America Needs an In-Kind Deterrent to Russia’s Political Warfare

Summary: President Trump can take quick and practical steps to protect American elections from Russian interference by developing a deterrence capability.

Background: Russian interference in the American political process is nothing new. It goes back to the 1920s.

The West never insisted that Russia make a permanent break with the Soviet past by releasing the Soviet archives and uprooting the old KGB. Many of the old Soviet political subversion agent networks remain in place. Specifically, Russia never disclosed the extent of past Soviet “active measures” (i.e., non-violent and even violent influence operations) and we must presume that the continued secrecy is to maintain agent networks and retain a Soviet-like subversion capability.

Trump’s statements: Following the Helsinki Summit, President Trump acknowledged the depth and scope of Russian subversion against the United States and said he would not tolerate it. “I let him know we can’t have this,” he said of Putin. “We’re not going to have it and that’s the way it’s going to be.” He noted on Twitter that “President Obama knew about Russia before the election. Why didn’t he do something about it? Why didn’t he tell our campaign?”

Apply a Deterrence Strategy: Trump can cheaply and quickly build his own enforcement tools without an Act of Congress. Those tools are the ability to retaliate against Putin for any interference in the American political system. Like nuclear deterrence, that ability has to be on par with the threat. Nuclear deterrence has helped prevent the Kremlin’s aggression for more than six decades. The United States can apply a similar strategy against Russian subversion of America’s political system.

Show Putin the Ability – and the Will – to Exploit his Vulnerabilities: Putin’s hold on power is more fragile than it seems. Strict information controls and news censorship, combined with the occasional murders of investigative journalists, show that the Kremlin fears exposure of the systematized corruption of Putin’s rule. The territorial and political integrity of the Russian Federation is also vulnerable. Russia’s control structure is plagued with unsustainable strains. Centralized power in Moscow has come at the expense of the rest of Russia, much of which is seething over Putin seizing political authority from the regions and sucking out their wealth to the corrupt oligarchs in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Autonomy and independence movements across Russia are growing: Not only along ethnic and cultural lines, but among ethnic Russians who resent the police-state controlling them from far-away Moscow. Ethnic Russians are declining in absolute numbers in their own country. In Siberia, massive illegal immigration and investment from China could cause the region to split away.
What to Do:

**Insist that Putin break with the Soviet past.** As a building-block toward greater trust and cooperation, President Trump should do what Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, and Obama failed to do: Insist that Putin break with the Soviet past by releasing the Soviet archives on KGB subversion abroad. Putin won’t do it, of course. The point is to place Putin on the defensive and keep the US and the world alert to the fact that KGB subversion networks remain alive and well, and that Trump – despite his professed respect for Putin – knows the game and won’t tolerate it. US insistence, and Putin’s refusal, will create the context for the US to build its political warfare deterrent.

**Develop an intelligence-driven information warfare deterrent.** Show the will to collect intelligence for the purposes of information warfare. Task the US intelligence community with collecting financial data to document the corruption of Putin loyalists, family members, and even Putin himself. The purpose is to release the information covertly to cause infighting among Putin’s support base and in his inner circle, and to empower current and potential rivals.

**Voice concerns about Russia’s own illegal immigration problem.** With the ethnic Russian population in the vast Siberian region shrinking, and massive illegal immigration and infrastructure investment coming in from China, Russia is in danger of losing Siberia within a generation. A true Russia First leader would stop this, but Putin, apparently for financial reasons, has not. Trump can put Putin on the spot for not standing up for Russian rights against Chinese illegal immigration and otherwise helping China become a far more powerful future foe to Russia.

**Give voice to autonomy movements within Russia.** Start by raising the legal status of “Kaliningrad,” the enclave between Poland and Lithuania that Moscow seized after World War II. The region, named after a Stalin henchman, is a sensitive issue for Putin. The Kremlin is repressing expressions of pre-Soviet culture, fearful of the area separating from the Russian Federation. The legal status of Kaliningrad has been unresolved since 1945. The Big Four Allied powers had agreed to decide the region’s fate among themselves, but never did. Trump should helpfully offer to promote democracy in Kaliningrad by supporting an independence plebiscite there.

**The Bottom Line:** This proposal makes a sharp break with the traditional democracy-and-human-rights mindset in the West that has failed Russia over the past 20 years. A “tough love” approach to Putin, by developing a deterrent capability to cause him massive troubles internally, does not need to be implemented in practice. All it takes is for President Trump to make statements that he is developing a political deterrent to safeguard the American democratic process from Russian interference, and set up an NSC-driven task force to design an architecture to operationalize that deterrent capability.