



Putinism and the New World Order

From its inception in 1958 the *Mindszenty Report* gave considerable attention to U.S.-Soviet relations. It was the height of the Cold War, and the expansionist foreign policy of the Soviet Union threatened Western democracies. Early *Mindszenty Reports* presciently warned of the Soviet nuclear build-up, the limitations of nuclear arms-control treaties, and the USSR's adventurist foreign policies. The *Mindszenty Report* was one of the first publications to warn in 1960 that the Soviet Union would try to place missiles in Cuba and to correctly identify Fidel Castro as a communist.

The onset of the nuclear age presented a new and dangerous world. American foreign policy experts viewed two well-defined ideologies and adversaries, the United States and the Soviet Union. Foreign policy appeared to be more of a chess game. Today, in the post-Cold War period, the world is exceedingly more complex.

The United States faces not just one major adversary, but a multiplicity of enemies that form free-floating alliances in pursuit of their national and ideological interests. America's major adversaries include China, Russia and Iran. Added to the mix is Islamic radicalism seen in ISIS, which is building a caliphate in Syria and Iraq. These entities are not natural allies of one another, either as nation-states or as ideological friends. In the post-Second World War period, the Soviet Union has engaged in military confrontations on its borders with China and Iran.

What these adversaries of America share is a common hatred of Western democracy and a belief in authoritarian centralized government. Leaders in China, Russia and Iran think that Western democracy has failed. Western Europe, they believe, is no longer a world power, and America is declining as a world power. Western democratic leaders are unable to address their own domestic problems from national debts to immigration. In foreign policy, Western democracies lack a coherent voice. Political leaders in

Russia, China and Iran conclude that democracy leads to chaos and failure.

In reaching this conclusion, the leaders in China and Russia, and, to a lesser degree, Iran have erected state capitalist systems, with oligopolistic economic elites closely tied to political rule at the top. In China this arrangement is conducted through the People's Liberation Army, local Communist Party elites and private interests. In Russia, Putin exerts control through economic oligarchs who understand that their interests lie in his authoritarian regime. Similarly, in Iran, with a less developed "market system," the regime operates through elites in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. These arrangements allow for pervasive corruption that belies any notion of free-market capitalism and imparts new meaning to the label "crony capitalism."

Anti-U.S. Nationalisms and Religions

These regimes are anti-democratic and anti-American. They play on the nationalist prejudices of their populations to maintain themselves in power. In Russia and Iran, this anti-Western orientation is promoted by alliances with established religious institutions, the Orthodox Church in Russia and Shia Islam in Iran. The Chinese leadership promotes Confucianism, but organized religion plays less of a role in China.

These regimes are no less hostile and no less a threat to American democracy and national interests than the older Communist regimes in the Stalin's Soviet Union or Mao's China. Indeed, given the volatility of a world in disorder, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the fragility of the global economy, the world is more dangerous in many ways than it was in 1958.

We are engaged in a new kind of struggle, with a multiplicity of threats. Today the international chess board has become three-dimensional. American and Western European political

leaders seemed confused by this new world order. It has not helped that our own president, Barack Obama, undertook a foreign policy in which he would lead from behind.

Putinism in Russia forms a part of this new world order (disorder) that confronts America and freedom-loving peoples. It is a different world from what readers of the *Mindszenty Report* experienced during the Cold War.

Obama's Reset with Putin

The confused nature of American foreign policy was captured shortly after the announcement of the Iranian nuclear deal when President Obama praised Putin for having made the agreement possible. Obama declared, "Russia was a help with this. I'll be honest with you" (Frida Ghitis, "Why Did Obama Praise Putin," *CNN*, July 14, 2015). Obama's comments came only a couple of days after the next head of the U.S. military warned that Russia posed the "greatest global threat" to the United States. Obama added to this confusion when he said he was encouraged when Putin phoned him to discuss the crisis in Syria. Putin told Obama that the serious losses of the Russian- and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad army offered the U.S. "an opportunity to have a serious conversation with them."

The Iranian nuclear deal turns out to be more than just an arms agreement. The Obama administration is pursuing a policy for a geopolitical transformation. To encourage this new world order in which Iran will become a major regional power, one that will be eventually nuclearized, American negotiators accepted a proposal to drop an arms embargo that had prevented Iran from receiving sophisticated weapons systems and missiles. For Putin the dropping of the arms embargo allows economically strapped Russia a lucrative arms trade with Iran.

The Russian and Iranian proposal to drop the embargo came in the waning moments of the negotiations. Reportedly Iranian and Russian negotiators were surprised that American and Western European representatives accepted this proposal so easily. Secretary of State John Kerry and the Obama administration claimed that the negotiations were only to address Iran's nuclear development program and not about anything else, such as Americans held in Iranian jails.

This willingness on the part of American negotiators to accept the lifting of the arms embargo suggests that something more was at work: Ending the embargo allows Iran to further its goal of becoming a regional military power. American negotiators appeared to accept this new status for Iran provided that it continue its campaign against the Sunni ISIS,

which denounces both the Assad regime in Syria and the Shia Iranian theocratic regime as "evil." American negotiators appeared to be giving the go-ahead signal to Iran to become a regional power—at the expense of our allies in the region, the Saudis and the Israelis.

Allowing Russia to profit by selling sophisticated arms to Iran, including new missile delivery systems and missile-defense systems, suggests that the Obama administration is also encouraging Russia to become a regional power at the expense of Russia's neighbors. Obama bristled at this suggestion, but it appears that the United States has reverted to the older 19th-century scheme of regional powers—in this case Russia, Iran and China—to maintain spheres of influence. To ensure that this balance of power is maintained, the Obama administration is downsizing our military, cutting back on weapons research and development and on military procurement.

Most experts agree that the Pentagon budget is bloated and full of waste. Nonetheless, military power rests not on the size of the army but on technological superiority. A meat-ax approach to cutting military expenditures means less investment in research and development, thereby ensuring a weaker military.

The sphere of influence approach to international relations, which the Obama administration appears to be pursuing, means maintaining a balance of power in which no nation has military superiority. If this is Obama's foreign policy strategy—and one has to wonder whether there is a geopolitical strategy or just a seat-of-the pants response to crisis situations—then the administration has found a perfect counter-party in Vladimir Putin, the nationalist intent on making Russia into a regional power.

Putin's Rise to Power

Putin's background as a KGB agent is instructive, but can be misleading. He is not an internationalist communist of the Stalinist regime, but a nationalist who has rejected communism. He emerged out of the KGB in the 1970s, when many in the younger ranks and some top leaders in the agency, such as Yury Andropov, realized that communism had failed. These KGB officers saw themselves as guardians of the state, protectors of Russian national interests, and not defenders of any specific system of governance. They took seriously the symbol of the KGB as the "shield and sword" of the nation. As Fiona Hill shows in her insightful February 2013 *Atlantic* magazine article, Putin was an outsider in the agency until his sudden rise in the late 1990s.

Putin was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, to a factory foreman and his wife in 1952. People from St. Petersburg took pride in living a city that was once the nation's capital. There was a natural resentment toward Moscow. In 1970, Putin entered Leningrad State University's Law Department, a training ground for the KGB, the police and the bureaucracy. He was targeted early by the KGB before he graduated in 1975. He recalled, "I was driven by high motives. I thought I would be able to use my skills to the best for society" (David Hoffman, "Putin's Career Rooted in Russia's KGB," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2000).

Putin was part of a new generation of recruits brought into the KGB by Yury Andropov to bring new voices to the agency. Andropov realized that the Soviet system was enfeebled and needed reform. The idea was not to overthrow the system, but to undertake deep reforms. Tensions between this group of recruits, usually referred to as the Andropov "draft," and older KGB insiders became quickly apparent. These tensions worsened after Andropov's sudden death in February 1984.

After working in Leningrad, Putin received an invitation to attend the elite foreign intelligence training institute in Moscow. He was assigned to Dresden, East Germany (GDR) at the age of 32. Dresden was not a premier assignment. There was no love lost between the Honecker government and the Mikhail Gorbachev government in Moscow. Gorbachev was pursuing perestroika, while Honecker and his hardline East German allies refused reform. Putin witnessed the tensions within the ruling party between hardliners resistant to reform and an opposition seeking to reform the system to maintain power.

In his memoir, as quoted by Hill in her *Atlantic* piece, Putin declares that "GDR in many respects was an eye-opener for me." He realized the GDR was "in a situation which we had gone through many years ago already in the Soviet Union. It was a harsh totalitarian country, similar to our model, but 30 years earlier. And the tragedy is that many people sincerely believe in all those communist ideals."

Meanwhile reforms in Moscow were not going well. As Putin recalls, again quoted by Hill, "It was clear the Union was ailing. And it had a terminal, incurable illness under the title of paralysis. The paralysis of power." His experience in the GDR, Putin later said, was transformative. He saw that the old world had collapsed and a new world was emerging. He returned to the USSR, seeking

to pursue a doctoral dissertation at Leningrad University. There he appeared to fall under the influence of Professor Anatoly Sobchak, a leader in the first wave of democratic reformers. When Sobchak was elected to the Soviet-era city council, Putin left the KGB to go to work as his aide.

When Sobchak was defeated for reelection, Putin left for Moscow. His career now entered the fast track. He became head of the Federal Security Service, the domestic successor to the KGB in 1998. At this time he completed his post-doctoral dissertation on strategic mineral renewal from what was considered a free-market perspective. Putin came to the attention of Boris Yeltsin, who brought him into his inner circle. By 1999, Russia was in a state of utter collapse. At this point, Putin was appointed acting president, later winning election. Russian leadership was looking for a strong leader, and they would find one in Putin.

Putinism Emerges

Putin came into office disillusioned with democracy. Gathering around him former KGB colleagues, he pursued a policy of what Putin called "sovereign democracy." This system called for an authoritarian government headed by a strong leader that exerted centralized control over regional governors, tied economic oligarchs to government, and controlled the news. Distinguished Russian historian Walter Laqueur details the rise of the regime in *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West* (2015). Laqueur shows how Putin's government played upon the deep nationalist sentiments of the Russia people, their xenophobia toward the West, and their messianic belief in the Russian Orthodox Church.

As Laqueur explains, Putinism was built on an authoritarian state capitalism and a new class of economic oligarchs closely tied to the government. During the Yeltsin years, privatization had led to the emergence of billionaires who purchased declining state enterprises and acquired vast business empires. Many of these new oligarchs came out of nowhere. Some were former truck mechanics, university mathematicians, or engineers working at the Academy of Science. Their loyalties were to themselves and not the state. They were often critics of Putin. Putin, through a systematic campaign of repression, imprisonment and exile, forced these oligarchs out and assembled a new class of oligarchs loyal to the government. Many were in the oil and gas industry. He nationalized the press to quell dissent. In the process, Putin himself became a billionaire.

A Show of Christianity

Supporting a cross on his neck, Putin encouraged relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. Many of his closest advisers became converts to Russian Orthodoxy. In contrast to the atheistic ideology of communism, Putin denounced America and the West as godless nations that had turned away from Christian values. He accused the United States of pursuing a “path to degradation” (<http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2014/01/29>). He decried Americans’ support of protest groups such as Pussy Riot, a female punk rock band, members of which were harshly imprisoned after they staged an anti-Putin protest in a Russian Orthodox cathedral.

This embrace of religious orthodoxy encouraged a rise in vigilantism seen in groups such as the Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers, who hold as their slogan “Orthodoxy or Death.” Novels, television documentaries and nonfiction monographs extolling the virtues of the Tartars, the old Russian church, and non-Western attitudes (and conspiracy theories) were promoted.

Laqueur argues that this was not fascism, but bore striking similarities to Mussolini’s Italy. Putin became a popular figure in Russia. Independent polls showed a 70 to 80 percent favorability rating for Putin, even as the body count of his assassinated opponents rose. Much of Putin’s initial success

rested on high oil and gas prices in the early 2000s. The more recent collapse of oil and gas prices, however, has damaged the Russian economy. Sanctions imposed by the West after Putin’s annexation of Crimea have worsened the situation in Russia.

Putin’s Russia has become a wild card on the international stage. Authoritarian leaders confronting economic crisis often turn to military expansion to distract a discontented citizenry. Putin wants to restore the greatness of the Russian empire. Unlike 19th-century czars, however, he heads a nation with nuclear weapons. For this reason he poses a threat to all his European neighbors, with Ukraine at the top of the list. His government is actively supporting nationalist far-right movements throughout Eastern Europe, as well as Marine Le Pen’s National Front party in France.

Any pretense that Putin is a friend of America should be rejected. To bolster his regime in any way to make Russia a regional power is destructively myopic. Our political leadership, and those running the State Department under Obama, should understand that international bullies, whether a Hitler in Germany, a Khomeini in Iran, or a Castro in Cuba, can be countered only with strength. Appeasing thugs leads, as history has shown time and again, to a much more dangerous world.

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