

This Week in Geopolitics

From the Baltic Encounter to the Internet Wars

BY GEORGE FRIEDMAN APRIL 18, 2016

Last week, two Russian SU-24 fighter planes buzzed a US Navy destroyer over the Baltic Sea. One of the planes flew within 30 feet of the ship, according to US officials. Secretary of State John Kerry protested, saying that the Russians were endangering the destroyer. The media in the West concluded that the Russians were simulating an attack on the destroyer. The Russians made no official statement, though a spokesperson for the Russian Defense Ministry commented to Interfax that Russia had done nothing that violated international laws or that endangered the destroyer or its crew. He expressed surprise that the Americans felt the need to be so “touchy”—and he was clearly pleased at the American response. Unofficially, the Russians dramatically inflated their account of what they did—an embellishment in many ways far more interesting than buzzing the destroyer.

To begin to understand this event, it is important to remember that such behavior was common during the Cold War and occurs with some regularity now as well. It involves not only Russia and the United States but also China and some countries allied with the US, including Britain and Japan. In November, the Turks [shot down](#) a Russian plane intruding on Turkish air space.

It is not as uncommon to see aircraft intercepting each other in international waters. There is a limited military purpose for this. Near-threatening behavior elicits responses. Those responses tell the other side about how ships and planes might maneuver in a real attack, how quickly events are communicated to higher echelons, frequencies used by fire-control systems, and so on. The target must assume that the approach is hostile and begin responding, and that response can provide useful data. But the

primary purpose of such a maneuver is simply to show that you are willing to do it, to signal unhappiness, and to impress the public by projecting a sense of power.

The media's claim that the Russians were simulating a real attack on the destroyer is not credible. An attacking aircraft does not swoop down on a ship these days. It launches anti-ship missiles from a position that it hopes is outside the range of the destroyer's anti-aircraft systems.

A destroyer would pick up an attacker with search radar at least 100 miles out. As it approached to fire its missiles, fire-control radar would lock on the aircraft, and if an anti-ship missile were fired, the destroyer would launch Standard surface-to-air missiles at the plane. The ship and aircraft would both activate electronic warfare systems to confuse the opponent's radar and incoming missiles. On the destroyer, fire-control radar would lock onto the incoming missiles and attempt to destroy them with missiles fired from the ship. If that failed, the ship would open intense fire on the incoming missiles with a Phalanx cannon. The attacker's strategy would be to saturate the destroyer with missiles to overwhelm the ship's defense systems, so multiple aircraft would be used in the attack. Finally, since the destroyer would likely be operating with a carrier battle group, when the Russian fighters were still hundreds of miles out, F-18s would be scrambling to intercept.

This is a very simple description of air-sea combat. Visual contact between ship and plane would be unlikely. A Russian aircraft coming in low and slow over an American destroyer would be blown into small pieces by the time any pictures were taken. It is not that the destroyer can't be sunk by an aircraft, or that an aircraft would always lose in such an encounter. The crux of the matter is that this is not how an attack would be carried out. That is why the risk involved in such hostile actions is low. In reality,

neither the aircraft nor the destroyer interpreted what was happening as hostile. The Russians were simply trying to jerk the Americans' chain.

The US was operating near Russian waters, and the Russians decided to show their displeasure (not that the US cared). The US tried to make the event appear as a near disaster (not that the Russians cared). The level of outrage expressed by the Americans was a bit greater than usual, given that the US Secretary of State decided to personally protest and indicated that the Russian planes risked being shot down (a possibility, yes, but an unlikely one). The encounter grew a bit heated but was still conducted within normal bounds on both sides. More intriguing was where Russian information operations (also known as psychological warfare, disinformation, propaganda, or lies) took the story.

The Russians need to convince their public that Russia is returning to “great power” status. President Vladimir Putin is embroiled in significant political challenges—from Ukraine to the price of oil and its effect on the economy. He wants to be seen as having rebuilt Russia's military to make it the equal of the United States military. This was one of the points of Russia's intervention in Syria, and it is also one of the reasons for this incident involving the US destroyer.

The Russians were delighted to see the event portrayed as a simulated attack on an American destroyer, and Kerry's outraged reaction was also valuable to the Russians. Both made the event appear much more significant than it was and therefore made Russia appear much more significant than it is. But lots of people knew better than to be impressed, and eventually, this view supplanted overblown concerns. The Russians then decided to add another dimension to their version of the story. Shortly after the incident, stories started appearing on the Internet claiming that the Russian attack aircraft carried new electronic warfare

equipment that had crippled the destroyer's combat systems. If that story took hold, Russian ability to cripple the defense systems of a US warship would turn into a major story, marking a turning point in naval warfare.

This story isn't true for two reasons. First, an electronic attack that could cripple all weapons systems would also have knocked out communications and navigation on board the ship, too. Consequently, the ability to maneuver the ship would likely be affected, if not negated. The ship showed no sign of such paralysis.

Second, if the Russians had such a system, it would be one of their most carefully guarded secrets. The last thing the Russians would want would be to let the Americans know they had this capability. If the Russians had successfully demonstrated a system like this, the US would be frantically analyzing what happened, trying to reverse engineer the system for US use, and making urgent upgrades to ships to foil such attacks. Finally, I would add that if this system required that Russian planes squat at 30 feet over a ship, the system would be useless; no Russian plane would be allowed to approach within dozens of miles of a US vessel.

So why did this story suddenly appear? The encounter was primarily a propaganda ploy that by itself had minimal significance. The US reaction made it seem more significant than it was. The Russians, in turn, tried to magnify its importance by spreading a claim that at least some people might believe—thus making Russia appear more militarily imposing than it is. Reality is tenuous on the Internet... particularly on Twitter. Managing the Internet effectively has the potential to alter perceptions, at least among some. All countries and corporations use the Internet this way, but the Russians are masters of the craft.

I was a minor player in one such event last year. On a visit to Russia, I told the business journal *Kommersant* that if the US

were behind a coup in Kiev, it would have been the most blatant coup in history, since the US government openly supported the uprising and had provided some funding for the demonstrating groups. In other words, it was no coup. The Russian news service *Sputnik* published what I said, cutting out a few odds and ends, and quoted me as saying that Ukraine “was the most blatant coup in history.” The neat part is that they didn’t make it up. I did say it. They merely left out the words before and after the statement. Since I was of no importance in the United States, they had to promote me as someone significant, which on the whole was nice of them. If you have absolutely nothing to do someday, check the Internet and Twitter, and you will find me saying the United States staged the most blatant coup in history.

Most Russians and most Americans didn’t notice this turn of events. But in a systematic campaign to saturate the Internet, the Russians fed the quote back into some major Russian print publications, then back onto the Internet, until it resonated and fed back on itself. Multiply this twisting of my statement several thousand times with the abuse of statements or near statements from other people, and the echo effect can reach a saturation point where the Russian narrative on what happened in Kiev becomes widely accepted. The Internet and its various subsystems have created an extraordinarily effective system for shifting perceptions of reality.

The Russians have spread disinformation since the founding of the Soviet Union. For example, they erroneously claimed that the US engaged in germ warfare during the Korean War. But most of what the Soviets did was simply what we might call PR, the attempt to shape public opinion by managing the media. But they achieved only limited success. The germ warfare story was widely believed but mostly by people who were pro-Russian and anti-American anyway. It did not change public opinion significantly. What limited the story’s reach was the fact that the primary media

outlets were relatively few and were heavily curated—or as the Russians might have said, biased.

The purpose of a publisher is curation, selecting the true and important from the mass of trivia and nonsense. Obviously, this process can screen out outlier views. The virtue of the Internet is that it makes everyone a publisher. It is a realm of nearly total publishing freedom, but it is also a realm where not only nonsense but also carefully constructed lies can become conventional wisdom among surprisingly large audiences. The Internet is an echo chamber, which if struck in the right way can reverberate and drown out competing views as effectively as any editor ever did.

People believe in the marketplace of ideas, but there really is no such thing. The market should work when information flows, but the problem is that the burden of distinguishing the true from the false falls to the reader. Given the range of topics readers encounter today, few people have the ability to distinguish the true from the false in most fields. Under those circumstances, the market can't function. The market depends on rational decision-making by consumers. On the Internet, where the cost of claiming something to be true is zero in every sense, the marketplace of ideas has come to resemble an incoherent avalanche of assertions. Those who understand how to shape the resulting noise can manipulate perceptions, creating perceived realities that persuade, seduce, and above all, persist.

Given the fact that Google remembers all things, preposterous ideas can hold sway for a very long time. In the past, PR campaigns dissipated when newspapers were thrown out and memories grew hazy. PR campaigns on the Internet, however, remain fresh and may dominate discourse for years. A skillfully managed SEO campaign continues to produce the highest ranked results for a search on a subject; therefore, it makes the first and

most powerful impression on precisely the person that the campaign wants to target—the person seeking answers but unable or unwilling to parse the quality of sources and answers that pop up.

The incident in the Baltic Sea was ultimately trivial. It will not long be remembered. However, anyone with an interest in such matters (conflict between US and Russian forces) will encounter Russia's widely dispersed claims about the event early and often, thanks to the Russians' well-crafted media campaign.

I don't think this Russian campaign will ultimately succeed, but its evolution drove home to me what anyone can do on the Internet, given a knowledge of Internet strategy. The person most susceptible to false or distorted claims is the person who is searching for answers on Google. That person wants to know what he or she doesn't yet know, or else why turn to Google? Recent Russian media strategy demonstrates how perceptions of an event—like the buzzing of a US Navy destroyer—can be shaped and manipulated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'George Friedman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

George Friedman