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## Not a New Cold War: Great Game II

Are Russia and the West about to revisit the ritualized competition of the Cold War? Not according to Mark Galeotti. A more useful analogy is the Great Game, that freewheeling 19th century struggle between Great Britain and Russia over Central Asia.

By Mark Galeotti for ISN

Suddenly the talk is of a [new Cold War](#) between Russia and the West, as Crimea is quietly written off as “lost” for the foreseeable future and the diplomatic focus moves to preventing a further—and potentially devastating—[move into eastern Ukraine](#). While an understandable metaphor, though, this is a dangerous one. The Cold War, for all its brinkmanship and proxy conflicts, was a relatively stable and even rules-bound process. Instead, in this new “hot peace,” perhaps a better, if less comfortable, analogy would be the [Great Game](#), that (since mythologized) nineteenth-century era of imperial rivalry over Central Asia between Britain and Russia.

### “Hot Peace”

The Cold War was underpinned by two basic axioms. The first was that the Western and Soviet blocs were engaged in a fundamental and existential struggle; for all the talk of peaceful coexistence, each saw the other’s ideology as antithetical. This is what made it a “war,” however much it was sublimated into other forms and theaters of competition, everything from proxy conflicts to [hockey matches](#). They were ultimately competing for the same thing, nothing less than the shape and future of the world. However, in an age of nuclear weapons and devastating industrial warfare, both Moscow and Washington appreciated the mutual risks in open conflict and so kept it “cold”.

This new era is different. The West would like Russia to be a liberal capitalist democracy instead of the current hybrid pluralist-oligarchic model, but there is little real appetite for regime or system change. Rather, it deplores certain tendencies in Moscow’s dealings with the rest of the world. Likewise, although Vladimir Putin genuinely appears to despise certain aspects of Western culture and politics, he has no interest in exporting the Russian model worldwide. Instead, he is [seeking](#) to assert that Russia gets the “respect”—influence—he feels it deserves in the councils of the world, as well as hegemony over what he sees as its rightful sphere of influence in Eurasia. These are ambitions which collide when, for example, Ukraine is in play, but they are much less fundamentally incompatible than the Manichean worldviews of the 1950s-1980s.

### Blended Operations

Nonetheless, such collisions in interest and worldview will occur and seem to do so with growing

regularity. In part this reflects Putin's efforts to forestall potential domestic opposition with some cheap narrative of foreign pressure and Russian triumphs—circuses to distract from a future lack of bread—but also the inevitable overlaps of national interests in an age of globalized political and economic connections. The West has interests in Russia's neighborhood, as well as dealings with traditional Russian allies and rivals alike, from Syria to Japan. Besides, since his return to the presidency in 2012, he has become [increasingly nationalist and assertive](#) in his views.

Russia will not, for a moment, contemplate challenging NATO militarily. The idea is absurd. But as we have seen in operations from the seizure of Crimea to the 2007 cyber campaign against Estonia, Moscow is willing to act assertively when it feels it can or must, and to do so with whatever means—military, political, covert, economic, hard power or soft—that will best work.

One of the particular characteristics of the original Great Game was that there was little real distinction between the instruments of conventional conflict and competition such as wars, diplomatic missions and treaties and those of the informal realm, from subsidized bandit chieftains to third-party intelligence freelancers. Although even during the Cold War there was a place for the mercenary, gangster and assassin this was, it has to be said, very much at the periphery. Even proxy wars fought by irregulars, such as the Mujahideen resisting the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Viet Cong in Vietnam, were more-or-less formally acknowledged by their patrons.

Now, though, Great Game II is one in which open state actions, deniable missions by state agents and the activities of mercenary agents (from computer hackers to local warlords) blend much more seamlessly. Furthermore, the nature of those operations ranges from military missions and shows of force, through espionage and sabotage, to subversion and misdirection by paid mouthpieces and front companies. John Schindler has retrieved the term "[Special War](#)" from old Soviet bloc playbooks for this kind of conflict.

### **State Non-State Actors**

A key element of Great Game II is the use of real or apparent non-state actors, which are actually nothing of the sort. When Moscow asserted that the so-called "[little green men](#)" who surrounded the government buildings and airports of Crimea were nothing more than local self-defense volunteers—despite their Russian military uniforms, Russian military weapons and Russian military vehicles—this was simply a diplomatic fiction and act of *maskirovka*, strategic deception. It won them the limited period of confusion and uncertainty in Kyiv and the West (is this a purely local, unsanctioned initiative? Are these mercenaries?) they needed to seize the peninsula in an almost bloodless coup.

Nonetheless, this does point to a genuine Russian practice of employing "official unofficial forces" for intelligence-gathering, political pressure and even the threat or fact of coercion. From Cossacks auxiliaries patrolling Sochi to the "patriotic hackers" encouraged to bombard [Estonian servers in 2007](#) and [Georgian ones in 2008](#), all the way to the [Night Wolves](#) motorcycle gang, Moscow has a powerful array of such forces, even before considering the deniable elements of its security apparatus.

This is not, however, a one-way street. In Syria, against a Russian ally, the West is [backing](#) a range of rebel movements, just as it has elsewhere. More controversially, while Western intentions may be good, Russian claims that externally-funded civil society and similar organizations devoted to democratization, transparency and accountability issues are actually "foreign agents"—and are now required to declare themselves as such, by [law](#)—actually has a certain perverse validity. Implicitly, they are campaigning for systemic change, and as such in Great Game II could be considered pawns just as much as Russian front organizations and state-linked corporations in the West.

This is, after all, one of the pernicious side-effects of the rise of the new Great Game. Everything can potentially be an agent of conflict, so the danger is that everything is viewed in that light, from journalism to scholarship, business investment to tourism. Never mind the division of Ukraine, emerging sanctions regimes (and the means the Russian elite will use to bypass them) and the galvanization of NATO, one of the legacies of the start of Great Game II is sadly likely to be paranoia, as well.

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