

PLEASE CHECK TEXT AGAINST DELIVERY, AS BROADCAST ON ABC 'BIG IDEAS' PROGRAM
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THEATRE, UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH.

This evening, I would like to share some personal reflections about my new book *Return to Moscow*: how it was conceived and published, and what I hope to achieve from it. The focus of tonight's lecture will be on the political dimension of my book. I am grateful to UWA IAS for providing an academic venue for this lecture – actually my first academic venue. I also want sincerely to thank my publisher, Terri-Ann White, Director of UWA Publishing, who nurtured this book through to its publication in March. Without Terri-Ann and her dedicated small staff, this unusual multi-genre book would have never seen the light of day. I would like to thank Charlotte Guest, UWA Publishing Officer, for her great efforts in putting together my Perth program,

Let me begin with some context. **FIRST SLIDE - PHOTO IMAGE OF DONALD TRUMP.**

Washington is in the throes of a bitter long-running crisis of presidential legitimacy, which began with Donald Trump's election in November last year. Trump will either lose power through a Watergate-style impeachment for great crimes and misdemeanours; or simply be removed by Congress for perceived incompetence; or he will somehow survive this crisis. The pressure on him from the American liberal hawk establishment – largely, but not all, supporters of the opposition Democratic Party – is massive and unrelenting.

The proper management of American relations with Russia is front and centre to this crisis.

SLIDE 2 - IMAGE OF NEW YORKER COVER DRAWING PUTIN AND TRUMP, MARCH 6 2017.

Some d the present crisis '-gate'. One might as well just change one letter and call it 'Russia-hate, for the central message of the anti-Trump critics – as strong as their intense loathing of Trump himself - is an intense mistrust and fear of Russia, a nation they see as a hostile power, even as America's existential enemy. For Trump's liberal hawk opponents in

Washington, the alleged Russian interference in America's internal politics, both through sabotage of the Clinton election campaign and through cultivating improper influence over Trump's inner circle of advisers, and perhaps even over Trump himself, poses a clear and present danger to American democracy and global power. Russia rejects these allegations.

Anti-Russian public language really took off in the US during Hillary Clinton's campaign. Obama was more careful in his public language as President about Russian policies, though he could be quite scathing in private. But it is now open season on Putin's Russia in Washington. The criticisms of Trump – for being lazy, erratic, vain, bullying, impulsive, childish – have merged into a fear that the Russian Government is deliberately exploiting these personal weaknesses. In Washington political culture now, outside the White House, there is deep suspicion of everything Russian: Russian Ambassador Kislyak is now being openly called a spy and agent of influence. **SLIDE 3 - PHOTO IMAGE OF LAVROV, TRUMP AND KISYLAK AT WHITE HOUSE.**

To my mind, he is simply an effective ambassador doing his job well.

I wrote my book expecting a Hillary Clinton presidency. Based on her record as Secretary of State and her aggressive campaign rhetoric, I feared she would be dangerously provocative of Russia. In the event, Donald Trump, a person more in tune with Vladimir Putin and with Russia, and with a pragmatic deal-making style, was elected. There was initial relief in Moscow. Trump's election seemed to offer an opportunity for serious strategists like Henry Kissinger to begin to recalibrate mainstream thinking in Washington on US-Russia relations: to begin to respond to the detente arguments that Russia had been trying in vain to put to Washington over many years.

Vladimir Putin famously described Donald Trump as '*yarkii*' – meaning a brilliant, vivid, colourful character. Putin and his Foreign Minister Lavrov were clearly hoping for a detente process to get underway with Trump. They certainly saw people like his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson as assets.

SLIDE 4 - PHOTO IMAGE OF LAVROV AND TILLERSON.

But as of now, Russian hopes for detente have had to be put on hold: Trump is too busy just trying to survive the Washington Russia-gate storm. I was not expecting it to be as strong as it has become.

It is hard to get more nuanced views on Trump and Putin's relationship across to my colleagues and friends in Canberra, most of whom simply find Trump dangerous and disgusting, and want to see him gone quickly, without considering who or what might replace him.

An influential essay in the 1 May issue of the *New Yorker* by senior editor David Remnick, *A Hundred Days of Trump*, offered sombre judgements. Remnick made a strong case against Trump's clownish and incompetent, but democracy-threatening right-wing populism. Remnick also took a swing at Putin:

SLIDE 5 - PHOTO IMAGE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN

'In Russia, Vladimir Putin has suppressed political competition, a nascent independent media, and any hope for an independent judiciary or legislature, while managing to convince millions of his countrymen that the United States is hypocritical and immoral, and no more democratic than any other country.'

Putin is now regularly bracketed by the West with Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's El-Sisi, Philippines' Duterte, and North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, as one of a nasty gang of ruthless strongmen leaders who imprison, torture and murder their democratic opponents at home. Chinese Premier Xi Jinping seldom appears in such lists of bad leaders – perhaps because his government is seen now as too powerful to be safely insulted.

No such inhibitions apply to Mr Putin. I was appalled by the *Economist* front cover of its special issue on 'Putinism' in October 2016. Before I show you this image look closely at the image of Putin now up on display – no doubt a Russian official photo of Putin at work. Now here is the *Economist* front page, gruesomely depicting Putin as a terrifying devil with nuclear missiles in his eyes. **SLIDE 6 -IMAGE OF ECONOMIST 'PUTINISM' COVER PAGE** . It is actually the same image, photoshopped. I find this a nice metaphor for the West's massive dissemination of a false distorted image of Putin.

By mid-May, Putin had had enough. He weighed in on 18 May with blunt public comments on the present anti-Russian campaign in Washington, and its adverse impact on international security. Putin spoke scathingly of 'political schizophrenia' and 'hysteria' in Washington. He said Trump was not being allowed to do his job properly. He said 'It's hard to imagine what else can these people who generate such nonsense and rubbish dream up next. What surprises me is that they are shaking up the domestic political situation [in the US], using anti-Russian slogans. Either they don't understand the damage they are doing to their own country, in which case they are simply stupid, or they understand everything, in which case they are dangerous and corrupt'.

Russians view the political chaos engulfing Washington in bemused horror. They don't know whether to laugh or cry.

They are as perturbed as everyone else by Trump's unpredictable policy swings and ineptitude, and by the frozen and confused state of policy-making in Washington. They watch with ironic *schadenfreude* as American power and dignity as 'leader of the free world' is being drained away by the ongoing public disaster that is Donald Trump.

But it is also saddening for thoughtful Russians, who had seen Trump and Tillerson as their best hope for real detente after sixteen years of escalating East-West military tensions, that began under US Presidents Bush and Obama, and with worse feared to come under Hillary

Clinton. They saw Trump and Tillerson as businessmen-pragmatists instinctively well-disposed towards detente with Russia.

Russians are disappointed to see the momentum of such reform aspirations blocked comprehensively since November by Russia-gate. There has been no progress towards detente. Russians know that they continue to be feared and hated – now, it seems, more than ever - in Washington's and NATO Europe's elite circles. They know that these circles are now trapped in their own ingrained Russophobia: snared in their own web.

We in the West have forgotten the recent East-West history, to our great cost. The Cold War ended peacefully in Malta in 1989. **SLIDE 7 - PHOTO IMAGE OF BUSH AND GORBACHEV AT MALTA 1989**. The new Russia acquiesced in this settlement. The majority of Russians were then expressing positive feelings of admiration and respect for the US-led West. They wanted to join the club. Sadly, the West's unbridled triumphalism and liberal hegemonism, in former Yugoslavia, in the Middle East and in Russia's near abroad – the former Soviet republics, Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states - destroyed all that goodwill. The West managed over the next 28 years to turn Russia and the majority of Russians against us once again.

Russians watched as the US and NATO expanded military forces and missile batteries relentlessly right up to their reduced post-Soviet Western borders, violating the key understandings on which Gorbachev had agreed to the end of the Cold War. The US and NATO built new strategic tripwires on these borders. NATO now exercises hundreds of tanks and deploys thousands of its best soldiers in the Baltic states, often in clear view of Russia, just 600 kilometers from Moscow. **SLIDE 9 - PHOTO IMAGE OF NATO TANKS & TROOPS IN BALTIC STATES**. This, in the topsy-turvy Orwellian language we are now used to hearing, is being done 'to deter Russian aggression'. Russia is forced to divert large resources to military research and spending on its new professional armed forces, to upgrade its nuclear deterrent, and to live under constant provocation and permanent war alert.

This deterioration in East-West relations began with the Georgian-Abkhazian War in 2008 and the bipartisan Magnitsky Act of 2012 which remarkably passed into US law the first economic sanctions against Russia for domestic human rights abuses. By this time, unstable and weakly governed Ukraine had become the main target for massive overt and covert American support for anti-Russian political parties and movements, culminating in the February 2014 Maidan Square armed overthrow of the elected Yanukovich government and the flight of Yanukovich pursued by death squads. Since then the East-West crisis has deepened around the civil war in Eastern Ukraine, the tense Baltic States' frontier confrontations with Russia, and the Syrian civil war. It continues to worsen. We are closer to war with Russia than at any time since the 1970s.

This is the political-ideological world in which we now live. The Cold War and Soviet Communism ended 28 years ago. But 'Putinism' has now replaced Soviet communism as the greatest perceived existential threat to Western democracy – witness the *Economist* cover image shown earlier.

It is now axiomatic in the West, not only that Putin has blocked the Western liberal project to assist Russia's transition to democracy, which began in 1985 with support for Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* and continued through the Yeltsin years; but also that Putin's global program now challenges the moral prestige, self-esteem and global 'soft power' of American liberal democracy itself. Putin therefore is seen as an existential threat whose Russian system the West must contest by every means short of nuclear war: including economic sanctions, political boycotts, the support of anti-Russian colour revolutions in former Soviet republics adjacent to Russia, above all in Ukraine, and ruthless information warfare aimed at undercutting Russia's global prestige and self-respect at home.

I discuss the impact of such extreme measures, and Russian counter-measures, in my book's last two chapters. I argue that 'anti-Putinism' has become a monster with a self-sustaining dynamic of its own. Russia's response has been, not surprisingly, to turn away, I would say sadly but decisively, from Europe and the West: to reach out for new friends and alignments in China and across the Middle East and Asian region. In these ways, the strategic map of the world is being redrawn. Finally, the tectonic plates of world politics are shifting. We are entering a truly multipolar world order, after decades of United States world leadership. The West brought this on ourselves by our failure over many years to try to understand Russia's post-Soviet perspectives, and for that matter China's perspectives as its economy and self-confidence strengthens.

In the West, we have become habituated, by torrents of pejorative journalism and a kind of self-reinforcing popular scholarship, to think of Vladimir Putin as a malevolent, even demonic, force of evil in the world. My book asks, is it possible that we might all be wrong?

What can we make of arrays of wellknown, easily accessible, books with titles like these?:

SLIDE 10 – SOME RECENT ANTI-PUTIN BOOK TITLES

The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin, by Steven Lee Myers, 2016

Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped, by Garry Kasparov, 2016

Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin, by Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, 2015

Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? by Karen Dawisha, 2015

Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism, by Marcel H Van Herpen, 2015

The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin, by Masha Gessen, 2013

The titles tell their own story. Now-familiar negative stereotypes about Putin migrate across books and articles, gaining strength and certainty as they multiply and cross-validate one another. As Joseph Goebbels said, a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth.

One of the best current English-language books on Putin, by Richard Sakwa, Professor of Politics at the University of Kent, offers a very different kind of in-depth judgement to those I have just listed. His 2014 political biography *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia*, updates his earlier, equally highly regarded in academic circles, 2004 biography: *Putin: Russia's Choice*. As I read Sakwa, I discover a different world to that portrayed by the earlier-listed authors. Absent is the constant underlying drumbeat of hostility and disdain. Sakwa presents Putin essentially as a highly capable Russian national-interest patriot, who has weathered many fierce international storms in his 17 years of national leadership, to restore the damage done in the weak Yeltsin years to the Russian state and economy, and to rebuild Russia's shattered pride in its own values and destiny.

Similarly, I would not have known about the brilliant work of American historian Professor Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies, history and politics at New York University and Princeton University, and contributing editor to 'The Nation' magazine. Stephen Cohen is a leading figure in the revived American Committee for East West Accord, and always a source of wisdom and historical perspective on American-Russian relations.

Western scholarship on Putin's Russia is now deeply divided between a judgmental and disdainful majority view, and the more balanced (to my mind) evaluations by a small minority of scholars spearheaded by Cohen and Sakwa. Their work starts with the understanding that Russia is culturally and philosophically different from the West, and that these differences need to be factored in – and respected - before Westerners attempt to pass judgement on Russia.

It is hard to find middle ground between Western writers who are all too ready to judge Russia harshly, and Western writers who try to understand the country without rushing to condemn. We are really, as my book sadly concludes, now in a world of two alternative and contesting realities. What you see depends on where you are looking from, and on which sources you choose to read and to believe.

Why does this matter? Because it influences greatly the way we in the West perceive the day-to-day course of East-West relations. Our frame of reference for assessing Trump's current crisis of legitimacy in Washington – Russia-gate - has been predetermined by the way in which in the past eight years or so we have become indoctrinated to false stereotypes of Russia and Putin. Had Hillary Clinton become President, we would have judged her performance against that same framework of received Western stereotypes about Russia and Putin. We know when Trump is being stupid and dangerous, because it is so obvious. We would not have necessarily known when Hillary Clinton was being stupid and dangerous until it was too late. Her proposed US no-fly zone over Syria might well have started an American war with Russia.

The Western disposition to hostile judgment of Russia is not new. It has deep historical roots, going far back to the Roman Empire and its fear of nomad invasions from the East. Also, to the Great Schism in 1054 between Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Tsar Peter the Great, a ruthless autocrat who set out to westernise his empire by force, sparked European fears with his building the new Baltic capital of Saint Petersburg and his victory over the Swedish army at Poltava in Ukraine in 1709. Napoleon reinforced European fears of Russia further, with his disastrous invasion in 1814 with an all-European coalition *Grande Armee*, which briefly occupied Moscow for the first time since the Polish-Lithuanian occupation in 1610-12, but was similarly destroyed.

Russia was a major architect of the 1815 Peace of Vienna, based on principles of equality of European states large and small, and on strict respect for national sovereignty. But European great powers feared Russia was replacing Turkey as the paramount Balkan power, and it became British and French policy to prop up Turkey against Russia. The Crimean War – a Western-led invasion of Russia which severely tested Russia's military strength - was part of the Great Game in Central Asia, a struggle for global imperial dominance between the British maritime and Russian land-based empires. Then came the two great wars in Europe, and Soviet Communism. After 1945, the United States inherited Britain's role as the

major global maritime power, which saw itself as in geostrategic conflict with the Eurasian Heartland led by Russia.

Russia has had a very different, poorly known in the West, perspective on all this often tragic history of East-West conflict and misunderstanding over many centuries. A few months ago, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov put up on the Foreign Ministry website in March 2016 an extended essay, 'Russia's Foreign Policy: Historical Background', setting out his personal perspective. It is well worth reading, and I quote from it in my book.

In February 2015, thanks to a surprise birthday gift of an air ticket, I decided to revisit Russia after watching from a distance the 47 years of great change since I had served there in 1969-71. I set about rebuilding my language skills. I began with one large asset - my memories of living and working in Moscow as a young Western diplomat at the height of the Cold War. I hoped this rather special life experience might help me write a useful book: a personal real-life perspective for comparing Soviet Russia then, and Russia today.

I researched what I thought were my most reliable guides to Russian history and politics, exercising my own initial confirmation biases. Which were these:

SLIDE 11 – WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

Russians are a serious-minded people who have undergone great hardships to build what they have now achieved - a generally decent civil society.

Russia is not an aggressive nation - it looks for security and peace with all its neighbours.

The West has gravely misread Russia and its national interests.

Such misreadings continue to deepen now, with potentially very dangerous consequences for the world's peace and security.

These personal judgements have been confirmed for me in the tragic past three years since the Ukraine crisis came to a head in Kiev's Maidan Square in February 2014. Ukraine is now the pivot of East-West conflict.

On the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, which Putin has said he views as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century, I commend three wise and highly readable books:

SLIDE 12 – THREE BOOKS ON SOVIET COLLAPSE THAT GREATLY INFLUENCED ME

Imperium, Ryszard Kapuszinski's searing portrayal of the Soviet Union in its death throes, (1993,1994)

Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000 , Stephen Kotkin, 2001, updated 2008

Moscow, December 25, 1991: the Last Day of the Soviet Union, Conor O'Clery, 2011, a gripping account of the deadly Yeltsin- Gorbachev personal feud that broke the Soviet Union.

I set out to experience in one month a number of cultural sites, S-I-T-E-S , that I believe express and most y to Russia's national identity today. My Table of Contents shows where I chose to visit. **SLIDE 13 - IMAGE OF MY TABLE OF CONTENTS , BOOK page vii .**

Some of these sites are places – cities , villages or estates. Some are museums. Some are great historical events. Some are outstanding works of literature. Some are national historical, literary or musical figures. Some are recent political leaders. I tried to give my readers, in the space of a reader-friendly account of a kind of literary pilgrimage, authentic insights into the drama, complexity, cruelty, pathos and courage of Russian history and culture.

I also left myself enough unprogrammed time and space to experience the mood and style of contemporary Russian life. I needed quiet days in Moscow and other places, in order to absorb something of the cultural atmosphere of civility and good manners, to help me break free of the hold of powerful negative Western preconceptions of today's Russia.

SLIDE 14 - IMAGE OF MAP IN BOOK , PAGE ix

The experience of just being there, and the accumulation of human detail and real-life everyday observation in emotive places like Pasternak's home, Tolstoy's country estate, the Gulag and Jewish museums, Yekaterinburg and Saint Petersburg, in going to concerts and operas, and simply sitting in cafes and on trains, reinforced my confidence that I could write a book about Russia that my readers might find truthful and authentic.

Of course , travellers see what we want to see – many 'useful idiots', to use Lenin's phrase, visited the Soviet Union from the West in the years of Lenin's and Stalin's rule, and came back hugely and naively impressed. I hope I was not such a useful idiot. I was not on a guided tour.

Did I reach any final conclusions about Putin's Russia? Only in a limited sense: my initial confirmation biases were affirmed by what I experienced during my visit. I left Russia concluding : **SLIDE 15 – MY CONCLUSIONS – RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

Russia is a warm and decent country.

Russia is a very different country from the West.

We should not try to judge it by Western standards.

On every issue of current criticism of Russia by the West, there is an alternative and contesting Russian version of the facts. We need to hear both sides.

Does my book try to make judgements on specific issues where there are conflicting versions of facts – above all, on the well-known lists of human rights abuses? Mostly it does

not, to the annoyance of some critics. One made reference to me bringing a telescope to my blind eye! But I felt that passing judgement on specific issues and case-studies would go beyond the scope and readability of my book. I hoped to leave readers with the view: yes, Russia presents many difficult issues, but we don't necessarily know both sides of the story, and we really do not have the right to pass judgement until we have heard both sides.

I would like to suggest something here on the importance of proportionality when one discusses Russia's relations with the West. Of course every life and every human rights abuse is important. But the world does not have the luxury of assuming that there are wise men there in Russia and the US managing the nuclear balance responsibly, while the rest of us can get on risk-free with our human rights hobbyhorses - whether it be Pussyriot getting arrested in Moscow's leading cathedral, or the poisoning of Litvinenko, or the murder of journalist Politovskaya, or politician Nemtsov's murder, or the cruel human rights abuses of gay men in Chechnya. People like Trump, Pence, National Security Adviser General McMaster, and Defence Secretary James Mattis, are running the US side of the nuclear deterrent balance. I have no confidence in their collective wisdom and understanding of what they are dealing with in their protagonist, Putin's Russia. I would have had a similar lack of confidence in Hillary Clinton's team of liberal hawks.

Putin and his top team are a great deal wiser. They know from the horrors of WW2 what war is, and what nuclear war between two nuclear superpowers could do to their country and the world: destroy it utterly. But they also know that Russia can never again bow down to Western bullying from a position of claimed superior nuclear strength. The more the US and NATO press Russia, the harder Russia will fight back. This - not Pussy Riot, Litvinenko and the rest - is what we all need to be more focussed on now, in our discussions of East-West relations. We need to get up and running again the mechanisms of civilised diplomatic discourse, based on mutual respect and a common understanding of the huge nuclear risks we all run, if the present slide in relations continues. This is what I mean by proportionality.

In conclusion: is there really any alternative to East-West detente, by which I mean an end to the West's demonisation of Russia, and a return to a civilised, regular East-West dialogue on all issues now in contention, on a basis of sovereignty and good manners? If not, what is the destination of the road down which the West now blindly travels?

We now face an undesirable and dangerous destination: with increasing militarisation by both sides; increasing political alienation of Russia and China from the West; increasing risk of war by accident or reciprocal brinkmanship; the erosion of psychological barriers to the threatened use in war of nuclear weapons; the possible replacement of responsible cautious Russian leaders like Putin by potentially much less prudent and responsible leaders. After all, look at the man whom the United States has just elected as their President!

FINAL SLIDE.

What do I hope this book might achieve? I hope that, particularly if it achieves overseas re-publication under licence to UWA Publishing, it might modestly impact on people in positions of influence, to take a less hostile, less pejorative view of Russia as it is today.

For my part, there are so many things that I love and admire about Russia as it is now. I was a guest in Russia. I hope that my affection and respect for this great nation is adequately conveyed in my book 'Return to Moscow'. I hope people will enjoy the read. Thank you.