

Negotiation in a Stealth Conflict

THE PROS AND CONS OF PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

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Compared to past conflicts between Russia and the West, the Ukraine conflict has been noted for the use of “stealth,” or covert, action. Parties to the conflict have not only contested each other’s interpretations of facts but the facts themselves. This is a new and potentially dangerous phenomenon, particularly between major powers. Undertaking large-scale covert action and denying responsibility for it may be rational as a way of gaining quick advantage in a conflict or as a response to a similar tactic already employed by one’s opponent. However, the risk that plausible deniability will generate powerful blowback effects is usually underestimated.

Fact and Fiction

During the Cold War and in many conflicts since, Washington and Moscow have frequently disagreed about the meaning and interpretation of events. Both sides often sought to mislead the other on their bottom lines and even to disguise their intentions. Nonetheless, disagreement on concrete facts has been rare, even during the fierce Cold War rivalry.

The Cuban missile crisis puts the problem in perspective. In 1962, the Soviet Union set out to covertly deploy ballistic missiles in Cuba. But as soon as the U.S. government presented Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko with aerial photos of the launch sites, Moscow acknowledged they were being constructed (for that matter, if the Soviet Union had overtly deployed missiles it might have had stronger leverage over the United States during the initial low-escalation phase of the conflict).

When the United States decided to invade Iraq, Washington also did not try to conceal its intentions. The Bush administration discussed it openly with potential allies and

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eventually began the operation over the objections of other major powers, including Russia.

Today, however, Moscow has repeatedly refuted evidence of its direct involvement in the Ukraine conflict. In a March 2014 press conference with Russian and international media, President Vladimir Putin suggested that the allegedly Russian servicemen spotted in Crimea in late February were members of local “self-defense forces” who “purchased their uniforms at military surplus stores.” In a later interview, however, Putin acknowledged that the operatives in question had indeed belonged to the Russian armed forces. A few months later, in May 2015, the Russian government refused to recognize two Russian army officers who were captured by Ukrainian forces in the Donbas, despite their own claims. If such methods had been applied in Cold War times, Gromyko would have dismissed the photographs of missile sites in Cuba as “fake” and “doctored by enemies in order to discredit the USSR.”

The International Dimension of Political Lies

Scholars have argued that deception in negotiations on state leaders’ key plans and intentions cannot be effective. Levels of trust among these leaders is always low. In *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics*, John Mearsheimer posits that even if senior officials wanted to bamboozle their foreign counterparts, their chances of success would be limited as state leaders do not expect counterparts to be truthful on matters of national security.

Mearsheimer makes an important caveat, however, by arguing that inter-state lies are usually directed at potential or real adversaries, in which case the level of trust is already low. The situation might be different when receiving a message from someone who is not considered an enemy, even if a certain rivalry between two states exists. State leaders cannot on a daily or monthly basis pose difficult questions to one another that require the disclosure of sensitive information; for instance, no one expects foreign states to be truthful about operative planning or technical specifications of military equipment. But when the salience of an issue is high, a candid response is usually expected from anyone except an open adversary, especially on issues of strategic significance. In particular, leaders expect truthful answers from non-enemy counterparts at relatively rare pivotal moments and high-stake situations, when lying can lead to confusion and unpredictable consequences.

The Downsides of Plausible Deniability

In the case of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine, Moscow’s use of stealth tactics proved more damaging than it expected. Since April 2014, Moscow’s repeated assurances to the leaders of major NATO members that Russia has not been involved in armed clashes between the Ukrainian government and Donbas separatists seriously undermined

Western trust in Russia's official statements. As a result, the space for substantive discussion on ways out of the current crisis narrowed considerably. That, in turn, led to an increase in a propaganda war that made the atmosphere in Russia-West and Russia-Ukraine relations highly toxic and difficult to repair in the near term.

Russia's gamble in Ukraine also led to increased uncertainty among EU and NATO members about Moscow's ultimate goals in Ukraine and Russia's wider foreign policy. This generated a strong fear that the West might overlook other subversive and adversarial Russian activities. Before the recent developments in Crimea and the Donbas, mainstream thinking in the EU and NATO was that Russia was only acting to ensure that none of its ex-Soviet neighbors (aside from the Baltic states) would be courted by the West to join NATO and that these countries' governments would not openly adopt anti-Russian policies in their domestic and international affairs. Given these assumptions, one might imagine reaching an agreement whereby certain Russian demands on Ukraine were met, such as multilateral guarantees of protection for Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine or even a role in possible future negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU or NATO.

When a new rebel offensive was launched at the start of 2015, however, many Western negotiators began to doubt whether Moscow's goals were limited to influencing politics in eastern Ukraine and restricting Kyiv's foreign policy choices. A number of theories emerged ascribing to Russia a range of far-reaching motives, from destabilizing and dismantling the whole of Ukraine ("Bosnia-ization") to discrediting NATO's collective defense guarantees. If such theories were to be believed, there was far more at stake for the West than just Ukraine. With Russia finding it difficult to convince the West of its non-offensive intentions beyond Ukraine, compromises that focused only on the latter came to be foreclosed. Putin's subsequent assurances that his country did not have expansionist designs were not accepted as credible and largely fell on deaf ears.

To be sure, embarking on an overt Russian military campaign in Ukraine, which several opinion leaders in Moscow proposed, would almost certainly have inflicted higher costs on Russia. Aside from the risk of direct confrontation with NATO, Moscow would have faced harsher sanctions, potentially including a Western embargo against the purchase of Russian oil.

But Russia's covert actions also backfired. Even if Moscow's goals were limited to re-integrating the eastern regions of Donbas back into Ukraine in their current decentralized pro-Russian form, the Kremlin now has to counter the measures NATO has taken in response to the elevated uncertainty about Russia's plans. As a result, Moscow finds itself in a strategically less advantageous situation than it was before late 2013, irrespective of its actual goals.

The Rationality of Deception

Given the high costs to Russia from its Ukraine gambit, was the Kremlin's decision to employ plausible deniability a mistake? In other words, do stealth tactics have a big downside and limited upside, or do the advantages outweigh the costs?

As the [media reported](#) and [defense analysts](#) confirmed, Moscow has spent quite a few years developing a new approach to international conflict. The so-called Gerasimov doctrine, named after Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of Russia's armed forces, places a premium on below-the-radar military and paramilitary actions against rivals coupled with "informational deterrence," a set of measures including but not limited to the spread of information and disinformation in order to gain an advantage over an opponent.

The key tenet of the Gerasimov doctrine is that hostilities should be prevented from taking on overt form. One's opponent should not be alarmed by an unambiguous declaration of rivalry and should be prevented from realizing that it is being subjected to adversarial pressures for as long as possible. In such a seemingly stable situation, expectations of truthfulness would be natural and would create the opportunity for snap attempts to gain the advantage by misleading other actors on high-stakes issues. At the same time, once an adversary discovers the attack, it must be assured that it will face unacceptable damage if escalation were to rise beyond certain limits.

Under what conditions would a state perceive that stealth tactics can work more effectively than approaches centered on simple kinetic escalation? Aside from helping to assess the viability of plausible deniability, such conditions provide a good description of Moscow's perspective on international politics and Russia's own role therein. Largely out of such considerations, Moscow opted for plausible deniability instead of a direct confrontation with Ukraine and its Western supporters.

First, plausible deniability may be appealing to a weaker state that perceives itself to be more vulnerable than its opponent and seeks to avoid an open conflict with that opponent. Such a state may expect covert tactics to generate less resistance. For example, Moscow may have been convinced that the West's vehement objections to Russia's military operation against Georgia in 2008 resulted from the open fighting that occurred, including the Russian army's incursion into Georgian territory beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia. That experience was surely taken into account in Crimea and the Donbas, where Russia recognized its vulnerability to a concerted reaction by the West, should it ever materialize, and decided to do its best not to provoke such a reaction.

Second, a party that resorts to plausible deniability likely believes its adversary has already begun a covert offensive that must be matched in order to avoid a strategic defeat. Moscow perceived that Washington was not fully sincere about its role in

negotiations between the EU and Ukraine on the Association Agreement that so antagonized Russia and triggered the crisis in November 2013; it had long been Washington's policy not to discuss Ukraine with Moscow and to discourage the EU from doing so, despite Russia's significant stakes in Ukraine's foreign policy and economic orientation. The Kremlin also claimed, rather implausibly, that the U.S. and allied governments were involved in covertly training and equipping militant activists who spearheaded the protests against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2013-14. Such allegations clearly played a role in justifying Moscow's stealth tactics in Crimea and the Donbas.

In fact, Moscow tended to believe that the United States had long engaged in stealth tactics against Russia. The Russian government has made numerous allegations of "covert subversive activities" by U.S. NGOs and funders operating in Russia. It has also cited Edward Snowden's revelations about the covert cyber war the United States has supposedly waged against Russia for many years, as well as alleged attempts by Washington to mislead Moscow on the "real" purpose of U.S. missile defense systems. The Kremlin almost certainly considered all these circumstances as excuses for employing stealth tactics in Ukraine. Indeed, as Mearsheimer argues, "lying comes easy to leaders who think that they live in a Hobbesian world."

Third, stealth tactics are more likely to be effective when deception provides a first-strike advantage. If deception allows for the quick creation of facts on the ground, which the winner can effectively protect, the temptation to use stealth tactics becomes stronger. The extent of the first-strike advantage provided by snap deception is a function of the speed with which the latter is detected. The higher the credulity of the deceived party, the greater the first-strike advantage. When the conflict in Ukraine was about to begin, U.S.-Russian relations were only experiencing mild turbulence after several years of a "reset." Moscow could believe that Washington still had enough trust in the Kremlin to accept Russian reassurances long enough for the stealth mission to be completed.

Finally, stealth tactics have less long-term costs when the situation in which they are employed is not likely to occur again, either because one's opponent will not have a chance to respond or relations with them are expected to lose their significance. The readiness to engage in stealth tactics may stem from expectations of an opponent's imminent decline. Russian mainstream politicians and experts were arguing, at least before late 2014, that Russia was on the rise, enhancing its international clout through a strengthened alliance with China, and that U.S. power had entered an irreversible decline that would only be precipitated by a demonstration of U.S. failure to achieve its goals in Ukraine.

Conclusion

This brief analysis of the costs of plausible deniability and the conditions under which stealth tactics may be effective suggest that plausible deniability is a rational tactic for Russia based on the Kremlin's assumptions about international affairs. It also suggests that the perception of a larger covert geopolitical game being waged against Russia may be less of a tool for domestic mobilization than a reflection of the true convictions of Kremlin policymakers who are prepared to reciprocate with risky tactics of deception. Changing these convictions would require the restoration of at least a basic trust between Russian authorities and their supposed enemies. Such a restoration is impossible, however, as long as both sides believe they are being subjected to deception. In the end, those convinced that important trends in world politics can only unfold by stealth and that key observed developments must be caused by invisible "underwater currents" will very likely be doomed to a vicious cycle of confrontation.

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