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Forget Putin, we need to fear Russia's weaknesses

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 23, 2018

Like *Casablanca's* Captain Renault, who was “shocked, shocked” to discover gambling was taking place at Rick's nightclub, the Democrats on the US House of Representatives' intelligence committee have barely been able to contain their outrage at evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

As their anger fills the airwaves, one can only imagine the guffaws at the CIA, which intervened in 81 elections between 1946 and 2000 alone, with one-third of those interventions being covert.

The CIA's aims were undoubtedly lofty; as Tom Lehrer quipped about the countries the US targeted: “They've got to be protected / All their rights respected / Till somebody we like can be elected.”

But whether American taxpayers got value for money is another matter. In a careful study, Carnegie Mellon University's Dov Levin found that covert operations, which in some cases misfired badly, were much less likely to influence outcomes than overt endorsements of particular candidates. And that mixed record was achieved by highly trained professionals commanding resources that often dwarfed those of local players.

To believe that a clutch of Russian amateurs, whose funding amounted to less than 1 per cent of Hillary Clinton's campaign spending, could have outperformed the CIA's finest experts strains credulity.

Rather, the fake news the so-called Internet Research Agency fabricated probably drowned in the torrents of misinformation Americans generated for themselves. And even assuming the Russians' output swelled the flood, the best analysis, by New York University's Hunt Allcott and Stanford's Matthew Gentzkow, concludes that to give Donald Trump his victory, “one fake news article would need to be 36 times as persuasive as one political ad”.

The material Russian agents allegedly hacked from the Clinton campaign's servers is more likely to have had a discernible impact. But that is because it was true, and confirmed American voters' suspicion that Clinton was untrustworthy, if not plain dishonest. However objectionable the Russians' methods, releasing accurate information — as the US regularly does in foreign elections — is scarcely an assault on democracy.

That won't, of course, calm the Democrats. Nor is that surprising: crying “we was robbed” is less painful than facing up to the party's problems, including the devastation wrought by identity politics. And the Democrats seem convinced that their protests will undermine Trump's legitimacy, despite the fact the President's approval ratings have improved over the past month.

The risk, however, is that America's foreign policy establishment will become even more fixated on Vladimir Putin than it was under the Obama administration, when defence secretary Ashton Carter called Russia the greatest security issue confronting the US, ahead of China, North Korea, Iran and Islamic State. To criticise Carter's assessment is not to deny the dangers Putin's Russia poses. But the reality is that Russia is a declining force.

Its gross national income, measured in purchasing power parities, is barely greater now than it was in 1990. The Russian Federation's economy was then six times larger than Australia's; thanks to Russia's stagnation, that differential has almost halved. And with little prospect of oil prices returning to their 2008 highs, the outlook seems bleak, especially as Russia has become - increasingly dependent on exporting raw materials.

Nor is Russia's political system capable of making the changes the country desperately needs. Putin has quelled the banditry that characterised the final years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. But at every level of government, private seizures of property have simply been replaced by the predations of corrupt officials.

Meanwhile, Putin's extremely personalistic form of rule, which rests primarily on his high approval ratings, lacks any stable basis of power, instead relying on lavish pay-offs to cronies, the military and the security agencies.

With the economy trapped in slow growth, funding both those pay-offs and the social spending needed to retain popular consent will become increasingly difficult.

The resulting strains could make foreign adventures attractive, particularly if they resonate with the regime's nationalistic rhetoric. So far, however, Russia's forays have been primarily reactive and its influence remains muted even in its "near abroad". Abhorrent as its actions in Ukraine are, they show few signs of being a broader threat. And Russia's ham-fisted attempts at bolstering populist movements in the advanced democracies have yielded scant dividends.

It is therefore difficult to disagree with the Carnegie Moscow Centre's Dmitri Trenin when he argues, in *Should We Fear Russia?*, that "the West should fear Russia's weakness more than its strength". A Russian collapse, likely accompanied by the disintegration of the federation, would create an immediate threat of nuclear proliferation while destabilising large parts of Asia.

Putin's popularity makes collapse unlikely in the short term. But as Tony Brenton, a former British ambassador to Russia, put it, "in Russia, with its particularly opaque and repressive tradition of public life, an impression of widespread public acquiescence in the way they are ruled can prove, when put to the test, startlingly shallow". As for what would happen if acquiescence turned to rebellion, Alexander Pushkin's phrase "Russian revolt: mindless and merciless" remains as telling today as it was when Russia's greatest poet coined it almost two centuries ago.

There is consequently plenty to worry about. But in terms of the danger to the West, Russia is trivial compared with China, with its ample resources, ruthless authoritarianism and growing assertiveness. So too in terms of covert influence, as the ever greater influence in Australia of the "China Party" shows.

None of that means the US should ignore violations of its laws. On the contrary, the vigour with which the Russia investigation is being pursued attests to the enduring strength of American institutions in the Trump presidency.

But Putin and his gang are opportunistic and rational crooks, not arch-demons. To claim otherwise is just more fake news.