The Trump and Putin Doctrines: Evolving Great Power Tensions Between the United States and Russia

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THE ROLE OF DOCTRINES

As outlined earlier in this volume (Renshon 2020), “doctrines” serve the primary purpose of alerting allies and enemies alike to a leader’s desired outcomes, usually specific to certain geographical areas or geopolitical circumstances. Such was the case with the Monroe and Truman Doctrines, aimed at European meddling in the western hemisphere during the nineteenth century, and the US approach to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In contrast, however, both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin not only focus on specific geographical regions or certain circumstances in their respective doctrines, but also publicly espouse broader doctrines with the potential to alter the entire international system.
At present, the international system is largely structured along liberal international lines put into place after World War II by the United States and its allies. Its primary elements are international organizations that attempt to develop and apply worldwide rules of internationally acceptable behavior such as diplomacy, cooperation, and liberal economic exchange. Since the end of World War II, the United States has been viewed as the leader of this international liberal order. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was the dominant global actor, using its moment as the global hegemon to strengthen this order. However, with the rise of China, a revanchist Russia, and ideological fissures within the West, the international order is increasingly challenged, spurring three questions about the Trump and Putin Doctrines and the international system. First, according to Trump and Putin, how ought the international order be structured? Second, how are Trump and Putin challenging the international order? And third, how are they challenging each other? The chapter addresses all three questions through a comparative analysis of both doctrines.

**Trump Doctrine**

The Trump Doctrine is well discussed in the first four chapters in this volume. Most particularly, Chapter 1, by Stanley Renshon, provides a thorough presentation and discussion on the Trump Doctrine. Here is a brief review of the six elements that comprise Trump Doctrine:

1. **America First**: not precluding positive interactions with other countries or international organizations, but only to the extent that such interactions benefit “America first.”
2. **American National Identity**: international interactions are most valued if their focus is on what America stands for, its core values and shared identity.
3. **Highly Selective Involvement**: emphasis on issues and areas that are important to US national identity, as opposed to seemingly open-ended, constantly unidirectional commitments to other states or international organizations.
4. **Comprehensive American Strength, Resilience and Resolve**: being prepared for any circumstance by being able to rely on its *self* and the *entire* gamut of tools and resources in pursuit of maintaining US interests and values.
5. **Maximum Pressure/Hyper-focused**: staying hyper-focused on the desired goals which leads to...
6. **Maximum Flexibility**: achieving those goals by successfully maneuvering around roadblocks, setbacks, opposition.

One final note on analyzing either Doctrine: as outlined by Suedfeld, Morrison, and Kuznar in Chapter 2, it is ineffective and inaccurate to analyze Trump’s or Putin’s Doctrine with speech alone. As is the case with most leaders, Trump’s and Putin’s speeches do not wholly reflect their actual policy behavior and an analysis of either Doctrine requires a much more nuanced and detailed methodology focused on policies.

**The Putin Doctrine**

How does the Trump Doctrine compare with Putin’s Doctrine vis-à-vis the international system? At their most basic, there is very little that separates the two Doctrines. So alike are they in basics that the same six elements that comprise the Trump Doctrine also provide a workable roadmap for the Putin Doctrine. However, the details are quite different and significant.

1. **Russia First**

There, initially, appears to be very little difference between the two Doctrines on this element other than geographical focus. This is not surprising, considering political leaders of most states are (or ought to be) concerned first, and foremost, with their own state. Indeed, both Trump and Putin are viewed as tolerating the existing international liberal order only to the extent that it benefits their respective states (Galeotti 2019; Carafano 2020; Nau 2020). When the international system stops benefiting their states, Trump and Putin are disinclined toward it. However, as discussed below, their respective disinclinations are substantially different.

Furthermore, the very concept of “Russia First” is challenged by a body of literature which suggests that Putin’s first concern is not Russia, but Putin and his cronies. According to this perspective, Putin and his

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1 Putin is not Russia, any more than Trump is America. Therefore, Putin’s Doctrine should not be misinterpreted as reflecting the desires, interests, or values of the Russian people as a whole. Rather, Putin Doctrine is a set of policy outlooks specific to Putin and his associates.
cronies (corrupt oligarchs, crime lords, societal influencers, and even religious leaders) all exploit the Russian state at the expense of the public (Taylor 2018; Galeotti 2018; Fried et al. 2018; Arbatova 2019; Gouré 2019). Consequently, this chapter’s analysis of the Putin Doctrine will also consider this claim.2

2. Russian National Identity

In both cases, America/Russia First is based on maintaining national interests rooted in core values and identity. Both Doctrines even reflect similar core values such as religiosity, a sense of destiny, a focus on ordinary working people, and an indifference/distain for multiculturalism or internationalism/globalism (Arbatova 2019; Löfflmann 2019; Renshon 2020). However, though the role of these values is frequently a point of debate in the discussion on American national identity, these values are largely unchallenged and even essential to Putin’s version of Russian national identity. Particularly, two of these values are paramount for understanding the rest of the Putin Doctrine: the religious nature of Russia’s identity, and the sense of destiny.

The first value, and most important for Putin and his doctrine, is the religious nature of Russian national identity. The Russian state has a strong historical connection with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This is still true today and Putin uses the formal ties between church and state to lend legitimacy to his domestic and international decision-making (Lamoreaux and Flake 2018; Kelly 2018). According to Patriarch Kirill, the current head of the ROC, Putin was chosen by God to lead Russia at this time (Coyer 2015: 6–10). And, if God has chosen someone, who can stand against that person? Furthermore, if God has chosen a person, it stands to reason that God has also chosen that person’s policies.

In practice this means that anyone who claims Orthodoxy as part of their own identity can be viewed as heretical if opposed to Putin and his policy approaches. And while Putin’s policies are not universally accepted by religious folk, he still commands considerable support among those identifying as Orthodox (Soroka 2016: 8; Petro 2018: 227) which comprises the majority of Russians.

2 A friend once suggested that Putin, as a former member of the KGB and the broader Soviet bureaucracy, has come by his dishonesty honestly. Also, to be fair, similar arguments about corruption and self-enrichment have been made about Trump.
Note that this broad religious support for Putin (whether real or societally fabricated [Soroka 2016: 8]), is quite different to the relationship Trump has with religion and the public in two respects. The first is an institutional difference. Whereas the US Constitution’s first amendment forbids an official relationship between church and state, the ROC is absolutely treated preferentially by the Russian government, a relationship further strengthened in Russia’s 2020 constitutional amendments. The second is a societal difference. Where both supporters and detractors of Trump claim a religious nature to their views, this is much less evident among Russians vis-à-vis Putin (Soroka 2016). Consequently, though religion is used to stoke nationalism in both states, religiosity strengthens Putin’s version of Russian National Identity while, for Trump, it is used both to strengthen his support base and his political opposition, potentially weakening Trump’s foreign policy objectives and their application.

The second key value in understanding the Putin Doctrine, and growing out of the religious nature of Russia’s national identity, is the idea that Russia is destined to play a major role in the world. This stems, in part, from the identity bequeathed on Russia (and, specifically Putin’s administration) as protectors of Christian values in the face of anti-Christian Western values (Lamoreaux and Mabe 2019). It also stems, though, from Russia’s past as a global great power. Institutional memory dies hard, and one of Putin’s key foreign policy objectives is to guide Russia back to its “rightful” place as a global great power. Worryingly for the United States, some believe this can only happen as US and Western dominance is weakened in the international order (Borshchevskaya 2019; Marsh 2019). To accomplish these goals, Putin’s Doctrine must include specific plans for recapturing Russia’s former glory, and for undercutting US power and influence globally, which leads to the next element.

3. Highly Selective Involvement

The Trump and Putin Doctrine’s share two general commonalities regarding this element as well. First, both decide global involvement on whether it will benefit the national interest and bolster national values and identity. Second, both are wary of entanglement in international institutions, especially those in which their voice is limited. For example,
Trump rails against NATO, but in actual deed supports it by strengthening the US military and by coercing/convincing other NATO members to increase their own military spending and improve their own military capabilities (Carafano 2020; Nau 2020).

In Putin’s case, however, bolstering Russia’s national interest, values and identity generally results in opposition to, and attempts to limit the influence of, the US. This is seen in relations vis-a-vis NATO, engagement in the Middle East, and a turn toward Asia. For Putin, NATO is not only a cause of frustration, it is a clear embodiment of the Western threat to Russia in three ways. First, Putin sees NATO’s troop build-up in the Baltic States and Poland as a direct military threat on Russia’s border. Second, Putin sees NATO as evidence of Western deceit (talk of NATO/Russia cooperation that rarely materializes, or talk of protecting Western values that, in part, resulted in the 2008 economic collapse). Third, and somewhat contradictory to the first, Putin sees NATO’s increased emphasis on cybersecurity and terrorism as evidence that Russia is insufficiently strong to even deserve NATO’s full attention. In other words, it reminds Putin that Russia is not where it deserves to be among global great powers (Tsygankov 2018: 106). Consequently, NATO is one area of selective involvement in international institutions for both Putin and Trump, though for contradictory, reasons.

Highly selective involvement, and particularly the focus on limiting the United States globally, also explains Russia’s involvement in Syria. Historically, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union wielded considerable influence in the Middle East. That influence diminished significantly with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia’s recent foray into Syria can be seen as an attempt to recover and increase Russia’s global influence. However, Russia’s involvement in Syria is not simply a gambit to increase Russia’s global reach. It also serves to limit US/Western influence globally. Ideologically this is achieved because Putin was able to establish a presence in Syria and maintain it where the United States could not and where President Obama said Russia would fail (Blank 2019a). Additionally, it has allowed the Kremlin to strengthen an A2/AD (anti access/area denial) shield across much of the Mediterranean and Middle East. This limits US influence both directly and through formal allies in the region, such as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (Blank 2019a: 412–414).

Russia’s foray into Syria also strengthens Putin’s own position within Russia. Many within the West argue that Putin’s position as the president of Russia includes being the country’s head kleptocrat. In other words,
his position of power allows him and his cronies to enrich themselves at the expense of the state and the citizens. Maintaining that position depends not only on religious nationalism and ROC support, but also on geopolitical nationalism created by regaining great power status and by projecting the West as an existential threat to Russia. Not surprisingly, the Kremlin-controlled media play an integral role in bolstering images of Russia under attack from the West, and of Russia regaining its great power status (Free Russia Foundation 2019a). In short, Putin is alleged to use his opposition to NATO and his foray into Syria to:

- Distract the public from elite corruption, as Putin and his network gets rich at the expense of the public. It keeps the public focused, instead, on the achievements of “Russia” (Free Russia Foundation 2019b; Gouré 2019: 62–63; Huntsman 2019).
- Justify increased military spending, and more central control of the military when no real threat exists (Blank 2019a: 6; Gouré 2019: 68).
- Justify its military activity (hot and cold) in the shared-neighborhood (Chekov et al. 2019; Schneider 2019: 312–314). This includes the annexation of Crimea; Kremlin-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine; frozen conflicts in Georgia, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and Moldova; constant saber-rattling (both in speech and in practice) against northern Europe and the Baltic States; Russian involvement in Syria. All of these (regardless of whether they produce any calculable results) provide the Russian public with the impression that Russia is again expanding to its former glory and countering imminent Western threats to Russia’s national interest.
- Justify hybrid warfare against the West in the form of election meddling, the distribution of misinformation, funding Western political parties and corporations, exacerbating political and social cleavages across the West, assassinations, and using Western legal and financial institutions to protect kleptocrats within Russia, all of which illustrate Russia’s global reach (Free Russia Foundation 2019a, b).

Putin’s selective involvement is not limited to NATO and Syria. Russia also has ties with China and the states of Central Asia. In those cases, as with Syria, the rationale is to strengthen Russia’s claim to great power status, and to limit the United States and Western global influence. This
is especially the case with China, a relationship in which Russia may well end up playing second-fiddle but which would still limit US global influence (Arbatova 2019; Gould-Davies 2020). However, the very fact that interaction with China and Central Asia is somewhat limited (Arbatova 2019: 21; Gould-Davies 2020: 18) seems to lend further credence to the argument that Putin’s emphasis is less on limiting US/Western influence and more on strengthening his own position in power by keeping the public focused on imaginary threats and great power competition.

One final thought regarding Putin’s selective engagement, and particularly the claim of self-enrichment through foreign policy: the twin arguments that Putin benefits immensely from his position, and that Russians, in general, are ignorant or tolerant of his corruption largely because of messaging from the Kremlin-controlled media, are both well documented as outlined above. However, what is also evident is Putin’s continued personal popularity within Russia. As of August, 2020, Putin’s popularity has never dropped below 59% since 2000 (Levada Center 2020). If nothing else, Putin and his policies are helping build a strong sense of nationalism, and providing a sense of purpose in Russia (Muraviev 2020). Consequently, despite ample evidence of corruption and a well-oiled and misleading propaganda machine, it is difficult to argue that Putin’s Doctrine is wholly bad for Russia and its people, especially considering the extent to which a strong sense of purpose are important to Russian national identity.

4. Comprehensive Russian Strength, Resilience, and Resolve

According to the Trump Doctrine, strength is what helps countries survive and thrive; adhering to liberal international group consensus does not necessarily pass that basic test. A comprehensive, all-inclusive, strength is what compels other countries to take the United States seriously. Indeed, causing other states, allies and enemies, to regard the United States with a modicum of fear or apprehension is viewed as positive for the Trump Doctrine. Consequently, the United States’ all-inclusive projection of strength must include economic, military, and even societal elements.

The US economy is the world’s largest. American military might is enormous and the country’s military spending is unrivaled globally. Although the American position as the leader of the free world with
Trump as president is questioned by many, including some allies, the United States is the putative leader of the group of countries projecting liberal norms and values in the international system.

However, this does not mean that Russian strength, resilience, and resolve do not cause concern within the United States and the West. Indeed, in at least two realms the West has much cause for concern from the “comprehensive strength” aspect of Putin’s Doctrine. The first realm, discussed above, is Putin’s control of Russia’s population through religious support, media manipulation, his vast public support, and foreign policy objectives that obfuscate domestic problems in favor of a message of international strength. As long as these trends continues, public support will be a strength for Putin and his Doctrine.

The second, however, is perhaps more concerning to the United States, and even the broader West. This is Putin’s ability and inclination to use a total-war (hybrid warfare) approach to even the most limited conflict (Binnendijk and Gompert 2019: 114–115). This could include conventional forces, nuclear forces, economic manipulation, information warfare (misinformation), saber-rattling, and even the cooptation of sub-state or non-state actors such as guerrilla, criminal, and terrorist organizations (Chekov et al. 2019). Whereas the United States and most Western states have historically been more circumspect in their approach to different kinds of conflicts and different types of opponents, Russia’s most recent doctrine views every conflict (whether hot or not) as war, and does not exclude any response (Chekov et al. 2019; Binnendijk and Gompert 2019; Schneider 2019). For example, if NATO or the United States were to increase conventional force capacity in Poland or the Baltic States, even without making any sort of offensive, Putin could consider threatening, or even using, a nuclear (escalate to de-escalate) strike in response (Binnendijk and Gompert 2019: 115). By adopting such a strategy vis-à-vis any threat, it allows Russia to project strength in ways not previously considered.

Most concerning of all is that Putin already views Russia as at war with the United States (Blank 2019b: 6–7; Chekov et al. 2019: 30, 40). This does not mean that the United States has launched a traditional military offensive against Russia as, in fact, they have not. However, Putin’s military doctrine views any and all conflict as war. Consequently, any time an opponent opposes Russian national interests, it is seen as an act of war. This means that US opposition to Russian aims in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe, even without the direct use of force, are
viewed as part of “total war.” Consequently, they can be countered by any means. As such, the United States risks ending up in a real war it does not want, from a policy it did not adopt, because of Putin’s current defense and security doctrines (Binnendijk and Gompert 2019). Does this mean that Putin will start a hot war with the United States? Not necessarily. Such moves always prove costly. Indeed, as many analysts argue, a strong US policy vis-à-vis Russian military activity, clearly outlining explicit, strong responses to any threats, could well prevent any potential military activity between the United States and Russia (as outlined below: for a full analysis see Blank 2019c).

5. Maximum pressure/Hyper-focused, and 6. Maximum Flexibility

Putin’s public focus on renewing Russia’s great power status, on projecting the United States and the West as threats to Russia’s identity and survival, and his willingness to use any and all tools to accomplish his goals (as presented in the previous two elements), define both elements 5 (Maximum Pressure/Hyper-Focused) and 6: (Maximum Flexibility) within his Doctrine.

A United States Response

Unfortunately, according to some experts, Trump still has no functional, comprehensive strategy vis-à-vis Putin and Russia (Blank 2019a: 402; Alcaro 2019; Glaser et al. 2019). What does Trump want, and importantly, how does he intend to get it? Broadly speaking, Trump would like the Kremlin to stop meddling in the internal affairs of the West, to stop threatening allies, especially in Eastern Europe, and to stop threatening US interests globally (Blank 2019b). In short, Trump would like Russia to decide to play nice.

To his credit, and despite his alleged deference to Putin and no clearly laid out strategy vis-à-vis Putin, Trump does have something of a broad containment strategy vis-a-vis Russia, four elements of which are discussed here. First, as mentioned above, he has increased US involvement in NATO, specifically in the Baltic States and Poland. Second, his rhetoric about possibly withdrawing from NATO, and his constant public complaints about allies, have spurred more military spending within
NATO member-states (Gvosdev 2019). It has also encouraged European states to take more ownership of their own security vis-à-vis Russia (though, the extent to which a united Europe will actually take ownership of its own strategic position, is an ongoing question [Noël 2019: 94]). Third, Trump has kept up dialogue with Putin, a practice that, though not guaranteeing any success, is a far better alternative to no dialogue (Kubiak et al. 2019).

Fourth, Trump has expanded US sanctions against Russia, and against specific individuals within Putin’s elite circles (Gould-Davies 2020: 12–13). Sanctions are nothing new, as President Obama implemented sanctions immediately following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Are the sanctions effective in stemming Putin’s foreign policy objectives? The answer is rather complicated.

Economically, Russia is suffering from the sanctions as their economic growth has slowed, GDP has shrunk, and targeted individuals are certainly feeling the pinch (Fried et al. 2018). Furthermore, the fact that Putin is talking about sanctions and consistently asking Trump and European leaders to lift the sanctions indicate that they are, at the very least, troublesome (Galeotti 2019). However, at a deeper level they haven’t changed Putin’s overall Doctrine (Giusti 2019: 226–227; Gould-Davies 2020). One could also ask whether Putin is even serious about getting sanctions lifted as Russia continues its influence campaign in Western Europe, including election meddling, political favor buying, and successful and failed assassinations (Free Russia Foundation 2019b).

What further steps can the United States take to counter Putin’s Doctrine? Consider the following suggestions (Blank 2019b). First, Trump needs to create a clearer set of outcomes he expects from Putin. These need to include, at the very least, a clear dial-down of military adventurism in Europe, the willingness to discuss nuclear doctrines and treaties, and the creation of some sort of formal process for continued dialogue. Second, Trump needs to continue pressure with more, individually focused, sanctions. Some US and Western sanctions are broad enough that they have little effect on Russia’s economy, or Putin personally. However, target sanctions, such as those adopted by Trump in 2018, are working and should be expanded to include more individuals in Putin’s network (Fried et al. 2018; Free Russia Foundation 2019b; Gould-Davies 2020). Third, the United States should attach clear anti-corruption and transparency expectations to sanction, offering to remove such sanctions if Putin’s network becomes more transparent in their finances (Fried et al.
Fourth, the United States should continue to include European allies in implementing those sanctions. Sanctions solely from the United States will be considerably less influential than sanctions from Europe as well.

Fifth, recognizing that Putin is willing to use force to achieve his Doctrinal outcomes, and further recognizing that wherever it happens Putin’s ultimate enemy will always be the United States (Chekov et al. 2019: 40), Trump needs to adopt a clear military response to any Russian offensive. It needs to send a clear message that the United States is ready and willing to respond forcefully to any forays against allies. This should include:

– Increasing our technological superiority over Russia’s military (Blankenship and Denison 2019: 45)
– sending a clear message that we will retaliate against any Russian aggression (Gouré 2019: 98), including the commitment to retaliate with nuclear weapons if Russia uses nuclear weapons (Binnendijk and Gompert 2019: 120–121)
– strengthening conventional forces in Europe, with European support, to dissuade Putin from attempting something similar to what he did in Ukraine (Gouré 2019: 92)
– eliminating national debt so we can spend more on the military while also taking care of social issues at home (Blankenship and Denison 2019: 48–50) which requires healing the partisan gaps that currently undermine bipartisan decision making (Lamoreaux 2019). This latter element is unlikely to be realized in the short term because of the economic consequences of the global COVID-19 pandemic, but is important to keep in mind as a future requirement.

Conclusion

This chapter started with three questions: first, according to Trump and Putin, how ought the international order be structured? Second, how are Trump and Putin challenging the international order? And, third, how are they challenging each other? As this chapter illustrates, the answer to the first question is relatively simple and straightforward. According to both Trump and Putin, the international order ought to be restructured to benefit their respective states. Both perceive a challenge to the system as
beneficial, though there is obviously no consensus on what its new shape ought to be.

Which leads us to the second and third questions: how are Trump and Putin challenging the international order and each other? The answer to these questions is also quite simple: Trump challenges the international order by challenging existing alliances, reaching out to perceived enemies such as Putin, and using a myriad of foreign policy tools to accomplish his goals. As for Putin, he continues to focus on challenging US global dominance however, whenever, and wherever possible, using all the possible tools at his disposal.

To that end, and as a matter of national security, it is vital that Trump adopt a specific, clear approach vis-à-vis Putin that includes clear economic and military consequences in response to potential violations of US national interest. Considering Putin’s willingness to do whatever it takes in pursuit of his interests, regardless of the potentially detrimental consequences for the United States and the West, the more specific and forceful the strategy, the better.

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