

Opinion

What is the rationale behind election interference?

Jan Kallberg



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Some of the Facebook and Instagram ads linked to a Russian effort to disrupt the American political process and stir up tensions around divisive social issues, released by members of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee on Nov. 1, 2017. (Jon Elswick/AP)

Any attempt to interfere with democratic elections, and the peaceful transition of power that is the result of these elections, is an attack on the country itself as it seeks to destabilize and undermine the core societal functions and constitutional framework. We all agree on the

severity of these attempts and that **it is a real, ongoing concern** for our democratic republic. That is all good, and democracies have to safeguard the integrity of their electoral processes.

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But what is less discussed is why the main perpetrator — Russia, according to media — is seeking to interfere with the U.S. election. What is the Russian rationale behind these information operations targeting the electoral system?

The Russian information operations in the fault lines of American society, seeking to make America more divisive and weakened, has a more evident rationale. These operations seek to expand cleavages, misunderstandings and conflicts within the population. That can affect military recruiting, national obedience in an national emergency, and have long-term effects on trust and confidence in the society. So seeking to attack the American cognitive space, in pursuit of split and division in this democratic republic, has a more obvious goal. But what is the Russian return on investment for the electoral operations?

Even if the Russians had such an impact that candidate X won instead of candidate Y, the American commitment to defense and fundamental outlook on the world order has been fairly stable through different administrations and changes in Congress.



Trump UN envoy: Russia's election interference is 'warfare'

Nikki Haley, President Donald Trump's chief envoy to the United Nations, cast Russian interference in the 2016 election as "warfare" on Thursday, breaking in tone, if not substance, from a president who has consistently downplayed Russian influence in American politics.

By: Steve Peoples, The Associated Press



Naturally, one explanation is that Russia, as an authoritarian country with a democratic deficit, wants to portray functional democracies as having their issues and that liberal

democracy is a failing and flawed concept. In a democracy, if the electoral system is unable to ensure the integrity of the elections, then the legitimacy of the government will be questioned. The question is if that is the Russian endgame.

In my view, there is more to the story than Russians just trying to interfere with the U.S. to create a narrative that democracy doesn't work, specially tailored for the Russian domestic population so they will not threaten the current regime. The average Russian is no free-ranging political scientist, thinking about the underpinnings of legitimacy for their government, democratic models and the importance of constitutional mechanisms. The Russian population is made up of the descendants of those who survived the communist terror, so by default they are not so quick to ask questions about governmental legitimacy. There is opposition within Russia, and a fraction of the population would like to see a regime change in the Kremlin, like many others. But in a Russian context, regime change doesn't automatically mean a public urge for liberal democracy.

Let me present another explanation to the Russian electoral interference, which might co-exist with the first explanation, and it is related to how we perceive Russia.

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The rise of China as a competitor in direct conflict with U.S. interests in many cases creates a situation where China is replacing Russia as the second superpower. If Russia loses its position as a superpower, then it also loses geopolitical leverage and bargaining power.

The focus of the old Soviet propaganda was to reach a point where the narrative was plausible. Russian information operations have inherited the approach. So by attacking the U.S. electoral system, it makes it believable that the Russians have been able to influence elections. Who are the players in elections? Politicians. So by attacking the electoral system, it mobilizes the politicians to defend their turf.

The Russian information operations stir up a sentiment that the Russians are able to change the direction of our society. If the Russians are ready to strike the homeland, then they are a major threat. Only superpowers are major threats to the continental United States.

So instead of seeing Russia for what it is, a country with significant domestic issues and reliant on massive extraction of natural resources to sell to a world market that buys from the lowest bidder, we overestimate their ability. Russia has failed the last decades to advance their ability to produce and manufacture competitive products, but the information operations make us believe that Russia is a potent superpower.

The **nuclear arsenal** makes Russia a superpower per se. Still, it cannot be effectively visualized for a foreign public, nor can it impact a national sentiment in a foreign country, especially when the Western societies in 2020 almost seem to have forgotten that nukes exist. Nukes are no longer “practical” tools to project superpower status.

If the Russians stir up our politicians’ beliefs that the Russians are a significant adversary, and that gives Russia bargaining power and geopolitical consideration, it appears more logical as a Russian goal.

Jan Kallberg is a research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute at West Point and an assistant professor at the U.S. Military Academy. He also runs informationwarfare.com. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Army Cyber Institute, the U.S. Military Academy or the Defense Department.

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