

HEINONLINE

Citation: 95 Foreign Aff. 38 2016



Content downloaded/printed from
HeinOnline (<http://heinonline.org>)
Mon Jun 6 07:36:49 2016

-- Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at <http://heinonline.org/HOL/License>

-- The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text.

-- To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your HeinOnline license, please use:

[https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?
&operation=go&searchType=0
&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0015-7120](https://www.copyright.com/ccc/basicSearch.do?&operation=go&searchType=0&lastSearch=simple&all=on&titleOrStdNo=0015-7120)

How Putin Silences Dissent

Inside the Kremlin's Crackdown

Maria Lipman

In December 2015, the Russian antigraft activist Alexey Navalny released a documentary in which he exposed the corrupt business dealings of the children of Yuri Chaika, Russia's prosecutor general—the top law enforcement official in the country. In the film, Navalny accuses Chaika's son Artem of “continuously exploit[ing] the protection that his father, the prosecutor general of the Russian Federation, gives him to extort from and steal other people's companies.” Artem owns a five-star hotel in Greece with his father's deputy's ex-wife, who, according to Navalny, maintains close business ties with the wives of violent gang members in southern Russia. The film includes scenes from the inauguration of the hotel, a grand celebration attended by Russian politicians, businessmen, and pop stars. The documentary also details Artem's involvement in a predatory takeover of a Siberian shipping company in 2002; after speaking out against Artem, the company's former manager was found hanged.

The film has garnered more than 4.6 million views online. In a survey

conducted by the Levada Center, an independent Russian polling and research organization, some 80 percent of those who had watched the film or heard about it said they thought Navalny's allegations “appeared true” or were “fully credible.” Shortly after the film's release, the Russian documentary film festival ArtDocFest awarded it a special prize, and Dmitry Gudkov, a federal lawmaker, filed a request with the Russian Investigative Committee, the Russian equivalent of the FBI, asking for an investigation into Navalny's allegations.

The characters in this story—a whistleblower, an independent film festival, and an antiestablishment lawmaker—seem to contradict the West's image of President Vladimir Putin's Russia as unforgiving and authoritarian. Yet this is only part of the tale.

The rest is that the Kremlin has persecuted Navalny for years. He has been repeatedly prosecuted on what have appeared to be trumped-up embezzlement charges. He has spent months under house arrest, and although he is not currently imprisoned, he remains on a suspended sentence. His brother, who was named Navalny's codefendant in a sham embezzlement case, has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison, and several of Navalny's coworkers have been threatened or forced to flee Russia.

Navalny's film went viral on the Internet, but Russia's state-controlled national television largely ignored it. Chaika dismissed it as a political attack backed by an American businessman. And Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, when asked about the film, said its allegations were “of no interest to us

MARIA LIPMAN is Editor in Chief of *Counterpoint*, published by George Washington University's Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies.

whatsoever,” as they concerned Chaika’s children, not the prosecutor general himself. Yet in Russia, few believe that Artem became a rich business tycoon simply because he is a talented entrepreneur. An ascent like his takes a special kind of protection, one that his father likely provided. In fact, in 2011, when Artem’s name surfaced repeatedly in connection with an investigation of underground casinos in the Moscow region, which operated under the protection of local prosecutors, the case ended with no indictments—apparently thanks to his father’s influence.

Gudkov, for his part, has become a one-man opposition. Of the 450 members of the Duma, Russia’s parliament, he is the only one who does not pledge full allegiance to Putin. But after reading his request, the Investigative Committee decided to transfer the case to the office of the prosecutor general—that is, to Chaika himself—effectively burying it. No matter how solid the allegations against Chaika’s family may be, the Kremlin simply will not rely on the accusations of a liberal activist to hold them to account.

Since the start of Putin’s third term in 2012, the Kremlin has grown increasingly intolerant of political and civic activism. But as the economist Sergei Guriev and the political scientist Daniel Treisman wrote in 2015, “new authoritarian” regimes, such as Putin’s, “can survive while employing relatively little violence against the public.” Instead, they rely on manipulation and intimidation, cultivating a sense that opposing the Kremlin is not just dangerous but also pointless.

So far, these tactics have served the Kremlin well. Now, however, Russia’s

ongoing economic decline may present an obstacle. The combination of a drop in oil prices and a shortage of investment has already led to a decrease in living standards; unemployment is also likely to rise. This makes it tempting to predict that Putin’s regime will soon unravel, but it remains impossible to tell when or how or what will come next.

PUTIN TAKES CHARGE

Back in 1999, Russia’s political order was unraveling. A protracted political battle with the Communist opposition had dramatically weakened the Kremlin. Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s approval rating had dropped to the single digits, the Russian parliament had accused him of destroying the Soviet Union, and he had narrowly escaped impeachment. In parliamentary elections that year, the pro-Kremlin party faced a coalition of local governors headed by two political heavyweights, former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. In the end, the Kremlin defeated its challengers, not least thanks to a televised smear campaign orchestrated by Boris Berezovsky, a Russian business tycoon and political operator. Yeltsin stepped down and named Putin his successor.

That election turned out to be Russia’s last competitive political campaign at the federal level. Once in office, Putin did everything he could to ensure that the ruling elite would never again risk losing power. The Kremlin subjected television channels to state control and curtailed the power of local governors. In the Duma, the governors’ faction was forced to merge with the pro-Kremlin party. The new party, United Russia, became an instrument

of the Kremlin. Other parliamentary parties, notably the Communists, reconciled themselves to the Kremlin's dominance.

In consolidating power, the Kremlin exploited the vulnerabilities of potential challengers. Regional governors were corrupt, and the Kremlin seems to have gained their loyalty by threatening them with prosecution; it also took advantage of the incestuous ties between government officials and new business owners, particularly TV magnates. With post-Soviet turmoil, corruption, and economic decline having eroded trust in new institutions, such as the independent media, the Kremlin's move to undermine them met barely any resistance.

These efforts were an impressive and rapid success, especially since the government mostly refrained from the use of force or outright persecution of potential challengers. The arrest of Russia's richest magnate, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in the fall of 2003 was an exception: unlike other big players in politics and business, who had resigned themselves to the Kremlin's dominance, Khodorkovsky continued to pursue his own agenda. His arrest sent a warning to Russian oligarchs: their billions notwithstanding, the only safe strategy remained unquestioning loyalty to the Kremlin.

Putin's uncontested reelection in 2004 and his thorough elimination of political competition provoked modest protest. Between 2005 and 2008, a handful of activists organized "Marches of the Discontented" in Moscow and other urban centers. Yet organizers were lucky if they could muster a few thousand people; more often, the marches drew just a few hundred.

Compared with the political turmoil and economic hardship of the 1990s, the first decade of this century was a time of relative political stability and growing prosperity, thanks to the high and rising price of oil. By the end of Putin's second term, his approval rating exceeded 80 percent. Term limits forced him to step down in 2008, and he became prime minister, anointing Dmitry Medvedev as his successor. Yet even in his new post, Putin remained the most powerful man in the country.

Medvedev was no reformer, but he was younger, softer, and more technologically savvy than Putin; he adopted the credo "Freedom is better than non-freedom." The combination of greater liberties, growing prosperity, and the spread of the Internet led to the rise of young educated professionals in Russia's big cities. They turned their backs on the Kremlin and dismissed Kremlin-controlled national television as outdated gibberish for the masses. They immersed themselves in their social networks, in the niche liberal media, and in a Western lifestyle in which charity and volunteer work played an increasing role.

RIPPLES OF PROTEST

By 2010, Russian civic activism was flourishing. Groups organized, for example, to protest against the driving habits of government officials, whose cars came with sirens, flashing blue lights, and government license plates, allowing them to flout traffic laws. Environmentalists waged battles against greedy developers. Navalny gained prominence as an anticorruption blogger. When disastrous forest fires swept central Russia in the summer of 2010,



A most wanted man: police detain Alexey Navalny in Moscow, February 2014

young educated urbanites demonstrated remarkable organizational and management skills; their large-scale volunteer operation made up for the government's bungled relief effort.

People also took to social media to expose government hypocrisy and, sometimes, to poke fun at Putin. In August 2010, Putin began a long and highly publicized drive across Siberia at the wheel of a domestically manufactured yellow Lada. State television channels covered the ride extensively. Yet amateur footage by a group of locals revealed that the Lada was actually accompanied by a presidential motorcade of some 100 vehicles, including two spare Ladas.

In 2011, online activists discovered that local election officials were scheming to deliver votes to United Russia in an upcoming parliamentary race. As the vote drew near, many young people

volunteered to join election-monitoring teams, broadcasting their findings on social media. The reality was even worse than they had feared. On election day, the young volunteers witnessed large amounts of fraud: ballot stuffing; counterfeited voting registers; and “merry-go-round voting,” in which buses drove pro-government voters from one precinct to the next so that they could vote multiple times. In the precincts, election officials and police kicked out those who cried foul. The revelations of cheating triggered a spontaneous protest, which was followed by a series of mass rallies in Moscow and other big urban centers in late 2011 and 2012. Putin had by then announced his intention to return to the presidency, and the protests against the fraud in the 2011 elections swelled into a growing sense of frustration with Putin's viselike grip on Russian politics. The rallies, filled with chants of “Russia

without Putin!” were unambiguously political. But the protests did not amount to an opposition movement. Most dismissed the idea of negotiating with the Kremlin, which they saw as immoral and untrustworthy. “Russia without Putin” was merely a slogan: the protesters did not appear to have in mind an alternative candidate of their own.

PUTIN 2.0

Despite the unrest, Putin maintained the support of Russia’s conservative majority and easily won reelection in 2012. Following Putin’s reelection, the Kremlin abandoned its policy of tolerance. On May 6, the day before Putin’s inauguration, an anti-Putin rally that began peacefully ended in clashes with the police and numerous arrests.

State-controlled television channels launched a smear campaign against the protesters, condemning them as pro-Western, unpatriotic, and immoral. National television painted the West as evil and labeled liberals, gays, and recipients of foreign grants as subversive Western agents. Vigilante groups soon started harassing gay activists and disrupting contemporary art exhibitions.

The crackdown had actually begun about two months earlier, when police arrested three members of Pussy Riot, a feminist protest group, for performing an anti-Putin “punk prayer” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. In August 2012, they were sentenced to two years in prison. Meanwhile, authorities prosecuted about 30 participants in the May 6 protest, and many of them were sentenced to prison terms of several years. The police also roughed up and detained sympathizers who gathered outside the courthouse.

Since then, the police have cracked down on unsanctioned protests, routinely detaining and beating participants. Even individual picketers have been targeted. In late 2015, under a new law restricting public assembly, authorities sentenced the peaceful Moscow activist Ildar Dadin to three years in jail for antigovernment street protests, some of which had involved no one but Dadin himself.

The Putin government has stopped short of banning public rallies outright. On several occasions, the Kremlin has even authorized marches and demonstrations, most likely to allow protesters to blow off steam. There have been demonstrations against the Kremlin’s ban on the foreign adoption of Russian orphans, for example, and against Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

But the sense of joyful defiance that existed in 2011–12 has disappeared, and hardly anyone truly hopes to influence the Kremlin. The protest against the Crimean annexation brought together tens of thousands of people in Moscow: a tiny minority who were excoriated by the overwhelming majority that hailed the annexation.

Perhaps seeking to avoid greater unrest, the Kremlin also decided not to imprison Navalny, who had gained broad popularity during the 2011–12 protests. Despite constant harassment and prosecution, Navalny has remained unintimidated, even arrogant; one year into Putin’s third term, he admitted to having presidential ambitions. A few months later, in the provincial city of Kirov, he was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison on seemingly trumped-up embezzlement charges. This news provoked protests in many Russian cities: in Moscow, a few thousand

people gathered in the city center. The police dissolved the crowd and detained several dozen participants. But in an unexpected turn of events, Navalny and his codefendant were released the next day on a suspended sentence. Navalny was even allowed to run for mayor of Moscow in 2013. Thousands of enthusiastic young volunteers worked for his campaign, and although he lost to the pro-Kremlin incumbent, he won an impressive 27 percent of the popular vote. Yet as soon as the race was over, Navalny was once again harassed and prosecuted.

THE CRACKDOWN CONTINUES

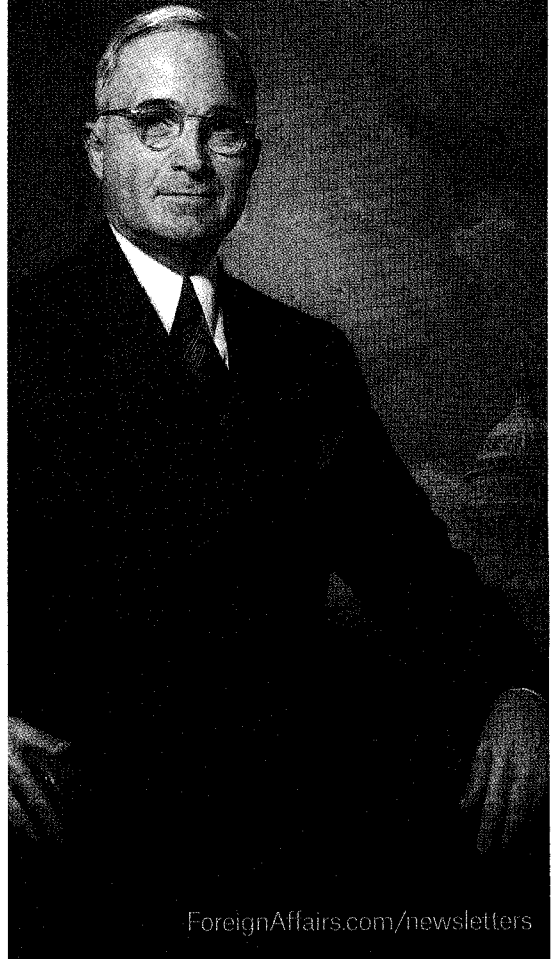
The crackdown that followed Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 extended to the liberal media, which had until then been allowed to operate fairly independently. The Kremlin relied on loyal media owners to shut down or reformat outlets the government did not approve of and on advertisers, who readily refused to conduct business with those they deemed disloyal. In 2014, cable TV operators, apparently acting on instructions from the Kremlin, terminated their contracts with the liberal Moscow channel TV Rain. It now operates solely online, and it has seen its audience drop from 12 million viewers to just over 70,000 paid subscribers.

The government has likewise stepped up measures to control the Internet. Russia does not have a Chinese-style firewall, and the Russian Internet remains a relatively free realm for public discussion. But the state is steadily expanding its interference: monitoring Web traffic, blacklisting websites, and employing teams of pro-Putin online trolls to post anti-American or anti-Ukrainian messages.

**Not all readers
are leaders,
but all leaders
are readers.**

-Harry S. Truman

**SIGN UP for the
Foreign Affairs
Books & Reviews
newsletter**



ForeignAffairs.com/newsletters

In the past year, authorities sentenced several bloggers to jail for posting “extremist” content; in most cases, the posts in question criticized Russia’s policies in Ukraine.

By 2013, the Kremlin had launched a campaign against foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations, enacting a law that forces such organizations to brand themselves as “foreign agents” if they engage in “political activity,” which is loosely defined. Organizations that refuse to accept this insulting label—the most obvious Russian connotation of “foreign agent” is “spy”—can expect significant fines. Since the law went into effect, more than a dozen such groups have had to shut down. With foreign funding all but outlawed, nongovernmental organizations that remain independent from the Kremlin find themselves in dire straits, unable to rely on donations from Russian businesses, which do not want to be seen supporting “foreign agents.” Crowd-funding is still not a viable alternative, as those donations are usually small and cannot replace large institutional grants.

In recent months, the Kremlin’s tactics have escalated. In February, two organizations were shut down by court order: one monitored elections; the other provided legal advocacy.

UNFAIR ELECTIONS

In the Kremlin’s quest to consolidate power, nothing has served it so well as the annexation of Crimea. In the wake of the annexation, Putin’s approval rating immediately shot up, and as of February 2016, it had remained over 80 percent for 23 months. Many Russians see Putin’s actions in Crimea as righting a historical injustice and reclaiming Russia’s status

as a world power. Those who disagree are viewed as unpatriotic enemies of the motherland.

The original euphoria over Crimea has subsided, but the surge of nationalism it generated has been fueled by the Russian-backed war in eastern Ukraine and the accompanying anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, Russia’s military operation in Syria, and tensions with Turkey. The Russian people are not optimistic about Russia’s economic prospects, but never since the collapse of the Soviet Union have they been so proud of Russia’s military might and global influence. Many Russians believe that Russia’s military rivals that of the United States and that Russia is right to confront the West. Many also blame the West for Russia’s current economic troubles.

The Kremlin will do its best to maintain that view as it navigates a legislative election year with a rapidly deteriorating economy. The government also benefits from the sense that Putin is Russia’s only option. The Kremlin’s opponents, such as Navalny, may enjoy credibility when they criticize Moscow’s corruption, but almost no one sees them as viable political alternatives.

Still, with the price of basic goods rising and average incomes stagnating, the forthcoming parliamentary elections are a risky affair for the Kremlin. Half of the Duma’s 450 deputies will be elected on party slates, making them more or less safe for United Russia. But the other 225 deputies will be elected individually in local districts, and the Kremlin is keen to bar opposition candidates. Yet rigging the elections is not an option: the Kremlin does not want a replay of 2011, when election fraud triggered mass protests.

Instead, the Kremlin is working to remove unwanted candidates before election day. This is not a new strategy. In 2015, in the campaign for the regional legislature in Novosibirsk, Leonid Volkov, the campaign manager for a tiny anti-establishment party, made his candidates' campaigns as transparent as possible to prove his party's compliance with election rules. Still, officials found reasons to bar his candidates, using pretexts such as typos in voter lists. Appeals to state authorities and even to Russia's Supreme Court proved pointless, as did a hunger strike by Volkov and several of his candidates.

To those who remain undeterred, a recent episode concerning a vocal Putin critic, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, acts as a warning. In February, when Kasyanov arrived in Nizhny Novgorod to meet with local constituents, members of a nationalist organization brutally harassed and insulted him, apparently with the Kremlin's blessing. Reporters for NTV, one of Russia's three major national television channels, filmed the whole scene.

In January, the Kremlin imposed additional constraints on election monitoring: reducing the number of volunteer observers representing a party or candidate to just two at every precinct and restricting journalists' access to precincts. And to neutralize critically minded constituents in large urban centers, Moscow has merged city voting districts with adjacent rural ones so as to dilute the urban vote with the more conservative and loyal rural one.

RUSSIA WITHOUT PUTIN?

In February 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a veteran opposition figure, was assassinated in

downtown Moscow. Russian police have arrested five men for the murder, but Nemtsov's family lawyer believes that high-level government officials have prevented investigators from digging too deep.

Whoever the perpetrators were, it is clear that there are forces within Russia ready to kill opponents of the Kremlin. A few days after Nemtsov's assassination, tens of thousands of people joined a mourning march in Moscow; on the one-year anniversary of his death, more than 24,000 people marched again. City authorities sanctioned both memorial events. But they have also repeatedly destroyed an improvised memorial on the site of the murder—a reminder to activists and their sympathizers that they are not welcome.

Activism hasn't quite died altogether, however. Civic projects are under way, especially in Moscow, where there are a broad range of charity initiatives, public lectures, and art and book festivals. Most of them rely, at least partly, on crowdfunding, although individual donations may shrink as a result of the declining economy. So far, the Kremlin has not interfered, perhaps deeming such small-scale projects innocuous.

Navalny's antigraft projects also rely on crowdfunding, although his donors try to avoid publicity. His activity is not regarded as innocuous, yet his investigations have had little true impact on the workings of the Kremlin.

Up to this point, the Kremlin's "new authoritarian" practices have proved fairly effective. Four years after tens of thousands of people chanted "Russia without Putin!" Putin's power remains unchallenged. Russia may have what *The Washington Post* recently called a

“motley band of oppositionists,” but there is no real political opposition. These days, the vast majority of Russians cling to stability, rallying around Putin and adapting to lower living standards.

Pollsters and commentators often predict that Putin’s regime has just one or two years left, that Russia’s economic woes, combined with its costly and adventurous foreign policy, will soon spell its demise. Yet such doomsayers typically avoid explaining what such a collapse would entail, and Russia’s long-term prospects remain unclear. This should not come as a surprise: Putin does not appear to follow a master plan, instead responding to major developments by finding ad hoc solutions.

Putin may no longer have the blessing of high energy prices, but he does have a public ready to accept that politics is not meant to be by the people or for the people. Socioeconomic protests have become more frequent, but they are invariably limited, reduced to one locality or one group. Today’s protesters seem much more likely to appeal to Putin than to seek the support of their fellow countrymen or political assistance from oppositionists.

If Putin’s approval wanes, however, the prospects for his regime will be grimmer. Russia’s elite is torn by internecine feuds, but everyone pledges allegiance to Putin—so long as he remains the invincible supreme leader. If not, an open rivalry may emerge among the various elite factions, not least between proponents of more repressive and isolationist policies and advocates of development-oriented reforms. Such a conflict could mobilize the public at large.

Yet those anticipating the regime’s demise should not underestimate Russia’s capacity to muddle through, accepting its fate as it lags further behind developed nations economically, technologically, in health and education, and in quality of life.

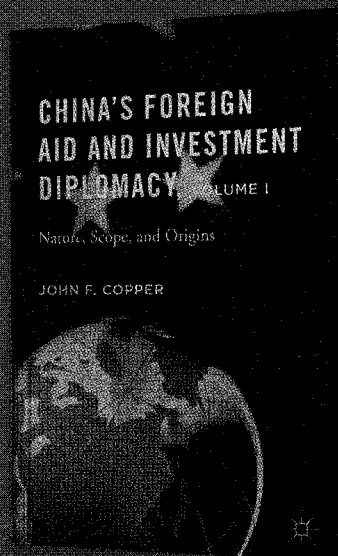
As for the expectations of Russians themselves, when asked by the Levada Center in December 2015 how long it would take for them to run out of patience, 21 percent of those polled said “a few years,” 14 percent said “very long,” and the most common answer, at 30 percent, was “nobody knows—everything can explode in a most unexpected way.”

CHINA'S FOREIGN AID AND INVESTMENT DIPLOMACY

VOLUMES I, II AND III

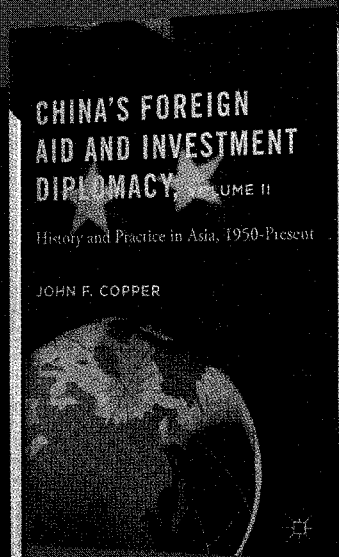
John F. Copper

This three-volume work is the first comprehensive study of China's aid and investment strategy to trace how it has evolved since Beijing launched its foreign aid diplomacy at the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The author also focuses on China recently becoming a preeminent purveyor of aid and investments to developing countries and thus its challenges to the U.S., the West and international financial institutions.



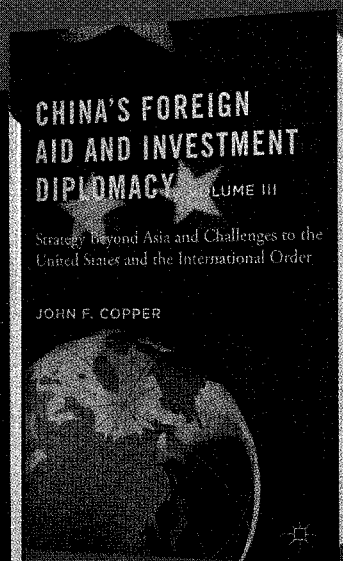
Volume I
Nature, Scope, and Origins

9781137551818
\$105.00



Volume II
*History and Practice in
Asia, 1950-Present*

9781137532725
\$105.00

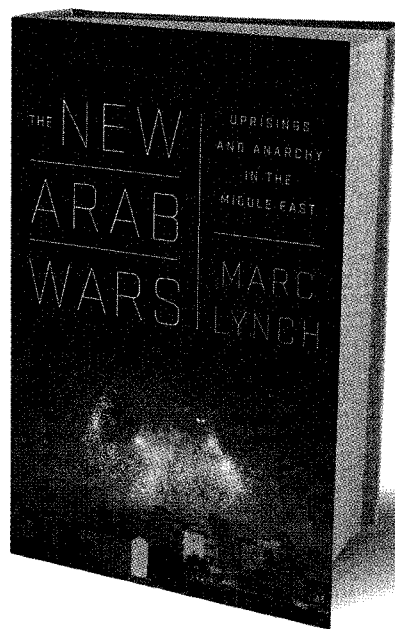


Volume III
*Strategy Beyond Asia and
Challenges to the United States
and the International Order*

9781137551832
\$105.00

palgrave
macmillan

Order online at palgrave.com



"This is an unblinking, unsparing, and unputdownable account of the anarchy and ruin that have engulfed the Middle East since the 'Arab Spring' dawned five years ago.... **A brutally honest book.**"

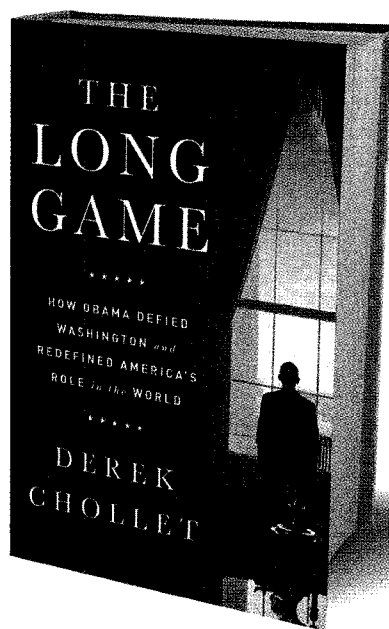
—DAVID IGNATIUS, columnist, *Washington Post*

APRIL 2016

"[A] penetrating and wise examination of the foreign policy of a deeply unorthodox president.... Chollet's conclusions are controversial, and will be debated fiercely in Washington and beyond."

—JEFFREY GOLDBERG,
National Correspondent, the *Atlantic*

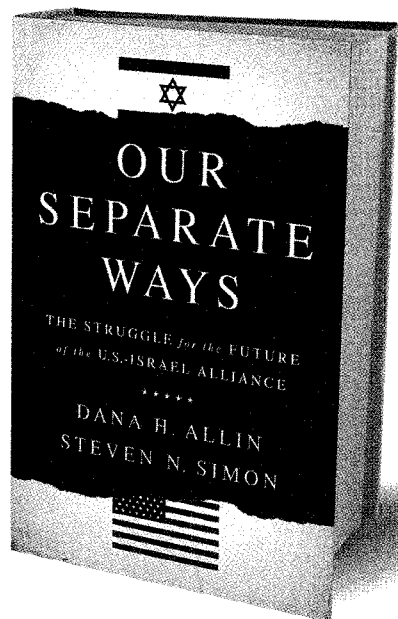
JUNE 2016



"*Our Separate Ways* is **essential reading**—a revelatory inside account of the U.S.–Israeli alliance in the Obama years and a searching, **insightful analysis** of the spreading fissures in that alliance."

—STEVE COLL, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University, and staff writer, *New Yorker*

JUNE 2016



AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER AND EBOOK
WWW.PUBLICAFFAIRSBOOKS.COM