

# Neo-Containment: a Strategy toward Russia

The West should draw inspiration from containment's intellectual origins and approach Russia as a political-psychological threat.

By Henrik Larsen

During the past five years, Russia has increased its capacity to shape Western domestic politics to its own geopolitical advantage. NATO and the EU should commit to *neo-containment* as a specific and calibrated response to the nature of the Russia challenge, which is more a matter of divide-and-rule than expansionism and which seeks to exploit the vulnerabilities in Western resilience more than in its military posture.

## Containment in Theory and Practice

At the outset of the Cold War, containment first crystallised as a strategy in the writings of U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan. In essence, containment prescribed readiness to muster enough force or resistance to contain the “expansive tendencies” of the Soviet Union. For him, the Soviet Union was not adventurist like Hitlerite Germany, but highly sensitive to the logic of force and would back down if met by firm resistance. Most situations on the European continent could therefore be handled without a major showdown or brinkmanship.<sup>1</sup>

In Kennan's perception, it was equally, if not more important to make use of the psychological, economic, and diplomatic instruments of containment. The U.S. Marshall Plan, launched in 1948 to forestall the spread of communist influence in war-torn Western Europe, dovetailed with the notion that containment was more than military readiness. Kennan warned about the Soviet Union's ability to undermine public confidence and exacerbate political divisions within and between countries through the use of propaganda and subversion. For Kennan, the antidote was

improving national self-confidence and projecting an image of successfully coping with domestic problems. In a world of competing ideologies, this would bolster Western moral and political leadership.<sup>2</sup>

In just a few years, containment assumed a more pronounced military aspect than what Kennan originally had envisaged. The Berlin blockade, the Soviet nuclear bomb, the “loss” of China and the Korean War empowered a new generation of Cold-War strategists such as Paul Nitze, who were convinced that containment without superior military strength was nothing but a policy of bluff. For them, the United States had to increase its defense budget and extend military assistance to allies in a worldwide struggle against communism. The United States emphasised the willingness to use nuclear weapons to raise the stakes of Soviet aggression. Military strength was the core of Western strategy to contain Soviet expansionism for the rest of the Cold War. Whereas Kennan saw com-

## Key Points

- Neo-containment should target Moscow's capacity to undermine public confidence and limit its space for political influence, which are bigger threats to Western cohesion than during the Cold War.
- Military deterrence is one element of a broader set of tools to discourage Russia from pushing limits that are not necessarily territorial.
- Public commitment to neo-containment would strengthen NATO and EU self-confidence in dealing with Russia.

munism as fundamentally flawed and the Kremlin's leadership as too rigid and doctrinal to be accepted elsewhere in the world, subsequent U.S. administrations sought to weaken their adversaries by pitting communist countries against each other and through military competition.<sup>3</sup>

### The Primacy of Information Warfare

Containment can teach us useful lessons. However, for it to be relevant for current conditions, we need to grasp its core insight, namely that the Soviet Union – just like Russia today – essentially represented a political-psychological challenge. Foreign policy cannot be separated from the need to mobilize domestic resilience against Russian meddling in internal affairs.

Moscow is no longer seeking to foment world revolution. However, it continues to seek the disintegration of Western societies. Russia's strategy is to weaken the coherence of NATO and the EU as geopolitical forces and to push the United States out of European security affairs. Moscow's renewed interest in subversion no longer follows a Messianic script, but its influence activities today are more pervasive and more successful in disrupting political processes and undermining public confidence than they were during the Cold War.

Moscow no longer threatens to invade Western and Central Europe, but it still believes that a sphere of influence in the near abroad is essential for Russian national security. Its willingness to go to war to protect its interests in Ukraine and Georgia highlights similar temptations in Estonia and Latvia, where significant numbers of ethnic Russians reside. There is reason for concern about Russian intentions in some areas that were, until recently, not considered to be militarily significant, notably Greenland.

Russia remains a regional threat, which requires a certain level of military preparedness. However, the West should also take into account the domestic financial and psychological constraints that the Kremlin faces. Russia has invested heavily in military modernization since 2009, but its budgets are strained and sensitive to how defense spending may affect the "social contract" with the Russian people on which President Vladimir Putin relies. Keeping the costs low has been a key objective in Russia's recent military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Even if it never faced superior force in Ukraine's Donbas region and even if it mostly played a supporting role for the separatists, the protracted conflict there has been a costly and messy affair for Russia.

Russia seeks to impose its will by integrating coercion across all military and non-military activities, but it prefers to minimize the scale of kinetic operations and to rely on information (cyber) warfare at the lower end of the escalation ladder to destroy its enemy's ability to act cohesively. Russia sees information operations as an unceasing strategic priority, making no distinction between peacetime and wartime.<sup>4</sup> The digital age enhances the opportunities for informational-psychological warfare, where Russia feels more comfortable operating.

### Russian Influence and Subversion

Moscow no longer enjoys special ties with communist parties in the West, but it has found new influence channels through right-wing political parties. These parties are not loyal to Moscow, but their policies converge in certain areas and they have more (and growing) influence within the political systems than what the West European communist parties had during the Cold War. Taking advantage of open democratic systems, the Kremlin works with parties that are isolated from the political establishment due to their EU-sceptic and anti-immigration policies. Russia encourages resistance to European integration and seeks to undermine support for the economic sanctions imposed after its 2014 intervention in Ukraine, and for Western solidarity with Georgia and Ukraine.

Some parties are open about their relations with Russia (including France's *Rassemblement National*, Austria's *Freiheitliche Partei*, Italy's *Lega Nord*, Hungary's *Jobbik*, Greece's *Golden Dawn*, and Bulgaria's *Ataka*) and some have merely benefitted from Russia's media platforms.

#### Further Reading

##### **NATO's Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony after the Return of History** *Henrik B. L. Larsen, Routledge, 2019*

On NATO's adaptation to illiberal challenges and the protection of Western democracy.

##### **George F. Kennan, Containment, and the West's Current Russia Problem** *Matthew Rojansky, NATO Defense College, 2016*

On similarities between Russia and the West today and during the Cold War and the value of enhanced Russia expertise in foreign-policy making.

##### **Democratic deterrence: How to Dissuade Hybrid Interference** *Mikael Wigal, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2019*

A whole-of-society concept to strengthen resilience against foreign interference in Western democracy.

##### **8 Ways to Stay Ahead of Influence Operations**

*Bruce Schneier, Foreign Policy, August 12, 2019.*

Practical guidelines to counter foreign influence campaigns.

Other anti-establishment parties are not necessarily Russia-friendly, but the rise of national conservatism and right-wing populism renders the political landscape more receptive to Russian influence and more prone to amplify Russian disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, social media widens the scope of Russia's opportunities to plant conspiracy stories, call into question facts and, thus, to fan polarisation in Western political culture and to undermine confidence in democratic institutions.

Russia maintains at least two security agencies (FSB, GRU) which operate above the law, both at home and abroad. Russia likely played a role in the attempted coup d'état in Montenegro in October 2016, an operation which was intended to prevent the country from joining NATO in the last months prior to its accession. In 2018, Russia allegedly fomented Greek resistance to the Prespa agreement with Skopje, which removed the last hurdle for the renamed Republic of North Macedonia on its way to NATO membership. Russia is also widely suspected of orchestrating several assassinations in Europe, notably the nerve agent attack against former military officer and British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in 2018 in the United Kingdom. This incident demonstrated Russia's ability to punish traitors who have taken refuge in the West and to fuel pre-existing narratives that government explanations cannot be trusted.

Russia has skilfully integrated its political influence channels with its subversive operations, focusing on electoral manipulation through disinformation about the target countries. The 2016 release of information hacked from the Democratic National Committee is the most successful Russian action against any EU or NATO member. Cyber space provides enhanced opportunities to harm free institutions without attribution, creating further confusion. Even if the extent of its impact on the U.S. presidential elections remains unclear, Russian meddling in U.S. domestic politics – which is ongoing – continues to polarise the domestic landscape and undermines Washington's leadership within the Western community.

### Western Vigilance and Unity

The centrepiece of the West's post-2014 response to Russia has been to deter aggression against Poland and the Baltic States (NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and Rapid Reaction). This is designed to raise the costs of military aggression to an unacceptable level for the cost-sensitive Kremlin. Since 2014, NATO has made progress in reassuring member states about their own security, but going forward it must demonstrate that it is capable of projecting power on its northern flank in order to deter Russian activi-



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks at an event marking the 100th anniversary of Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, in Moscow on November 2, 2018. *Reuters*

ties in what will be a crucial area of geopolitical competition.

Yet military deterrence should be seen as one element of a broader set of tools. Russia's cost sensitivity to the use of kinetic force holds important implications for Western policy making, which should be designed to increase the vigilance and unity of Western societies. While an institutionalized Western response drives military deterrence, that is not the case for the containment of Russia's meddling in domestic affairs, where it enjoys much stronger – and growing – influence.

George Kennan had concerns about the resilience of democracies confronted by autocratic regimes and believed that the state should play a role in educating the public about the Soviet Union. Today's polarization within the West, between internationally-oriented liberals and nationalist conservatives, makes educating the public about Russia a difficult task. Nevertheless, Western institutions have begun to raise awareness about Russian disinformation: the EU through its East StratCom Task Force and NATO through its public diplomacy effort to debunk Russian myths.

Kennan's insight about strengthening self-confidence among democracies is truer than ever in the face of a rival that takes advantage of growing national skepticism about European political-economic integration. A time of political division calls for rallying around long-standing democratic virtues such as separation of powers and the market economy that unite the EU and NATO. After all, they are superior to the Russian model, which relies on oppression, is highly prone to corruption, and fails to generate a high standard of living. The solution is not to isolate and shame the national conservatives, which is a failing strategy, but to find ways to accommodate their concerns about open borders and supranational decision making into a new Western consensus. Otherwise, Russia will be

able to build alliances with (even more) embittered political parties hostile to NATO and the EU.

Western resilience depends on the ability to repel Russian manipulation of free institutions. This is especially true in the Baltic States, which Russia might be tempted to isolate through hybrid tactics. Resilience-building is also required in the Western Balkan states, whose often-corrupt public institutions are particularly vulnerable to foreign interference. Western policy makers should also think about how to incentivize countries such as Georgia and Ukraine to build resilience against Russian disinformation and cyber-attacks, because oligarchic capture of the political-administrative systems there hampers effective whole-of-society responses.

### The Virtue of Strategic Patience

Neo-containment would build on existing policies but re-frame them as part of a coherent Western strategy based on a sober assessment of the challenge that Russia poses. Flexibility will be key in adapting to Moscow's shifting targets and influence channels, while buttressing confidence in the Western way of life. The need for readiness at the lower levels of the escalation ladder is an opportunity for deepened NATO-EU cooperation in areas such as hybrid threats and military mobility. Both organizations should publicly commit to neo-containment, because this would enhance the credibility of resilience, deterrence, and thus negotiation power.

NATO and the EU should base neo-containment on the assumption that Russia acts out of a position of weakness and should try to stabilize the relationship with Russia, which is at the highest level of tension since the end of the Cold War. The West cannot ignore Russia, given its proximity and the interconnectedness of the digital age. However, a self-confident West that is able to contain Russian influence has no need to accommodate it and should instead recognize the virtue of strategic patience.

The only real threat to Western institutions would be a failure to unite in the face of Russian divide and rule strategies. Moscow's breach of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is a test of NATO's ability to agree on an appropriate common response, similar to when Moscow deployed SS-20 missiles in Europe during the Cold War.

Neo-containment should be open-ended, while rejecting the (then-correct) Cold-War assumption that the enemy eventually will mellow or collapse under its own weight. Russia is a nation state that has survived centuries of crises and war and which cannot simply be outwaited until its flawed domestic structures come crashing down, as some liberal commentators contend. Most Russians connect democracy to the instability and economic collapse of the 1990s and see President Putin as a strong leader who restored the nation to its former glory. Moreover, the Putin regime needs the West as an enemy figure to legitimize its own existence.

Cold War history teaches that economic weakness at some point should force Moscow to the negotiating table. The Russian Federation shares some of the key vulnerabilities of its Soviet predecessor, which in the end sought negotiation because it could no longer afford an expensive arms race with the West. Russia is vulnerable to fluctuations in world gas and oil prices and recognizes the problems caused by its lack of development and continued reliance on raw material exports. It would like the West to lift the economic sanctions imposed after 2014 and it needs Western investments and access to Western markets for economic growth. The logic of neo-containment suggests that a stagnating Russia, if facing a self-confident West, will eventually seek dialogue and perhaps even détente.

### Selected sources

1. George F. Kennan, "The Long Telegram." National Security Archives, 1946.
2. X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs* 25, 1946–1947.
3. John L. Gaddis, "Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy." Oxford University Press, 1982.
4. Dima D. Adamsky, "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 41 (1–2) (2018).

**Dr. Henrik B. L. Larsen** is a Senior Researcher in the Swiss and Euro-Atlantic Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) with a focus on NATO and transatlantic security.

**Policy Perspectives** is edited by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

Editor: [John \(Jack\) Thompson](#)

Comments welcome at [PolicyPerspectives@sipo.gess.ethz.ch](mailto:PolicyPerspectives@sipo.gess.ethz.ch)

Recent editions of **Policy Perspectives**:

- ! **Educating Engineers for Resilience** (7/3) by Benjamin Scharte
- ! **A Politically Neutral Hub for Basic AI Research** (7/2) by Sophie-Charlotte Fischer and Andreas Wenger

For more editions, and for a free online subscription, visit [www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/css-policy-perspectives](http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/css-policy-perspectives)

© 2020 Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich [www.css.ethz.ch](http://www.css.ethz.ch)

ISSN: 2296-6471; DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000388211