aimed at eliminating ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. How will the new strategy affect Washington's relationship with Moscow in the Middle East as well as the continuous conflict in Ukraine? Answering this question requires a fundamental reexamination of US foreign policy over the past two decades, where at every turn Russian-American relations formed the hidden context.

## **THE CLINTON AND BUSH YEARS**

At the turn of this century, new elected Russian president Vladimir Putin genuinely sought to enlist US support for a second Chechen war. Terrorism was the hook.

President Bill Clinton and his principal Russian hand, Strobe Talbott, met Putin in September 1999 at a summit in New Zealand. Clinton would recall how avidly Putin thanked him for supporting Russia, despite rising international criticism of the Chechen bloodshed. But when the US president urged humanitarian measures, Putin drew a map on a napkin, detailing how recent actions in Dagestan represented not just a resumption of the war, but "the beginning of an invasion of Russia." Nor was it just "Chechen bandits" who were involved, "but the forces of international Islamic terrorism."<sup>2</sup>

Putin knew about the al-Qaeda attacks against US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in the fall of 1998, which had killed 224 people. Thirteen days after the attacks, Washington had launched retaliatory cruise missiles at al-Qaeda targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. Putin's problem, however, was that al-Qaeda was not fully on America's radar. Saddam Hussein

was still perceived as the main threat. With bipartisan support, Clinton had signed the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, authorizing regime change.

Talbott saw Putin masterfully calculating Russia's national interests and articulating them to his American "partners." Henry Kissinger, too, viewed Putin as "a cold calculator of Russia's national interests," a character out of Dostoevsky with "a great sense of connection, an inward connection, to Russian history."<sup>3</sup>

### ***Bush and Putin: The 2001 Slovenia Summit***

The partnership between the two new leaders, Putin and George W. Bush, was entirely unexpected. It arose on June 16, 2001, at their very first summit in Slovenia. At the meeting, the presidents were accompanied by their National Security Advisers, Condoleezza Rice and Vladimir Rushailo, respectively.

The summit featured three significant events. First, Bush asked Putin, "I have to know whom you trust. Who is the person we should turn to if there are sensitive matters between us?" "Sergei Ivanov," answered Putin, naming his Minister of Defense. "For me it will be Condi," said Bush. Thus began an asymmetric relationship. While the Russian leader named the usual channel, his defense minister, the American decided to rely on his National Security Advisor and excluded his Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

Then, with the meeting underway, as Rice noted, Putin suddenly broke off discussion of an arms control treaty and delivered a stark warning. Referring to Pakistan's support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and how they all were "funded by Saudi Arabia," he predicted that "[I]t was only a matter of time until it resulted in a major catastrophe" for the US.

"Putin ... was right," Rice was to recall. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were time bombs that would explode on September 11, 2001. She added, "I was taken aback by Putin's alarm and vehemence."<sup>4</sup> After the summit, Bush and Rice kept these events close to their vests. Putin kept his promise, and sensitive issues were thereafter discussed by his minister of defense and Rice.

Bush also asked Putin, “Is it true your mother gave you a cross that you had blessed in Jerusalem?” Confirming this, Putin launched into a story of how the cross had been lost during a fire in his dacha and was the only thing he cared about. He dramatically mimed how a worker opened his hand and revealed it.<sup>5</sup> To Rice, the story was “syrupy,”<sup>6</sup> but Bush, a born-again Christian who began all his cabinet meetings with a prayer, was clearly moved.<sup>7</sup> Asked later by reporters if he trusted Putin, the president famously replied, “Yes, I looked the man in the eye ... and was able to get a sense of his soul.”<sup>8</sup>

For years thereafter, most dismissed this remark as naiveté if not outright ignorance; former Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated the usual view that Putin was a “stone cold killer.”<sup>9</sup> But this commonplace summation ignores the unusual complexity of Vladimir Putin.

He is not a totalitarian psychopath and mass killer like Josef Stalin. Putin instead resembles the Christian tsarist autocrats of the past, or their proconsuls, who used violence selectively against those who threatened the interests of the Russian state. To the late Mikhail Gorbachev’s principal adviser, Alexander Yakovlev, Putin was the reincarnation of the tsarist minister Peter Stolypin. A dedicated economic reformer, Stolypin zealously punished rebellious peasants and revolutionaries in 1905 with the “Stolypin necktie” (hanging). Putin’s assassins, however, have focused on journalists. Between 2000 and 2009, nearly 20 journalists have been killed; only one of their murderers was brought to justice.<sup>10</sup>

Like the tsars, Putin is also a devout Christian. It was on this basis that he and Bush developed not only a partnership, but for a time, a warm friendship, including repeated visits to each other’s homes. Bush later recalled how the Russian president showed him the private chapel in his *dacha* where he sees a confessor weekly.<sup>11</sup> In mid-November 2001, visiting Bush’s Crawford ranch, Putin was even invited to a Presidential Daily Briefing, carefully prepared to exclude sensitive material.<sup>12</sup>

Was Putin’s religiosity just a show for Bush? Our interviews with Russian believers and clergy in Russia, Europe, and the Middle East confirmed that his embrace of religious orthodoxy is genuine. He is supportive of conservative family values and sensitive to the suffering of Middle East Christians. He is also very friendly to Israel, and is the only leader in Russia’s long history to have visited Jerusalem twice.<sup>13</sup>

### ***What Happened to Putin's 9/11 Warning?***

Why was Putin's 2001 warning to Bush of a coming terror attack ignored? Hadn't CIA director George Tenet learned from Putin's FSB that a "key Chechen Islamic terrorist leader, Ibn Kattab, has promised some 'very big news' to his troops"?"<sup>14</sup>

The answer began to emerge in one of the first conversations between National Security Advisor Rice and National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Richard Clarke. "As I briefed Rice," wrote Clarke, "her facial expressions gave me the impression that she had never heard the term [al-Qaeda] before." He concluded she was unaware of the "new, post-Cold War security issues" of Islamic terrorism and asymmetric warfare.<sup>15</sup> Like Tenet, Clarke was a holdover from the Clinton administration, where he had been a valued member of the Principals Committee. But he was downgraded by Rice to meeting only with their deputies.

"*Tui znaesh nas* [You know us]," Putin would say to Rice, referring to her role as a Russian specialist.<sup>16</sup> He surely knew about her closeness to the president. On his own visits to Bush's Crawford ranch, he must have noticed she was a regular presence there.

Rumsfeld certainly did, writing that she lacked "senior level experience" and "reinforced Bush's instincts rather than challenging or questioning them." In his view, she was "almost always ... the last person the president talked to on any given national security issue," and "used that proximity and authority to press for action in the president's name."<sup>17</sup>

As he met with Bush, Putin wondered why, as with Clinton earlier, the issue of jihadist terrorism was on the back burner, even after the al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole on the eve of the November 2000 presidential election. Bush's Secretary of the Treasury, Paul O'Neill, provided one good answer: Iraq. Ten days after the inauguration, O'Neill stated that "[g]etting Hussein was now the administration's focus, that much was already clear."<sup>18</sup> Most NSC meetings were devoted to planning regime change in Baghdad, including oil field contracts for foreign suitors.<sup>19</sup>

When Clarke argued at deputies' meetings for "pressure on the Taliban and al-Qaeda" and the need to target Osama bin Laden, deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz "fidgeted and scowled." "Well, I just don't

understand why we are beginning by talking about this one man bin Laden,” he said. When Clarke responded that al-Qaeda posed an “immediate and serious threat to the US,” Wolfowitz replied, “There are others that do as well ... Iraqi terrorism, for example.”<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, repeated warnings by the intelligence community failed to alarm Rice, even as Tenet told “everyone who would listen the system was ‘blinking red.’”<sup>21</sup> On July 10, 2001, Tenet and Clarke went to Rice with Cofer Black, the large, forceful head of the CIA’s counterterrorism center. All three demanded action as an al-Qaeda attack was imminent. “What should we do?” Rice inquired. Replied Black, “This country needs to go on a war footing *now!*”

In 1999, Black, another Clinton holdover, recalled how he had also apprised National Security Advisor Sandy Berger of possible attacks by al-Qaeda during the 2000 New Year celebration. Berger at once mobilized meetings and oversaw warnings not only to embassies and military bases worldwide but also to police and federal law enforcement agencies throughout America. Rice did nothing.

Stranger yet was what happened in Genoa. Meeting at the G8 Summit on July 20-22, Bush and Putin, now committed to partnership, had a happy reunion that was marred by a warning to the CIA from Russia’s FSB of a possible al-Qaeda aerial attack. Italy closed its airspace and placed a missile battery near the summit, and Bush was said to have slept aboard an American aircraft carrier.<sup>22</sup> Yet the 9/11 Commission, investigating the tragedy in 2004, found that Rice did not make “any special effort to discuss terrorist threats with Bush ... it was not a matter of special interest to either of them that summer.”<sup>23</sup>

Tenet had taken comfort that, although he and Clarke had been blocked from the president by Rice, Bush was still receiving alarming Presidential Daily Briefings (PDBs). So it was on August 6, 2001, when Mike Morell served as the CIA debriefer for a PDB entitled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the US”.

Bush read the PDB while vacationing at his Crawford ranch. As Morell later admitted, “I did not treat it as a ‘hair on fire’ or action-forcing piece, and the president did not read it that way either.”<sup>24</sup> Why not? It may have been

because the president was, in fact, overwhelmed with PDBs related to bin Laden. From January 20 to September 10, he had received 40 of them.

Rice, who was usually present at Crawford, was absent on this occasion. She was preparing a September 11 speech on missile defense. “To be fair,” she later admitted, “I did not dwell on the terrorist threat.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***Decoding the 9/11 Coverup***

The 450-word August 6 PDB is one of the most controversial national security documents in US history. A few passages remain classified even today. A terrific struggle between the 9/11 Commission and the White House even occurred over the title of the document. In introducing the memo to the press, the president’s spokesman, Ari Fleischer, left out of the title the all-important preposition “in” [the US].<sup>26</sup>

Perpetuating the coverup, Rice testified and Bush wrote that this particular PDB came in response to the president’s request. Both Tenet and Morell, however, recalled that it was a CIA in-house memo initiated by Morell.<sup>27</sup> But Richard Clarke’s testimony that Rice had ignored warnings was supported by some of the 9/11 Commission members, especially Republican John Lehman. A former NSC aide to Kissinger, Lehman remarked that his old boss “would have paid much more attention,” and that Rice “had failed to understand that the world had changed radically ... terrorism was the great and growing threat of the new century. She was focused instead on missile defense.”<sup>28</sup>

Rice survived her investigation by the Commission. Heading it was her close friend and coauthor, Prof. Philip Zelkow, who used his position on the Commission to exonerate her and blame Clarke and Tenet.

The 9/11 tragedy actually began two days earlier in Afghanistan, when al-Qaeda suicide bombers murdered Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of an anti-Taliban militia known as the Northern Alliance and viewed as a possible future president of Afghanistan. Morell briefed Bush on Massoud’s death on September 10, but there were no blinking red lights and no orders to close airports. The 9/11 attacks then unfolded with all their horror and drama and the deaths of almost three thousand Americans.



### ***Putin's Reaction to 9/11***

Putin was the first foreign leader to reach out to Bush, informing him that he had declared a minute of silence in Russia to show solidarity with the US. He had already reassured Rice that he had not upgraded Russia's military readiness in response to America's move to Defcon 3. "I want you to know," he told Bush, "that in this struggle, we will stand together."<sup>29</sup>

The war in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001. With the attack on the US, Article 5 of the 1949 NATO Treaty was invoked for the first time, and all NATO members were obliged to defend the US. Putin told Bush, "Russia [will] be doing more for the US in Afghanistan than its traditional allies."<sup>30</sup>

Remaining in constant touch with the president by phone, Putin opened Russian air space to the US Air Force and used his influence with former Soviet republics in Central Asia to secure entry into Afghanistan for US troops. He made provisions for US cargo carriers to supply American troops and ordered his generals to share their own 1979 experiences fighting in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

Bush's wartime performance sent the president's ratings skyward. Meanwhile, Rice was convinced that Putin saw the struggle against Islamist terrorism "as the new epicenter of Russia's relationship with the US, [where] principles, strategy and tactics" would be shared.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Apocalyptic Forces of Gog and Magog: On to Iraq!***

But Bush's Iraq obsession did not dissipate. A day after 9/11, he took Clarke aside. "See if Saddam did this ... if he's linked in any way." "But, Mr. President, al-Qaeda did this," said an incredulous Clarke. "I know, I know, but ... Just look. I want to know, any shred."<sup>33</sup>

Nine days after the fall of Kabul, on November 21, Bush secretly instructed Rumsfeld to update the war plan for Iraq.<sup>34</sup> This was despite the fact that the major problem still had not been solved: the CIA had unearthed no suitable "shreds."

Enter Philip Zelikow once again. At Rice's request, he laid out a theory justifying preemptive attacks against another country even if a good reason was not apparent.

This was not discussed with Putin, and the Russian president frankly disagreed with Bush's view that Saddam represented a threat to America. British intelligence scraped up faulty indicators that Saddam possessed WMD, but Putin found them unconvincing.

Nor was he alone in this view. At a January 20, 2003 meeting of the UN Security Council, even dependable allies said they believed nothing justified an intervention in Iraq. France's Jacques Chirac was horrified when Bush disclosed to him that his war plans were related to fighting the apocalyptic evil forces of Gog and Magog.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Putin held his peace.

No one can deny the genuine idealism underlying Bush's desire to liberate the Iraqi people from oppression. Moreover, after 9/11, more than 70 percent of the US public believed in Saddam's complicity with bin Laden. Yet in Clarke's words: "Having been attacked by al-Qaeda, for us now to go bombing Iraq in response would be like our invading Mexico after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor."<sup>36</sup>

On March 17, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Ivanov cautioned President Bush "not to take steps that might threaten the unity of the anti-terrorist coalition."<sup>37</sup> Eventually Putin likely concluded what Clarke did: "Bush and his principals had no real interest in complicated analysis; on the issues that they cared about, they already knew the answers, it was received wisdom."<sup>38</sup>

The invasion of Iraq began on March 20, 2003. Four days thereafter, Putin called Bush. "This is going to be awfully difficult for you," he said. "I feel bad for you."

"Why?" asked Bush.

"Because there's going to be enormous human suffering," replied Putin.

"No, we've got a good plan," replied Bush. "But thank you for your concern."<sup>39</sup>

Putin would later assert that there had been no good reasons for a military invasion. The existence of WMD and the ties between Saddam and al-Qaeda were murky at best. Yet, as revealed in a 2002 Downing Street Memo and later the 2016 Chilcot Report, President Bush, seeking justification for his war, discussed with British Prime Minister Tony Blair the possibility of even provoking a confrontation. As Bush explained, this could be accomplished by “flying U2 reconnaissance aircraft planes with fighter cover over Iraq, but painted in UN colors.” If Saddam fired on them, “he would be in breach of UN resolutions.” In the end the idea was rejected.<sup>40</sup>

Bush did receive some good advice. The Saudi position was that the US-led invasion “should be quick and decisive,” and the US troop presence in Iraq should be “small and reduced rapidly.”<sup>41</sup> But with Saddam’s death came what Secretary of State Colin Powell had predicted: an explosion of civil war between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Rapid departure was not possible. America became the long-term occupier of a country whose residents were united in only one thing: their hatred for their “liberators.”

The costs of the Iraq war between 2003-2011 were later calculated to be between two to over four trillion dollars, with 4,488 American servicemen killed and 190,000 lives lost overall.<sup>42</sup> Still worse, the officials of Saddam’s defeated Baath Party merged with Sunni extremists and al-Qaeda offshoots to create further havoc in the guise of the “Islamic State.”

When the full extent of the Iraq debacle became known, it was the norm to blame Vice President Dick Cheney; his Chief of Staff, Lewis Libby; Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz. They all share the blame with Bush, but the lion’s share lies with Rice. As Rumsfeld recalls, she, with the aid of some misguided academicians, pushed for an impossible policy – to build a “democratic Iraq.”<sup>43</sup> Rice also fought her NSC rivals, Powell, Tenet, and Rumsfeld, with intrigues worthy of the Kremlin leaders she had once studied.

After several years of quagmire in Iraq, Bush resolutely deployed new forces under the command of General David Petraeus, a military intellectual whose surge defeated the Sunni uprising and provided a temporary victory. Unfortunately, President Barack Obama, seeking re-election in 2012, withdrew all forces from Iraq, snatching an election victory from the jaws of Iraq’s defeat.

### *The Unravelling of the US-Russia Partnership*

As early as August 2001, two months after the Putin-Bush Slovenia summit, Rumsfeld found Putin interested in the option of closer ties with NATO. “Russia,” he complained, “is being pushed out of the system of civilized Western defense, [and] NATO had not been sufficiently receptive to including Russia in its collective defense strategy.”<sup>44</sup>

But in 2004, Putin’s perceptions began to change dramatically. The key concern was that America had promoted admission of countries into NATO, bringing the alliance to Russia’s very doorstep. Both Bush and Rice noticed that Putin began to talk about Russia’s “encirclement” while Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev spoke of Moscow’s privileged sphere of influence.

During that year, the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine, respectively, brought to the fore two pro-Western leaders, Mikhail Saakashvili in Georgia and Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. The loser in Ukraine was Putin’s preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovich.

In his second term, Bush found himself facing a different Putin. He noticed that the Russian president, though polite as ever, was now competitive, even bragging that his Labrador was “bigger, stronger and faster than Barney,” Bush’s Scottish terrier. Bush also found Putin becoming “aggressive abroad and more defensive about his record at home.” He refused to be lectured about Russia’s lack of progress in democracy, and his charm or aggressiveness, the president also noted, seemed to rise or fall with the price of oil.<sup>45</sup> Putin now gave Bush reasons “to revise my opinion” as a man Americans could trust.<sup>46</sup>

A turning point came in 2007 when both Georgia and Ukraine applied to join NATO. Both were turned down by France and Germany, worried that NATO could be drawn into a war with Russia.

Still viewing Bush “as a decent man and someone with whom he could do business,” Putin’s view of the Iraq war had evolved. He recognized that Bush’s invasion had provided the ideal chaotic conditions for the rise of Islamist insurgency. Nor was he shy in his

criticism. Washington, he charged, with its “uncontested military power,” had created “a unipolar” world” with “more wars and regional conflicts” caused by the “almost uncontained, hyper-use of force.” He also asked, “Why was NATO expanding aggressively towards a non-threatening Russia?”<sup>27</sup>

### ***Saakashvili “Like Saddam Hussein”***

The reckoning with Georgia came about in 2008. Putin used the 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo as precedent for Russia's supporting the pro-Russian provinces South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which sought to secede from Georgia. Many of their citizens had already been issued Russian passports.

In early August 2008, Bush and Putin met for lunch in Beijing at the Summer Olympics. Putin had already set a trap for the Georgian leader. Thirty minutes after Saakashvili began to quell rioting in the South Ossetian capitol, the Russian army poured into Georgia. Meanwhile, Putin’s navy descended on Abkhazia, restoring to Russian use an important former Soviet port.

Putin’s story to Bush was that “Volunteers are being gathered in the region, and it’s very hard to withhold them from taking part ... A real war is going on!”

“You’ve made a serious mistake,” said Bush.

Medvedev had already explained to Bush that “Saakashvili was like Saddam Hussein.” Putin now told Bush Saakashvili was “a war criminal who had provoked Russia.” The US invasion of Iraq was being used as justification for Russia’s carving out chunks of Georgia.

“I’ve been warning you Saakashvili is hot-blooded,” Bush lamented.

“I am hot-blooded too,” said Putin.

“No, Vladimir,” said Bush. “You’re cold-blooded.”<sup>48</sup>

Defeated, Saakashvili lost the next election to a pro-Russia candidate and ended up in exile in Ukraine. Georgia did not join NATO.

## **PUTIN AND THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY**

In November 2008, Barack Hussein Obama was elected president of the US. Putin must have soon realized that, unlike Bush, a sort of Christian soul mate and believer in conservative family values, Obama supported the full range of liberal social issues. Particularly offensive to him was Obama's support of the LGBT community. A Judo black belt who reveled in manly, daredevil pursuits and being photographed bare-chested, Putin would later be repelled by Obama's sending an LGBT delegation to the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

Within the Kremlin, the new American president was viewed as a naive, leftist radical; deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin even referred to him as "comrade Obama."<sup>49</sup> Putin also learned of the White House's new, politically correct lexicon: "radical Islamists" had been replaced with "extremists" while "terrorist attacks" were "workplace violence."

Putin soon realized that Obama's approach to the Middle East was wholly different from Bush's and his own. Obama supported the uprisings of the "Arab Spring", whereas to Putin, any disorder either at home or abroad was anathema.<sup>50</sup> Putin must have also discerned that Obama, like Bush, was driven by ideology. But while Bush's worldview was underpinned by his Christian beliefs and convictions about a democratic, omnipotent America, Obama was riveted by the illusion of an Islamic renewal and a democratic "Arab Spring." By helping Egypt and Libya cast off their rulers, he believed America would avoid being on "the wrong side of history."<sup>51</sup>

### ***The Libya Intervention and Its Consequences***

In mid-March 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Ambassador Susan Rice, and Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, made the case for a NATO military intervention in Libya. Although President Obama made the final call, the prime mover was Clinton. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, supported cautiously by a few other officials, was firmly opposed to the measure, as in his view, America's core national interests were not at stake.<sup>52</sup> Yet the intervention decision was made on Hillary's urging that "Qaddafi's troops were now a hundred miles from Benghazi and closing fast. We were looking at a humanitarian catastrophe."<sup>53</sup>

Even before the decision, Obama had signed a “finding,” a secret order authorizing covert US operations to arm the Libyan rebels against Qaddafi.<sup>54</sup> A special liaison to the rebels had been appointed: Ambassador Christopher Stevens.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, Russian cooperation at the UN Security Council was deemed necessary, which Clinton got through prevarication. Ambassador Rice explained that the intervention, a no-fly zone, and NATO logistical support were urgently needed to save civilians from being massacred. In the end, Russia proved receptive to a no-fly zone and humanitarian rescue. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Hillary, “We can’t vote in favor. But we will abstain and it will pass.”<sup>56</sup>

As in the cases of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, and the 2008 intervention in Georgia, Kremlin decision-makers were again embroiled in international crises and internal regime politicking. The Kremlin’s struggles continued as NATO air strikes began.

Then something unprecedented happened. Russia’s ambassador to Libya, Vladimir Chamov, sent a cable to Medvedev complaining that Moscow’s abstention not only spelled the loss of a lucrative ally, but was also a “betrayal of Russia’s [financial] interests.” As Medvedev remained unimpressed, Chamov rushed to Moscow and aired his views with Putin’s supporters in the Moscow newspapers. Medvedev was now open to criticism; bureaucratic politics, as before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, continued through the lower levels of government.

The ambassador had a point. By backing the Libyan arms embargo, Russia had lost \$4 billion in arms deals. Its companies had potentially lost hundreds of millions of dollars in oil and gas contracts, along with a 2.2 billion euro contract to build a railroad.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, as Gates noted, Putin wasn’t fooled for long. The bombing and destruction of Libya’s air defenses soon revealed NATO’s true intention: regime change.

This was subsequently confirmed when FSB analysts read Clinton’s declassified correspondence and hacked her correspondence with Sid Blumenthal. Demonstrated therein was a conspicuous absence of humanitarian concerns. Discussed instead were money, oil, and power, along with the French fear of a new Libyan currency threatening the franc in northern Africa.

Putin was beyond furious. In Gates's words, "Convinced they had been tricked, the Russians would subsequently block with 'brick walls' any future resolutions aimed at deposing Russia's last Middle East client, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, in Syria."<sup>58</sup> In mid-December 2011, Putin delivered a four-hour diatribe, accusing the US of direct involvement in the dictator's death. "All the world saw him being killed, all bloodied. Is that democracy?" Putin asked. "And who did it? Drones, including American ones ... Then commandos ... brought in so-called opposition and militants. And killed him without trial."<sup>59</sup> He then turned his wrath on Clinton, blaming her for both the Libya debacle and fomenting street demonstrations against him during the December 12, 2011 parliamentary elections. She had "set the tone," he accused, and given "a signal" to the demonstrators.<sup>60</sup>

Nearly a year later, on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, a well-planned attack by al-Qaeda local affiliates took the lives of Ambassador Stevens and three other Americans at the secret Benghazi "consulate," revealing its presence to the world. Vying for the presidency with Obama, Governor Mitt Romney sensed a new opportunity. "Russia," he declared, "is without question our number one geopolitical foe." Meanwhile, unaware of an open microphone, Obama promised outgoing President Medvedev that "After my [re]election I [will] have more flexibility." Medvedev promised to pass this information to Putin.<sup>61</sup> Russia's "vote" was consequently, if unenthusiastically, for Obama.<sup>62</sup>

Obama was not slow, however, to grasp that the Benghazi attack jeopardized his election slogans "Osama is dead" and "al-Qaeda is defeated." A coverup was necessary, and the decision was made to blame the terror attack on a California-produced anti-Muslim video. Communications adviser Ben Rhodes provided guidance: the administration must "underscore that these protests [against the video] did not represent "a broader failure of [our] policy."<sup>63</sup> Susan Rice obligingly delivered these talking points to the TV networks.

Congressional committee hearings on Benghazi became a favored pastime for FSB agents in Washington as well as analysts in Moscow. Gradually they discovered at least part of the truth, as, for example, when Senator Rand Paul questioned Clinton about the transfer of weapons from Benghazi to Turkey. "To Turkey?" asked Hillary, her



voice suddenly jumping an octave. “I will have to take that question for the record. Nobody has ever raised that with me ... Well, Senator, you have to direct the question to the agency [CIA] that ran the annex. I will see what information is available.”<sup>64</sup> Paul was onto something. The true function of the Benghazi compound was gun-running for the Libyan and later the Syrian rebels.

Ambassador Stevens had worked with Abdelhakim Belhadj, leader of the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, in facilitating shipments to Turkey. There, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s full knowledge, the CIA had been vetting and delivering them to rebel groups in Syria.<sup>65</sup> Through more Benghazi discoveries, Putin was also able to discern that his man in Syria was now in Obama’s crosshairs.

### *The Syrian-Ukrainian Linkage*

Early in 2012, reports surfaced that Syria had large stockpiles of chemical weapons. In August 2012, Obama issued a stern warning that moving or mixing chemical agents would be a red line for the US.<sup>66</sup> Doubtless he never expected it would be crossed. But in early 2013, evidence emerged that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons repeatedly, killing hundreds of civilians. Now, seeking to punish Assad, Obama sent five destroyers to Syria’s shores bent on a major missile strike.

Despite definitive pronouncements from Washington regarding the origins of the attacks, Putin denied that Assad was the real culprit. “They say they have proof,” he challenged. “Well, let them show it to the United Nations inspectors and the Security Council.” He went on to assert that the attack was “nothing more than a provocation by those who want to drag other countries into the Syrian conflict, and who want to win the support of powerful members of the international arena, especially the United States.” Meanwhile, he was prepared to defend the regime together with his ally, Iran.

Faced with this tough Russian response, Obama backed away from his red line, allowing Putin to broker a deal through which Assad’s chemical weapons would be removed by Russia. But despite general relief, there were serious consequences. Failure to act was, according to US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, “a blow to American credibility.”<sup>67</sup>

That same year, bolstered by the general perception of Obama as a paper tiger, Putin busied himself with an intervention of his own. By 2010, his puppet, Viktor Yanukovich, had finally come to power in Kiev. Putin helpfully took a variety of steps to assist his campaign, including twice shutting off the gas to Ukraine and Central Europe. Nevertheless, by the fall of 2013, the smell of corruption, together with the Orange Revolution, once more permeated Ukraine.

When Yanukovich yielded to Kremlin pressure not to accept a nearly negotiated association agreement with the EU, a spark caught fire. Gathering in Kiev's Maidan Square, the protesters' cries of "Yanukovich must go" echoed Cairo's earlier "Mubarak must go." As in Libya, the climax came as pro-Kremlin snipers shot into the crowd and killed dozens of demonstrators. The demonstrators armed themselves and fought back. Amidst revolutionary fever, the parliament voted to remove Yanukovich.

Equating revolution in Kiev with an illegal "coup," Putin realized that not only Yanukovich's life but Russia's continued rental of the naval base in Sevastopol – home of Russia's prize Black Sea Fleet – was again in doubt, as it had been under Yushchenko. Ordering his FSB and military to "save the life of the Ukrainian president," Putin told his colleagues that "We are forced to begin the work to bring Crimea back into Russia."<sup>68</sup>

Typically, Obama procrastinated on imposing sanctions while denying Ukraine defensive weapons. Russia was, after all, helping him with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA] nuclear treaty with Iran, his major project in the Middle East. Was he aware of Moscow's major interest in the nuclear deal – the sale to Tehran of arms and nuclear technology?

With Obama still practicing "strategic patience," Putin undertook a proxy war in eastern Ukraine, while claiming that Russian troops were not in the country. America began to witness a new type of warfare, courtesy Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, whereby "a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."<sup>69</sup>

### *The Tussle Over Syria*

Putin's Syrian intervention was limited to areas around the port of Tartus and the Latakia air base, both heavily upgraded by Russia. His aim was not a full occupation, but a gradual expansion of a strategic corridor from Damascus to Aleppo. He did not fear US repercussions. Obama's 2013 red line back-step had convinced him the president would be passive in the face of aggression. One hour before the intervention began, Obama was haughtily advised to clear the air spaces. Putin did not attempt to conceal his contempt.

Besides protecting Russia's heavy investments in Syria, Putin was still very much concerned with the more than 2,000 militants from Chechnya and elsewhere who were fighting in Syria, preferring to fight them there rather than in his homeland. He viewed it as in Russia's national interest to prevent Syria's falling into Islamist hands, as the death of Assad could plunge the country into chaos.

Putin wrestled with the fact that, while Assad had been loyal to him, he had no particular love for this dictator who had killed so many of his own people. The main problem was, who could replace him? Among battling warlords, Assad seemed the only guarantor of stability – something always of extreme importance to Putin. He was firmly resolved that Obama's policies were not going to turn Syria into a jihadist paradise as they had Libya.

It was time for Putin to turn his attention to the US presidential campaign. He knew that if Clinton won the 2016 presidential race, her Syria policies would likely follow the path charted by one of her principal advisers, Michael Morell. Advocating a robust proxy war in Syria aimed at effecting regime change, Morell's approach can be summed up as follows: 1) Assad must go; 2) cooperation with Russia is impossible. If necessary, Washington should covertly engage in killing Russians and Iranians in Syria through rebel proxies as it did in Afghanistan; and 3) an alliance with "moderate" rebels (if any could be found) was necessary to defeat Assad, but extremists could be used if necessary.

For Putin, the deciding factor was surely Morell's open advocacy of "killing Russians" in Syria.<sup>70</sup> The clear choice in the election, therefore, was Trump, who had expressed a desire for a new relationship with

Russia. Morell's sentiments, meanwhile, were manifest in that he repeatedly attacked Trump during the campaign as an "unwitting agent of the Russian Federation" and "a threat to our national security."<sup>71</sup>

Russian analysts, as noted by the journal *Sputnik*, had by this time observed a "catfight" in Washington between the CIA, the Pentagon, and the State Department over policies towards Syria.<sup>72</sup> While the Pentagon was interested in fighting ISIS, the State Department, together with the CIA, placed the major emphasis on deposing Assad.

The reason Putin knew this may have been because one of the key opponents of this State-CIA goal was Obama's former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, General Mike Flynn. Flynn's first trip to Russia was in 2014, when he became the first US military intelligence officer ever allowed into GRU headquarters. There he briefed the entire staff on leadership. (This was, in fact, quite normal, as the US had maintained an ongoing military-to-military relationship with Russia for decades to cooperate on various issues.)

In December 2015, the general attended a dinner for the *Russia Today* TV program in Moscow, where, whether by chance or design, he was seated next to Putin. He quickly discovered from the discussion at the table that Putin "has no respect for the United States leadership."<sup>73</sup> Not for the United States, but the leadership." Neither, in fact, did Flynn. By now he had lost his job over his differences with Obama over the war in Syria.

Two months after his dinner with Putin, Flynn joined the Trump campaign, obviously bringing with him his strong disagreement with Obama's policy of arming jihadist rebels to unseat Assad.

### ***Intervening in the US Elections***

American officials have long lobbied the Kremlin for their favored presidential candidate. Flynn was likely no exception. Former Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin recorded that during close US presidential elections, there were full debates in the Kremlin about whom to "vote" for. The preferred candidate was whichever contender was less menacing for Moscow and had the greater potential to open a new era of partnership. Attempts at election tampering, however, went in both directions.

Given prior precedent, Flynn, Trump's initial choice as NSA, did not do anything out of the ordinary by communicating with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak. After his firing by Trump, the public learned of his genuine errors: unreported financial payments from both Russia and Turkey, and prevarication with Vice President Pence over whether or not he had discussed the lifting of sanctions with Kislyak. But the new, and really unsettling, aspect of Russian interference was the use of cybernetic warfare, above all the hacking of Hillary Clinton's emails.

Flynn was reluctantly fired by Trump and replaced by General H.R. McMaster. Such was the situation on April 6, 2017, when a new sarin attack on Syrian civilians seemed to change the course of events.

## CONCLUSION

As Barbara Tuchman observed, "The contemporary [historian] has no perspective; everything is in the foreground and appears the same size. Little matters loom big and great matters are sometimes missed because their outlines cannot be seen."<sup>74</sup> Only in reviewing the past do we have the perspective to comprehend historical errors, patterns of repeated mistakes, failed or successful policies, and attributes of character as tools to assist future decision-making.

Doubtless what has been disclosed above is no cause for cheer. Whereas Vietnam was the American foreign policy disaster of the 20th century, Iraq so far takes that honor in this one. But none of Washington's Middle East wars in the 21st century thus far have achieved the grand goals to which American leaders have aspired.

Thousands of lives have been lost and trillions of dollars have been spent. In 2008, the war in Iraq nearly wrecked the US economy, spurring a great recession as well as the disastrous national debt. In Afghanistan, the US is losing to the Taliban after nearly two decades of military engagement. If there is any solace to be found, it lies in the advent of a new generation of determined military leaders, notably Generals James Mattis, H.R. McMaster, and John Kelly. They have now arrived at the principal seats of power. As it turns out, US military leaders have proved more astute at fighting these wars than their elected leaders have in planning them.

In his 1998 book *Dereliction of Duty*, NSA General McMaster demonstrated that the Vietnam tragedy was not just a product of historical or ideological forces but of Washington's flawed decision-making process. The same applies to the recent Middle East wars. Interventions undertaken without congressional approval, based on flawed, even cooked intelligence, as well as whitewashes and coverups that corrupted the American system of checks and balances, have not just had detrimental consequences, but have in some instances disturbingly resembled Soviet transgressions of the past. Indeed, Washington's forays around international law appear to have provided justification for Russia's 21st century trespasses in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine.

American presidents do not seem to consider the costs of their invasions when they are planning them. This is in contrast to the Kremlin, which under Putin has always weighed the costs in blood and money with great care when contemplating an intervention. Putin, unlike most Soviet leaders past, has opted for only limited interventions, while striving to carve regions with people he can trust not to resist.

Most injurious to US interests has been Obama's doctrine of "strategic patience," which projected weakness and procrastination. If recent events tell us anything, it is that President Trump seeks to be the anti-Obama and once again project a message of peace through strength. His strike at Assad's airport, use of the largest conventional bomb in the US arsenal in a remote region of Afghanistan, deployment of a naval task force to North Korea's shore, and new strategy aimed at destroying ISIS are designed not only to project strength, but to quiet critics at home who seek to destroy his presidency with charges that he or members of his team have had nefarious dealings with Russia.

Two presidents, Richard Nixon in his first term and Ronald Reagan, succeeded in their foreign policy by creating perceptions of unpredictable strategic assertiveness combined with a determination to use force in defense of US vital national interests. Like them, Trump must continue not only to reject strategic patience but to initiate a second track of deal-making with both China and Russia. The president did not slam the door in Putin's face. He deliberately left it ajar.

The most pressing national security issue right now is North Korea. US strategy must be to deprive the North Korean dictator of his nuclear capacity through cyber warfare, and then, if necessary, use other means. Futile negotiations during the Clinton years bought the world a respite but allowed Pyongyang to attain nuclear weapons, leaving future administrations the daunting task of returning this genie to the bottle.

North Korea might be the one place where regime change is necessary for reasons not of national security but of global security. It appears that Trump has been successful in bringing Beijing on board. Unlike in the past, the Chinese leadership has realized that Trump's rejection of strategic patience is a serious new strategy and seems prepared to do for him what it never would have done for Obama. Mobilizing their forces at the North Korean frontier, the Chinese are putting pressure on Pyongyang to give up its WMD.

Tehran should be put on a back burner but not forgotten, given its proven cheating on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. In Syria, it might be difficult to find another Alawite leader who can immediately replace Assad, but Washington and Moscow must establish a strategic partnership to resolve the Syrian crisis and combat ISIS. Trump's new anti-ISIS strategy, announced on May 19, can have a salutary effect on a strategic understanding with Russia on Syria. If properly executed, it can strengthen the president's deal-making not only with Putin, but also with China.

There is no reason why such a partnership should not be feasible. As shown herein, Putin was perfectly willing to collaborate with presidents Clinton and Bush against the scourge of Islamist terrorism. He may well be amenable to doing the same with the Trump administration, provided the latter recognizes Moscow's security concerns, especially in eastern Europe.

This is not to suggest that Washington delude itself about Putin, with his duality as a Christian autocrat and merciless calculator of national interests. He does not aspire to democratic reform, nor does he believe the Russian people are ready for genuine democracy. But Putin is by no means an irrational leader, let alone a madman. Like all his predecessors, he will not risk a wider war and nuclear holocaust. As Washington has tolerated anti-democratic, repressive measures in a NATO ally, Turkey, it should not give up on a strategic partnership with Moscow against jihadist imperialism.

Key to success is recognition of the linkage between the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. Given Putin's record of broken treaties, any partnership against terrorism must be coupled with a second track of implementing both Minsk agreements in Ukraine. The deal-making should include the delivery of defensive arms for Ukraine while negotiating its armed neutrality and repudiating its NATO membership.

In Syria, despite the declamations of some analysts, Putin has tangible reasons to work with Washington. Besides the threat of new jihadists from Central Asia in addition to those from the northern Caucasus, there are elections next year. Putin is always worried about his own survival, both political and literal, and as the current mass demonstrations in Russia indicate, his regime is becoming politically unstable.

Putin rejected Marxism and replaced it with a nationalist Orthodoxy, a cross between Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Ivan Ilyin. Yet as a modernizer, former economic adviser to Anatoly Sobchak in Leningrad and former prime minister, Putin has a firm grasp of Russia's economic situation. He realizes that his armed forces, tailored to limited land interventionism in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, are a heavy burden on the struggling Russian economy. Thus, he decided not to develop a blue water navy, instead refurbishing Russia's only air carrier and focusing on building frigates, not destroyers. Putin understands the limits on Moscow's military might imposed by a deteriorating economy.

Meanwhile, the inexperienced Trump, haunted by Russia-gate, needs not just the counsel of generals but of seasoned Russia experts and historians to help him decipher Putin's intentions, using both old-fashioned Kremlinology and social science methods. This is all the more important given that, as on the eve of WWII and the early stages of the Cold War, the West is approaching the uncharted territory of several crises at once. Much depends on the moves recommended by Trump's highly experienced national security team led by Generals Mattis and McMaster. But also of inestimable importance is the president's ability to liberate himself, if he can, from the ongoing Russian "hacking" crisis and attempt by political foes to impeach him. The latter would be of incalculable harm to American foreign policy, as Watergate was earlier.





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- No. 7 The Gaza War, 2014 – Initial Assessment, *Efraim Inbar and Amir Rapaport*, December 2014 (Hebrew)
- No. 8 Perfect Storm in the Middle East, *Yaakov Amidror*, June 2015 (Hebrew), July 2015 (English)
- No. 9 Israel-Greece Relations, *Arye Mekel*, September 2015 (Hebrew)
- No. 10 Space Wars, *Aby Har-Even*, May 2016 (Hebrew)

### Colloquia on Strategy and Diplomacy

- No. 28 The IDF Force Structure (Hebrew) May 2014
- No. 29 Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations: Whereto? (Hebrew) August 2014
- No. 30 IDF Challenges (Hebrew) August 2016



