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RAPPROCHEMENT WITH RUSSIA: POST-PUTIN PREP

— Ivan Krastev

In the days of the Cold War, many subscribed to the view of the American spy hunter James Angleton that “deception is a state of mind – and the mind of the state.” What would have come as a surprise to them is that three decades after the end of the Cold War deception has become the state of the world.

If a Martian were to be sent to Earth with a secret mission to figure out the trends in international politics on our planet, he would certainly be puzzled by the outsized role that Putin’s Russia plays in the 21st century imagination of the West.

While a decade ago Russia was viewed as weak, sick, and trivial, today almost half of Americans tend to believe that Moscow rigged and even decided the 2016 US Presidential elections. Many Europeans suspect that the Kremlin shapes public opinion in their countries, and some of the leading Western media outlets insist that Russia’s President Vladimir Putin is the world’s most influential political leader.

The paradox of the West’s obsession with Russia is rooted in the fact that although Putin’s Russia is a major military power, and the annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin’s military intervention in Syria have proven Moscow’s growing capacity to achieve its strategic goals, Russia’s power and influence are a pale shadow of those of the Soviet Union. Russia can be at best defined as a resurgent global power in the age of a rising China.

Why then is the West so preoccupied by Moscow’s actions?

It is fair to suggest that Russia’s resurgence has succeeded in unnerving the West more than the rise of China partly because China’s rise to prominence can be easily explained by the successful modernization of the country. By contrast, Russia’s

return to global politics questions the post-Cold War narrative that the influence of global powers is primarily defined by their economic success, and that economic interdependence is the source of security in the globalized world.

Russia troubles us because its success redefines the meaning of power in a globalized world, and it signals further challenges that the Western world will face in the coming age of disruption.

As a remarkable Harvard University study demonstrates, wars today are not only increasingly asymmetrical, pitting large military forces against smaller, non-traditional ones such as insurgents, separatist movements, and militias, they have also increasingly been won by the militarily weaker side. In the asymmetric wars that broke out between 1800 and 1849, the weaker side (in terms of soldiers and weapons) achieved its strategic goals in just 12 percent of cases. But in the wars that erupted between 1950 and 1998, the weaker side prevailed more often, at 55 percent of the time. For the weaker party to prevail it is enough to disrupt and survive. Russia’s success is a classic demonstration that the economic and military superiority of the West cannot be easily translated into political hegemony.

What is most shocking in the case of Russia’s resurgence is that, paradoxically, Moscow has benefited from the major pathologies of its political system. It is the corrupt nature of the Russian security forces (who habitually make money on the side) that allows the emergence of an effective network consisting of cyber criminals and security agents that the Kremlin has used in its meddling in the electoral politics of Western democracies. It is partially Russia’s economic underdevelopment

and the “Soviet mentality” of its citizens that help it to withstand Western sanctions. And it is the authoritarian nature of its political system that makes it so difficult for Western governments to undermine Putin’s regime. Contrary to the optimistic prophecy of a decade ago, it has turned out that — at least for now — it is authoritarian regimes rather than liberal democracies that are benefiting from the technological revolution.

In this context, the risk for the West is to try to repeat what worked in the days of the Cold War and to neglect the fact that, in the age of disruption, the nature of confrontation is fundamentally different; concepts like containment, deterrence, and propaganda have a different meaning in an environment dominated by big data and fake news.

In this sense, any Western policy towards Russia should be able not simply to answer the questions of what Russia is doing and how it does it, but why is it doing it? Did the Kremlin interfere in the American elections because they hoped to assist Donald Trump and by doing that to normalize

relations with Washington? Or did they do it with the purpose of discrediting the American democratic system in the eyes of its own citizens and of the world? To claim that they aimed at both of these goals would be a mistake. Because if the goal was normalization of US-Russia relations, the operation was a failure, and if it was de-legitimizing American democracy, it was a success.

If the West wants to be able to respond successfully to the challenge coming from Putin’s Russia, it should learn to understand whether the Kremlin views the interference in the US Presidential elections as a success or as a failure, and, as it does so, it should keep in mind that deception is at the core of Putin’s state.

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