The Strength of Weakness: Weaponized Information

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ABSTRACT

The Russian Federation has recently implemented a foreign policy strategy aimed at subverting the West’s ability to deter Russia from destabilizing its neighbors. This strategy combines elements of conventional military strategy with “weaponized information” in order to achieve success in the political and military arenas of conflict. “Weaponized Information” goes beyond the “network-centric” warfare envisioned by cyber security experts, focused instead upon the development of “fake news,” disinformation, and encouraging conflicting media narratives. This thesis explores this strategy through Thomas Schelling’s framework of deterrence elucidated in *Arms and Influence* and uses recent events in Ukraine, Syria, the United States, and Europe to describe the development and implementation of “weaponized information” in 21st Century international conflicts.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Beginning with the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, this thesis will examine the development of Russia’s strategy of “weaponized information.” “Weaponized information” includes: “fake news,” election tampering, disinformation, and hacking. Weaponized information compliments conventional military operations in order to keep Russia’s adversaries from realizing they are under attack and keeps Russia’s adversaries from intervening against Russia. This thesis examines the historical reasons Russia has developed this strategy, how it intersects with theory on how to stop adversaries from intervening against a country’s actions, and provides real-world examples of how and where weaponized information is used. Understanding these events will better prepare the United States and the West to defend themselves against aggressive states that seek to harm them. This thesis also attempts to provide to combine understanding of this military strategy with academic work on how to analyze it to better prepare future scholars who research in this field.
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Introduction

Why Understanding Weaponized Information Matters

In the 2012 United States Presidential Election, Mitt Romney stated that Russia was the United States’ “No. 1 geopolitical foe.”¹ For this, Romney was mocked by President Obama during the campaign. Obama stated that “[t]he 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because the Cold War’s been over for 20 years….When it comes to our foreign policy, you seem to want to import the foreign policies of the 1980s.”² Russia invaded and annexed Crimea less than two years later, leading to an increasing confrontation between Russia on the one hand and the United States and Europe on the other. This has become increasingly thought of as a return to the Cold War, with many recognizing the geopolitical threat Russia poses to the West.³

Russia has recently utilized a form of political warfare based on the use of what has become known as “weaponized information” in its pursuit of its interests in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere.⁴ “Weaponized information” can be traced back to the Soviet Union’s campaign of “active measures” against the West and its domestic audiences during the Cold War.⁵ These measures are designed to discredit possible opponents, undermine security obligations, and

² Ibid.
⁵ Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
make it difficult for policy makers to discern the true causes of conflict, tensions, and violence in regions of interest to both Russia and the West.  

It is critical to understand that this type of warfare is not conceived by scholars as a conventional struggle between the armed forces of two opposing sides, but rather as a struggle between two competing narratives of “truth” and two competing ideas of how international relations should be structured. The consequences of these contestations can be seen in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential elections, where foreign governments were able to subtly influence the electoral process.

Russia increasingly views itself as surrounded and under threat from the “liberal interventionist” policies of the United States and Europe. However, it does not wish to become engaged in a large conventional war between the two sides. Instead it attempts to counter Western policies through the creation of a counter-deterrent strategy based on weaponized information that obfuscates and invisibilizes Russian direct involvement in anti-Western operations in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere in order to keep the West from intervening against Russia’s interests.

Despite a significant amount of literature on “information” warfare and “hybrid” warfare, military strategists and policy makers are still not preparing for the type of conflict Russia is now waging. These writers remain focused on the applications of “network-centric”

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6 Ibid.  
7 Barry W. Ickes and Clifford G. Gaddy, "Beyond the Sanctions: Russia, the West, and Ukraine," (2014).  
warfare and fighting wars more reminiscent of those in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Europe during World War II.  

The national security establishment, think tanks, academia, and others have begun only recently to understand that hybrid threats extend beyond the battlefield and beyond targets for possible terroristic acts. The Russian invasion of Ukraine following the 2014 Maidan Revolution changed the discussion of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare away from the network-centric and insurgent-focused strains of military thought to a wider understanding of multidimensional conflict taking place outside, but still operating in conjunction with, the traditional sphere of military operations.

Russian military officials openly talk of “the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals” and how they have “exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”\(^\text{11}\) This is compounded and supported by “military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces” as well as “the open use of forces - often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation...for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”\(^\text{12}\) So far, however, very little work has been done to understand the “role of nonmilitary means” through an academic lens.\(^\text{13}\)

Academics and policy makers need to be aware of these developments in order to create a better understanding for how deterrence works in the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) Century. This thesis hopes

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\(^{10}\) Ibid.  
\(^{12}\) Ibid.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
to strengthen the literature on informational warfare, going beyond the traditional formulations of cyberwarfare to discuss how weaponized information has a much wider application. Deterrence theory and the concept of brinksmanship can provide a context for understanding how weaponized information is employed. Weaponized information is utilized in a way that increases the likelihood of war between opponents but also attempts to covertly undermine outside security commitments that could pose a problem for any state intervening militarily in another. This is additionally important, as this thesis aims to strengthen the understanding of how deterrence is applied and subverted in modern international politics and conflict in the time since the theories were first developed.

This thesis argues that the West, particularly the United States under President Obama and now President Trump, fails to adequately understand the threat it faces, is deterred from acting decisively against the Russian government by failing to understand the tactics used by Russia, and has not realized that the use of economic sanctions by the West has failed to achieve the objective of stopping Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere. Failure to recognize the scope of Russian weaponized information will lead to an inability to formulate a comprehensive deterrent response without which the West will continue to be open and susceptible to Russian political warfare, election tampering, and lose its ability to defend its interests.

Failure to confront Russia over this level of interference and the Western acceptance of Russia’s use of military, political, and informational force to subvert international norms, such as conquering territory from neighboring states by force, will create a dangerous world for
Western interests. The future of the European Union could be influenced by election tampering, as does the integrity of the existing international order that the United States and the West built after the Second World War to keep the peace in Europe and spread liberal values and human rights across the globe.

To illustrate these points, this thesis delineates the underlying historical causes of the current Russian foreign policy of political warfare through the use of weaponized information, develops an understanding of the policy in the context of Thomas Schelling’s discussion of deterrence strategy and behavior, and examines in-depth its practical application through the case study of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. The concluding chapter features an examination of the broader scope of weaponized information in the context of the Syrian Civil War and refugee crisis, the 2016 United States election, and attempt to provide thoughts on how to approach future work dealing with this subject matter.

Chapter 1
The Historical Precursors and Influences of Current Russian Foreign Policy

Russian history provides a lens through which one can view the development of the current iteration of Russian foreign policy, Russian preoccupation with border security, and the defense of international allies and interests. Three distinct historical legacies can be elaborated upon in order to understand the Russian approach in Ukraine: challenges to Russia’s external security and history of territorial insecurity, the need for continued economic expansion to provide for public legitimacy, and political obligations to protect ethnic Russians and historic allies.

Russia has dealt with pro-Western governments on its periphery for the past twenty years and has attempted to minimize the security risks it perceives from these states. These pro-Western governments have often pursued policies that have aimed at NATO ascension, something which has been perceived as a direct challenge to Russia’s border security. Russia’s efforts to restore its military capacity for intervention, particularly through the formation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, has been aimed at the establishment of military forces “capable of preventing Color Revolutions” in Russia and its allies. ¹⁶

Legacies of Insecurity
Historically, Russian insecurity can be traced back over the course of ten centuries of expansion and foreign invasion. Over this time, successive Russian governments have demonstrated a strongly defined sense of its borders and interests in the near-abroad. Russia’s history of the Mongol invasions, the invasion of Russia during the First and Second World Wars, and the continued militarized dispute with China over the Siberia border region have led to a situation

where the preservation of national borders has become of paramount nature for Russia and its government.\textsuperscript{17} The destruction of Russian industry and political structures by the Germans during the First and Second World Wars remain serious issues for Russia. Russian historical experiences with foreign occupation by European and Asian powers has always come at the cost of Russia’s global prestige, in addition to the destruction of large parts of Russian society.\textsuperscript{18} These historical episodes have been cemented in Russian popular consciousness and have been used as comparisons for NATO and the EU’s expansion toward Russia since 1991.\textsuperscript{19} Additionally, Western interventions in Russian interests have also often come during periods of economic and political chaos, such as the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War and NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, a historical interest of Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The post-Soviet rollback of Russia’s influence from Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus has been a major shock to Russia. Such moves have come as a major shock to Russian policy makers. The Russian people that has always prioritized the maintenance of strong borders away from the heart of Russian society. Even today, a growing number of Russians perceive themselves as being threatened by outside military forces, while nearly half of Russians surveyed indicated that the European Union poses a serious threat to Russia.\textsuperscript{20}

The current fears of insecurity stem from the Russian view of the geopolitical situation that has developed after the end of the Cold War. The wave of popular protest movements that resulted in regime change across the post-Soviet world, most notably in the Rose Revolution in

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas F. Remington, \textit{Politics in Russia} (London: Routledge, 2011).
\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Graham, "The Sources of Russia's Insecurity," \textit{Survival} 52, no. 1 (2010).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, have been perceived by Russia as a serious challenge to Russia’s interests, both domestically and internationally, as they tend to remove pro-Russian governments and provide a blueprint for opposition groups to remove Putin from power.\(^{21}\) The protests have resulted in democratization and liberalization policies in post-Soviet states that have led them toward a more Western-leaning position.\(^{22}\) Additionally, these protests have provided a model for the Russian opposition’s efforts to push the Putin regime for increased government transparency and non-symbolic democratization.

Russia’s bellicose approach to its near abroad since 2008 can be tied the perception of its neighboring countries not as potential partners but rather “potential beachheads for enemies.”\(^{23}\) The Russian government under Vladimir Putin has consistently expressed its view that the United States is the primary driver of the public protests that have led to the Color Revolutions.\(^{24}\) The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia resulted in the installation of the government of Mikheil Saakashvili, an enthusiastic pro-Western politician who intensified Georgia’s efforts to join NATO and distance Georgia from Russia politically. The threat of Western encroachment on Russia’s borders was only further underlined by President George W. Bush’s embrace of Saakashvili’s Georgia as a “beacon of liberty” for the Caucasus.\(^{25}\)

Importantly, the Russian government saw Western interference as generally undesirable when it was pursued with a high degree of enthusiasm. The Russian government much

\(^{21}\) Jeanne L. Wilson, ”The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 57, no. 2 (2010).

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Stephen Kotkin, ”Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016).

\(^{24}\) Wilson, ”The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy.”

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
preferred the moderate and pragmatic pro-Western position of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze to the enthusiastic pro-Western orientation of President Saakashvili. Russia only intervened in Georgian politics, and finally intervened militarily, when it became clear President Saakashvili actively threatened Russian interests in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia’s military intervention in Georgia would serve as a precursor to its efforts in Ukraine in 2014.

The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine heightened Russian anxiety about Western encroachment. Ukrainian protestors forced the government to annul the results of a corrupted election that had indicated that Viktor Yanukovych had won in a second round of voting. Another round of voting resulted in the victory of Viktor Yushchenko, another pro-Western politician like Georgia’s Saakashvili who wanted to put Ukraine on a path toward E.U. and NATO ascension. Russia perceived these events as a significant threat to Russia’s national security position due to the issue of Russian bases in Sevastopol and the wider Crimean peninsula. In 2006, the Orange Revolution government rejected the possibility of extending the Russian lease of Sevastopol. The Russian government aggressively increased gas prices and cut off gas shipments in order to pressure the Orange Revolution government to be more accommodating to the Russian perspective, while at the same time using its power to demonstrate how Ukraine was an unreliable partner for the European Union. Despite this, it would not be until 2010 that the Ukrainian government, under the leadership of a finally triumphant Viktor Yanukovych,

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26 Ibid.
27 Wilson, Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West.
29 Wilson, "The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy."
would renew the Russian lease on Sevastopol and guarantee continued Russian control over the warm water port it had fought for centuries to control.  

This episode highlights how the Russian government came to see the Color Revolutions as a direct threat to Russia itself. The Russian government protested what it saw as Western interference and encroachment on Russian security concerns and required a means to defend itself from perceived Western aggression. Russia views attempts by the West to spread norms of human rights protections by intervening in sovereign states as a direct threat to Russia and its devotion to state sovereignty.  

Economic Pressures
The Russian economy currently struggles under the weight of Western sanctions, persistent and immense corruption, and diminished energy prices. The Russian economy experienced an economic downturn that mirrored the experiences of the global economy following the 2008 Financial Crisis. However, in the years immediately following 2008 Russia recovered well and was back on its growth track. However, a combination of factors have led to sustained capital flight from the Russian economy that has been further exacerbated by Western sanctions.  

During the early Putin Years, the Russian economy recovered from the 1999 Financial Crisis and entered into a period of sustained rapid growth. Russian income grew at rates near

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33 Ibid.
26%, faster than Chinese growth during that same time frame (1999-2005). The Russian economy experienced growth in a multitude of sectors in concert with increases in energy-related revenues thanks to the increase of oil prices during the 2000s.\textsuperscript{35} Russia’s economic success led to the formation of the Common Economic Space of the Eurasian Union between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine in 2006.\textsuperscript{36}

Investors in Russia have withdrawn their capital from the country following a string of cases where Russian law enforcement agencies participated in the seizure of private assets, most famously in the Hermitage Capital Management/Magnitsky affair.\textsuperscript{37} Capital investment comprises twenty percent of Russian GDP, but has left Russia at rates between four and eight percent since 2001.\textsuperscript{38} This has left a significant gap in the Russian economy that has only partially been filled by Russia’s sovereign wealth funds.\textsuperscript{39}

The dramatic collapse of oil prices has compounded this problem as oil revenue makes up nearly a fifth of Russian GDP. More importantly, however, Russian energy revenue comprises nearly half of the Russian government budget.\textsuperscript{40} Energy revenues that were worth $200 billion in 2014 are now estimated to be worth just $80 billion today.\textsuperscript{41} This reduction has had further knock-on effects on the value government bonds, company stocks, and has reverberated across the Russian economy.\textsuperscript{42} Russia has also been forced to abandon plans for

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{38} Guriev, ”Russia’s Constrained Economy: How the Kremlin Can Spur Growth.”  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
its proposed South Stream Pipeline due to this loss of revenue and international tensions and is now facing considerable opposition the proposed construction of Nord Stream 2.43

Finally, Western sanctions on Russia have severely diminished Russia’s economic gains from the previous fifteen years. Russia’s lack of access to the global banking system has caused significant inflation of the ruble and a rapid drop in real incomes and wages.44 Russia’s announced countersanctions against Western agricultural products and foodstuffs have been counterproductive as the exporting countries do not conduct significant business in Russian markets.45 So far they have only succeeded in demonstrating the weakness of the Russian economy to the people of Russia, as the Russian government is forced to destroy thousands of illicit foodstuffs while there are pending food shortages in Russian supermarkets.46

Before 2008, Russia experienced rapid growth in its economy and in its influence in the post-Soviet sphere.47 Russia’s economic prosperity allowed the Russian government the ability to engage in a soft power approach to its neighbors through the attraction of increased business relations and economic development. However, this policy has been forced to change following recent economic downturns, due to shortages in the Russian budget.48 Russia no longer maintains the dynamic economy necessary to engage in a soft-power-focused foreign policy. Additionally, the reduction in government revenues could force the Russian government

44 Guriev, “Russia’s Constrained Economy: How the Kremlin Can Spur Growth.”
45 “Why Russia’s Import Ban Has Mostly Failed,” (Stratfor, 2015).
46 “Russia’s Impending Food Shortages,” (Stratfor, 2015).
to curtail its economic or social programs, such as expanding Russia Today programing and cultural exchange programs, in favor of its continued modernization of the military.\(^{49}\)

**Political Pressures**

Many political elites in Russia felt that Russia could be the next target of a Western-backed campaign of political protest. Under Putin, the Russian government asserted itself over independent media and began to monopolize broadcasting under state control.\(^{50}\) The Russian government could limit the ability of the opposition to advance its agenda and make the public aware of their movement. This action was the first step toward the integrated media campaign the Russian government utilizes today to reach domestic and international audiences. It also insured the supremacy of Russian program over any possible pro-Western news outlets.\(^{51}\)

The Russian government has also engaged in the regulation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a means of combating foreign influence. Half of the foreign-run NGOs were funded by American sources, and almost all of the funding for human-rights focused NGOs were founded by foreign donors. The Russian government saw these organizations as a direct foreign treat to its legitimacy, as many NGOs had been critical in the successful Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.\(^{52}\) Accordingly, the Russian government made foreign-funded NGOs register as “foreign agents” and subjected the NGOs to much greater police and government investigation, as well as the establishment of an outright ban on all


\(^{50}\) Wilson, "The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy."

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
NGOs involved in political activities. The Russian government did provide a carrot along with the stick, setting aside significant portions of the Russian budget to help fund NGOs as a replacement for foreign funding.

However, the Russian government has recognized the threat of popular opposition, particularly from young students, that is often engaged with NGOs. Youth movements have become integral parts of Putin’s struggle against foreign influence. The Russian government established a number of youth groups that traded on the image and slogans of anti-government youth groups in Russia and abroad. Many of these government-run organizations have marked similarities to Soviet-era youth organizations. These youth organizations were dedicated to the defense of the established political order and sought to fight back against any revolutionary or anti-government groups. Russia undertook youth projects to provide young citizens an outlet for political activity that might otherwise have been captured by opposition movements, similar to the way in which young people and students had been the backbone of the Color Revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia.

Most importantly, the Russian government under Putin has developed a means to promote managed elections. The Russian government raised the threshold for minority parties to be seated in parliament and eliminated single-member districts in order to completely deny the liberal opposition power-sharing in government. The Russian government also disqualified oppositional candidates or harassed them through state-controlled media and regulators until

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
they suspended their campaigns. This would come to be a critical component of Russia’s exported campaign of weaponized information.

Russia’s laws and regulations aimed at the prevention of Color Revolutions have resulted in a very specific formulation of patriotism and democracy. The Russian government now requires non-governmental organizations receiving funds from outside of Russia to register as foreign agents, banning election monitors from the country, and forming state-run youth organizations as a means to combat a Color Revolution.⁵⁹ Putin’s creation of a state patriotism with a strong authoritarian leader at the head, reliant on conservative support, creates the possibility of a real political movement that Putin will have to appease or risk the loss of power.⁶⁰ Putin has created a narrative in which “‘liberals are a fifth column, traitors, and a cowardly intelligentsia has sold out’ to the West.”⁶¹ Because of this, Putin has to adopt increasingly conservative policies and closes the option to resort to liberal reforms to release political pressure.

The conservative ideology of the Russian electorate today reflects traditional values that have been expressed by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Putin’s calls to support and protect Russian-speaking peoples, wherever they may be, reflect a deep trend in Russian politics that focuses upon the responsibility of the Russian government to insure the long-term success of its citizens on a local level.⁶² This tradition was born out of the influence of Orthodox Christianity that came to Russia in the 10ᵗʰ Century that emphasized “mutual responsibility between

⁵⁹ Wilson, "The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy."
⁶¹ Ibid.
⁶² Tsygankov, Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations.
people, society, and the government." Since that time, Russia has manifest this emphasis on patrimonialism with the creation of autocratic state structures that were dissimilar from European models of governance in its responsibilities to the people. The people of Russia, along with the Orthodox Church, expected the autocratic class to protect them and guide them through periods of trouble. The traditional relationship between serfs and nobles is demonstrative of a relationship of obligation of service in exchange for protection, a mirror to the development of the Russian state today. This patrimonial relationship can be found in Russian support for the Putin regime.

Putin’s government has carried over the concepts of patrimonialism and protective leadership that characterized Tsarist and Soviet Russia. Russian history demonstrates the development of the various political institutions and systems that have been historically associated with the Russian state throughout its various incarnations. The governmental implications of its patrimonial duty to the domestic population has been the creation of an autocratic state that is dissimilar from the approach undertaken by its historical European contemporaries.

The Russian people have historically had, and have expected to have in turn, an autocratic class to protect them and guide them through periods of trouble. The relationship between the peasants and the monarchy, even under serfdom, is more of a development of the state that prioritizes its obligation as a protective entity over all other motivations and

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63 Ibid.; Wilson, "The Legacy of the Color Revolutions for Russian Politics and Foreign Policy."
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
concerns. This continues to manifest itself today in the development of Russian foreign policy and nationalist leadership that provides Russians with a set of institutions that emphasize the importance of continued well-being and security over personal liberty. Leadership and governance today, primarily in Putin, reflects this obligation to Russian Orthodoxy and protection in their appeals to associate themselves with the Church and historic Russian figures. They carry over many of the same concepts of patrimonialism and protective leadership that characterized the Tsarist and Soviet eras but without the Western connotations of inherent totalitarianism or authoritarianism as an evil or immoral development.

With these constructions has come an increased public obligation to defend Russia’s cultural and historical allies. Russia has historically aspired to demonstrate itself as a defender of civilization and Christendom, dating back to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Russia engaged in a series of wars with the Ottoman Empire in the name of defending Orthodox and Slavic brethren. The call to defend cultural and traditional allies has come to be a cornerstone policy of Russian governments over time. It also served as a means of achieving the expansion of Russian borders away from the vulnerable Russian heartland. Russian leadership has historically maintained its obligation to defend cultural allies “even to the detriment of its own interests.”

The obligation to defend allies has been expanded under the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet Russian Federation to include the defense of ideological allies. This is best illustrated by the Soviet interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan during the Cold War and

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68 Ibid.
69 Remington, Politics in Russia. Page 33.
70 Ibid.
the Russian support for Georgian and Ukrainian separatists in the 21st Century. Soviet intervention was often framed as a fraternal international socialist obligation, serving as an echo of the justifications for actions by Tsarist Russia.\(^71\)

Putin’s actions in response to the color revolutions and to this issue of obligation have played a major role in the construction of Russia’s policy toward Ukraine. Putin’s cultivation of conservative support following the 2012 elections has constrained the direction Russian policy can move in. Recent developments in Ukraine have seen the creation of far-right political groups in Russia which are now agitating for Putin to adopt an even more interventionist approach. Igor Strelkov, a former commander in the Donetsk separatist military, contended that Putin will likely face opposition from far-right patriots because he has not fully embraced the patriot policy prescriptions for action in Ukraine, such as outright invasion and annexation.\(^72\) The Russian far-right continues to enjoy many of the political rights denied to the liberal opposition, however their political activism demonstrates the rise of a xenophobic nationalism that Putin will have to embrace or eventually confront.

Putin has staked his legitimacy upon a nationalist-driven intervention in Crimea and Ukraine now that the Russian economy is no long capable of providing a significant soft power advantage for Russia in the near abroad and Europe. As time goes on, Putin is likely to find it increasingly difficult to take a moderate approach to his foreign military adventures. Putin has used the Russian military to demonstrate to political opponents and supporters that Russia is an equal to the West even during a time of economic struggles. Even recently, polls suggest

\(^{71}\) Tsygankov, Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations.  
\(^{72}\) Mat Babiak, "Girkin: Putin Will Be Murdered Like the Tsar, or Die in Prison Like Milosevic," Ukrainian Policy 2015.
that Putin’s foreign adventurism is no longer the panacea for the Russian public, with approval for the direction the country is headed dropping 10% in the last six months.\textsuperscript{73}

**Historical Use of Misinformation and Political Technology**

The use of misinformation by the Russian Federation developed out of the practices of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Soviet use of misinformation aimed to discredit adversarial states, such as the United States. The Soviet Union fabricated evidence that blamed the United States for sponsoring the Algiers Putsch against Charles de Gaulle and implicated the CIA for the assassination of President Kennedy.\textsuperscript{74} The Yeltsin and Putin regimes have expanded and applied practices of misinformation in the domestic arena following the end of the Cold War. Boris Yeltsin won the contentious 1996 Russian elections because of the effects of a campaign of misinformation. The Yeltsin campaign released stories which destroyed the credibility of members of the opposition by accusing them of being fascists, cannibals, and pedophiles.\textsuperscript{75} Opposition groups could not combat the vast volume of false claims directed against them, which resulted in Yeltsin’s victory in the election.

Yeltsin’s administration had primarily relied upon ex-KGB operatives who had helped the Soviet Union pursue its misinformation operations. These operatives were employed by many of the major economic oligarchs during the end of the Yeltsin years. Major oligarchs advanced their business interests by utilizing these operatives and their work to insure favorable government policies. Vladimir Putin’s administration has further refined the practices

\textsuperscript{73} “A Hollow Superpower,” *The Economist* 2016.
\textsuperscript{74} Pomerantsev and Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money.”
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
of misinformation which has enhanced the Kremlin’s influence on public opinion. Putin actually formed a government monopoly on “political technology.” Putin’s regime arrested major oligarchs, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, and consolidated its management of the political narratives in Russia. 77

“Political technology” developed out of the need for the management of public relations in the emerging Russian democracy in the post-Soviet era. 78 Political technologists helped Yeltsin win the 1996 Russian election through the creation of smear campaigns against Yeltsin’s opponents but have evolved their tactics over time. Newer tactics include fake interviews, biased media coverage, and selective election fraud. The use of political technology achieves two main goals: the relief of anti-government pressure through the co-option of protest groups, and the discouragement of legitimate opposition through demonstration of its mastery over public discourse. 79 These goals allow the government to respond to the issues that drive political opposition, such as corruption or fraud, without significant action that could destabilize the regime’s power structure. The Russian government silenced opposition groups and removed challenges to its popular legitimacy. The co-opted opposition groups accommodated the Kremlin’s narrative and helped “program public opinion” in support of the Russian government.

The Russian government increased its nationalistic and conservative tone in 2011 when Putin’s decision to seek the presidency sparked renewed protest. The nationalistic tone

76 Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West*. 22-23
77 Ibid.
78 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
79 Ibid.
solidified far-right support for Putin’s political party and served as a counterweight against the liberal opposition. Putin’s regime emphasized anti-Western, nationalist, “traditional values,” such as Eastern Orthodoxy and opposition to LBGTQ rights, that reinforced Putin’s grip on power. The loss of liberal support for the government was offset by the support of non-urbanite Russians.80

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, best demonstrates the development of symbolic opposition candidates by political technologists. These symbolic candidate undermine genuine challenges to the Putin regime by fragmenting opposition support. Political technologists created the Liberal Democratic Party in the early 1990s. The Liberal Democratic Party diffused support for liberal democratic reformers near the end of the Soviet Union. Zhirinovsky’s candidacy diluted opposition for the late-Soviet government and has continued in that capacity for Putin’s government. 81 The Liberal Democratic Party galvanizes support among marginalized voters from the Russian ultra-right. Zhirinovsky’s regular rants about the invasion of Alaska, re-annexation of the Baltics, and rabid anti-Semitism has resulted in Zhirinovsky only winning 10% of the vote in presidential elections. 82 Zhirinovsky’s performance allows Putin an outlet for ultra-right wing groups to oppose the regime without endangering the Kremlin’s power. The Liberal Democratic Party’s utility as an outlet for pressure has kept Zhirinovsky from government prosecution, unlike many other opposition

candidates. Members of the opposition and members of the ultra-right who do not support Zhirinovsky, are often prosecuted by the government.  

The Russian public is not the only group to experience the actions of political technologists. The Ukrainian public has also been subjected to the reality bending misinformation of the political technologists during the 2004 elections. Advisors funded and trained by the Kremlin assisted Viktor Yanukovych in his presidential campaign. Yanukovych had long standing pro-Kremlin views and sought outside Russian help for his campaign.

Ukrainian candidates who ran against Yanukovych experienced the same slander and misinformation as Russian political opposition. Russian advisors who worked for Yanukovych fabricated stories that claimed other candidates had allied with neo-Nazi groups. Undecided voters who were influenced by these stories failed to vote or voted for alternative candidates rather than for the leading opposition members. Yanukovych lost the election despite the support of the political technologists. Political technologists continued their work for Yanukovych after the defeat. Yanukovych’s political technologists created fraudulent parties and infiltrated other parties with corrupt officials. In the 2012 election Yanukovych’s staff also supported a divisive ultra-right candidate and passed language laws to elevate the status of Russian language in Ukraine. These actions enflamed Ukrainian nationalist groups and further divided opposition to Yanukovych.

84 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
85 Ibid.
86 Wilson, Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West. Pages 61-62
Going Forward

Russia’s system of managed elections, political technology, and its interactions with Russia’s political, historical, and economic issues, both domestically and internationally, provide the basis for an analysis of the development of Russian foreign policy in a theoretical framework. The next chapter will focus examine Russian strategy and its theoretical influences in order to understand how the above issues have manifest themselves in a coherent Russian foreign policy. Specifically, the discussion of soft power and Russia’s transition toward a misinformation, non-passive approach to the near abroad will be elaborated upon to demonstrate how Russia’s attempts at influencing its near-aboard, and its relations with the West, have changed over time.
Chapter 2

Deterrence, Power, and the Strategic Doctrines of Weaponized Information

Because of Russia’s military weaknesses following the end of the Cold War, and the perceived threat of American regime change for Russian leadership after watching the United States act unilaterally to intervene in conflicts and states across the world. While the current state of the Russian military would allow it to secure some gains against NATO in a fully militarized conflict, it cannot contest a long-term struggle with the United States and its allies through purely military means. The Russian government has responded to this weakness through the increase of its capacity for non-militarized deterrence and aggression. Understanding the basic conceptions of deterrence is critical to understanding how the Russian government utilizes weaponized information in conjunction with military operations to achieve a deterrent effect.

The following chapter will illustrate the theoretical background in which current Russian strategy has developed. Furthermore, this chapter will demonstrate that the Russian utilization of weaponized information is aimed at the development of a deterrence strategy that will keep its adversaries at bay while undermining the traditional deterrent strategies employed by the West. Additionally, this chapter will highlight how Russia’s actions represent a deep understanding of the geo-political situation in Europe and the Russian near abroad in order to develop a strategy that allows Russia to advance its interests while it circumvents and defeats Western reactions.

Deterrence

As Thomas C. Schelling concludes at the end of his first chapter of *Arms and Influence*:

“Military strategy can no longer be thought of, as it could be for some countries in some eras, as the science of military victory. It is now equally, if not more, the
art of coercion, of intimidation and deterrence. The instruments of war are more punitive and acquisitive. Military strategy, whether we like it or not, has become the diplomacy of violence.”

This nuanced assessment of the changing military strategy is critical to understanding the current Russian diplomatic and military strategy even half a century after it was first written. Even with the general easement of the overbearing threat of near-instantaneous annihilation that followed the end of Cold War, there remains a very serious need to understand the role of deterrence in international relations.

Deterrence theory, as Schelling highlights above as a critical element of the “diplomacy of violence,” demonstrates the means through which states protect their interests and keep adversarial states from advancing their interests. Specifically, states can dissuade adversaries from directly challenging their interests through the introduction of a “genuine risk of violent reaction.” If an adversarial state perceives that its actions could incur serious violent reaction from others, it will be less willing to undertake those actions.

Schelling uses various historical examples to illustrate how adversarial states can be kept from undertaken actions that would infringe upon the interests of another state, so long as the adversarial state understands the risk of violence to be too high for the pursuit of those gains to pay off. Schelling believes that it is important for states to posture themselves in such ways that they will be forced to react to incursions against their interests, as a means to retain the integrity of their commitments across the globe.

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88 Ibid. Page 51.
89 Ibid, Page 43.
Schelling is first and foremost concerned with the impact of nuclear weapons on international relations. However, his understanding of deterrence strategy, conventional or nuclear, provides an important framework within which to situate Russian actions and strategy. As discussed in the previous chapter, Russia has increasingly viewed Western actions in its near abroad as undermining Russian security. As such, the Russian government has adopted more of an adversarial stance toward the West since early 2000s. This stance is reminiscent of the stance of the Soviet Union toward the United States and the West.

However, Russia no longer retains the same resources the Soviet Union commanded. Therefore, it must seek to avoid open confrontation with the West while still advancing Russian interests. In order to do so, Russia has sought to modify its military and diplomatic strategy to affect the deterrence of other states, while subverting the deterrence strategies of those countries which seek to oppose it. NATO has consistently attempted to bring Russia into a peaceful partnership, but Russia continually chooses to see NATO and NATO expansion as a significant security threat that needs to be deterred from interfering with Russia.90 The expansion of the European Union, despite recent setbacks in Britain, also poses a significant challenge for Russia. A united European Union with a common foreign policy and security strategy could pose a significant threat to Russia’s economic and military interests if it were to ever be fully realized in the future.91

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91 Graham, "The Sources of Russia's Insecurity." Page 63.
Deterrence Through Obfuscation and Invisibilization

In addition to laying out the basic policy formulations necessary to promote deterrence, Schelling’s work addresses situations where deterrence can break down or be undermined. Aggressor states may seek to test the limits of a state’s willingness to defend its interests.\footnote{Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}. Page 67.} Aggressors can utilize a steadily incremented level of pressure in order to discover the level at which actions will incur a response.\footnote{Ibid.} In doing so, adversarial states may find that the opposing states may not be willing to defend their interests, at least not until significant force is applied against them.\footnote{Ibid.} This allows the aggressor a degree of leeway in its actions that can allow it to undermine the opposing country’s security commitments.

The North Vietnamese invasion of annexation of South Vietnam following the 1973 Paris Peace Accords best illustrates this point. Despite the ceasefire, large North Vietnamese military formations continued their assault on South Vietnam. However, the United States did not authorize the airstrikes and air support it had promised the South Vietnamese if the North Vietnamese violated the ceasefire systematically. This emboldened the North Vietnamese, as it demonstrated to them and the South Vietnamese that the United States would no longer guarantee South Vietnamese independence. North Vietnamese forces escalated their violations of the ceasefire until they finally formally launched a large, country wide offensive in December of 1947. By the end of April 1975, without the promised American support, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam.
As Schelling explores in his book, deterrence can be undermined by several critical factors. States that fail to respond to challenges directed against it can often find that their interests will be eroded over time, or that other states will no longer trust the commitment they have made. Additionally, aggressor states will be able to expand their operations and act in bold and assertive manners toward their objectives. It is thus in the aggressor’s best interest to do all in its power to create a situation where the defenders cannot fully engage the aggressor and its proxies.

Weaponized information has become the primary method through which the Russian government can achieve deterrence and coerce its adversaries into submission. It utilizes weaponized information to create an atmosphere in which adversarial states are unable or unwilling to oppose Russia’s actions. When the adversarial states do choose to challenge Russia, they use weaponized information to degrade the state’s ability to resist Russia’s demands and actions. This has been best evidenced in Ukraine, where Russia continues to try to undermine the Ukrainian government through propaganda, military action, and economic pressure.

Schelling describes a situation in which an aggressing state introduces volunteer units into a third-party conflict in order to achieve its goals without triggering a violent response from a competing power. By doing so, Schelling states, the aggressor is able to both avoid a violent reaction and make the competing power’s commitment to a violent reaction seem “porous and infirm.”

This process would allow the aggressing state to advance its agenda while still

\[95\] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. Page 68.
subverting the deterrent effect of mutual defense pledges and other commitments to collective security.

However, the actions undertaken to undermine a country’s deterrent strategy can itself be used as a deterrence strategy. The introduction of “volunteers” into a conflict can signal an aggressor state’s intentions and interests in a particular region. If those signals are received by other powers, they may be less willing to intervene, so long as they determine that the risks of confrontation outweigh the positives of opposition or intervention.

In this way, the aggressor is both undermining the deterrent effect of a mutual defense agreement at the same time as it forces the opposition to consciously choose if it wishes to escalate the situation or not. As is discussed in the case study to follow, the Russian Federation is undermined Western guarantees of security and protection to Ukraine given in the Budapest Memorandum while at the same time demonstrating its resolve to keep the West out of Ukraine, deterring it from action.

Furthermore, the nature of “volunteers” in and of themselves offers an ability to create a complex situation that deters others from becoming involved. The introduction of volunteer forces by an aggressor state poses a serious challenge to decision-makers in the targeted states. Questions of how best to respond are complicated by the unofficial nature of volunteer forces. If the defenders choose to engage the volunteer force they could risk the aggressor state escalating the situation further. However, failure to engage the volunteers appropriately could see their power and legitimacy eroded.

Here we see that there is a deterrence in the complexity of a conflict and intentionality. Deterrence for Schelling is primarily about signaling intentions and declaring clearly stated
boundaries that will force decision makers to react should they be violated. However, various types of actions themselves can have deterrent effect, even when used to undermine deterrent commitments. Schelling offers an argument that decision makers must be willing to undertaken action in order to compel the retreat of an aggressor. However, if the aggressor’s strategy, goals, and level of involvement are obscured to a greater or lesser degree, decision makers may be deterred from the employment of a vigorous defense.

If states are able to create complex situations in which there appear a disparate collection of actors with many divergent goals, world powers will be less willing to directly involve themselves in the conflict. Western experiences in Libya and Syria in the past decade have demonstrated a fundamental unwillingness on the part of Western leadership to involve themselves with myriad of organizations that are engaged in the conflicts and seem to be advancing their own agenda, even after the West has engaged in some level of involvement. The Obama Administration has expressed serious doubt about the advisability of expanding its military operations in Iraq and Syria, even after it releases statements calling for the removal of Assad. Russia’s move to complicate the situation in Syria led to a general American failure to entrench its chosen allies in the conflict.

Furthermore, the introduction of proxy forces or complicated battlespaces forces other states to confront the possibility of “accidental war.” “Accidental war” is defined as the possible outbreak of conflict through misunderstanding during a moment of crisis. In this

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96 Ibid. Page 70.
case, states must confront the possibility that their actions could result in a wider conflict, even if they are attempting to limit their involvement and have no intention of escalation. The shared battlefield of Syria poses serious problems for a cautious American government that does not seek to confront Russia, but is still engaged in military operations in the same area and supports forces in opposition to Russian strategies. The United States may be deterred from further action if it feels like it could risk the accidental outbreak of war through a change in its current military or diplomatic posture.

Deterrence through invisibilization acts as a compliment to complexification. The creation of a complex situation can keep some states from being involved to lesser or greater degrees. However, the actions of the aggressor state can be invisibilized and disguised by a complex situation, making it more difficult for defender states to recognize the aggression being directed against it. As discussed in detail next chapter, Russian actions in Ukraine were disguised and invisibilized by Russian military units removing their insignia and working as and with local militia groups to disguise Russia’s true interests in Crimea. As discussed above, a failure to recognize a threat to one’s interests fundamentally hampers one’s ability to respond.

The invisibilization of actions can also deter states through obfuscation of the obligations great powers have with their client states. If it cannot be adequately demonstrated that the threat is of interest to the great power, the client state will be less likely to receive aid. This would thus allow the aggressor state a greater degree of freedom of action as it is not being directly deterred. Aggressor states’ support for volunteers or rebel movements allow it to decouple events from international power politics to a significant degree. Russian actions in Ukraine, through the invisibilization of its involvement, made it more difficult for the Ukrainians
to call on the United States and the United Kingdom to uphold their security guarantees in the Budapest Memorandum, as it was unclear if Ukraine was being attacked by a foreign power or not.

**Soft Power and Aggression**

Weaponized information subverts many of the assumptions about “soft power” as the concept was elucidated by Joseph Nye, Jr. However, the focus of “soft power” on communication, cultural exchange, and the construction of lasting affinities do comprise some of the elements of weaponized information and Russian foreign policy within the last decade. Russian soft power has been used in various ways across the post-Soviet near abroad, particularly during the era of economic progress between 1999-2008. A. T. describes Russia during this time as focused on “influence, rather than power.” 99 Russia attempted to play upon the historical legacy and interconnectedness of the former Soviet Union in order to advance its influence through media, historical commemoration, in addition to economic and security cooperation.100

Russia during the period between 1999-2008 dedicated itself to building up its relationship with the Russian diaspora across the world by funding cultural heritage projects. The Center for Support, Development, and Dissemination of the Russian language in Russia, the Former Soviet Republics and Other European Countries’ budget grew by twenty percent in 2003 and 2004 in order to promote cultural ties between Russian speakers and the states in which they resided.101 Under Putin’s direction, the Russian government plans to increase its funding for cultural projects abroad from $60 million dollars a year to around $300 million by

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100 Ibid.
101 Tsygankov, "Projecting Confidence Not Fear: Russia’s Post-Imperial Assertiveness." Page 682.
Additionally, Russia has promoted the role of Russian language as the language of business in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russian-language media is highly influential in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Baltics. This media engagement has only grown as the Kremlin continues to advance and support English-language media through RT and Sputnik news agencies.

There lies, however, the beginnings of current Russian policy in the development of its soft power during the 2000s. Russia used its economic development to help subsidize the Ukrainian economy by $3 to 5 billion a year, in the hopes that Ukraine would see the attractiveness of association with Russia. Ukraine developed a beneficial relationship with Russia while the Ukrainian people retained the goal of moving toward further integration with Europe. Russia used its “influence” in surprisingly aggressive and hard power oriented ways during the time period, such as when it raised the prices of gas in Ukraine and Georgia after they expressed anti-Russian tendencies. Russia may be focused on building its soft power capacity and attractiveness, but it uses these elements in very traditional “hard power” oriented ways.

The merging of “soft power” techniques with “hard power” strategies marks a new change in the dynamic of power in international politics. “Soft power” of attraction can be

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102 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
103 Tsygankov, "Projecting Confidence Not Fear: Russia's Post-Imperial Assertiveness." Page 682.
104 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Wilson, Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West.
108 Tsygankov, "Projecting Confidence Not Fear: Russia's Post-Imperial Assertiveness."
utilized in a quasi-militarized situation in order to negate established military and non-military responses to aggression. The recent American election has demonstrated that Russian “attractiveness” can be mobilized to undermine the United States’ attempts to counter Russian aggression in Ukraine, Syria, and the United States itself. Russian hacking of the United States is dismissed as irrelevant by pro-Russian American political groupings, undermining the United States attempts to respond to the aggression.109

Another element of Russia’s aggressive use of soft power influence can been seen in the development of “fellow traveler” political parties in EU member states that strongly identify the Russians as their allies. The problem is particularly acute in the Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania where significant numbers of Russian speakers provide the Russian government with a receptive audience that almost exclusively tunes into Russian news media rather than Western media.110 Russian money has also found its way to pro-Russian parties and NGOs in the Baltic states, with the Mayor of Tallinn, Estonia being named as a Russia agent by Estonian security services after he requested money from the Russian government.111 Russian government supported television in the Baltics has successfully induced over half of the Russophone population of Estonia to believe that Estonia voluntarily joined the Soviet Union, as a means to undermine Estonian legitimacy and create a divide between ethnic Estonians and Russians.112 Pro-Russian non-governmental organizations and political parties have used this

110 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
111 Ibid.
112 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
divide to stir up political unrest that has resulted in riots and cyber-attacks on the Baltic governments by Russians and pro-Russians. These actions demonstrate the ability of the Russian government to use “soft power” techniques in “hard power” ways in order to undermine the legitimacy, stability, and security of those states which it labels as a threat.

Lithuania and Latvia are also heavily dependent on Russian money to continue their economic prosperity and have large pro-Russian media outlets and political groups. Russian money has been tied to keeping Lithuania from moving away from Russian energy supplies and to various Latvian political groups that harbor admiration for the Russian government. Lithuania and Latvia have had their media markets infiltrated by publications and news stations that receive their primary funding from the Russian government or from influential Russian oligarchs with significant resources. All of this aimed at influencing these countries from the inside in order to keep them from offering too much resistance to Russian goals. This influence has been cultivated through soft power means of “attractiveness” but has been used aggressively. Instead of long term development of influence, the tactics used are often provide a short period of influence followed by Russia taking advantage of the situation to advance its short term interests, rather than as a long term strategy.

Weaponized information is not aimed at building an “attractiveness” or lasting affinity for Russia among the international community. Instead, weaponized information deters Western responses to Russia’s actions. Russia’s ability to create plausible deniability for its involvement as well as its ability to paint the Ukrainian government as sympathetic to the cause

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
of Neo-Nazis kept the West from supporting Ukraine as the United States and United Kingdom pledged to do when Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons during the 1990s in accordance with the Budapest Memorandum. Weaponized information draws upon its roots of the use of misinformation by the “Political Technologists” of the Yeltsin era. The weaponization of information has developed in such a way as to “not convince or persuade, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid, rather than agitated to action.”\textsuperscript{116} Weaponized information is not focused on tangible production of coercion or persuasion, but instead promotes a narrative designed to paralyze those states Russia perceives as adversarial. Once the adversarial state is paralyzed it is kept from acting decisively against Russian interests.

\textbf{Information and Rapid Dominance}

The focus on immobilizing the enemy is one that builds upon the American notion of “Rapid Dominance,” otherwise known as “Shock and Awe.” When first articulated, American strategists focused on the American military’s ability to “impose [an] overwhelming level of [force] against an adversary on an immediate or sufficiently timely basis to paralyze its will to carry on.”\textsuperscript{117} The American strategy sought to “paralyze or so overload an adversary’s perceptions and understanding of events so that the enemy would incapable of resistance at the tactical and strategic levels.”\textsuperscript{118} This overwhelming force is aimed at the enemy command and control facilities and national leadership.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Harlan Ullman and James Wade Jr., ”Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance,” (National Defense University, 1996).
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
The implementation of this strategy by American forces has been totally military in nature. The destruction of command and control, the elimination of all major combatant forces, and the total dominance over the targeted regions is the primary objective of American military forces undertaking these actions.\textsuperscript{119} The American doctrine also focuses on an extremely quick and unrelenting series of blows against critical targets to “affect will, perception, and understanding” of oppositional forces, in an effort to render the opposition compliant and hopeless. They focus on “total mastery achieved at extraordinary speed and across tactical, strategic, and political levels” in order to “destroy the will to resist” in the enemy. These steps are undertaken to prevent the enemy from being able “to see or appreciate the conditions and events” that are unfolding.\textsuperscript{120} This is an apt description of the goals of weaponized information as well, as it is predicated on destroying an adversary’s ability to perceive aggression.\textsuperscript{121} However, instead of airstrikes and massed military formations being employed to accomplish these tasks, it is largely untraceable cyberwarfare, proxy combatants, and insignia-less advisors.

The Russian strategy, discussed below, builds on this. There remains a strong focus on the use of deception and misdirection, just as in the American doctrine, but these processes have been further invisibilized to maximize effectiveness. Russia accomplishes its goals through a combination of military and non-military ways that extend the practices of misinformation into the social, economic, and political realms at a much larger scale. There is little doubt about who is responsible for actions when the United States announces its intentions to intervene or holds a press conference to explain the targets its forces have destroyed. In the Russian model,

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 17.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
on the contrary, no pronouncements are made. It is unclear who the forces on the ground are acting on behalf of or what their eventual end goals will entail. Instead of “producing so much light and sound” or “depriving the adversary of all sense,” Russian actions appear designed to limit the traces of its involvement while overloading the adversary’s senses so that it is unable to make sense of the events that are occurring.\footnote{122}{Ibid. 28.}

**Hybrid Warfare, Weaponized Information, and the Gerasimov Doctrine**

Russian military strategy appears to have moved away from the purely military to a more nuanced approach to the domination of opponents, as they are not reliant on highly observable and costly conventional military force. Instead of “direct annihilation” Russia focused on the opponent’s “inner decay” to be achieved through tools associated with soft power rather than hard power military assets.\footnote{123}{Jānis Bērziņš, “Russian New Generation Warfare: Implications for Europe,” ed. Center for Security and Strategic Research (National Defense Academy of Latvia, 2014). Page 5.} Russian strategy focuses on a “contactless war” that is waged “in the human consciousness and in cyberspace.”\footnote{124}{Ibid.} Military forces are still employed, but their overwhelming force is set up by non-military operations designed to delegitimize, demoralize, and confuse opponents, rather than just the application of incredible force in an accelerated time frame. Perhaps most critically, the Russian strategy focuses its efforts on the inducement of “the opponent’s military and civil population [to] support the attacker to the detriment of their own government and country.”\footnote{125}{Ibid.} As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, this played a major role in undermining the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government as it tried to deal with the seizure of Crimea and the separatist insurgency in the Donbass region. Russian
propaganda, broadcast directly into Ukraine, demonized the Ukrainian government as neo-
Nazis and hyper-nationalists, causing the Russophone Ukrainians of the East to support Russian
military forces invading Ukraine.\textsuperscript{126}

The focus on paralyzing the enemy demonstrated by the American strategy of “rapid
dominance” is mirrored in Russian strategic doctrine, and laid out in a 2013 article written by
Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, in the Russian defense
publication \textit{Military-Industrial Courier}. The strategy draws upon the events of “color
revolutions” and the “Arab Spring” to demonstrate the lessons that can be used to further
Russian goals.\textsuperscript{127} While the American strategy of Rapid Dominance is primarily focused on the
application of overwhelming military power, Gerasimov focuses on “non-military means of
achieving political and strategic goals” and points out non-military means “have exceeded the
power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”\textsuperscript{128} Additionally, the article goes on to state
the open use of force should only be an option of last resort or only after “informational
conflict and the actions of special-operations forces” have been completed.\textsuperscript{129} The combination
of “informational warfare” and the use of special forces in support of local opposition groups
would allow for the Russian military to achieve its aims without the use of the traditional
elements of hard power, full conventional military deployment.

Non-military operations are undertaken in order to achieve an environment of
“informational intoxication” that render the adversary unable, or at least in a severely degraded

\textsuperscript{126} Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
\textsuperscript{127} Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Prediction."
\textsuperscript{128} ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} ibid.
capacity, to offer resistance to Russian forces just as the overwhelming application of military force paralyzes opponents of the U.S. military. The weaponization of information changes the way that force is applied. It does not primarily rely upon the use of military hard power, unlike the strategy of “rapid dominance.” The Russian strategy is similar to the American strategy of “shock and awe” in that it degrades the enemy’s ability to control its forces and resist the military power. However, it does not make extensive use of overwhelming military force as the primary focus of conflict. For Russia, the primary center of conflict is “consciousness, perception, and strategic calculus of the adversary.” The conflict prepared for by Russia is an “informational struggle” with the aim of achieving “informational superiority.” The Russian government wants to blur the lines between the states of war and peace in order to achieve its overwhelming effect. Soft power tactics are used to interfere in the internal affairs of the adversary and manipulate their “picture of reality” in order to disrupt their ability to adequately oppose Russian aggression. This takes place on both a “technological” and “psychological” front in order to induce the population to “cease resisting and even support the attacker.”

On the contrary, the Russian strategy, with its focus on non-military weapons as part of a greater strategic and military policy in deterring Western aggression and intervention against Russian actions, approaches the issue differently. Open warfare is avoided as much as possible. Weaponized information deters targeted states through increased obfuscation of

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Prediction."
the political or military situation. This complexity is achieved through the introduction of competing narratives of conflict that isolate states from their possible allies. In Ukraine, paralysis is achieved by the introduction of competing narratives of the nature of the government in Kyiv and the Maidan Revolution. Russian sources attempted to forestall international and domestic support for Ukraine and its revolutionary government by means of allegations that it was a fascist junta and American-backed coup.135

Russian strategy may be taking advantage of the emerging concept of hybrid warfare. The actions undertaken by the Russian federation defy traditional conceptualizations of what constitutes an act of war.136 These efforts are specifically aimed at the invisibilized deterrence mentioned previously. Russia is seeking to manipulate information and public perception, in addition to the elimination of critical government infrastructure, to insure that it is not being countered by Western actors.137 The fact that there are gaps in the understanding of what constitutes an act of war is utilized by Russia to advance its agenda through shadowy acts that push boundaries but have not so far elicited a significant response from Western states.

As Jānis Bērziņš states, “the Russians have placed the idea of influence at the very center of their operational planning.”138 This represents a change from the traditional applications of influence in soft power ways discussed by Nye and others. The influence is highly aggressive and weaponized to achieve military goals with limited resistance and with limited military force employed. They are able to achieve the creation of a “parallel material

135 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
137 Ibid.
reality” in their targeted areas that legitimizes Russian actions and undermines the legitimacy of the opposition, thus this would allow Russian troops to seize key objectives without significant difficulties.\textsuperscript{139}

**Conclusion**

The statement by President Obama that “Russia is not a threat”\textsuperscript{140} may be exactly the end goal of Russia’s invisibilization strategy. Russia’s disguised actions, which will be discussed and illustrated at length in the next chapter, provide it with a degree of deniability. Russia’s denial of involvement allow it to escape the worst of possible Western reaction as it does not fully recognize the extent to which Russia is involved. States only engage in acts of deterrence when they perceive and recognize a clear threat to their interests. As will be described in more detail later, Russia is engaged in the use of a strategy that specifically minimizes their exposure when acting in Ukraine by removing clear connections between Russia and the forces engaged in fighting the Ukrainian government. The use of unidentified troops, proxy fighters, and hard-to-trace acts of cyber warfare, and media manipulation contribute to the continued invisibilization of Russian actions and allow it to act without significant Western opposition.

The weaponization of information and influence, traditionally thought of as tools of soft power strategies aimed at building attractiveness and cooperation, presents a serious challenge for states seeking to resist Russian pressures. The building of attraction itself can be turned into a weapon to delegitimize the states that comprise the former Soviet Union in favor of a resurgent Russia. It can also pose a serious problem for the liberal democracies of Western

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{140} Alexis Simendinger, "Obama: "Regional Power" Russia Is No Threat to U.S.,” Real Clear Politics 2014.
Europe whose populations have held increasingly cynical views of the European Union and their liberal institutions.

Russia’s courtship with far-right political parties in European states and its effort to build affinity are focused on the destruction of the concept of objective truth. This is a complete reversal of the norms and beliefs that started the Age of Enlightenment that led to the foundation of modern Europe. Perhaps more pressingly, these actions are aimed, not for a long lasting and peaceful coexistence between European and Russian beliefs, but rather at the destruction of the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the entire post-Cold War era in favor of a more authoritarian, revanchist, and revisionist vision of European politics. Russia’s attempts to increase its prestige and attraction to the world is not predicated on international security or peace-making, but rather a roll back to an era of geopolitics from the era of peace in Europe to the geopolitical chess match that led to numerous continental conflicts and two world wars.

Russia’s support for the far-right parties of Europe and the United States accomplishes its effort to deter and undermine the West through the spread of weaponized information through domestic actors for domestic audiences, rather than coming from Russia itself. Far-right parties legitimize the weaponized information through incorporation of their political world view, their political manifestos, and appeals to the public. These organizations, such as the Trump campaign in the United States, then delegitimize existing media and political institutions that might stand to combat weaponized information, such as Trumps attempted take down of the New York Times, or through undermining the American commitment to NATO.
With the theoretical influences and strategic formulations discussed, the next chapter will cover the case study of Russian actions in Ukraine since the start of the Maidan Revolution in 2014. The case study will be utilized to better illustrate the operationalization of the above concepts and demonstrate the ways in which the Russian government has put its weaponized information strategy into use. The construction of false realities, the degree of Russian efforts to both cover up its involvement, and its efforts to deter Western intervention will be discussed through a discussion of the major events of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.
Chapter 3

Weaponized Information in Ukraine

The case study of Ukraine provides the demonstration for Russia’s response to its legacies of insecurity through the use of weaponized information and its counter-deterrent strategy. The use of information warfare by Russia in Ukraine supports the achievement of two different sets of Russian goals. The first is the achievement of military goals through the obfuscation of actions through exploitation of increased situational and narrative complexity. This is used in the context of the Gerasimov Doctrine to limit Western intervention on the ground in Ukraine until such a time as the military goals are achieved. The second is the achievement of political goals through the obfuscation of intentions by deterring Western intervention through the invvisibilization of Russia’s political and strategic motivations.

Deterrence Through Obfuscation

The Russian campaign against the Ukrainian government began immediately after the flight of former President Yanukovych from Ukraine in February 2014. The Russian government crafted its own narrative for the conflict, both domestically and internationally in order to deny the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government. Russian state television ran fake interviews that overemphasized the role of Ukrainian right wing parties in the Maidan Revolution to paint the new Ukrainian government as a “fascist junta.”141 Russia Today (RT), the Kremlin funded English-language news organization, published several articles on the plight of the Ukrainian Jewish community and its fears of the rise of nationalist groups. Russian media interviewed a rabbi in Simferopol and edited it such a way as to imply that he was leaving Crimea due to

141 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
threats made by the “fascist far right” when in actually he had left because of the Russian occupation.¹⁴² Russian media also ran reports that tied the Ukrainian “fascist junta” to the American CIA.¹⁴³ These actions built support for Russian actions among Russian-speaking populations, and Western-skeptical audiences across the world.¹⁴⁴

The Russian state undermined Ukrainian appeals for Western support through the obfuscation of the exact nature of the revolution and subsequent conflict.¹⁴⁵ The narrative is no longer about Ukraine’s wish to join the West and the European Union through reform and development. Instead, Russia demonizes Ukraine as a radical “fascist” state that does not deserve Western sympathy. Public outrage for Russian actions is muted by these efforts and Western leadership is less likely to support the government because action could be seen as supporting a morally and politically questionable regime. Russia media published false reports that Ukraine had worked with the RAND Corporation to create a plan of ethnic cleansing and total destruction in eastern Ukraine as a means of pacification.¹⁴⁶ Russian media continued to report on the story even after the document was declared a forgery and traced back to a notorious conspiracy website.

In the immediate aftermath of the Maidan Revolution, the Russian misinformation campaign shifted focus from the delegitimation the new government in Kyiv. Instead, Russian weaponized information obscured Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine. Russia deterred

¹⁴² Ibid.
¹⁴³ Ibid.
¹⁴⁶ Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
Western and Ukrainian responses to its moves in Ukraine through the complexification of the narrative about what had occurred in Crimea.

In late February 2014, several armed groups reported to be “local self-defense units” seized the Crimean parliament building and other key government installations in Simferopol, Ukraine. Russian-speaking Berkut officers from Crimea and the rest of Ukraine comprised the majority of these forces. Russian military units rapidly reinforced these “self-defense units” and seized critical military installations and airports in Crimea. The Russian government issued passports and granted citizenship to the Berkut officers at the same time as Russian military forces occupied Crimea. This was the first step toward the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation.

The Russian military units in Crimea did not identify themselves as such and did not have any military insignia on their uniforms. Media updates on the situation refused to clearly identify them as such, despite the fact that the units wore Russian military uniforms and used Russian military equipment only available to the Russian military. It is only two weeks into the Crimean crisis that Western news outlets speculated that the “little green men,” as the soldiers had been named by the residents of Crimea, were most likely Russian soldiers.

The developments in Crimea best illustrate the nexus of military and non-military “means of achieving political and strategic goals” discussed by General Gerasimov.

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148 Wilson, Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West.
149 Ibid.
150 Bugriy, "The Crimean Operation: Russian Force and Tactics."
151 Ibid.
152 Vitaly Shevchenko, ""Little Green Men" or "Russian Invaders"?,” BBC 2014.
153 Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Prediction."
Gerasimov’s “informational conflict” and “military means of concealed character” are the foundation of Russian efforts in Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution. The narrative of spontaneous separatist uprisings in Crimea obscured the fact that Russia had invaded Ukraine with the military forces positioned in and around Crimea. This narrative combined with the narrative of an “illegal fascist junta” in Kyiv to create real doubt as to the nature of what had happened in Crimea. It was a reasonable assumption that, inflamed by Russian media, pro-Russian groups in Crimea rose up to defend their territory.

Western leadership, confronted with this situation, continued to recognize the new government in Kyiv but did little to support the government against the “separatists” in Crimea. Western statements sought a peaceful resolution to the situation and condemned the plans for the referendum on both independence and annexation by Russia. President Obama’s remarks on the situation stated that there was “a strong belief that Russia[n] action is violating international law” and that information “indicated” that Russia was using force to achieve its goals. President Obama’s statement demonstrates how competing narratives influenced the situation. The phrases “indicated” and “strong belief” demonstrate that even the United States government, with all its access to intelligence and knowledge far beyond what is available to the common person, was not taking a firm and declarative stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the early phase of the conflict.

Western states only responded to Russian aggression on the 17th of March. The EU, United States, and Canada issued a series of sanctions against targeted officials involved in the Crimean crisis. However, Western sanctions targeted Crimean officials and local Russian

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officials who had advocated for an independent Crimea. Both the United States and the EU failed to engage the Russian state directly in choosing low ranking officials of the Russian Duma and pro-Russian Ukrainians with sanctions, rather than high-level Russian officials. No Western support for the restoration of Ukrainian control of Crimea materialized and the targeted sanctions failed to deter Russian aggression, as they punished twenty-one minor officials who had limited assets and access to the West. Furthermore, the sanctions came after the Russian government formally recognized the independence of Crimea. Gerasimov’s forces had achieved their primarily objectives: limited Western support for Ukraine, paralyzed the Ukrainian government’s ability to respond, and seized all major installations in Crimea without major penalties.

Schelling’s outline of deterrence and brinksmanship allows a framework for understanding how Russian strategy is aimed at subverting Western responses and deterring them from entering the conflict. Schelling states that:

“Brinksmanship is thus the deliberate creation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control. It is the tactic of deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, just because its being out of hand may be intolerable to the other party and force his accommodation. It means harassing and intimidating an adversary by exposing him to a shared risk, or by deterring him by showing that if he makes a contrary move he may disturb us so that we slip over the brink whether we want to or not, carrying him with us.”

This concept is very much in line with Russian strategy. Russia’s deployment of advanced weaponry along with unmarked soldiers into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine created a

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situation where war was possible between the United States and Russia if the United States were to defend Ukrainian sovereignty under the stipulations of the Budapest Memorandum.

Gerasimov’s strategy and Russia’s choices forced the West to either honor their commitments to Ukraine in an effort to address Russian action or to tacitly allow Russia to continue without serious opposition. This was particularly targeted at the Americans and British who had assured Ukraine’s territorial integrity as part of the Budapest Memorandum.\(^{157}\)

The security commitments under the Budapest Memorandum also lead to another discussion of Schelling’s conception of deterrence and counter-deterrence. The Gerasimov Doctrine is a modern representation of “salami tactics” discussed by Schelling.\(^{158}\) Salami tactics are those methods used to “circumvent an adversary’s commitment” a little at a time.\(^{159}\) The actor first commits a small transgression against its adversary and awaits a response. If a strong response is not forthcoming, it will continue to commit larger transgressions until it meets some form of resistance from its adversary as a means of testing the veracity of its commitment.\(^{160}\) The failure of an adversary to stand by its commitments and resist or oppose the mounting transgressions in a serious way allows the actor to continue its operations as it sees fit as “the day never comes when the camel’s back breaks under a single straw.”\(^{161}\) The introduction of troops in Crimea to set up roadblocks and start protests against the government in Kyiv was not stopped by the West, Ukraine’s security guarantors. Once that was clear, they

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\(^{158}\) Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. Page 66

\(^{159}\) Ibid.

\(^{160}\) Ibid.

formally moved against Ukrainian military bases to force them to surrender or withdraw from
the peninsula.162

Upon the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation the Russian campaign shifted
focus to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, collectively known as the Donbas region.
At the time of the demonstrations in eastern Ukraine Russian state television resurrected the
tsarist construction of “Novorussiya.” The concept of “Novorussiya” dates back to 1764 when it
was established by Tsarina Catherine II as a military district in order to organize military
defenses of the southern Russo-Ottoman border and was disbanded as a territorial unit in
1783.163 Putin has repeatedly referred to the regions of eastern Ukraine as rightful Russian
territory that were given to Ukraine by the central government of the Soviet Union during the
1920s.164 Russian forces and pro-Russian separatists proclaimed that they would fight to
liberate Novorussiya from Ukraine. The Russians utilized this concept as a means of assigning
historical importance to the region and argue that it has traditionally been a part of Russia.

The fabricated narrative neglects the fact that most people living in Donbass, whether
from Russian or Ukrainian extraction, had never considered themselves to be Novorussiyan, nor
had there ever been independent political entity known as Novorussiya.165 Russia’s revival of
the Novorussiyan concept is a direct attempt to emulate the success it had in Georgia in the
previous decade. The creation of quasi-legitimate statelets provided a “legitimate” pretext for

162 “Troops, Believed to Be Russian, Surround Ukranian Base in Crimea,” (Radio Free Europe/ Radio
Liberty, 2014).
163 Sakwa, Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands.
165 Ibid.
Russian armed forces to move in and secure the area, just as they did in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Ukrainian government declared that it was engaged in an “anti-terrorist operation” in eastern Ukraine on April 15th, 2014. Ukrainian military forces, limited as they were, began to push into the territory of the self-declared People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The initial military conflict in eastern Ukraine was primarily fought between local separatists and the Ukrainian military. These engagements were limited in nature, often short skirmishes among small groups of Ukrainian police and separatist forces. Ukrainian military units deployed to the western areas of the Donbas region and took control over areas that the separatists had claimed but had not occupied. Numerous volunteer battalions augmented the Ukrainian military deployment, primarily composed of former Maidan self-defense units and other political groups that formed their own militias after the annexation of Crimea. The Ukrainian military launched the first offensive against the separatists after the May 25th presidential elections. Ukrainian troops, backed by artillery, aircraft, and elite paratrooper units, attacked separatist positions across the Donbas region. The Ukrainian military gained significant ground during the offensive and inflicted serious casualties on the separatists, though not without casualties of their own.

Throughout this time, Ukrainian forces repeatedly uncovered evidence that substantiated claims of Russian support for the separatist movement. “Little Green Men” seen in Crimea were spotted with separatist militias, weapons and uniforms only available to Russian

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166 Ibid, 165.
167 Ibid, 166.
servicemen were captured or photographed, and videos demonstrated how tanks, armored
vehicles, and supplies freely crossed the border from Russia to Ukraine. Open source
intelligence groups also traced “separatist” artillery fire back to firing positions on the Russian
side of the border.

The Ukrainian military continued to rollback separatist forces throughout the summer of
2014. Separatist controlled territory had been reduced by 75% by mid-August 2014. The
Ukrainian military reduced separatist control to two major pockets around Luhansk and
Donetsk and was preparing to restore total control over the Russo-Ukrainian border as well as
Kyiv’s control over the Donbas region. In last summer of 2014, “pro-Russian” forces launched
an offensive against Ukrainian positions. These offensives utilized Russian Army training and
weapons depots near Rostov-on-Don and the Ukrainian border as their logistical support.
Additionally, many of the formations taking part in the offensive were Russian military units
and not Eastern Ukrainian separatists.

The Russian forces pushed back the Ukrainian military close to the original frontline of
the initial anti-terrorist operation boundary before operations halted. The formations also
utilized equipment that was similar to the types used by the Ukrainian military and pulled from
Russian storage in order to further conceal the identity of the actors involved. Despite this,
modern Russian equipment not found in the arsenal of Ukraine was found in position of “rebel”
units and Russian transit and military unit markings were left uncovered and unchanged in enough circumstances to conclusively tie the equipment to the Russian military.\textsuperscript{175} This strategy afforded Moscow a level of deniability that would keep the Western press and governments from the clear identification of the conflict as an actual Russian invasion. It created the narrative of a complicated multi-party conflict that the West was not soon to become involved with following Western intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

Schelling points out that the use of volunteers was a staple strategy of the Soviet Union when attempting to undermine the American security commitments around the globe.\textsuperscript{176} This was often use to circumvent deterrence as it allowed the troops to be inserted into the conflict in question, demonstrate how “porous and infirm” the security commitment was, without triggering a full-scale reaction from the United States.\textsuperscript{177} This has continued in Ukraine, to avoid the brunt of Western outrage over Russia’s actions. Troops fighting in Ukraine are often described as “volunteers” or simply “Pro-Russian separatists” despite often being Russian servicemen, later described as “liberators” in Crimea and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{178}

In response to the Russian offensive, representatives of the Ukrainian government, the “Donetsk People’s Republic,” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” met in Minsk, Belarus on the 5\textsuperscript{th} of September 2014. The talks occurred after weeks of informal meetings between the Kyiv government and the separatists. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}. Page 68.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} Daniel Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin," \textit{Foreign Affairs} 95, no. 3 (2016).
\end{flushright}
(OSCE) mediated the talks which also included the Russian ambassador to Ukraine. The Ukrainian government hoped to reach a ceasefire and peace settlement that included the reintegration of the Donbas region into Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Poroshenko released a “Fifteen-point peace plan” that would form the basis for the Minsk I Protocol. The text of the Minsk I Protocol established a ceasefire along the current frontline in Ukraine, provided for a dialogue on the devolution of powers to regional governments in Donbas, created a system for the exchange of prisoners of war, and granted amnesty to all fighters. The treaty also established the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine which coordinated continuing peace talks, observation of the ceasefire, and prisoner swaps. Russian, Ukrainian, and OSCE officials comprised the Trilateral Contact Group and were responsible for its enforcement.

Despite the agreement, combat continued along the frontline in eastern Ukraine. In response, the OSCE announced a supplementary agreement to the original protocol that banned the use of heavy weapons and ordered their withdrawal away from the immediate cease-fire zone. Offensive actions and combat aircraft were also banned. The OSCE established a monitoring regime along the cease-fire line and reported on violations by both sides. Pro-Russian fighters launched an offensive on Ukrainian positions at the Donetsk

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181 "Protocol on the Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group, Signed in Minsk, 5 September 2014."
182 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
International Airport despite the ceasefire and captured the airport on 21 January 2015 after extremely heavy fighting.\textsuperscript{185}

Ukrainian forces were barred from advancing from their positions or to take any actions beyond defensive fighting for fear of losing the support of Western powers. Meanwhile, the separatist forces continued to violate the ceasefire and simply blamed the Ukrainian government for the situation regardless.\textsuperscript{186} Given that the OSCE was unable to enforce or verify the claims of either side, statements on ceasefire violations failed to accurately demonstrate that situation on the ground. This would continue to be a persistent problem for the Ukrainian government.

The Minsk I agreement slowly broke down and another round of peace talks were called to address the issue. The Minsk II agreement was concluded on the 11\textsuperscript{th} of February. The terms of the agreement reaffirmed the terms of the Minsk I Protocol and explicitly defined the weapons being withdrawn. Chancellor Merkel of Germany, President Hollande of France, and President Lukashenko of Belarus mediated talks between Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Poroshenko. The Minsk II Protocol also clarified the terms and conditions for the implementation of amnesty and devolution laws.

Despite the signing of Minsk II, pro-Russian groups disputed the terms of the ceasefire and launched an offensive to take the embattled town of Debaltseve, just as they had launched an offensive against the Donetsk International Airport following Minsk I. Several thousand Ukrainian troops defended the town and repealed repeated attempts by enemy forces to storm

\textsuperscript{186} Natalia Zinets and Gabriela Baczynska, "Ukraine Military Says Separatists Violate Month-Old Ceasefire," \textit{Reuters} 2014.
the city. During this time intelligence gathering units announced that Russian troops were actively deployed in the area around Debaltseve. The Russian forces comprised a majority of forces participating in the assault and relied on heavy artillery fire from weapons explicitly banned by the Minsk Protocols in order to achieve their objective.\textsuperscript{187}

The Russian forces and their separatist allies declared that the cease-fire did not apply to the town of Debaltseve, where there were significant concentrations of Ukrainian troops.\textsuperscript{188} Russian diplomats blamed Ukraine for the failure to implement the cease-fire despite the fact that Ukrainian troops were merely attempting to defend the agreed cease-fire line.\textsuperscript{189} This is yet another example of the way Russian diplomatic statements, coupled with the terms of the Minsk Protocols, have been used to advance a narrative that undermines the Ukrainian position on the international stage.

The example of the Minsk I and II Protocols best demonstrates how the weaponization of Information has been applied to support combat operations in eastern Ukraine. The Minsk Protocols have bound the Ukrainian government in such a way as to limit their ability to combat Russian aggression. Ukrainian forces cannot respond to Russian artillery fire or launch offensives of their own because of their reliance on Western support. Western media report on violations of both the Ukrainian government and “separatist” forces in ways that create a confused narrative of what has happened on the ground.

\textsuperscript{188} Anton Zverev and Gleb Garanich, "Ukraine Rebels Disavow Ceasefire at Encircled Town," Reuters 2015.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
Schelling’s discussion of “salami tactics” also applies in this case. The Russian forces repeated broke the ceasefire of the Mink I and Minsk II agreements in order to test the resolve of both the Ukrainian government and wider international community, just as shelling talks about in the slow ratcheting up of actions to see if a reaction can be provoked.\(^{190}\) The West’s failure to respond to these provocations demonstrated that Russian forces in Ukraine would incur few, if any, penalties for continuing their assault on Debaltseve despite the ceasefire. Schelling states that “[s]mall violations of a truce agreement, for example, become larger and larger” without triggering a reaction.\(^{191}\) A reaction, from the West in this case, does not come because “no sharp qualitative division between a minor transgression and a major affront” have been made and thus these violations are “never quite presenting a sudden, dramatic challenge that would invoke the committed response.”\(^{192}\)

Russian state media have also twisted the language in the Minsk Protocols that mandated the withdrawal and disarmament of “foreign fighters” and “illegal groups.” These news agencies have constantly over film clips that claim to show “Americans” in Ukrainian military uniforms near the frontline and in Ukrainian volunteer battalions.\(^{193}\) A Russia Today (RT) news anchor speculated that the unidentified uniformed individuals could be American and brings in a “foreign affairs expert” to discuss the segment. The “expert,” a blogger with a BA in International Studies and History and not formally trained in linguistics, stated that the accent of the unidentified individuals was “military American.”\(^{194}\) This information is explicitly

\(^{190}\) Schelling, Arms and Influence. Page 66.
\(^{191}\) Ibid. Page 68.
\(^{192}\) Ibid.
\(^{194}\) Biographical information on the purported expert was pulled from the presenter’s Linkedin account at: https://www.linkedin.com/in/nebojsa-malic-91b68a4
false, as at least one of the individuals identified as American in the videos speaks with a non-Anglo-North American accent. The “expert” further states that no evidence of a “phantom Russian invasion” has been released by the West to substantiate their claims, in clear contradiction to the multitude of news releases and evidence provided by NATO and other Western sources in the months following the outbreak of violence.195

This type of analysis is critical for a campaign of weaponized information. The introduction of a competing theory of events obscures the interpretation of the diplomatic protocols that have been established. Russia justifies its continued support for the “separatist” forces in eastern Ukraine by stating that the Minsk II Protocol only applies to those armed groups currently fighting for the Ukrainian side. The documented military forces who supported the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples’ Republics are quasi-legitimate in the Russian perspective and therefore not subject to disarmament. Russian state media can then blame Ukraine for multiple violations of the Minsk agreement, which lowers support for Ukraine abroad, while defending its own actions as legitimate and outside the scope of the Minsk guidelines.

This strategy is also used when dealing with ceasefire violations and the use of heavy weapons banned by the Minsk II agreement. Russian forces and their local militias constantly violate the ceasefire arrangement to launch bombardments against Ukrainian positions, as characterized above in the assaults on the Donetsk International Airport and Debaltseve during the Minsk I Ceasefire. Ukrainian leadership ordered its military forces not to respond in kind.

when fired upon by enemy forces. If Ukrainian forces respond to Russian aggression, Russian media use it as an example of Ukraine violating the cease-fire.

**Deterrence Through Invisibilization**

Russia has taken some actions that have been intended to obfuscate the situation in Ukraine, but have also taken steps to hide their involvement. The process of invisibilization began with Russian attempts to use military equipment that could easily be found in the service of the Ukrainian military. This allows Russia to deter outside involvement by denying and obfuscating the basic facts of its involvement in the conflict. Russia thus deters the West from taking steps toward escalation toward Russia since it cannot conclusively prove that Russia is involved directly.

Invisibilization has also spread to two other important cases as a means of deterring Western involvement and backlash. The first of these cases is the existence and operational mandate of the OSCE monitoring mission in eastern Ukraine. The OSCE working group for Ukraine called for an “effective monitoring and verification” of the cease-fire and withdrawal of heavy weapons. They also relied on the Trilateral Contact Group for support in implementing the Minsk Protocols. The Minsk II Protocol stipulated that the OSCE would be afforded any means necessary to monitor the compliance of both sides. These means included the use of drones, satellites, and other advanced technologies. However, Ukraine has recently complained to the OSCE about its inability or unwillingness to fully report on cease-fire violations. The OSCE

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has allowed “pro-Russian” separatists to use their vehicles to move around eastern Ukraine with greater ease, in clear violation of standard practices.\textsuperscript{199} Ukrainian forces complained after OSCE monitors allowed the separatists to occupy fighting positions that the Ukrainians had abandoned as part of the Minsk II Protocol.

The OSCE experienced difficulty when it recorded cease-fire violations across the Ukrainian front line. Russian forces have jammed OSCE drones which would otherwise have confirmed Russian failure to fully implement the Minsk Protocols.\textsuperscript{200} The continued non-cooperation of Russia and its active efforts to undermine the peace process present another critical element of weaponized information. Russia diplomatically presents itself as working for peace, which focuses the West on a political solution instead of a military solution. Russian forces can then continue the campaign against the Ukrainian military while peace talks are pursued and can justify their actions through the claim that the Ukrainian military has violated the spirit of the cease-fire talks. The OSCE is unable to present clear and consistent evidence of Russian cease-fire violations as they cannot access the separatist frontlines and weapon locations like they can on the Ukrainian side.

In addition to these problems, the OSCE monitoring force in the Donbas employed a number of Russian citizens to conduct its investigations. Ukraine complained about possible bias among these observers, and their fears have been born out. OSCE officials revealed the location of Ukrainian fighting positions and have not reported cease-fire violations by separatists. Ukrainian counterbattery artillery wounded an OSCE observer when it fired upon a

\textsuperscript{199} O.S.C.E. "Regrets" That "Rebels" Drove O.S.C.E. Car in Donetsk," \textit{Ukraine Truth}.

\textsuperscript{200} John Hudson, "International Monitor Quietly Drops Drone Surveillance of Ukraine War," \textit{Foreign Policy} (2016).
separatist artillery position that was violating the ceasefire. The OSCE confirmed that at least one of its local staffers worked for Russian military intelligence while he monitored the ceasefire and that the staffer provided separatist forces with information and support gained from his status as an OSCE monitor.

By infiltrating the group reporting on the ceasefire the Russian military is further able to hide its involvement and insure that their cause is advanced without Western involvement or heavy scrutiny. Reports on violations of the ceasefire do not assign blame and often cannot accurately pinpoint the location of the artillery involved in the violation. Despite the fact open source intelligence is able to report on trajectory and origin of artillery fire, the ceasefire monitoring force routinely fails to engage in any investigation of violations and has no power to enforce the ceasefire due to Russia’s continued objections to any armed peacekeeping force in Ukraine, despite the continued fighting.

This process goes beyond Schelling’s discussion of “salami tactics” as it is not concerned with gradually gaining what it wants over time. While traditional “salami tactics” are about escalating slowly over time, this case represents an attempt to deny that the slicing has occurred. The Russian government attempts to both escalate and cover up that escalation so that it has the ability to continue to influence events and continue its aggression without

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202 Allison Quinn, "Russian O.S.C.E. Monitor in Ukraine Fired after 'Drunkenly Saying He Was a Moscow Spy'," The Telegraph 2015.
204 Schelling, Arms and Influence. Page 66.
drawing attention to itself. Under Schelling’s conception of salami tactics, the aggressor generally attempts to commit more brazen actions without forcing the adversary to intervene through the commission of actions that escalate in intensity only a little at a time. Under this evolution of salami tactics, Russia is able to commission even more escalatory actions because its opponent does even notice that the actions have occurred, let alone have escalated in intensity.

The case of Flight MH17 also highlights the ways in which the Russian military and government have attempted to invisibilize their involvement in the Ukrainian conflict and thus avoid direct Western intervention and intense international condemnation. The Russian use of weaponized information increased in the aftermath of the shoot down of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17. On July 17th, 2014 a Boeing 777 carrying 298 people was shot down over the Donbas region. All onboard died after a surface-to-air missile fired from separatist held territory struck the aircraft and exploded. International backlash was mounted as it became clearer that a missile from separatist territory was responsible for the tragedy. Flight MH17 carried a large number of Dutch citizens and local Dutch newspapers called for NATO intervention in the aftermath of the tragedy. The Russian government utilized weaponized information to deflect blame away from the separatists and forestall the possibility of NATO intervention in Ukraine.

Russian news sources reported that the separatists shot down a Ukrainian military aircraft on the morning of July 17th, 2014. Initial reports indicated that the aircraft was a

\[\text{206 Schelling, Arms and Influence. Page 68.}\]
\[\text{208 Ibid}\]
Ukrainian AN-26, a type of aircraft that the separatists shot down several days earlier.\textsuperscript{209} Separatist leadership also reported that they had shot down a Ukrainian aircraft that morning. Others celebrated the role of the Buk missile systems that were being used by the separatists in eastern Ukraine. The Russian media reports and separatist official announcements listed time and location which corresponded to the details of the MH17 shoot down.\textsuperscript{210}

Russian and separatist officials introduced new narratives of what happened to flight MH17 after it had become clear that they had shot down a civilian airliner and not a Ukrainian transport plane. Initially, the Russian U.N. ambassador stated that “If [the separatists] believed that they had shot down a military plane, it was [a matter of] confusion” and not a deliberate act.\textsuperscript{211} This admission of guilt was denied by the Russian government and separatist leaders. Instead, the Russian media changed their stories and reported that a Ukrainian military SU-25 shot down the airliner.\textsuperscript{212} Russian media used a fabricated “spy satellite” picture that reported to show a “MiG-29” shooting down the airliner, despite the fact that initial stories claimed a SU-25 shot down the airliner.\textsuperscript{213} Additionally, the “spy satellite” photograph showed a SU-27 following the airliner, not a MiG-29 nor a SU-25. The photograph also did not show the proper location, nor the correct time of the shoot down.\textsuperscript{214} A general designer of the Su-25 and other

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\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
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aeronautic experts pointed out that the SU-25 is fundamentally unable to engage a target at MH17’s last recorded altitude.  

Russian and separatist forces obfuscated the facts of the MH17 as a strategy of delay. Russia and the separatist forces delayed and confused the investigation team through other ways in addition to the introduction of alternative versions of events: separatist forces removed MH17’s black boxes and placed them in Russian custody, the investigation team was denied access to the crash site, and wreckage and bodies were not properly handled. By engaging in this behavior, the Russian government hoped to delay the investigation or render it inconclusive. The case for NATO intervention, or increased Western support for the Kyiv government, could not be justified if the investigation could not provide conclusive evidence that the separatists were responsible for the shoot down. Furthermore, Russia covered up its role in providing the anti-aircraft missile system to the separatists by removing the Buk launcher back across the border and presenting these alternative theories of the shoot down. The International Investigation Group confirmed that the most likely cause of the MH17 crash was the destruction of the aircraft by a Russian-provided Buk missile system controlled by separatists.

The cover-up of Russian involvement in the destruction of MH17 demonstrates how these invisibilized “salami tactics” are useful in the modern political arena. The Russian government was able to delay the investigation, remove the BUK from Ukraine, and scrub it from the inventory of the Russian government before the West had a clear picture of who was

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215 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
directly responsible for the downing of the civilian aircraft. Whereas this event may have triggered an overwhelming international response against Russia if it had occurred strictly under the framework of Schelling’s conception of “salami tactics,” the invisibilization of the “salami tactics” allowed Russia to continue to make minor escalatory moves that did not trigger international intervention. Russia was able to continue despite the fact they had committed an act that may have “broken the camel’s back” because they were able to successfully hide their involvement in the immediate aftermath. 218

Russia’s actions deterred Western intervention in the Ukrainian conflict through the obfuscation of the situation on the ground. It was not immediately clear who had fired the missile or who had given the command. Open source intelligence groups used numerous videos to trace the path of the Buk missile system through eastern Ukraine and back to Russia. However, the source of the system could not be immediately established, nor could the authenticity of the phone calls collected by Ukrainian intelligence be confirmed. 219

Conclusion
Russian actions in Ukraine demonstrate an evolved understanding of Russia’s geopolitical position. Russian leadership has adapted Western political and military strategy as a means of confrontation without the direct engagement of Western and Russian military forces. The West deterred overt Russian military aggression following the 2008 Georgian War, but Russia has developed a means of confrontation that can accommodate Russian military weakness. Russian strategy, as examined in the context above, deters the harshest Western responses and allows

218 Schelling, Arms and Influence. Page 68.
219 Miller et al., "An Invasion by Any Other Name: The Kremlin’s Dirty War in Ukraine."
Russia to achieve its military and political goals through obfuscation. Russia distracted the Western public and deterred the West from intervening in the process.

Russia’s effective deterrence of the West can be demonstrated in the actions taken by Western diplomats as part of the cease-fire talks. The German government, which has been helping broker peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, has urged Ukraine to rigidly abide by the Minsk Protocols out of fear that Russia will use attempts to defend the cease-fire line as justification to continue its assault on Ukraine. In this way, Russia has effectively neutralized Western military power through the creation of favorable conditions that allow it to simultaneously violate the cease-fire, paralyze Western response, and blame Ukraine for the ineffectiveness of the cease-fire that Russia itself violated.

President Obama argued that “[r]eal power means you can get what you want without having to exert violence.” However, this analysis of Russian actions misses the point of Russian intervention and demonstrates how weaponized information takes advantage of enflamed sentiments and political opinions in the target population as a means to achieve goals. Obama’s dismissal of Russia as a regional power unworthy of American attention, and unable to threaten the United States’ security, demonstrates the way that the Russian government has invisibilized its goals to the point where the West is unable to counter them. That President Obama does not identify Russian power as legitimate and that he does not identify Russian actions as a significant threat is exactly the position Russian strategy seeks to cultivate.

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221 Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."
Schelling points out that the value of NATO is not in the development of a capacity to win a local conventional or nuclear war with the Soviet Union (now Russia) but rather its ability to resist long enough in a local conflict that the risk of general warfare is so great that it risks the destruction of both sides. The total willingness of Western governments to completely forsake the idea of military engagement with the Russian Federation is exactly why the Russian government feels emboldened to take actions in Ukraine, and possibly in the Baltic states as well.

Russia achieved, through obscured and complex strategy, the goals it set out for itself. Whether its actions align with personal conceptions of “real” power is irrelevant, and it is important for Western leadership to understand that. Russia achieved, without significant Western response, the primary goal of a buffer between itself and the West. Russia, by sidelining the possibility of Western military intervention, insulated itself from its greatest vulnerability.

Western military leaders, particularly the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Breedlove, have argued that the West should provide weapons to Ukraine in order to combat Russian aggression. However, the Obama Administration has been perceived as doing little to combat Russian interference. Early in the conflict Obama ruled out military

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222 Schelling, Arms and Influence. Page 112.
operations in support of Ukraine, in favor of continuing economic sanctions that have that have failed to stop Russian aggression in Ukraine.\(^{225}\)

This is a problem in the deterrence framework outlined by Schelling. The Obama administration’s dismissal of military option completely removes the risk of war between the United States and Russia. Obama, in removing the risk of local conflict, effectively removed the incentive for Russia to disengage from the conflict. As Schelling points out, Obama removing the potential for conflict does not force Russia “to recognize that with these things flying around, exploding now and then, and with themselves responding in whatever way they feel obliged to, it is not altogether clear that the country concerned, and the Russians know how to keep total war from occurring.”\(^{226}\) Russia no longer has to worry about possible escalation, as they have effectively engaged in brinksmanship, ratcheted up the possibility for conflict, and have effectively demonstrated that they are much more willing to risk conflict than the United States. The success of this Russian deterrence strategy inherently leads to the United States taking less risks, and not confronting Russia in a meaningful way because they fear conflict more than Russia.\(^{227}\)

This process also demonstrates a key process of Schelling’s deterrence framework. Deterrence is predicated on pushing the decision to escalate onto the opponent, in order to make them second-guess themselves.\(^{228}\) In this case, the United States must make a conscious decision to escalate into direct confrontation with Russia, rather than forcing Russia to

\(^{225}\) Bradley Klapper, "Obama Condemns Russia for Ukraine Violence; Rules out U.S. Military Involvement," \emph{PBS Newshour} 2014.
\(^{226}\) Schelling, \emph{The Strategy of Conflict}. Page 198.
\(^{227}\) Ibid.
\(^{228}\) Schelling, \emph{Arms and Influence}. Page 70.
determine if it is willing or able to engage in a conflict with the United States.\textsuperscript{229} Russia can simply use the fear of conflict to force the United States into inaction, thus deterring it. On the flip side, the onus is now on the United States to undertaken sustained action in order to compel the Russians to leave their position, and must do so in such a way that heavy pressures and punishments must be maintained on Russia until they are forced to comply with the wishes of the West.\textsuperscript{230} Economic sanctions, however, are not being leveled at the magnitude required to heavily disrupt Russian economic, political, or military life.

Problematically, while sanctions on the Russian government initially appeared to have a great impact, sanctions haven’t been as effective as the West perceives them to be. The sanctions were placed on the Russian government and companies at a time when world oil prices were reaching historic lows for the past decade. The price of oil collapsing, not the sanctions themselves, led to the downturn in the Russian economy as Russia’s natural gas and oil resources are its primary economic driver.\textsuperscript{231} Even if the sanctions were not intended to ruin the Russian economy but rather to compel the Russian government to cease its action in Ukraine, they have failed.

For deterrence to function in order to stop the “continuance of something the opponent is already doing,” the deterrent strategies must have some of the “character of a compellent threat.”\textsuperscript{232} The economic sanctions do not have such a character as they are “self-limiting” and their consequences are too clearly delineated to serve as an ambiguous threat.\textsuperscript{233} These self-

\textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{231} Emma Ashford, ”Not-So-Smart Sanctions: The Failure of Western Restrictions against Russia,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} (2016).
\textsuperscript{232} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}. Page 77.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
limiting and clearly delineated consequences offer the United States no leverage against Russia, as Russia can simply continue to do what it pleases so long as it is willing to pay the costs of the defined Western response. They are able to do this because they can safely know that the United States will not escalate beyond their limited policy.

Little has been done even after the Congressional leadership joined calls by General Breedlove to provide arms for Ukraine. The Obama Administration provided blankets and other “defensive” military equipment to the Ukrainian government but did not follow through on providing lethal defensive weaponry to the Ukrainian government despite the Congressional and military support for such programs.

Further, the Obama administration’s push back against providing the Ukrainians with information and weapons capable of striking back against Russian aggression demonstrates that the Obama administration was unwilling to contemplate engaging Russia in Ukraine even as it condemn its actions. This stance has often frustrated potential allies and left the American presidency as not confronting Russian aggression.

However, political leadership in the West, as examined in the above paragraphs, will not confront Russia for fear of an escalation in the conflict and because it does not see itself as being directly confronted by Russian actions. Western responses and failure to provide Ukraine with weapons clearly demonstrates that the Russian campaign of deterrence through

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complexification, achieved through the use of weaponized information, has achieved its primarily goals. To reiterate: Russia has seized key territory, kept Ukraine out of NATO and the European Union, and has done so without significant confrontation with the West. These actions against the United States, NATO members, and the European Union are not confined simply to Ukraine. The next chapter will illustrate how Russian weaponized information has moved outside of Ukraine and into new spheres of influence in the United States and Europe.
Chapter 4

Global Weaponized Information

Russian efforts against the United States and the European Union have not been confined to the time period centered around the conflict in Ukraine. Russia weaponized information has played a major role in the conflict in Syria and in the United States Presidential Elections of 2016. This chapter will examine the ways in which Russia has attempted to influence and undermine the West in ways similar to its practices used in Ukraine, but without having to (or being able to) engage with its opponents in a direct capacity.

Russia in Syria

Ukraine has not been the only target of Russia’s actions. Russian operations in Syria have followed a similar pattern. Russia legitimized its intervention in support of President Bashar Al-Assad as an anti-terrorist operation against Islamic extremists embodied by the Islamic State. Russian government officials have repeatedly released statements detailing their anti-terrorist operations in Russia, often stating that they are striking ISIS targets on a near-daily basis. However, Russian military forces, and a large majority of their air strikes, have targeted moderate anti-Assad militias. Russia engaged Islamic State forces near Palmyra and several other locations, but has left the overall effort against the Islamic State to Turkish and NATO forces. Russia has strategically approached its activities in Syria as an attempt to fight any

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“jihadist” groups so as to insure they don’t return to activate simmering rebellions in Russia’s Caucasus and in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{240}

Russian focus on the moderate rebels is an effort aimed at forcing the West to come to terms with President Al-Assad’s continued rule of Syria. The Russian military utilizes the cover of fighting terrorist organizations as a means to eliminate moderate opposition to Assad.\textsuperscript{241} Russia has not completely neglected fighting the Islamic State, as was demonstrated by securing Palmyra in the spring of 2016. However, Russia has focused on the total destruction of moderate rebel groups in Aleppo through airstrikes and ground assaults and has stopped fighting the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{242} This allowed the Islamic State to once again capture Palmyra from Russian and Syrian forces.\textsuperscript{243}

Numerous open source intelligence agencies and news organizations have pointed out that even when Russia claims to be striking against the Islamic State, it is more often than not bombing moderate rebel groups far away from Islamic State territory.\textsuperscript{244} Russian Ministry of Defense and state media have also falsely reported attacks on civilian targets as striking terrorist operational areas.\textsuperscript{245} Russian airstrikes often target civilian hospitals and grain depots rather than striking against Islamic State staging areas or in support of battlefield operations.\textsuperscript{246} The reduction of the moderate rebels will eventually force the West to essentially cooperate

\textsuperscript{240} David S. Sorenson, \textit{Syria in Ruins} (ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016).
\textsuperscript{241} Cornell, "The Fallacy of 'Compartmentalisation': The West and Russia from Ukraine to Syria."
\textsuperscript{242} Bellingcat Staff, "What Russia's Own Videos and Maps Reveal About Who They Are Bombing in Syria," (Bellingcat, 2015).
\textsuperscript{243} Michael D. Regan, "I.S.I.S. Recaptures Ancient City of Palmyra," \textit{PBS Newshour} 2016.
\textsuperscript{244} Nathan Patin, "Geolocation Once Again Disproves Russia’s Targeting Claims in Syria," (Bellingcat, 2015).
\textsuperscript{245} Eliot Higgins, "Fact-Checking Russia’s Claim That It Didn't Bomb Another Hospital in Syria," (Bellingcat, 2016); Staff, "What Russia's Own Videos and Maps Reveal About Who They Are Bombing in Syria."
\textsuperscript{246} Nick Waters, "Analysis of Red Crescent Aid Convoy Attack," (Bellingcat, 2016).
with the Russian and Syrian militaries to fight the Islamic State by removing a viable alternative to Assad, thus securing Russia’s interests in the region.

Russia is able to achieve its foreign policy goals in Syria because it has effectively positioned itself as a combatant in the conflict against the Islamic State. The Russian ministry of defense consistently publishes, with the help of Russian state media, proclamations that its airstrikes are hitting ISIS targets in nearly every strike they launch, while in reality hitting anti-Assad rebel groups. President Obama also declined to challenge Russia’s actions in Syria and instead decided to focus on ISIS even while the Russian government was bombing U.S. backed rebels. Obama made it clear that he would not “make Syria into a proxy war between the United States and Russia” and stated that Russia was acting “not out of strength but of weakness.”

Time and again the Obama administration openly admitted it would do little to stop Russia from harming U.S.’s interest in supporting the pro-Western, pro-European Union revolution in Ukraine, and the United States’ attempt to bring about a stable Middle East by removing Assad and ending the Syrian Civil War that has allowed I.S.I.S. an environment to grow. Each time, Russia has expanded its operations, targeted pro-Western groups, and faced no substantive opposition from the United States or the member-states of the European Union. Russia has demonstrated that it is expertly utilizing the concept of brinksmanship to

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247 Team, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria (September 30, 2015 - September 19, 2016)."
248 Paul McLeary, "Russians Hit U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels, as Hostile Groups Converge within 'Grenade Range'," Foreign Policy 2017.
force the United States to back down from a possible confrontation because it fears a larger conflict. This is a textbook example of how to “[circumvent] your adversary’s commitments.” Russia continually challenged the United States to follow through on its commitment to remove Assad, and increased the pressure on the United States until the United States ceased to actively work against Russia interests, a perfect application of brinksmanship as Schelling defines it.  

**Weaponized Migration**

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, more than four million Syrians have become refugees. Roughly sixty percent of Syrians have been displaced by the fighting that has raged since 2011. These refugees after predominately going to Turkey and on to the Europe Union in search for life opportunities and asylum for their families. This has strained the working relationships within the European Union, and its detention, closing of borders, and prolonged detention of refugees have undermined Europe’s image as a beacon of tolerance and liberal values. The indiscriminate and wanton bombing of civilians and hospitals in the besieged city of Aleppo and the denial of basic humanitarian aid to such areas are an example of the Russian tactics used in Syria. These measures create a better bargaining atmosphere for Russia in Europe, and vis-à-vis the West in general. Russia had (previous to the Syrian chemical

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251 Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*.
252 *Arms and Influence*. Page 68-69
257 Ibid.
weapons strike in 2017) effectively influenced the Obama administration, Trump administration, and many Europeans to stop seeking to remove Assad from power in Syria.\textsuperscript{258} American and European governments are also considering sanctions relief for Russia, as the impact of sanctions has been overstated and are unlikely to bring Russia to withdraw from Crimea or stop its interference in Ukraine in the near or even long term.\textsuperscript{259}

This strategy has deliberately been used in order to create a mass refugee problem that has not only strained European relations with Turkey, but also challenged the nature of the liberal regimes in the European Union.\textsuperscript{260} The influx of refugees has led to security fears among Western European states and, as those fears have been realized by several high-profile attacks, Western European populations are beginning to succumb to the old temptations of populism and intolerance.\textsuperscript{261} This undermines the West’s image abroad and helps Russian influence grow as voters become increasingly attracted to right-wing populist parties that have been funded by the Russian government for years.\textsuperscript{262}

The West’s acceptance of refugees and Europe’s approach to the refugee crisis has also become the target of an active weaponized information campaign to discredit Chancellor Merkel of Germany and other European leaders. Russian news media created a false news story about a German-Russian pre-teen girl who was raped by migrants in Berlin, and repeatedly


\textsuperscript{261} Bruce Stokes, "The Immigration Crisis Is Tearing Europe Apart," \textit{Foreign Policy}\textsuperscript{2016}.

\textsuperscript{262} Cas Mudde, "Europe’s Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making," \textit{Foreign Affairs} 95, no. 6 (2016).
referenced it after it had been dismissed by the police as a hoax and false claim. Russian news media continues to promote similar cases in order to make the current governments of Western states look incompetent and overmatched compared to the highly securitized Russian government and its supporters. 

Russia utilizes the current geo-political situation as a form of brinksmanship to continue to advance its goals of retaining its strategic positioning in the Middle East and keeping the West from continuing its policy of liberal interventionism. Russia has been targeting anti-Assad rebels and ISIS alike, though mostly focusing on the anti-Assad rebels, and forcing refugees into Turkey and the European Union. In order to solve the Syrian problem and end the migrant crisis, the Europe Union and United States are faced with either becoming fully involved in Syria and the removal of Bashir al-Assad or acquiescing to Russia’s support for a settlement based on Assad retaining power. Striking Assad risks striking his Russia advisors, raising the possibility of a limited conflict becoming a major conflict between Russia and the United States. This is perhaps just the position Russia would like the West to be placed in, as a means of forcing countries in Europe to come to terms with Russia. Some in Europe have already voiced this aversion to the risk of limited war, allowing Russia to utilize brinksmanship to further its gains.

265 "The Russian Federation’s National Security Strategy."
Hacking and Election Interference

During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Russian cyberwarfare groups hacked the Democratic National Committee’s and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee’s computer networks. These groups appear to have leaked sensitive information at a critical time in the election campaign as a means to influence the outcome in favor of Donald Trump, a more pro-Russian candidate. The Russian hacking groups linked extensively to the Russian government, were responsible for the hack of the Democratic National Committee. Numerous American intelligence officials have spoken out and demonstrated that the United States was the target of Russian cyber-warfare.

Additionally, renowned international whistleblower organization Wikileaks released additional information about the campaign of Hillary Clinton from the emails of John Podesta, chairman of the Clinton campaign, in an effort to paint the 2016 election as corrupted. It was later revealed that significant portions of the Wikileaks data came from Russian government sources. Russian state news agencies reported on the leaked emails a day before Wikileaks released them to the press.

This information was leaked to the press and severely damaged the standing of the Clinton campaign. The Trump campaign particularly capitalized on the information and painted the Clinton campaign as out of touch, corrupt, and actively undermining the American

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270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid.
273 Ibid.
275 “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections.”
people. This strategy is similar in nature to the tactics employed by Russian political technologists on behalf of favored candidates across Europe and the former Soviet Union.  

Fake news today has transcended the crude and unrefined personal assaults that characterized the Yeltsin era of Russian politics, but still focuses on the creation of favorable political and media environment for the supported candidate. Attacks remain personal in many cases and also generally completely fabricated and unfounded, though the best use of weaponized information is when it is based upon some facts but with added flourishes to achieve a more credible destruction of the targeted individual’s reputation.

Late in the election when the Federal Bureau of Investigation became more actively involved in the Anthony Weiner scandal and confiscated his wife’s laptop as part of their investigation, it claimed to have found information related to Hillary Clinton’s State Department emails. However, FBI investigators refused to disclose that the information found on the laptop was not groundbreaking information or even new information until well after the initial speculation. The unfounded speculation about the legal troubles of Hillary Clinton credibly damaged the Clinton campaign. During this lag in reporting, fake news stories speculated on the nature of Clinton’s emails and continue to make unfounded claims of corruption. RT and other Russian state media agencies are prime purveyors of these types of conspiracies and misinformation.

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276 Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money."
In 2017, Donald Trump tweeted completely unfounded claims that then-President Obama had wired tapped Trump Tower during the 2016 presidential elections.\textsuperscript{280} Congress also launched several investigations into the Trump Administration’s links to the Russian government at the same time.\textsuperscript{281} In response, Wikileaks then released a cache of information about CIA hacking and electronic intelligence techniques.\textsuperscript{282} This is arguably a way for the Russian intelligence services to launder information they have accessed by hacking into American organizations in support of Russia’s own goals, such as deterring Western intelligence services from investigating Russia’s ties to President Trump.\textsuperscript{283}

Only after the 2016 U.S. presidential election did the Obama administration come to terms with the basic premise underlying the tactics utilized by Russia and described by Schelling. Obama is said to have personally warned Vladimir Putin against interfering in the U.S. elections.\textsuperscript{284} It is now clear that Obama’s warning to the Russian government not to interfere was not heeded, nor should it have been according to Schelling’s analysis. Each time Russia had put the onus on the United States to react to their provocations, and the Obama administration rarely decided to act to counter Russia letting Russia undermine U.S. commitments and deter the U.S. from taking a strong stance.\textsuperscript{285} None of the actions taken by the Obama administration up to that point would have indicated an American willingness to confront and roll back Russian

\textsuperscript{280} Emily Tamkin, "No Evidence for Trump Wiretap Claims, Houst Intel Panel Says," \textit{Foreign Policy} 2017.


\textsuperscript{283} Max Boot, "Wikileaks Has Joined the Trump Administration," \textit{Foreign Policy} 2017.

\textsuperscript{284} Justin Carissimo and Christ Stevenson, "Obama Says He Personally Warned Putin to ‘Cut It out’ over Election Hacking," \textit{The Independent} 2016.

\textsuperscript{285} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}. Pages 66-68.
aggression. Obama did expand the economic sanctions leveled against Russia and expelled Russian diplomats thought to be linked with Russian intelligence services in December of 2016.\textsuperscript{286} Additionally, Obama finally acknowledged, in the last month of his presidency, that he needed to take covert responses and remain flexible in his description of the United States’ commitment to countering Russia.\textsuperscript{287}

These types of tactics fit firmly in the framework of “salami tactics” that attempt to protect Russia’s interests by committing increasingly flagrant transgressions.\textsuperscript{288} Russia has provided support for its chosen candidate, Donald Trump, and dared the Obama administration and others to counter its strategy. When Congress began to investigate Russia’s election interference, Russia increased its aggressive stance to see if they could continue to deter the legislative branch from interfering with Russia’s goals.

“Fake News”
Recent media coverage has focused on the revelation that much of the news posted on Facebook leading up to the American election was “fake news.” Blogs and websites devoted to page views or just general pranks created fake news stories that gained significant traction on Facebook and other social media sites. It has created an atmosphere of “un-reality” and “subjective truth” where any side of an argument can find a fake news article to back up virtually anyone’s views, no matter how unfounded or unhinged those views might be. Fake news surrounding Hillary Clinton’s health resulted in a media cycle in which it was speculated that Hillary Clinton was dying of an unnamed disease in the run up to the election, or possibly

\textsuperscript{286} Elias Groll and Robbie Gramer, "Obama Finally Hits Back at Russia for Election Hack with Sanctions, Expulsions," \textit{Foreign Policy} 2016.
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{288} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}. Page 68.
suffering from mental illness. None of these articles are founded on strong evidence or media reports, but are merely sensationalized news media stories that had found their way into the popular consciousness. Stories planted in “alternate” news sites by reporters working for the Russian government or sympathetic to the Russian government are promoted on Facebook and Twitter by a large number of Kremlin controlled “bots” that automate the process of spreading the fake news stories. These stories are then shared by unwitting users and spreads to other news sites and on social media like Twitter and Facebook.

These types of media narratives have been perfected by Russian government sponsored groups since the times of Boris Yeltsin, if not earlier, and have spread from Russia to Ukraine and now to the United States and Europe. InfoWars and other alt-right websites connected to Russia presented a conspiracy theory that the Clinton campaign emails released by Wikileaks contained references to a child-prostitution ring being run by the Clintons out of chain of pizza stores known as Comet Ping Pong. The reports eventually lead to an armed standoff between police and a man from North Carolina who arrived at a Comet Ping Pong location brandishing an assault rifle and demanding to independently investigate the claim. The claim is reminiscent of the charges leveled by Boris Yeltsin against his opponents in the 1996 Russian presidential elections.

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289 Example: RT Staff, "Photo of Clinton Having Trouble with Stairs Fuels Rumors of Bad Health," RT 2016.
290 Ibid.
291 Ibid.
293 Ibid.
Russia Today (now RT) is reported to be the “second most watched foreign news channel in the United States” and “systematically portrays the US as a land of corrupt capitalism, social injustice, imperialism, militarism, colonialism, and consumerism” in order to “confuse” by introducing fake news narratives that “kill the possibility of debate and reality-based politics.”295 News stories featured by RT often attempt to “misinform the public” by “manipulating historical facts [to create] some false notions which convince uniformed Western publics that Russia is only laying claim to what is rightfully theirs.”296 This organization has created ties to a number of popular “alternative news” outlets such as Breitbart and InfoWars, which are now under investigation by the FBI as possible fronts for Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.297

There will remain a need to address the systematic destruction of the idea of “truth” in popular discourse in favor of the highly subjective and partisan selectivity of the existing political and informational environment. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the cultural impacts, outcomes, and future issues that may arise, but the aim has been to point out that this problem is not going away and has clearly identifiable roots in Russian political warfare. Today’s foreign policy problems associated with Russia’s efforts to traffic in fake news are the development of weaponized information and the direct implementation by the Russian government in the past few years, a time when Russia’s status at home and abroad is powerfully being called into question.

295 S. Samadashvili and W.M.C.E. Studies, Muzzling the Bear: Strategic Defence for Russia’s Undeclared Information War on Europe (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2015).
296 Ibid.
The obfuscation of the “truth” in popular discourse makes it easier for Russia to “discredit” or “circumvent” the West’s commitments and deterrence mechanisms. It becomes unclear if the people or states under assault by Russia are really worth defending, or if they are even being aggressed by Russia in the first place. “Hegemonic narratives” of what is occurring on the ground in these areas of contestation between the West and Russia are unable to be formed as Russian fake news is aimed at providing people with “a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context” in order to confirm previously held beliefs. In doing so, Russia effectively counters Western efforts to draw upon political support for Western responses against Russia. This allows Russia to continue with its “salami tactics” without being faced with a significant public outcry from adversarial states and alliances by never letting the aggression seem to reach a point at which an additional measure “breaks the camel’s back” in Schelling’s terms.

**Conclusion**

The use of weaponized information in these ways is part and parcel of the Russian effort to obfuscate its involvement in fomenting rebellion in Ukraine, seizing Crimea, and acting in support of Assad’s regime against Western-backed mainstream rebel groups while still getting recognition for fighting ISIS. As discussed in the previous chapter, this process allows Russia to invisibilize its use of “salami tactics” in order to get away with more operations and aggressive...
moves without triggering an overwhelming response by the United States or the European Union. Russia is increasingly able to do harm to the United States and European Union without facing significant responses because it continues to hide the full extent of its actions, while still rolling back Western interests.

The events and conflicts detailed above indicate that there is a serious need to confront the weaponization of information and its ability to influence European and American politics and interests. Using the framework of Thomas Schelling, we can see the election interference, hacking, weaponization of migration, and spread of fake news as the modern form of “salami tactics.” Russia is attempting to test the resolve of the West to confront its aggressions as well as attempt to minimize its exposure so that it can commit more actions before triggering an overwhelming Western response, or deter the West from issuing a challenge at all. Continued failure to address Russian involvement in attempts to influence and undermine Western governments may result in a roll back of progress in the international system and the possible collapse of the “liberal international order.” The threats to American power and European peace and security are far too large for the West to continue to ignore.

Weaponized information poses a significant issue for Western leadership in the years to come and should be explored more in depth to understand how Western foreign policy has often failed, seen its strategic initiatives curtailed, and has been subverted by Russian actions. The Obama administration’s foreign policy is of particular interest, as the strategy of “hitting

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303 Ibid. Page 68.
singles and doubles” and “don’t do stupid shit” constitute an ineffectual counter-strategy to the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation.  

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States on the back of apparent support and interference by the Russian government, as well as the Russian interference in French, German, and other European elections through similar informational and financial interference should be studied more deeply to better understand the major threat Russia poses to the established international order. There are deepening security risks that need to be confronted and presented coherently to Western publics in order to demonstrate the harm Russian actions are causing to their societies.

Finally, there remains a gap in deterrence strategy that needs to be addressed. As examined in this work, cyber, informational, and hybrid warfare present difficult challenges for existing deterrence strategy. These challenges need to be addressed if the United States and its NATO allies seek to maintain the effectiveness of the liberal institutional order in the era after *Pax Americana*. The nature of weaponized information infiltrating news media and popular culture means that purely economic and purely military responses are insufficient as possible counters.

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Conclusion

The Future of Deterrence and Weaponized Information

This thesis sought to illustrate the way in which Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy and use of weaponized information could be understood through the framework of Thomas C. Schelling’s discussions of deterrence and brinksmanship. It probed the historical insecurities that drive Russia’s view of the international system and the perceived threats posed by the United States and the European Union, highlighted its connection to its development of a political-military war strategy that has been utilized in numerous conflicts and confrontations in the past five years, and illustrated the practical application of this strategy through the case study of Ukraine, and discussed the strategy’s use in a wider global context.

Schelling’s discussion of “salami tactics” as a means of slowly stepping up the pressure against adversarial states in such a way as the adversary is never able to point to a single measure as crossing a line provides a great framework for understanding how Russia is accomplishing its geo-political goals today. However, this framework requires additional means to understand the full extent to which Russia has attempted to hide its actions from its adversaries, or how it invisibilizes its involvement in global conflicts.

Instead of “salami tactics” I would suggest that this situation be described as “French-fry tactics” for Russia’s ability to hide its actions, just as a person does when they steal a French fry from another’s plate and deny that any food is missing if confronted. Rather than approaching its strategy as a means of gradually escalating tensions one step at a time (i.e. taking a slice of salami at a time), Russia is gradually escalating tensions one step at a time and
hiding any evidence of that escalation. This process allows Russia to commit a significantly larger number of escalatory and aggressive acts in order to undermine the United States’ commitments and security goals than it would otherwise. Russia is able to steal more fries in this analogy because its adversaries fail to realize how many Russia has already stolen.

This calls into question the current application of Western deterrence strategies. Russia’s actions are made clear in the context of Schelling’s formulation of deterrence but will require enhanced vigilance. Future deterrent strategies will need to focus on recognizing the escalatory acts it faces and will require Western leadership to be more decisive in the face of Russian interference in elections and in their military operations against pro-Western groups in Ukraine and Syria. Russian interference today is even reaching back into Afghanistan, with the Taliban receiving support from the Russian government as the United States attempts to wind down its deployment in the country.305

Only through recognizing and effectively confronting Russian attempts at escalating tensions and out-maneuvering Russia’s attempts at engaging in brinksmanship can the United States and the West revive their deterrence strategies. Many people today are worried about the unity of the European Union, the bitter partisan divide in the United States, and the Russian harassment of the Baltic states and Eastern Europe. A concerted effort needs to be made to clearly identify and disqualify those that are accepting of Russian money and influence in national political processes, strategies for dealing with internet trolling and the deliberate spread of false news, and other countermeasures need to be expertly devised to stop the

assault on the current international order that has secured Europe in peace for the past 70 years so that Putin and Russia’s “Post-West” world does not come to pass.\textsuperscript{306}

\textsuperscript{306} Lizzie Dearden, "Russia’s Foreign Minister Calls for 'Post-West World Order' in Speech to Global Leaders," The Independent 2017.
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