

Dangerous Game: How the Wreckage of Russiagate Ignited a New Cold War

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It's been nearly four years since the myth of Trump-Russia collusion made its debut in American politics, generating an endless stream of stories in the corporate press and hundreds of allegations of conspiracy from pundits and officials. But despite netting scores of embarrassing admissions, corrections, editor's notes and retractions in that time, the theory refuses to die.

Over the years, the highly elaborate "Russiagate" narrative has fallen away piece-by-piece. Claims about Donald Trump's various back channels to Moscow—[Carter Page](#), [George Papadopoulos](#), [Michael Flynn](#), [Paul Manafort](#), [Alfa Bank](#)—have each been thoroughly discredited. House Intelligence Committee transcripts released in May have revealed that nobody who asserted a Russian hack on Democratic computers, including the [DNC's own cyber security firm](#), is able to produce evidence that it happened. In fact, it is now clear the entire investigation into the Trump campaign was [without basis](#).

It was alleged that Moscow manipulated the president with "[kompromat](#)" and black mail, sold to the public in a "[dossier](#)" compiled by a former British intelligence officer, Christopher Steele. Working through a [DC consulting firm](#), Steele was hired by Democrats to dig up dirt on Trump, gathering a litany of accusations that Steele's own primary source would later [dismiss](#) as "hearsay" and "rumor." Though the FBI was [aware](#) the dossier was little more than sloppy opposition research, the bureau nonetheless used it to obtain warrants to spy on the Trump campaign.

Even the claim that Russia helped Trump from afar, without direct coordination, has fallen flat on its face. The "[troll farm](#)" allegedly tapped by the Kremlin to wage a pro-Trump meme war—the Internet Research Agency—spent only \$46,000 on Facebook ads, or around [0.05 percent](#) of the \$81 million budget of the Trump and Clinton campaigns. The vast majority of the IRA's ads had nothing to do with U.S. politics, and more than half of those that did were published *after* the election, having no impact on voters. The Department of Justice, moreover, has [dropped its charges](#) against the IRA's parent company, abandoning a major case resulting from Robert Mueller's special counsel probe.

Though few of its most diehard proponents would ever admit it, after four long years, the foundation of the Trump-Russia narrative has finally given way and its edifice has crumbled. The wreckage left behind will remain for some time to come, however, kicking off a new era of mainstream McCarthyism and setting the stage for the next Cold War.

It Didn't Start With Trump

The importance of Russiagate to U.S. foreign policy cannot be understated, but the road to

hostilities with Moscow stretches far beyond the current administration. For thirty years, the United States has [exploited](#) its de facto victory in the first Cold War, interfering in Russian elections in the 1990s, aiding oligarchs as they looted the country into poverty, and orchestrating Color Revolutions in former Soviet states. NATO, meanwhile, has been enlarged up to Russia's border, despite American assurances the alliance wouldn't expand "[one inch](#)" eastward after the collapse of the USSR.

Unquestionably, from the fall of the Berlin Wall until the day Trump took office, the United States maintained an aggressive policy toward Moscow. But with the USSR wiped off the map and communism defeated for good, a sufficient pretext to rally the American public into another Cold War has been missing in the post-Soviet era. In the same 30-year period, moreover, Washington has pursued [one disastrous diversion after another](#) in the Middle East, leaving little space or interest for another round of brinkmanship with the Russians, who were relegated to little more than a talking point. That, however, has changed.

The Crisis They Needed

The Washington foreign policy establishment—memorably dubbed "[the Blob](#)" by one Obama adviser—was thrown into disarray by Trump's election win in the fall of 2016. In some ways, Trump stood out as the dove during the race, deeming "endless wars" in the Middle East a scam, calling for closer ties with Russia, and even questioning the usefulness of NATO. Sincere or not, Trump's campaign vows shocked the Beltway think tankers, journalists, and politicians whose worldviews (and salaries) rely on the maintenance of empire. Something had to be done.

In the summer of 2016, [WikiLeaks published](#) thousands of emails belonging to then-Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, her campaign manager, and the Democratic National Committee. Though damaging to Clinton, the leak became fodder for a powerful new attack on the president-to-be. Trump had worked in league with Moscow to throw the election, the story went, and the embarrassing email trove was stolen in a Russian hack, then passed to WikiLeaks to propel Trump's campaign.

By the time Trump took office, the narrative was in full swing. Pundits and politicians rushed to outdo one another in hysterically denouncing the supposed election-meddling, which was deemed the "political equivalent" of the [9/11 attacks](#), tantamount to [Pearl Harbor](#), and akin to the Nazis' 1938 [Kristallnacht](#) pogrom. In lock-step with the U.S. intelligence community—which soon issued a [pair of reports](#) endorsing the Russian hacking story—the Blob quickly joined the cause, hoping to short-circuit any tinkering with NATO or rapprochement with Moscow under Trump.

The allegations soon broadened well beyond hacking. Russia had now waged war on American democracy itself, and "sowed discord" with misinformation online, all in direct collusion with the Trump campaign. Talking heads on cable news and former intelligence officials—some of them playing [both roles at once](#)—weaved a dramatic plot of conspiracy out of countless news reports, clinging to many of the "bombshell" stories long after their key claims were [blown up](#).

A [large segment](#) of American society eagerly bought the fiction, refusing to believe that Trump, the game show host, could have defeated Clinton without assistance from a foreign power. For the first time since the fall of the USSR, rank-and-file Democrats and moderate progressives were aligned with some of the most vocal Russia hawks across the aisle,

creating space for what many have called a “[new Cold War](#).”

Stress Fractures

Under immense pressure and nonstop allegations, the candidate who shouted “America First” and slammed NATO as “[obsolete](#)” quickly adapted himself to the foreign policy consensus on the alliance, one of the first signs the Trump-Russia story was bearing fruit.

Demonstrating the Blob in action, during debate on the Senate floor over Montenegro’s bid to join NATO in March 2017, the hawkish John McCain castigated Rand Paul for daring to oppose the measure, riding on anti-Russian sentiments stoked during the election to [accuse](#) him of “working for Vladimir Putin.” With most lawmakers agreeing the expansion of NATO was needed to “push back” against Russia, the Senate approved the request [nearly unanimously](#) and Trump signed it without batting an eye—perhaps seeing the attacks a veto would bring, even from his own party.

Allowing Montenegro—a country that illustrates [everything wrong with NATO](#)—to join the alliance may suggest Trump’s criticisms were always empty talk, but the establishment’s drive to constrain his foreign policy was undoubtedly having an effect. Just a few months later, the administration would put out its [National Security Strategy](#), stressing the need to refocus U.S. military engagements from counter-terrorism in the Middle East to “great power competition” with Russia and China.

On another aspiring NATO member, Ukraine, the president was also hectored into reversing course under pressure from the Blob. During the 2016 race, the corporate press savaged the Trump campaign for working behind the scenes to “[water down](#)” the Republican Party platform after it opposed a pledge to arm Ukraine’s post-coup government. That stance did not last long.

Though even Obama decided against arming the new government—which his administration [helped to install](#)—Trump reversed that move in late 2017, handing Kiev hundreds of Javelin anti-tank missiles. In an irony [noticed by few](#), some of the arms went to [open neo-Nazis](#) in the Ukrainian military, who were integrated into the country’s National Guard after leading street battles with security forces in the Obama-backed coup of 2014. Some of the very same Beltway critics slamming the president as a racist demanded he pass weapons to out-and-out white supremacists.

Ukraine’s [bid to join NATO](#) has all but stalled under President Volodymyr Zelensky, but the country has nonetheless played an outsized role in American politics both before and after Trump took office. In the wake of Ukraine’s 2014 U.S.-sponsored coup, “Russian aggression” became a favorite slogan in the American press, laying the ground for future allegations of election-meddling.

Weaponizing Ukraine

The drive for renewed hostilities with Moscow got underway well before Trump took the Oval Office, nurtured in its early stages under the Obama administration. Using Ukraine’s revolution as a springboard, Obama launched a major rhetorical and policy offensive against Russia, casting it in the role of an [aggressive](#), expansionist power.

Protests erupted in Ukraine in late 2013, following President Viktor Yanukovych’s refusal to

sign an association agreement with the European Union, preferring to keep closer ties with Russia. Demanding a deal with the EU and an end to government corruption, demonstrators—including the above-mentioned neo-Nazis—were soon in the streets clashing with security forces. Yanukovich was chased out of the country, and eventually out of power.

Through cut-out organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, the Obama administration poured [millions of dollars](#) into the Ukrainian opposition prior to the coup, training, organizing and funding activists. Dubbed the “Euromaidan Revolution,” Yanukovich’s ouster mirrored similar US-backed color coups before and since, with Uncle Sam riding on the back of legitimate grievances while [positioning](#) the most U.S.-friendly figures to take power afterward.

The coup set off serious unrest in Ukraine’s Russian-speaking enclaves, the eastern Donbass region and the Crimean Peninsula to the south. In the Donbass, secessionist forces attempted their own revolution, prompting the new government in Kiev to launch a bloody “war on terror” that continues to this day. Though the separatists received some level of support from Moscow, Washington placed sole blame on the Russians for Ukraine’s unrest, while the press breathlessly predicted an all-out invasion that never materialized.

In Crimea—where Moscow has kept its Black Sea Fleet since the late 1700s—Russia took a more forceful stance, seizing the territory to keep control of its long term naval base. The annexation was accomplished without bloodshed, and a referendum was held weeks later affirming that a large majority of Crimeans supported [rejoining](#) Russia, a sentiment western polling firms have since [corroborated](#). Regardless, as in the Donbass, the move was labeled an invasion, eventually triggering a raft of sanctions from the [U.S.](#) and the [EU](#) (and more recently, from [Trump himself](#)).

The media made no effort to see Russia’s perspective on Crimea in the wake of the revolution—imagining the U.S. response if the roles were reversed, for example—and all but ignored the preferences of Crimeans. Instead, it spun a black-and-white story of “Russian aggression” in Ukraine. For the Blob, Moscow’s actions there put Vladimir Putin on par with Adolf Hitler, driving a flood of frenzied press coverage not seen again until the 2016 election.

Succumbing to Hysteria

While Trump had already begun to cave to the onslaught of Russiagate in the early months of his presidency, a July 2018 meeting with Putin in Helsinki presented an opportunity to reverse course, offering a venue to hash out differences and plan for future cooperation. Trump’s previous sit-downs with his Russian counterpart were largely uneventful, but widely portrayed as a meeting between master and puppet. At the Helsinki Summit, however, a meager gesture toward improved relations was met with a new level of hysterics.

Trump’s refusal to interrogate Putin on his supposed election-hacking during a summit press conference was taken as irrefutable proof that the two were conspiring together. Former CIA Director John Brennan declared it an [act of treason](#), while CNN gravely [contemplated](#) whether Putin’s gift to Trump during the meetings—a World Cup soccer ball—was really a secret spying transmitter. By this point, Robert Mueller’s special counsel probe was in full effect, lending official credibility to the collusion story and further emboldening the claims of conspiracy.

Though the summit did little to strengthen U.S.-Russia ties and Trump made no real effort to do so—beyond resisting the calls to directly confront Putin—it brought on some of the most extreme attacks yet, further ratcheting up the cost of rapprochement. The window of opportunity presented in Helsinki, while only cracked to begin with, was now firmly shut, with Trump as reluctant as ever to make good on his original policy platform.

Sanctions!

After taking a beating in Helsinki, the administration allowed tensions with Moscow to soar to new heights, more or less embracing the Blob's favored policies and often even outdoing the Obama government's hawkishness toward Russia in both rhetoric and action.

In March 2018, the poisoning of a former Russian spy living in the United Kingdom was blamed on Moscow in a highly [elaborate storyline](#) that ultimately [fell apart](#) (sound familiar?), but nonetheless triggered a wave of retaliation from western governments. In the largest diplomatic purge in US history, the Trump administration expelled 60 Russian officials in a period of two days, surpassing Obama's ejection of 35 diplomats in response to the election-meddling allegations.

Along with the purge, starting in spring 2018 and continuing to this day, Washington has unleashed round after round of new sanctions on Russia, including in response to "[worldwide malign activity](#)," to penalize alleged [election-meddling](#), for "[destabilizing cyber activities](#)," retaliation for the [UK spy poisoning](#), more [cyber activity](#), more [election-meddling](#)—the list keeps growing.

Though Trump had called to [lift](#) rather than impose penalties on Russia before taking office, worn down by endless negative press coverage and surrounded by a coterie of hawkish advisers, he was brought around on the merits of sanctions before long, and has used them liberally ever since.

Goodbye INF, RIP OST

By October 2018, Trump had largely abandoned any idea of improving the relationship with Russia and, in addition to the barrage of sanctions, began shredding a series of major treaties and arms control agreements. He started with the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which had eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons—medium-range missiles—and removed Europe as a theater for nuclear war.

At this point in Trump's tenure, super-hawk John Bolton had assumed the position of national security advisor, encouraging the president's worst instincts and using his newfound influence to convince Trump to ditch the INF treaty. Bolton—who helped to detonate a [number](#) of [arms control pacts](#) in previous administrations—argued that Russia's new short-range missile had violated the treaty. While there remains some dispute over the missile's true range and whether it actually breached the agreement, Washington failed to pursue available dispute mechanisms and ignored Russian offers for talks to resolve the spat.

After the U.S. officially scrapped the agreement, it quickly began testing formerly-banned munitions. Unlike the Russian missiles, which were only said to have a range overstepping the treaty by a few miles, the U.S. began testing nuclear-capable [land-based cruise missiles](#) expressly banned under the INF.

Next came the Open Skies Treaty (OST), an idea originally floated by President Eisenhower, but which wouldn't take shape until 1992, when an agreement was struck between NATO and former Warsaw Pact nations. The agreement now has over 30 members and allows each to arrange surveillance flights over other members' territory, an important [confidence-building measure](#) in the post-Soviet world.

Trump saw matters differently, however, and turned a minor dispute over Russia's implementation of the pact into a reason to discard it altogether, again egged on by militant advisers. In late May 2020, the president [declared](#) his intent to withdraw from the nearly 30-year-old agreement, proposing nothing to replace it.

Quid Pro Quo

With the DOJ's special counsel probe into Trump-Russia collusion [coming up short](#) on both smoking-gun evidence and relevant indictments, the president's enemies began searching for new angles of attack. Following a July 2019 phone call between Trump and his newly elected Ukrainian counterpart, they soon found one.

During the [call](#), Trump urged Zelensky to investigate a computer server he believed to be linked to Russiagate, and to look into potential [corruption and nepotism](#) on the part of former Vice President Joe Biden, who played an active role in Ukraine following the Obama-backed coup.

Less than two months later, a "[whistleblower](#)"—a CIA officer detailed to the White House, Eric Ciaramella—came forward with an "urgent concern" that the president had abused his office on the July call. According to his [complaint](#), Trump threatened to withhold U.S. military aid, as well as a face-to-face meeting with Zelensky, should Kiev fail to deliver the goods on Biden, who by that point was a major contender in the 2020 race.

The same players who peddled Russiagate seized on Ciaramella's account to manufacture a whole new scandal: "Ukraineigate." Failing to squeeze an impeachment out of the Mueller probe, the Democrats did just that with the Ukraine call, insisting Trump had committed grave offenses, *again* conspiring with a foreign leader to meddle in a U.S. election.

At a high point during the impeachment trial, an expert called to testify by the Democrats revived [George W. Bush's](#) "fight them over there" maxim to [argue](#) for U.S. arms transfers to Ukraine, citing the Russian menace. The effort was doomed from the start, however, with a GOP-controlled Senate never likely to convict and the evidence weak for a "quid pro quo" with Zelensky. Ukraineigate, like Russiagate before it, was a failure in its stated goal, yet both served to mark the administration with claims of foreign collusion and press for more hawkish policies toward Moscow.

The End of New START?

The Obama administration scored a rare diplomatic achievement with Russia in 2010, signing the New START Treaty, a continuation of the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty inked in the waning days of the Soviet Union. Like its first iteration, the agreement places a cap on the number of nuclear weapons and warheads deployed by each side. It featured a ten-year sunset clause, but included provisions to continue beyond its initial end date.

With the treaty set to expire in early 2021, it has become an increasingly hot topic

throughout Trump's presidency. While Trump sold himself as an expert dealmaker on the campaign trail—an [artist](#), even—his negotiation skills have shown lacking when it comes to working out a new deal with the Russians.

The administration has [demanded](#) that China be incorporated into any extended version of the treaty, calling on Russia to compel Beijing to the negotiating table and vastly complicating any prospect for a deal. With a nuclear arsenal around one-tenth the size of that of Russia or the U.S., China has refused to join the pact. Washington's intransigence on the issue has put the future of the treaty in limbo and largely left Russia without a negotiating partner.

A second Trump term would spell serious trouble for New START, having already shown willingness to shred the INF and Open Skies agreements. And with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) already killed under the Bush administration, New START is one of the few remaining constraints on the planet's two largest nuclear arsenals.

Despite pursuing massive escalation with Moscow from 2018 onward, Trump-Russia conspiracy allegations never stopped pouring from newspapers and TV screens. For the Blob—heavily invested in a narrative as fruitful as it was false—Trump would forever be “Putin's puppet,” regardless of the sanctions imposed, the landmark treaties incinerated or the deluge of warlike rhetoric.

Running for an Arms Race

As the Trump administration leads the country into the next Cold War, a renewed arms race is also in the making. The destruction of key arms control pacts by previous administrations has fed a proliferation powder keg, and the demise of New START could be the spark to set it off.

Following Bush Jr.'s termination of the ABM deal in 2002—wrecking a pact which placed limits on Russian and American missile defense systems to maintain the balance of mutually assured destruction—Russia soon resumed funding for a number of strategic weapons projects, including its hypersonic missile. In his [announcement](#) of the new technology in 2018, Putin deemed the move a response to Washington's unilateral withdrawal from ABM, which also saw the U.S. develop [new weapons](#).

Though he inked New START and campaigned on vows to pursue an end to the bomb, President Obama also helped to advance the arms build-up, embarking on a 30-year [nuclear modernization project](#) set to cost taxpayers \$1.5 trillion. The Trump administration has embraced the initiative with open arms, even [adding to it](#), as Moscow follows suit with upgrades to its own arsenal.

Moreover, Trump has opened a [whole new battlefield](#) with the creation of the [US Space Force](#), escalated military deployments, ramped up war games targeting [Russia](#) and [China](#) and looked to [reopen](#) and [expand](#) Cold War-era bases.

In May, Trump's top arms control envoy promised to spend Russia and China [into oblivion](#) in the event of any future arms race, but one was already well underway. After withdrawing from INF, the administration began [churning out](#) previously banned nuclear-capable cruise missiles, while fielding an entire new class of [low-yield nuclear weapons](#). Known as “tactical nukes,” the smaller warheads lower the threshold for use, making nuclear conflict more

likely. Meanwhile, the White House has also mulled a live bomb test—America’s first since 1992—though has apparently [shelved the idea](#) for now.

A Runaway Freight Train

As Trump approaches the end of his first term, the two major U.S. political parties have become locked in a permanent cycle of escalation, eternally compelled to prove who’s the bigger hawk. The president put up mild resistance during his first months in office, but the relentless drumbeat of Russiagate successfully crushed any chances for improved ties with Moscow.

The Democrats refuse to give up on “Russian aggression” and see virtually no pushback from hawks across the aisle, while intelligence “leaks” continue to flow into the imperial press, fueling a whole new round of [election-meddling allegations](#).

Likewise, Trump’s campaign vows to revamp U.S.-Russian relations are long dead. His presidency counts among its accomplishments a pile of new sanctions, dozens of expelled diplomats and the demise of two major arms control treaties. For all his talk of getting along with Putin, Trump has failed to ink a single deal, de-escalate any of the ongoing strife over Syria, Ukraine or Libya, and been unable to arrange one state visit in Moscow or DC.

Nonetheless, Trump’s every action is still interpreted through the lens of Russian collusion. After announcing a troop drawdown in Germany on June 5, reducing the U.S. presence by just one-third, the president was met with the now-typical swarm of baseless charges. MSNBC regular and retired general Barry McCaffrey [dubbed](#) the move “a gift to Russia,” while GOP Rep. Liz Cheney [said](#) the meager troop movement placed the “cause of freedom...in peril.” Top Democrats in the House and Senate [introduced bills](#) to stop the withdrawal dead in its tracks, attributing the policy to Trump’s “absurd affection for Vladimir Putin, a murderous dictator.”

Starting as a dirty campaign trick to explain away the Democrats’ election loss and jam up the new president, Russiagate is now a key driving force in the U.S. political establishment that will long outlive the age of Trump. After nearly four years, the bipartisan consensus on the need for Cold War is stronger than ever, and will endure regardless of who takes the Oval Office next.

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