

War by other means; Trolling for votes; Sources and methods; Nuclear superiority

A UNANIMOUS INTELLIGENCE DECISION

The US Intelligence Community issued a rare public report in early January, explaining its unanimous judgment that Russian intelligence, under the direct orders of President Vladimir Putin, conducted a massive effort to interfere with the US presidential election, mainly through social media and the selective leaking of hacked information. It was the boldest example yet of Russia's move toward achieving its ends through hybrid warfare.

The report was released the day after a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) on cybersecurity, where outgoing Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper explained Russia's influence campaign within the US.

"Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency," said the unclassified version of the report, released late on Jan. 6, hours after a secret version was briefed to President-elect Trump.

"We further assess Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump. We have high confidence in these judgments," read the report, issued by Clapper on behalf of the CIA, FBI, National

any tampering with ballots or voting machines or hacking of other vote-counting technology.

Trump, issuing a statement after his briefing, called it a "constructive meeting." He said, "While Russia, China, other countries, outside groups, and people are consistently trying to break through the cyber infrastructure of our governmental institutions, businesses, and organizations, including the Democratic National Committee [DNC], there was absolutely no effect on the outcome of the election."

Clapper would not comment directly on whether Russia had managed to sway the election, saying simply that it is not the place of the intelligence agencies to assess how the electorate was influenced by the disinformation campaign.

The Intelligence Community said Russia's goals in this campaign were both broad and specific. Broadly, Putin wanted to advance Russia's "long-standing desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order"—that of free and fair democratic elections and free speech—which he saw as "a threat to Russia" and his regime.

WHY HIM, NOT HER?

Moreover, "Putin most likely wanted to discredit Secretary Clinton because he has publicly blamed her since 2011 for inciting mass protests against his regime in late 2011 and early 2012, and because he holds a grudge for comments he almost certainly saw as disparaging him," the report said. Clinton had also orchestrated sanctions against Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and the seizure of Crimea. Along with falling oil prices, the sanctions severely damaged the Russian economy.

In Trump, meanwhile, Putin saw an opportunity "to achieve an international counterterrorism coalition" against ISIS. He'd also had "many positive experiences working with Western political leaders whose business interests made them more disposed to deal with Russia," such as former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

"Pro-Kremlin proxy Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, proclaimed just before the election that if ... Trump won, Russia would 'drink champagne' in anticipation of being able to advance its positions on Syria and Ukraine," according to the report.

The report summed up the findings as follows: "Moscow's influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users, or 'trolls.' Russia, like its Soviet predecessor, has a history of conducting covert influence campaigns, focused on US presidential elections, that have used intelligence officers and agents



Clapper offers the consensus view.

Security Agency, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other agencies.

DISINFORMATION VS. VOTE-CHANGING

Although Russia hacked "and maintained access to elements of multiple US state or local electoral boards," the DHS said those "targeted or compromised were not involved in vote tallying." The Intelligence Community said it didn't detect



Photo by Gage Skidmore

Trump: Hacking had “no effect.”

and press placements to disparage candidates perceived as hostile to the Kremlin.”

A NEFARIOUS, STATE-CONTROLLED WEB

The National Intelligence Council said Russia’s strategy was to use its military intelligence organization (called the GRU) to hack the DNC and people associated with Clinton, then feed anything embarrassing to Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks website. Stories would next appear on the government-sponsored RT (formerly Russia Today) network and other websites. The GRU then used paid internet trolls to create and spread social media campaigns to further distribute the stories on Facebook, Twitter, and other media. In some cases the information was factual, in others it was exaggerated or wholly contrived, but it was given the look of real news.

The unclassified report cited mostly open-source information about how items originating on RT were disseminated through social media. In one of more than a dozen bulleted examples: “On 6 August, RT published an English-language video called ‘Julian Assange Special: Do WikiLeaks Have the Email That’ll Put Clinton in Prison?’ and an exclusive interview with Assange entitled, ‘Clinton And ISIS Funded by the Same Money.’ RT’s most popular video on Secretary Clinton, ‘How 100% of the Clintons’ ‘Charity’ Went to ... Themselves,’ had more than nine million views on social media platforms.”

Other conclusions were based on classified information, and Clapper waved off discussing those in an unclassified setting, saying sources and methods are “fragile” and the US would have to “kiss that off” if they were exposed. They would be almost impossible to reconstitute, because opponents would rapidly move to block the leaks. This was particularly true of cyber attributions, he said.

The intelligence estimate held that the Russians became convinced in October that Clinton would win the election and shifted their campaign from promoting Trump toward “undermin-

ing her expected presidency,” “crippling” it from the start, and questioning the legitimacy of the election.

The report said Russia had conducted “cyber operations against ... both major US political parties” in the 2016 election, as well as “think tanks and lobbying groups they viewed as likely to shape future US policies.”

Russia “collected on some Republican-affiliated targets but did not conduct a comparable disclosure campaign,” the report added, but it did not offer a judgment on why Russia withheld this information.

NEW NORMAL

The report concluded with a judgment that Russia’s behavior in the 2016 US election marks the start of a “new normal” in Russian interference in the politics of its adversaries.

“We assess Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes.” It has already used these techniques with effect in some Western European countries and in former Soviet-bloc republics.

At the SASC hearing, chairman Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) decried the absence of a strategy in dealing with hack attacks from foreign governments and criticized the Obama administration for failing to establish clear-cut rules as to “what constitutes an act of war” in the cyber domain. He called Obama’s expulsion of Russian diplomats and other sanctions in response to the election tampering a weak response that won’t deter Russia or other countries, such as China and North Korea, from cyber espionage or election-tampering campaigns such as the one Clapper described.

Clapper said cyber retaliation is fraught with peril, because it’s hard to gauge what will happen as a “counter-retaliation.” Clapper said he’s a “big fan of sanctions” as a tool to punish such cross-domain campaigns and cyber attacks. He also acknowledged that the US, too, conducts cyber espionage and warned that “people in glass houses” might think twice before “throwing rocks.”



Kremlin photo

Putin insists on meeting the five-year goal.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), running with that metaphor, said, “It is time now not to throw pebbles but to throw rocks.”

RED STAR RISING

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annual address to his defense leaders showed clearly that he’s aiming for a military not just equal to that of the US, but superior to it. Putin suggested a continuation of the aggressive policies of recent years where Russia used military force to subdue independence-minded or pro-Western neighboring governments.

In the Dec. 22, 2016, speech, a transcript of which was made available by the TASS state-run news agency, Putin said he expects the Russian military to meet his goal of having a 70 percent modern military—both conventional and strategic forces—by 2021. He instructed it to develop nuclear weapons that can overcome any potential defenses.

“We need to enhance the combat capability of the strategic nuclear forces,” he said. These must be “guaranteed to penetrate existing and future missile defense systems.” He said strategic non-nuclear forces “must also reach a new level of sophistication, so as to neutralize any military threats Russia may face.”

Though there’s much to do to strengthen Russia’s nuclear triad, missile warning, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and ground and naval forces, Putin insisted, “Today we are stronger than any potential aggressor. I repeat, any aggressor.”

In the speech, Putin said the Russian military has made good progress toward modernizing, urging his leaders to “maintain momentum.” In nuclear forces, he said 60 percent are modernized already. He mentioned a series of exercises and “four snap inspections of combat readiness” that have demonstrated the quickness and increased efficiency of conventional forces. These exercises have “reaffirmed that our military units can be quickly deployed ... large distances ... in strategic directions,” he said.

NATO leaders have said these snap inspections, conducted without prior notice, have put alliance forces on alert and driven them to adopt a posture of deterrence, not merely reactive readiness. (See “Bears Watching,” September 2016, and “NATO’s New Reality,” October 2016.)

Putin wants close tracking of “any changes in the balance of forces and military-political developments” in the world,

especially on the Russian border, and “timely action to adjust plans so as to neutralize potential threats our country may face.”

He touted the success of Russian forces in Syria, saying they have “passed the test of counterterrorist struggle.”

Syria and Russia refer to all opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria as terrorists, making no distinction between groups such as ISIS and the Free Syrian Army that seeks to install a democratic Syrian government.

The military services of Russia must be modernized in a “balanced” fashion, Putin said, urging all to “assimilate high precision weapons” as quickly as possible, along with “the latest communication, intelligence technology, means of [command and] control, and electronic warfare.”

Putin urged close cooperation between the military and armaments industry, warning of heavy repercussions if it fails to perform. Referring to the 2021 modernization goal, he said, “Five years is not a long period for a program of this scale. Any delay in its implementation can have a disruptive effect on the production chain that will be very hard to put back on track. For this reason, any failure in the execution of contracts must be subject to severe sanctions.”

In addition to a push for modernization, Putin signaled an increase in training and its realism.

ARMS SHOW?

The success of Russia’s weapons in Syria “offers new possibilities” for arms sales and cooperative weapons programs with other countries, Putin said, urging that “full use” be made of these opportunities.

“We know that foreign partners are very much interested in Russian weapons,” he asserted. Russia has been trying out new weapons in the Syrian fight, ranging from a new long-range cruise missile to satellite guided munitions comparable to the US satellite guided Joint Direct Attack Munition, or JDAM.

Putin said he’s done much to provide for “the well-being of the army personnel,” boasting that “people on the waiting list to obtain housing from the Defense Ministry dropped 2.8-fold since January 2012.” He told his defense leaders that “caring for army personnel and providing better social guarantees for soldiers and officers is ... the most important contribution to training a new generation of defenders of the Fatherland.”

Lastly, Putin urged no letup in the push to modernize, saying there’s no time for even “a single significant mistake.”

Su-30M fighters are part of Russia’s big push to modernize and dominate.



Russian Federation Ministry of Defense photo