



The Line Between Support for Ukraine and War With Russia Just Gets Thinner

Recent Pentagon leaks reveal that the shadow war between Russia and the US over Ukraine is becoming more overt—and far more dangerous.

By James Bamford

MAY 22, 2023



A view of the Kremlin showing the Spasskaya Tower after the reported drone attack on May 3. (Sefa Karacan / Anadolu Agency via Getty)

On the eastern wall of the Kremlin, Spasskaya Tower rises high above the old gray paving stones of Red Square. Beneath its hipped roof are the “Kremlin Chimes,” a 500-year-old clock with four broad 20-foot faces. In the darkened, early morning hours of May 3, the hands registered 2:27 when the first drone appeared, quickly speeding in high above the yellow and white sign warning that the area was a “No Drone Zone,” in Russian and English. A split-second later, it exploded a few feet above the green dome of the Kremlin’s Old Senate Palace. Sixteen minutes later, a second drone coming from another direction set off a bright flash and crashed into the convex roof near a pole bearing a fluttering Russian flag. Security officers could be seen ducking as they scrambled up a ladder to check out the earlier damage.

In all of Russia, there is no greater symbol of power and authority than the green dome and the building beneath it. Completed in 1787 and the

shape of an isosceles triangle, this was where Vladimir Lenin had a private four-room apartment, along with a 40,000-volume library; where Joseph Stalin had an office and a five-room suite that also housed his children, Svetlana and Vasily; and where Nikita Khrushchev paced the floor of his office, next to a desk cluttered with tacky models of satellites, planes, and locomotives, while pondering the fate of the world during the Cuban missile crisis. For all those who followed, from Brezhnev to Yeltsin, the Kremlin served as a way station during their years in power. Today, it is where Vladimir Putin has his presidential office, with its tall windows covered in French-style curtains of silky-white folds, his polish oak desk with a briefing console extending from the front, and his flat-screen computer monitor with its screensaver of the Spasskaya Tower at night.

Instead, the attack was the latest, and boldest, move in a deadly three-way shadow war between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. Deadly and extremely dangerous. The armed drones were an unsubtle and explosive message: Forget your warning signs and your high-tech defenses, we know where you are, we know how to kill you, and you are on our list. “If we presume it was a Ukrainian attack,” noted Russia specialist and security analyst Mark Galeotti, “consider it a performative strike, a demonstration of capability and a declaration of intent: ‘Don’t think Moscow is safe.’”

As with the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline, there were accusations that Russia itself had attacked the Kremlin. “Social media is awash with cries of ‘fake!’ and ‘false flag!’” said Steve Rosenberg, the BBC’s Moscow editor, who went on to ask: “Why would it stage-manage such a potentially embarrassing incident that many will interpret as a sign of the Kremlin’s weakness? And think back to those TV news bulletins: They avoided showing images of the explosions.”

Rather than Russia, it was instead far more likely that Ukraine was behind the attacks, just as it was also likely behind a recent string of assassinations, both attempted and successful. Among them, the car-bomb murder near Moscow of Daria Dugina, the daughter of Aleksandr

Dugin, a Russian ultra-nationalist philosopher who is known as “Putin’s brain”—and was probably the intended target of the attack. The Russian Federal Security Service alleged that Dugin’s murder “was prepared and committed by the Ukrainian intelligence agencies.” And the United States reportedly agreed, believing that parts of the Ukrainian government authorized the killing.

PENTAGON LEAKS REVEAL NEW DANGERS

With no repercussions from Washington or Europe following that attack, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky apparently decided to ramp up his assassination program along with other sabotage attacks in Russia. In a meeting in late January, for example, Zelensky suggested that Ukraine “conduct strikes in Russia.” Among them was an operation to “blow up” the Soviet-built Druzhba pipeline that provides oil to Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic—all members of NATO. These new revelations are contained in the hundreds of highly classified Pentagon and intelligence documents allegedly leaked by Jack Teixeira, a 21-year-old Air National Guardsman later charged with espionage.

In addition to revealing just how far the Ukrainian government is prepared to go to take the fight to Russia, the leaked documents bolster the view that Ukraine itself was also behind the September 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline. From the context of the messages, and the codewords on the documents, it is clear that the US National Security Agency has long been eavesdropping on the highest levels of the Ukrainian government, if not Zelensky’s private cell phone. After all, in the past the NSA has targeted the private cell phones of allied leaders in such countries as Brazil and Germany. What seems clear is that the Biden administration knows much more about Ukraine’s likely role in the pipeline’s destruction—a violent act of war against Russia, Europe, and NATO—than it has shared with the American public.

Following the January meeting focused on “strikes in Russia,” on April 2 Vladlen Tatarsky, a high-profile pro-Kremlin military blogger, was assassinated when handed a bomb-rigged sculpture in a St. Petersburg

café. A month later, on May 3 came the drone attack on the Kremlin, and just three days later was another assassination attempt. This time, the target was another popular pro-war blogger, former State Duma (parliament) member Zakhar Prilepin. As with Daria Dugina, the weapon was a remotely controlled car bomb and, although Prilepin survived with injuries, his passenger was killed. The Russian Prosecutor General's Office later charged Alexander Permyakov, a 30-year-old native of the occupied Donetsk region of Ukraine, who, they said, "claims that he was acting on the orders of Ukraine's special services." A spokesman said the organization could neither confirm nor deny the involvement of Ukraine's special services in the explosion.

"We regard these actions as a planned terrorist act and an attempt on the president's life, carried out on the eve of the Victory Day, May 9, parade," said a statement from Putin's presidential office regarding the attack on the Kremlin. "The Russian side reserves the right to take retaliatory measures where and when it sees fit." Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, then blamed the United States. "We know very well that decisions about such actions, about such terrorist attacks, are made not in Kyiv but in Washington," he said. "This is also often dictated from across the ocean.... In Washington they must clearly understand that we know this." The leaked documents will probably bolster that view, since they clearly indicate that the US. knew in advance about the planning for such violent attacks—but apparently never intervened to stop them. Or if they did, Ukraine simply ignored the warning.



Russian Orthodox priests pray during a memorial ceremony for Daria Dugina, on August 23, 2022. (Getty Images)

Just as President Joe Biden is never far from the “football”—the black leather briefcase containing the nuclear go-codes to launch World War III—President Putin is never far from his “cheget,” that serves the same purpose. “All the necessary communication tools, including the strategic communications, are always with the president wherever he is, be it Russia or any other country in the world,” Peskov told reporters in Moscow in 2021. Lest anyone forget, it was the assassination of a lowly archduke that precipitated the start of World War I.

On cable news programs and the Internet, day-to-day coverage of the war focuses on which battalions have advanced or retreated from one place or another, or what Ukrainian town or village was the latest to suffer a missile attack. But the other war—Ukraine’s increasing use of covert operations inside Russia—takes place in the shadows. And it is that war that poses the greatest danger of involving the United States as a cobelligerent, especially if US intelligence is used to carry out sabotage and assassination operations inside Russia. As House Armed Services

Committee Chair Adam Smith (D-Wash.) has warned, “We have to help Ukraine in every way we can without widening the war and stumbling into World War III.”

Until this past March, when hundreds of documents were leaked from the Pentagon, neither the American public—nor, possibly, Moscow—had any idea of the enormous intensity of US intelligence collection targeting Russia on behalf of Ukraine—or how much the United States knew about Ukraine’s secret assassination and sabotage programs. An indication of the depth and breadth of that intelligence coverage comes from the classification of many of the documents, such as one dated March 1, 2023. Titled, “Russia/Ukraine: Status of the Conflict as of 1 Mar,” and “updated every workday,” its classification line read: “TOP SECRET//HCS-P/SI-G/TK//FGI/RSEN/ORCON/NOFORN/FISA.

What those classifications mean: **TOP SECRET** is the highest national security classification. **HCS-P** stands for Human Intelligence Control System—Product, meaning that the information is extremely sensitive because it is the product of human CIA spies, likely in Russia. **SI-G** stands for Special Intelligence, indicating it is the results of NSA eavesdropping, and G stands for Gamma, meaning it is extremely sensitive. In the past, Gamma has been attached to high-level intercepts from senior Kremlin officials. **TK** stands for Talent Keyhole, a designation used on very sensitive overhead imagery from spy satellites controlled by the National Reconnaissance Office. **RSEN** stands for Risk Sensitive, indicating that the data is a highly sensitive analysis of overhead imagery by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). **FISA** means Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, indicating that the intelligence was derived from a court authorized national security wiretap. **NOFORN** indicates that the information should not be released to foreigners “without permission of the originator.” And finally, **ORCON** is used when the information “clearly identifies or reasonably permits ready identification of intelligence sources or methods.”

Beyond the arcane intel babble of the classification system is the enormous army of human and machine spies secretly and aggressively targeting Russia on behalf of the Ukraine government. It’s a multibillion-

dollar spy war that, as a result of an accident or a deliberate act, could quickly trigger a hot war involving the United States, NATO and Russia. A key example, revealed in the leaked Pentagon documents, was the near downing of a NATO RC-135W signals intelligence aircraft with over 30 members of the British military on board. A Russian fighter sent up to keep a close eye on the spy plane misunderstood a command from the ground and fired a missile at the aircraft. It was only because of another glitch that the missile failed to hit its mark and potentially ignite World War III.

EYES IN THE SKY

But the RC-135Ws are only one element in a vast and growing airborne armada of spy craft constantly patrolling the tense and increasing crowded skies above the land and sea border regions of Russia, often shadowed by Russian fighters dangerously close to their wingtips. “We Hoover everything up,” said a former US RC-135 mission manager. “It’s a flying vacuum cleaner—we take every frequency, every angle we see.” The spy planes provide critical intelligence for Ukraine’s military commanders, and likely as well for its covert operators during their cross-border assassination and sabotage operations. Other intelligence comes from the constellations of spy satellites orbiting high above the airborne armada

The center for US satellite espionage targeting Russia sits just south of Denver, on Buckley Space Force Base in Aurora, Colo. Known as the Aerospace Data Facility-Colorado, or Space Delta 20, it’s a lunar vista of bulbous white radomes, stretching for acres, which serve as the downlink for scores of eavesdropping and high-resolution satellites providing imagery useful both for tactical warfare on the battlefield, as well as covert operations deep within Russia. In just the first two weeks of the war, “the Ukrainian government used or streamed or downloaded more than 40 million square kilometers of area,” Sandra Auchter, director of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency’s highly secret Denver facility, told a symposium of geospatial intelligence specialists. “For us to be able to provide that to a foreign partner in such a short period of time is incredible.”

Last February 26, according to the leaked March 1, 2023, top secret document mentioned above, Ukraine launched a covert sabotage operation in neighboring Belarus, a country friendly to Russia but thus far holding back from sending troops. In many ways, the operation was a carbon copy of the dual drone attack on the Kremlin several months later. Ukrainian intelligence agents inside Belarus launched two small weaponized drones that attacked and damaged a highly sophisticated Russian airborne early-warning aircraft. Known as an A-50U Mainstay, the plane had been deployed to Belarus's Machulishchy Air Base south of Minsk. Although nervous officials in Kiev issued an order calling off the attack at the last minute, it went ahead as planned. The Ukraine government regularly denies involvement in such covert operations, as it did with the Kremlin drone attacks and the recent assassinations. But the leaked top secret documents make it clear that the United States knew the February operation was carried out by Ukraine's Security Service, the SBU, and "its agents in Belarus."

Shortly after that attack, a dual Russian-Ukrainian national was arrested by Belarus police. Then the country's leader, Alexander Lukashenko, issued a warning to both Ukraine and the United States. "A terrorist was trained," he said. "The security service of Ukraine, the leadership of the CIA, behind closed doors, are carrying out an operation against the Republic of Belarus," he said.

The United States currently provides Ukraine with massive amounts of intelligence—but only minimal oversight and restrictions on how they use it. These circumstances give rise to the perception, justified or not, that Washington is an active collaborator—a cobelligerent—in Ukraine's growing list of bloody political assassinations and drone attacks like those on the Kremlin, in Belarus, and elsewhere in Russia. Such reasoning was only reinforced by Biden's own words early in the war indicating a desire for regime change in the Kremlin: "For God's sake this man cannot remain in power."

Unless the Biden administration demands an end to Kiev's thinly veiled use of assassination and terrorism within Russia, at the same time it is on the receiving end of America's most valuable spyware, the risk of dragging the US deeper and deeper into an endless quagmire will continue to grow. That's terrain the United States seems to have occupied in every recent war, from Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq. But in this one—with two of the parties having 11,405 nuclear weapons aimed at each other—the stakes are much, much higher.

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