

Testimony of Secretary Leon E. Panetta

Hearing on:

“With American Lives on the Line, Lessons for Managing the Russia Threat”

Before the Subcommittee: Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

July 10, 2020

Via Cisco Webex

Chairman (Bill) Keating, Ranking Member (Adam) Kinzinger, distinguished members. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the significant threat that Russia poses to our troops, our democracy, and our nation.

I had the honor to serve in the House of Representatives from 1977 until 1993 ... from the end of Vietnam era ... through the Reagan buildup ... through the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. And Congress played an enormously important role in conducting oversight ... to ensure that our national security interests were protected. And so, I commend you for this hearing and for your oversight.

Let me start off by being clear. We are in a new chapter of the Cold War.

But the challenge of this new chapter with Vladimir Putin’s Russian Federation is different – and in some ways more dangerous – than the challenge we

faced from the USSR. The only way to deal with Putin is from a position of strength. If he reads weakness on the part of the United States, make no mistake, he will take advantage of that weakness – as he has done in Russia’s aggression in the Ukraine, Syria, U.S. elections and now in Afghanistan. This new chapter will require resolute, clear-eyed leadership from the President and the rest of our government, informed by our diplomatic, military, and intelligence professionals, and guided by America’s national interests.

Let me start with Putin’s ambition and his strategic outlook.

Putin is a former KGB officer who believes that the glory of the former Soviet State must be restored. He believes that the fall of the Iron Curtain ushered in an era of weakness, and he is determined to return Russia to the status of a global Superpower. Key to this strategy is finding ways to undermine the United States and to influence our foreign policy.

Realistically, this has been a difficult project for Russia. The Russian population is aging and shrinking. Its economy has struggled – serving up a mix of an overburdened socialist state with a corrupt core of Oligarchs who have stolen untold billions from the Russian people. No democracy would tolerate such

mismanagement and corruption, and so Putin has done away with any semblance of democracy.

As this Committee is well aware, Putin recently pushed through a constitutional referendum that could allow him to remain in power through 2036.

Restoring Russia's Superpower status is a pillar of Putin's narrative for his domestic audiences. When you translate this narrative into Russian foreign and defense policy, it means the following four things:

First, undermining NATO and its key missions;

Second, undermining the U.S. military presence in Europe, or what Russia calls its "near abroad;"

Third, re-inserting itself into International Organizations like the G-7, which it was kicked out of after invading Ukraine; and

Fourth, interfering in US and other Western elections, to sew chaos and discord, and if they are very successful, to achieve an electoral outcome that is more favorable to Russian interests.

Since Russia cannot match the United States in a force-on-force conflict, it has developed a form of asymmetric power – or, “hybrid warfare” – using a mix of civilian and military capabilities to undertake deniable, lethal covert operations ... influence operations ... election interference ... recruitment of spies and agents of influence ... theft of technology ... taking of prisoners ... and other methods designed to gain geostrategic leverage *without* triggering an all-out conventional armed conflict with the West.

The reported intelligence on Russia’s payment of bounties to the Taliban in Afghanistan to kill U.S. troops is *right out of Putin’s playbook*. And although I have not read the intelligence assessment, I know enough about Russia to know that we need to take these reports extraordinarily seriously ... and at the least, we need to **read** and consider them as we fashion our policy toward Russia.

The reason I say this is right out Putin’s playbook is because Russia has always viewed with deep concern our presence in Afghanistan. First, there are

obvious echoes of when we kicked the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan in the 80s. Second, they believe that we have used the Afghan war as a pretext to position U.S. military and intelligence assets on the doorstep of Russia. Third, Afghanistan has been a NATO mission. Russia's principal goal is to fracture NATO, and no better place to do this than in Afghanistan, which is known as the "graveyard of empires."

These covert actions – which the Russians call, "active measures" -- are consistent with other methods that Putin has employed. He has employed a paid mercenary force, known as the "Wagner Group," to attack our forces in Syria and to take over oil facilities in Libya. He ordered an assassination attempt in the streets of the UK against Sergei Skripal (*Scrip-pal*), a former Russian intelligence officer – who the U.S. helped free from Russian prisons when I was at the CIA. He used deadly poisons to attack the former KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko (*Lit-vin-yen-ko*).

But by far the most successful "active measure" was the attack on our democracy during the 2016 election. As the U.S. intelligence community concluded in its declassified 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment: "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US

presidential election.” The IC further assessed that “Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes.”

In other words, this is not a hoax. This is a very real threat. And it means the Russians are coming again in the 2020 election. And why shouldn't they? Look at the return they got on their small investment:

- First, they deeply strained relations between the U.S. and its NATO allies. According to published accounts, the Administration came dangerously close to withdrawing from NATO altogether, which is Putin's ultimate fantasy. *As Secretary, I met regularly with our NATO partners, and I saw the importance of the U.S. to that alliance. You pull the U.S. out of NATO, and the entire military structure that we have used to contain Russia falls apart overnight.*
- Second, they have paid no price for annexing Crimea. Military aid that Congress approved got held up while the President sought to shake down the President of Ukraine for help in the 2020 election. We know how

that went. And although the aid was restored, it made clear to Putin what the President's real priorities are all about.

- Third, the Administration has been slow to enforce sanctions against Russia – sanctions that were enacted by this Congress.

- Fourth, the President has invited Russia back into the G-7, a move opposed by our allies and that will reward Putin without obtaining any concession in return.

- And Fifth, the Administration announced earlier this month that it will redeploy 9,500 U.S. military forces from Germany. Reducing the U.S. military presence in Europe is precisely what will embolden Putin to think he can achieve his aims with no consequences. Those forces play a critical role in signaling U.S. resolve on the continent.

As for what we can do as a country to counter this threat from Russia, let me list them here, and we can discuss them further in the Q and A.

First, I believe we must make clear to Putin through public and private diplomacy where the lines are that cannot be crossed – that he will not get away with attacks against our forces and that we will respond with further diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and military force, if necessary, to defend our troops.

Second, we should recommit ourselves to the NATO alliance, stop undermining them, and make clear that NATO remains the most important military alliance in the world.

Third, we should redouble our efforts here in our country to ensure that we have a free and fair election, where everyone who is eligible to vote *can* vote and where the election is free from Russian interference.

Fourth, we should carefully read and listen to intelligence assessments about Russia. This information is collected at great risk, and our professionals who have spent their careers analyzing the Russian Federation can help inform our policies. No leader can act without good intelligence.

Fifth, we should suspend any actions to redeploy forces from Europe – and in fact, I believe we ought to be looking at higher numbers of troops in Europe given the threats we face there.

And finally, I think we need to rededicate ourselves to the values that make America strong and free – because at the end of the day, what Putin fears most is the spread of our values. We must return to being champions of freedom of the press, freedom of speech, equality for all of our citizens ... because this – not any weapons system or nuclear missile – is the true source of strength as a nation.

Which brings me back to the issue of bounties paid to kill our troops. Putin knows that in a democracy like ours, the images of U.S. servicemembers being returned in flag-draped transfer cases will be broadcast throughout our media ... it will spark outrage from families and also from Members of Congress ... and it will, over time, sap the will of the American people to stay committed to the mission. And in particular, if he knows that he will pay **zero price** from this Administration for such conduct – because he can deny it, and his denials will be believed over our own intelligence professionals -- than the benefits for Putin far outweigh the costs.

As Secretary of Defense and as CIA Director, I signed orders sending young men and women into harm's way. I went to Dover Air Force Base to receive home our fallen heroes, and I met with the loved ones of those who have given the ultimate sacrifice. I went to Arlington, to present a folded flag to the next of kin and to thank them "on behalf of a grateful nation."

This is not an academic exercise for me ... this is life and death. *And so Mr. Chairman*, there are families in our nation today that deserve an answer to the simple questions of *what did our government do to protect our troops ... and what price will Russia pay for doing this?* I am confident that this Committee will help those families and all Americans get the answers we deserve if we are to be confident that we are doing everything necessary to protect our troops, our national security and our democracy.

- End -