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The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin, by Steven Lee Myers.
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Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East, by Simon Mabon.
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Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising, by Gilbert Achcar.
Publisher: Stanford University Press

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The purpose of strategic communication is to have an impact on a situation by framing choices and shaping perceptions in a way that helps achieve strategic objectives. Strategic communication can either create or close down opportunities for diplomacy and conflict resolution. It can deter opponents and rally support, provide legitimacy and forge alliances or, when badly done, make national strategy impossible. If done well, it can transform obstacles into strategic openings.

Think of the way in which President Rouhani of Iran opened up the space for nuclear negotiations soon after his election in 2013. He went to the United Nations General Assembly determined to change not only perceptions but to change his country's strategic position. Within a few days, he seized the initiative with a series of friendly appearances for the media, exuding charm and reasonability. It was, in the

words of Financial Times columnist Philip Stephens, 'a masterclass in how to reframe world opinion […] The shift in tone is important insofar as it fosters confidence and provides space for compromise'.[1]

That last point is crucial. The strategic communicator can make room for changes in policy, sometimes of profound strategic importance, by words, images, and other signals, without taking any action at all. But action must then follow in the space created. One difference between propaganda, or spin, and strategic communication is a seriousness of intent to match changes in attitude with substance. The currency of strategic communication is credibility. Rouhani used his credibility as an independently minded, genuinely elected, non-ideological figure to influence US diplomacy in three ways that changed the strategic situation:

1) to convince policymakers at the White House and the State Department that that he had the genuine intent to deliver an agreement;

2) to persuade Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to back him against his opponents within Iran's complex political environment, at least for long enough to test the potential for lifting international sanctions;

3) to generate enough support among commentators and in public opinion for rapprochement, at home and abroad, so that President Obama and Ayatollah Khamenei would feel safe in taking a diplomatic risk.

Rouhani's communication strategy was not sufficient to deliver a deal, but it was necessary to make a deal possible. Where there had been only obstacles, there were now openings.

This is a case of credible communication as a positive force in conflict avoidance and resolution. That is how strategic communication conventionally works, by building trust, using soft power to attract support, allaying suspicions through personal authenticity, and by credibility of word and deed.

The key word is 'conventionally'. But the conventions are now being challenged by the rise of 'post-truth' politics, to use the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016. Is it any longer possible to rely on facts and evidence as the basis of political communication when President Putin is achieving international goals by a strategy with disinformation at its heart, or when the US election has been won by Donald Trump? The implications are that objective realities and checkable facts are as old-fashioned as print newspapers in the iPhone age. If there are no truths, only opinions, if authenticity is no more than believing what you say at the time when you say it, if credibility is getting others to believe whatever they want to believe in the blizzard of aggressive tweeting and fake news on Facebook, then does strategic communication need to be defined as saying whatever works? No, not in international relations.

There is a difference between political campaigning in which the winner takes all and pays no penalties and confrontations between states in which the deterrence of opponents and the reliability of allies depend on straight dealing.

[1] Stephens, Phillip, 'Talks are the only way to reset Iran's atomic clock', *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2013.

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As Tom Fletcher writes in *Naked Diplomacy: Power and Statecraft in the Digital Age*: 'Honesty is in fact central […] in negotiations you live or die by your reputation. The best negotiators recognise that trust is essential.'

Fletcher writes with engaging originality about the accelerating changes of modern communication, while grounding himself in the lasting verities of the diplomatic trade. He uses a wonderful pun on the biological nomenclature, *Phono sapiens*, to capture the effect of instant communication on negotiators and communicators, all of us in thrall to our devices. But *Phono sapiens* trades in the same commodity communicators have always used—authentic information. In almost all circumstances, attraction depends on respect and trust: only if people believe they can rely on what you say, can your words influence their thinking and their decisions. Strategic communications is not propaganda, nor psychological operations, nor information ops, nor spin—all of which involve an intention to mislead in some way. Strategic communications is about strategic impact through credible narrative. In complex situations, where reasonable people can hold different views or see the problem from different angles, strategic communication is an honest attempt—always honest—to frame the way people around the world understand what is at stake.

There is currently nothing as complex, nor so contested in terms of narrative, as the Syrian conflict. Fletcher makes this shrewd point: 'Syria been a grim example of the limits of global reach, stomach and compassion. Assad has been a fortunate man—his brutality coincided with a period of global economic weakness, inwardness and war-weariness.' But Fletcher is an optimist, writing with refreshing zeal about the new tools of the diplomatic trade: 'The overall effect of the Internet is positive, and will give more people the means to understand, engage and influence the world. It is better ultimately to have too much information than too little'. However, he cautions that 'the 24/7 news cycle destroys the ability to be strategic'.

The verb 'destroys' is too strong, in my opinion. The pace of news in the age of permanent immediacy sets challenges that strategic communicators must meet in order to alert the public to what matters in the moment's rush and to focus decision-makers on what is lastingly significant. The difficulty of doing this is skilfully exploited by the cynical, whose aim is to confuse public opinion and paralyse diplomacy. There is a battle for the truth around all conflicts and negotiations, and it is currently being fought at its hardest over Syria.

Tom Fletcher says we need diplomats more than ever, to do 'what diplomats do best: stopping people killing each other.' This is, sadly, so far unachieved in Geneva, where United Nations Envoy Staffan de Mistura has laboured in vain to make any progress in resolving the conflict. As an advisor on strategic communication to the Syrian Opposition I have seen this close up. De Mistura is a fine communicator, exuding tireless civility in pursuit of peace, a decent man pained by the dreadful facts on the ground. The UN diplomacy in Geneva and New York has become a maze without exits in which every initiative, breakthrough, and ceasefire gets lost amid confusing disputes over the complexities of this many-sided conflict.

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In *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* Gilbert Achcar is forthright in pinning 'primary responsibility in producing the worst of all possible outcomes' on the Obama administration, which did not give enough support to Syria's 'mainstream opposition'. Syria is caught between 'an increasingly murderous regime', Lebanese and Iraqi shi'ite 'proxies of Iran', and 'fanatical Sunni-fundamentalist anti-Assad regime forces'. In Achcar's trenchant and unflinching analysis: 'With the barbarism of the Assad regime fostering the emergence of ISIS, Syria has become a major theatre [… for] the clash of barbarisms.' Then came Russia's military intervention in September 2015, at which point 'the Obama administration did indulge in wishful thinking about Moscow and Tehran helping it out of its Syrian quandary by convincing Assad to step down.'

Achcar is surely right to say: 'In order for the regime to be willing to compromise, it needs to feel threatened in its very existence—or else to be put under pressure by its sponsors, who would do so only if they feared that the alternative was the regime's collapse.'

This scenario was briefly close to fulfilment in February and March of 2016, when Russia and Iran took part in the Munich meeting of the International Syria Support Group that agreed to a cessation of hostilities. After a delay, the cessation was imposed to the extent that hostilities were reduced by 90%, according to the UN envoy. It was only by working with Russia and Iran that the US and its European and Gulf allies were able to create the conditions for negotiation in Geneva. When President Putin marked the re-opening of the talks by announcing his partial withdrawal from Syria, he seemed to be signalling to all sides a serious intention to have the war ended through the UN process. But that moment was brief. Russia's, by then, six months of aerial engagement had strengthened Assad sufficiently to feel he could send his negotiators in to filibuster, and his sponsors in Moscow and Tehran did nothing to prevent them making the talks meaningless.

The paradox is that that there was—is?—no hope of a political solution being forced upon Assad unless Russia makes it happen; that it can happen only if Russia is in control of the situation; but if Russia is in control, it has no incentive to go for political transition. Russia is perfectly comfortable with Assad as the alternative to Daesh, as defined by the communication strategy. Much the same applies to Iran's influence, though it is President Putin, rather than Ayatollah Khamenei who has taken on the role of dictating the appalling rhythm of events. Repeatedly during 2016 the Russian President put himself into a position from which he could have orchestrated a solution through diplomacy, but each time reverted to supporting the Assad regime's military strategy.

And so we go round and round the maze. Whatever Russia's long-term objectives, the short-term impact is that all routes in the maze lead back to Assad remaining in power. The international community has yet to find an escape route from this unacceptable conclusion. This is what has lasting significance in the mesmerising media coverage of each round of diplomacy and breakdown.

Russia has, in my view, protected the Assad regime not only with aerial support, but with the firepower of President Putin's formidable strategic communication. Putin's international communication is doing something more difficult to deal with and more far-reaching in its effects than propaganda. When he is photographed bare-chested with a gun—that is propaganda, crudely obvious in its intended effect to polish Putin's image as he ages. It presumably has a certain appeal within Russia. But internationally, Putin's strategy is anything but crudely obvious in its effects. It goes deeper than distorting the facts. It is a challenge to facts themselves; a communication strategy which corrodes confidence that there are *any facts or evidence at all* to rely on. While the evidence is being neutralised, whether in Syria or Ukraine, diplomacy is sidelined and Russia makes its intended gains, whether in Aleppo or Crimea.

Putin's strategy is not based on the usual rules of attraction and accuracy. The Russian President has forged a different kind of strategic communication based on a different kind of credibility; credibility that relies on neither honesty nor trust, but on confrontation and sowing confusion. Again and again over the last year he has voted for United Nations Security Council Resolutions and made agreements as co-chair of the International Syria Support Group, which his government has immediately broken while talking earnestly of concern over humanitarian aid and the need for ceasefires. The communication strategy is to deny what seems obviously true, devaluing the whole idea of objective reality. In the end—are we there already?—there are no facts, only cynical relativism in which nobody can be believed about anything. Some call it 'weaponised relativism': combining military force with a scorched-earth policy toward evidence and accurate communication.

Take, for example, the press conference held by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov on 4 October 2016, the day after the Americans broke off talks about Aleppo in protest of what seemed to be solid evidence of Russian complicity in the Assad regime's air assault on rebel-held areas of the city, and following the bombing of an aid convoy in which eye witness and photographic evidence pointed to Russian involvement.

Lavrov said: 'Unfortunately, from the beginning there were people who wished to break down the agreements [referring to a ceasefire and US-Russia co-operation on targeting the Nusra front], including within the US administration. Yesterday, to our deep regret, those who were against political settlement of the Syria crisis, who were against the fulfilment of the relevant UN resolutions, and who have clear plans for solving the situation by force, succeeded. We are not giving up. We will make efforts so that the UN Security Council Resolutions are fulfilled.'

Now, pause and play that clip again, but substitute *Russian government* for *US administration*: '(...)from the beginning there were people who wished to break down the agreements, including within the Russian government. Yesterday, to our deep regret, those who were against political settlement of the Syria crisis (…) succeeded.'

It is like stepping through a strategic looking glass: Lavrov is describing the situation in precisely the terms the US might use to blame those 'who have clear plans for solving the situation by force', pointing to the evidence that Russian aircraft were involved in the Assad regime's assault on Aleppo taking place at that very moment.

International broadcasters and global news agencies report such statements by Russia respectfully, because of their journalistic culture of balance, a culture that stems from Western values. Russia, which does not subscribe to such values, exploits balanced Western reporting to give itself cover for breaching the UN resolutions that its impressively plausible foreign minister meanwhile claims to uphold.

It is a policy not so much of creating the facts on the ground as of destroying them. The value of evidence—eyewitness accounts from doctors and rescue workers, photographs, and videos—is steadily undermined by the relentless plausibility of Russia's strategic communication. Plausibility and authenticity are different, but both are kinds of credibility. If the relevant evidence is neutralised, credible communicators can have real difficulty in dealing with skilled plausibility.

The technique is consistent with President Putin's handling of the confrontation with Ukraine in 2014. As Steven Lee Myers writes about Putin's strategy in Crimea in *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, Russia 'blended hard power with soft power, speed and stealth, obfuscation and relentless propaganda meant to deflect culpability until it was too late to do anything about it. By the time Putin acknowledged that Russian forces had, in fact, taken control of the entire peninsula before the referendum on its status, the annexation was already a *fait accompli*.' The fact that this description fits Syria as well as Ukraine suggests a deliberate, consistent strategy. You could call it Putin's 'strategy of *fait accompli*'. Strategic communication is at the heart of it. While Putin's representatives were tying up the international community in arguments over an Aleppo ceasefire in August 2016, Assad's forces, supported by Russia, captured Dayara—the besieged Damascus suburb that had been among the earliest places to rise against Assad. *Fait accompli*.

Looking back, Putin's approach to the Geneva talks feels like a strategy to use the negotiations to achieve his strategy of *fait accompli*. While he and Lavrov maintained the appearance of untiring diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, Russian bombers continued to pound civilians. When the opposition's communication strategy started to gain some international traction in Geneva the bombing increased and the talks broke down, while Russia continued to insist that it supports diplomacy. They said that the bombers were targeting terrorists, while regularly hitting hospitals; that Russia was fighting Daesh, while bombing areas held by the opposition who were at the table with de Mistura in talks overseen by Russia and the US as co-chairs of the ISSG. It is a circular strategy, which continually takes diplomacy back to zero.

Take as an example the events of early September, when it seemed probable that painstaking diplomacy between Russia and the US was going to ease the conflict enough for the intra-Syrian talks to resume in Geneva.

A ceasefire agreement was reached on 9 September, but within days it was destroyed as much by what was said as by what happened. Two catastrophic events in quick succession were immediately subjected to a dispute over the facts: an attack by the US-led coalition against Daesh, which struck Syrian government forces rather than ISIS fighters; then an air attack on a United Nations aid convoy preparing to relieve areas of Aleppo besieged by the Syrian government. Russia and the regime suggested the aid convoy simply caught

fire or that it was attacked by the rebels themselves, destroying their own aid supplies. However bizarre the counter-accusation, it served to sow doubt and cause dispute, while the Assad regime declared the ceasefire over and Russia joined the air attacks while denying doing so. By disputing the evidence regarding both the destruction of the aid convoy, and the US's mistaken attack on Syrian forces a few days before [not a mistake, claimed Lavrov], Russia reduced both incidents to a non-factual, value-free equivalence. It then had no difficulty in riding out a UN Security Council meeting on 8 October, blocking France's ceasefire resolution under cover of counter-accusations against the US.

By now the technique is well practised and polished. In his well-informed and briskly readable account Lee Myers, a New York Times correspondent, writes that when Putin made his move in Crimea: 'Secrecy was essential, as was deniability. Putin could not be sure of the potential international response—from NATO, above all—and wanted to test the resolve of the world's leaders before he acknowledged the extent of his plan.'

Putin's unconventional, anti-factual communication seems to be part of a strategy to test resolve again and again, while achieving a series of *faits accomplis*. Amid the controversy and confusion over each move, Russia becomes more and more indispensible; without the Russians there can be no hope of resolving anything—even if each attempt to resolve things runs diplomacy back round the maze with no exits. My reading of President Putin's communication strategy is that his aim is to make Russia the 'Indispensible Power', and he has succeeded. The more he confuses and disguises, the greater his leverage. He has made the strategic impact he wanted.

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Sergei Lavrov recently wrote a long historical analysis in the Russian foreign ministry's house magazine, *Global Affairs,* which includes these revealing paragraphs about two of his country's greatest leaders:

> 'Relying on strong measures inside the country and decisive and successful foreign policy, the first Russian emperor [Peter the Great]: managed to put Russia among leading European states in slightly over two decades. Since then Russia could no longer be ignored, and no serious European issue could be solved without it. … Russia's size, strength and influence increased significantly under Catherine the Great and reached a level where, as then Chancellor Alexander Bezborodko observed, "Not a single cannon in Europe could be fired without our consent".'[2]

This is similar to comments from one of the most influential thinkers in Russia's defence and foreign policy establishment, Sergei Karaganov. With regard to Syria he said: 'Russia wants to be a grand power. It is in our DNA for better or worse.' And on Ukraine: 'The main reason why we did what we did was to teach our partners a lesson in how to behave and how to respect Russian interests.'[3]

[2] Lavrov, Sergei, 'Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2016.

[3] Interview with Sergei Karaganov on World Policy Conference TV, 20 November 2015.

Sergei Karaganov is chairman of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, which gives strategic advice to the President and Foreign Minister. He gave an interview recently to the German magazine Der Spiegel, in which he made the same point: 'We want the status of being a great power. We unfortunately cannot relinquish that. In the last 300 years, this status has become a part of our genetic makeup.'

Karaganov had this to say about Syria in his interview:

> **'SPIEGEL:** The partial Russian withdrawal from Syria was a surprise, for example. You intentionally left the West guessing how many troops you were withdrawing and whether you would secretly redeploy some of them. Such tactics don't exactly create trust. **Karaganov:** That was masterful, that was fantastic. We take advantage of our pre-eminence in this area. Russians aren't good at haggling, they aren't passionate about business. But they are outstanding fighters. In Europe, you have a different political system, one that is unable to adapt to the challenges of the new world. The German chancellor said that our president lives in a different world. I believe he lives in a very real world.'

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While diplomacy in Syria is dominated by the US and Russia, the conflict is of course many-sided, with Iran-Saudi Arabia being an important contest within the conflict. Simon Mabon's study, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*, provides deep roots for the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. He tells us that Persia [the name changed to Iran in 1935] was a Sunni state until 1501, when a 14-year-old military leader called Esma'il declared that shi'ism was now the religion of his territories. For one so young, Esma'il left a lasting mark. As Mabon says, this 'would have severe repercussions for both regional and internal stability over the coming centuries.' Fast forward to the 1979 revolution and, says Mabon, 'Iran has become the most influential and vocal Shi'a state in the world.'

An event of similar importance for Saudi Arabia—and the region—happened in 1703 when Muhammed Ibn Saud invited a rebellious scholar, Muhammed Abd al Wahhab, to a meeting at an oasis. They formed an alliance in which Saud would support al Wahhab 'against unbelief and idolatry'. Thus began the alliance between Wahhabism and the House of Saud, or as Mabon puts it, 'between the religious zealot and political power'.

Mabon argues that understanding Iran's and Saudi Arabia's rival Islamic narratives helps us understand 'the values guiding behaviour within both states [...] Given the importance of Islam, particularly as a legitimising tool for regimes to resolve internal security dilemmas and to demonstrate external legitimacy and vitality, it is easy to see how moves by either Riyadh or Tehran within an Islamic sphere have ramifications for the legitimacy and security of the other'. Mabon devotes a chapter to the role of narratives, saying that 'the necessity of deriving legitimacy for new regimes often results in leaders referring to myths and tales that evoke nationalist sentiment'.

He points to a 'serious contradiction' in current strategy between Saudi Arabia 'seeking to ensure its own internal stability and that of its allies' on the one hand, and on the other supporting groups trying to overthrow Assad. So 'geopolitical considerations outweigh ideological considerations'. Thus 'Riyadh's involvement in Iraq, Bahrain [both on the side of status quo] and Syria is increasing Iranian concerns' to the extent that, Mabon says, Iran feels Saudi Arabia is 'meddling in the Islamic Republic's internal security dilemma.' Meanwhile for the Saudis, 'the influence of Iran within Iraq has proved to be of great concern'. And at the same time the prominence of Al Qaida in Saudi Arabia means that Riyadh is 'engaged in a delicate balancing act between the burgeoning influence of Iran across the region and between the dangers posed by Al Qaida'.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a battle of narratives—my phrase, not Mabon's—in which the Saudis 'export Wahhabi values across the Middle East and into Central Asia in an attempt to increase Saudi legitimacy; and Iran meets ideological threats with the doctrine known as *velayat-e faqih*. Mabon describes this as theological legitimacy, resting on the idea that 'loyalty to the revolution equates to loyalty to the Islamic Republic and God'. Mabon is good on Iran's 'incredibly complex' political structure, saying that it is based on the doctrine that only high-ranking clerics are 'able to rightly interpret and apply the Shari'a and, thus, rule.' The system is built around two pillars: unelected, around the Supreme Leader [Khamenei]; elected, around the President [Rouhani].

These two power centres do not always speak with one voice, setting problems of strategic interpretation for those dealing with Iran. There were points in the nuclear negotiation of 2015 when the Supreme Leader seemed to be fully behind the President and Foreign Minister in their negotiating strategy, and times when Khamenei seemed to be usefully applying pressure on US and European negotiators by hinting that he wouldn't accept what his foreign minister had agreed. Which was genuine? That was for the diplomats on the other side to guess or calculate. Such doubts are skilfully exploited by Iran, as the Foreign Secretaries of Britain, France, and Germany found in launching the nuclear diplomacy in 2003. My contribution as Jack Straw's press secretary was to ensure that the European Three jointly announced an agreement only if it contained the authentic language that underpinned a two-year suspension of the nuclear programme. Hassan Rouhani, then chief nuclear negotiator, wanted a fudged phrase, but Straw, Dominique de Villepin, and Joschka Fischer knew the importance of precise language in diplomacy—not only in the agreed document, but at the press conference. In fact their refusal, at my urging, to hold a press conference without precise, agreed language, was the moment when Rouhani conceded. He wanted the prestige of an agreement, and saw that it had to be genuine.

Since Rouhani became President, tensions have been unresolved, in reality and in strategic communication, between his use of attractive or soft power, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) use of hard power. Ayatollah Khamenei either veers genuinely between the two, or knows the value of keeping opponents wondering. This seems to me an exploitation of creative doubt that is entirely legitimate in conventional communication, making strategic use of what is authentic; in contrast to President Putin's unconventional communication, which seeks to destroy the very idea of authenticity. Negotiators are entitled to make opponents doubtful, but not to mislead them or world opinion.

Mabon makes an important point about where the real power lies in Iran: 'The commanders of both the IRGC and regular forces are appointed by and answerable solely to the Supreme Leader'—Ayatollah Khamenei, not President Rouhani. The book was published before the nuclear negotiation's fascinating climax, and in the early stages of the Syria war, so its value is in the roots and the context rather than in current events.

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Gilbert Achcar brings us up to date. He highlights a statement made by President Rouhani in an interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN on 2 October 2015 concerning Iran's strategy:

> 'When in Syria, when our first objective is to drive out terrorists and combating terrorists to defeat them, we have no solution other than to strengthen the central authority and the central government of that country as a central seat of power. So I think today that everyone has accepted that President Assad must remain so that we can combat the terrorists.'

This is the heart of the narrative battle between the international supporters and opponents of the Assad regime, which is articulated more often and more aggressively by Russia than Iran, and by the US than Saudi Arabia (or Europe or Turkey). The war aim of Assad's supporters is framed as 'driving out the terrorists', which to Iran and Russia justifies their objective 'to strengthen the central authority', giving Assad a respectable platform on which to give interviews to international broadcasters in the guise of a national leader battling to rid his country of terrorists, which is how he defines anyone who opposes him. The public finds it hard to follow this argument, and to distinguish between the international fight against ISIS that is waged partly on Syrian territory, and Assad's battle for survival against moderate opponents who have fighters linked to Al Qaida alongside them. According to Staffan de Mistura at his press conference on 6 October 2016, in Aleppo, of 8,000 troops opposing Assad, approximately 900 were Nusra Front fighters connected with Al Qaida. Assad and Putin are happy to use confusion as cover for bombing hospitals and besieging civilians, claiming to be fighting terrorists. [I am sometimes asked why I am working for Al Qaida when I say I am advising the Syrian Opposition.]

Defining the complexities of this many-sided war as 'combating terrorists' makes it hard for the US to articulate its own anti-terrorist objective without further confusion. People are entitled to wonder—if they haven't, by this stage, switched off the news—why Russia and America are at loggerheads when they both say they are fighting terrorism, surely a good thing to be doing. This is how Russia's strategy of *fait accompli* works—by sowing confusion through strategic communication, and locking the US into a narrative straightjacket from which John Kerry struggled in vain to free himself.

Achcar's verdict that Obama and Kerry were guilty of 'wishful thinking' is a little harsh. The United States' engagement in Syria diplomacy with Russia was the rational choice when President Putin was prepared to sponsor the process through a UN resolution (2254) in December 2015. It is hard to see what Obama can have gained by refusing to co-operate diplomatically on the ground that Putin might not

be entirely sincere in his motives. Once you are engaged in joint diplomacy, it makes no sense to signal that you don't quite trust your partner. And once the diplomacy founders, the alternatives are to let it collapse or try to find ways of restraining the conflict by working for ceasefires. Working for restraint is not wishful, but rational thinking, up to a point. Where comes the point when you have to revolt against being played along? There is always a slight chance that you are not being played along, but are dealing with very difficult people in a very difficult situation, and may yourself be making some mistakes. So you keep trying. This is the bind in which the Kremlin has entangled the White House and State Department: work with Russia and risk being trapped in a process with little hope of success, or don't work with Russia, and be sure of no success. Opting for certainty of no success is poor strategy. It's the same choice that the democratic Syrian Opposition has faced at critical and desperate moments along the way. My view— not in theory, but in practice, advising Assad's opponents—is that it is better strategy to try a small chance of success than to go for the guarantee of no success.

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So how can we deal with Russia's onslaught against communication based on respect for evidence? Is the only answer to meet dishonesty with dishonesty? Do we have to surrender our values, which include a cultural faith in facts? Must we walk through the looking glass into that 'very real world' where Vladimir Putin rules by strength and subjectivity? No, emphatically we must not! It is tempting to read the excesses of Brexit rhetoric and the election of Donald Trump as evidence that facts hardly matter any more, even within democracies; it seems as if evidence were as quaint as red phone boxes in the age of *Phono sapiens*.

The reasons for renewing our faith in facts, and for reaffirming accuracy and authenticity as the foundations of strategic communication, are both moral and practical. Democratic governments have a duty to explain themselves reliably to their domestic audiences so that they can be held accountable. This can be done only if communication between governments remains an honest attempt to frame perceptions and influence decisions in the national interest. The national interest must never become an excuse for dishonesty in pursuit of diplomatic objectives, or even during conflict. Strategic communication must be weaponised honesty, not opportunistic relativism.

As Joseph Nye, originator of the concept of 'soft power', summarises: 'It's not only whose army wins, but whose story wins.'[4]

NATO's story could not win a contest of distortion and denial with Russia, even if NATO wanted to, because it must take a basic contempt for honesty to speak as plausibly as Sergei Lavrov does when saying what is manifestly not true. NATO's role is to defend values as well as territory, so challenging dishonesty with distortion would be a strategic defeat.

[4] Megias, Mari, 'The Future of Power with Joseph Nye', Harvard Kennedy School website, 22 May 2012.