

# Meiji Institute for Global Affairs

## *MIGA COLUMN GLOBAL DIAGNOSIS*

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Ken Watanabe

Visiting Researcher, Meiji Institute for Global Affairs, Meiji University

### Short Curriculum Vitae – Ken Watanabe

Ken Watanabe received a bachelor's of science in electronic engineering at Shibaura Institute of Technology in Tokyo, Japan. After several years of work experience, he flew to the United States for pursuing graduate studies at San Jose State University in California and Texas A&M University in Texas. During his residency in the US, he received master's degrees in communication studies and education (curriculum and instruction). Trained in the field of communication discipline, particularly rhetoric and intercultural communication, his expertise grounds in critical analysis of public discourse and social affairs focusing language and its effect on social community. His research interest covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to public policy, English as foreign language education, race & gender discrimination, media criticism, and legal system. He returned to Japan in the summer of 2015. He has served his current position since January 2016. He is a native of Tokyo, Japan.

### **Russian Cyber Attacks and Intervention in US Election Policies and Its Impact on Public Opinion**

Whether it is domestic or overseas, there is no argument about strategic importance of information gathering in bolstering national security and politics through effective utilization of cyberspace and IoT (Internet of Things). Today we are facing a growing challenge of cyberattacks that have spiked in the last several years. Among all, we are particularly concerned over the threat of hacking and malicious attack by unidentified users who exploit a new or refined computer viruses to disrupt the interests of public and private sectors. A growing significance of cybersecurity is manifested in the context of international relations and diplomacy, as we are witnessing the call for its

governance both at regional and national level, involving the West, Europe, the Middle East, and ASEAN. What makes cyberattack the utmost threat to national interest is that when it becomes the source of political exploitation against rivals and hostile countries while being used as strategic diplomatic tools. A classic example of this is political intervention made by a foreign government. This column focuses on Russian government's political involvement in recent 2016 US president election through orchestration of cyberattacks. By doing so, it explores how the cyberattack has influenced public opinions on discernment of news reporting on elections and politics.

### **Allegation of Russian Interference and Public Opinion**

In the United States, the allegation of foreign government's political interference has sparked a storm of public controversy. It is about the suspicion that Russian Federation could intervene in the election and pull of cyber-based disruption against the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton from the beginning of 2016 to the campaign season. It began with the breaking news about the e-mail hacking incident at the DNC (Democratic National Convention) in May last year. <sup>i</sup> It was followed by subsequent news about the incidents of personal e-mail server — compromised by data breach last March and appeared in the WikiLeaks in October — belonged to John Podesta, a former Clinton election campaign chief strategist. <sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless, these incidents made no disruption on national election.

One month after the winning of Donald Trump, a Republican presidential nominee, the things made a quick turn. Mainstream news media such as CNN and NBC began to report the allegation of Russian interference in the election. <sup>iii</sup> It also became a daily news topic, appeared in the published articles of mainstream newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post. <sup>iv</sup> Responding to the news media, several politicians also spoke out. In an interview with CNN, John McCain, a Republican senator from Arizona, criticized the Russian intervention as “an act of war.” <sup>v</sup> The US Congress vowed to organize internal committee for a thorough investigation on the matter. <sup>vi</sup>

In the beginning of the new year, on January 6, 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) released their investigative report about Russian government's deliberate interference and disruption in the 2016 presidential election. <sup>vii</sup> This report is based on the findings of their independent investigation, focusing on the degree of interference by Russian federation and its internal government agents body to concern its impact on US public opinions in the presidential election. The report pointed out that the Russian government had aided the Trump campaign behind the scenes for benefit of his candidacy, by making the series of disruption, such as outright slandering and smear campaign against Clinton to manipulate public opinions and information about the election. <sup>viii</sup> More specifically, it charged that Russia's National Intelligence Agency (GRU) was responsible for directing the operations of cyber intelligence by utilizing Guccifer 2.0 persona, DCLeaks.com, and WikiLeaks as key resources, so that they could breach into the Democratic National Committee (DNC) server and gain access to election campaign staff through the dispatch of a hired Romanian hacker impersonated as a Russian individual. Furthermore, it became clear that such operations were aimed in sabotaging Clinton's electability as a national president, such as having national media Russian Today (RT) or Sputnik create fake news about her financial aide to ISIS or fictitious WikiLeaks' disclosure of e-mails that criminalized Clinton to instigate the viewers. It is said that there had been frequent meetings and consultations between media executives and the national authority including Russian president Vladimir Putin and his officials for the orchestration of such propaganda. With Russian government's unspoken nod, the perpetrators systematically disseminated the fake news through English news programs of aforementioned state-run broadcasting company and national media in the North America, Russian bloggers, and hired trolled for the secret intelligence operations. In this way, the report suggests, their propaganda campaign used social media such as Facebook and Twitter as venues, to spread fakes news about candidates and election as if they were real during the campaign season.

In response, now a president-elect Donald Trump issued his statement on his own website on January 7, the day after release of the report. In the statement, he dismissed the causality with its election outcome. <sup>ix</sup> But, interestingly enough, he recognized the possibility of Russian hacking and cited Russia as a country that had to be put in the watch list like China. Although it might be hard to believe in the light of his repetitive criticism and insults on the CIA and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) through the

media and his own Twitter accounts up until today, he didn't make any rebuttal (or any accusation of them) to the findings of investigation as a whole.

It is safe to say that this CIA report gives decent credits to the legitimacy of news reporting on Russia's possible intervention in the election. One thing I would like to emphasize here is that key focus of their investigation was on Russia's political intervention for the purpose of manipulating public opinion in the United States. It is not about correlation with credibility of Trump's victory or election outcome. The report makes no mention about the impact on the election system or any illegality. In this respect, it can be argued that this CIA report provides deterrence to left-leaning media and critics who are skeptical about Trump's qualifications as president and those who have been calling for the void of election outcome. Ever since his inauguration, there has been a heated debate from both left and right wings of media and critics over Trump's qualifications and credibility of his administration. At this point, however, it has not yet reached to the phase that would prove any fraud on the election outcome.

### **The Impact of Cyberattacks on media and press freedom**

What is most crucial in the arguments over the impact of Russian political intervention through cyber hacking is our discernment on public opinion especially over the perception of truth in political news. Fake news, which emerged and flooded the internet during the election campaign, is literary a "fake," for providing any information that is apparently lacking trustworthiness. Nevertheless, in a form of mass amplified through social media, it has a significant effect on the mindset of voters about information of candidates in a way to accept it as truth without any doubt. <sup>x</sup> Such outlets provided one of the very few sources to gather information about candidates, particularly in the eyes of white and Hispanic working-class voters, who become fed up with frustrating situation that makes little or no improvement in their socio-economic life circumstances under the Obama administration.

The spread of fake news also poses its significance in gauging public distrust of mainstream media over blind-spots and slip-ups. During election campaign, most mainstream media chose to tout their reports on Trump by focusing on his gaffes,

allegations of sexual harassment, and many other problems in his personal businesses. By doing so, they deflected public attention away from Clinton by downplaying her questionable handling of classified mails in Benghazi and personal mail server, close ties with Goldman Sachs, her positions on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and her past remark that called out working-class African Americans as “super predators.” It is ironic that such attempt to cover up misogyny<sup>xi</sup> deeply rooted in society was shattered by the fake news that actually brought her stigma out in relief — as if to uncover its conventional norm as undeniable truth.

Another factor that accounts for significance of fake news in upsetting public confidence was insufficient media coverage of the Trump campaign in contrast to Clinton. Many news media outlets didn't bother looking into the fact that approaches made by Clinton and Democratic team to working-class voters were inadequate. Nor did they pay close attention to Trump's strategy to garner his vote constituents through use of anger toward corruption in Washington politics and the establishments on both parties, and his vigorous appeal to voters through inflammatory words.<sup>xii</sup> Regardless of the question on political qualifications or public speaking skills, the mainstream media completely overlooked his passion and effort that mustered support from voters with his unique style in demagoguery, and created the power strong enough to put cracks on the existing voting blocs in swing states. This is also evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of media predicted a Clinton victory right up until the day before the election.

News reporting of Russian intervention by cyber attacks draws on the canvas of public sphere a scale of national distrust that cuts deep into public opinion to its bi-polarization. One side is a growing force of movement igniting distrust and rage against the pre-existing system through hate, exemplified by racist remarks and assault on immigrants, blacks, Muslims, Jewish-Americans, and other minorities. On the other side, there is a staunching opposition to the Trump administration over its national policies that would revert to pre-modern age by revealing its autocratic and tyrannical characters. This scale of bi-polarization is also reflected in public perception of truth over political news reporting, highlighted by a new coinage “post-truth” that emerged after the election. It is exemplified with the emergence of new alternative media outlets

such as Breitbart, a leading right-wing mogul that came to the fore to challenge the mainstream stream.

As many of you know, president Trump keeps doing his job as usual after his inauguration. With his Twitter account and at press conferences, he spends his time making unconfirmed (and false) statements, attacking news media over criticism of his policies and mocking Congressional lawmakers, Hollywood actors and actresses. His approach to promote his own ideas as the fact to normalize them for public understanding is also reflected on several key players of his administration: Sean Spicer, a White House press secretary who displayed a hostile, chip-on-his-shoulder demeanor at the press conference<sup>xiii</sup>; KellyAnn Conway, White House Counselor to the President who made the “alternative facts” remark<sup>xiv</sup>, and Stephen Miller, a newly appointed political advisor, who made utterly inconsistent remarks in the recent interview<sup>xv</sup>.

Glenn Greenwald, an investigative journalist who won a Pulitzer Prize for his landmark journalistic scoop on exclusive coverage of Edward Snowden over National Security Agency (NSA)’s espionage, spoke out on the role of journalism and free press since Trump administration and news reporting on Russian intervention.<sup>xvi</sup> In the interview with Democracy Now!, Greenwald criticized mainstream media’s tendency for exaggerated reporting that painted Russia as a sole perpetrator of spreading fake news despite the lack of evidence. He also accused the mainstream media of neglecting to check the accuracy of information, such as deliberately spreading apparently wrong information through social media, and quietly deleting incorrect portions later, as if the information was correct at the very beginning.<sup>xvii</sup> His concern covered polarization political views in both Democrats and Republicans, backlash against freedom of the press, exemplified by retaliation against the whistleblowers within the government over internal corruption. Greenwald was also critical of Trump for discrediting CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post as “fake news” and using his own Twitter account as the key source of information. Calling such behavior as opportunistic and autocratic, he stated that it would not lead to the solution to numerous problems surrounding media and free press.

## **The Impact of Cyberattacks on Election and Voting System**

Incidents like DNC hacking and Podesta's e-mail leak drew public concern over cybersecurity that was also spilled on the canvas of national election. It posed serious questions on political understanding of cyberthreat and its impact, by ranging from Clinton's problematic handling of classified e-mails through her private e-mail sever during her term as Secretary of State to question on the integrity of Trump's victory in election. After the election, some group of computer experts called for vote recount in the three states (Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, respectively).<sup>xviii</sup> Jill Stein, one of the third candidates who ran for the election from Green Party, agreed to process the petition to be submitted to the court (The petition was granted in Wisconsin only. The other two states denied the petition.) Such effort did bring no difference in outcome: it found no irregularities or misconducts in voting for both electronic machine and paper-ballots.<sup>xix</sup> It confirmed Trump's victory as reported on the election day.

Including last year's national election, no case of cyberattack — such as hacking electronic vote-counting system — has ever been confirmed in any election so far. Similarly, Trump's voting fraud allegation is also subject to the same amount of criticism for its speciousness. As elections and political science experts convincingly suggest, there is no single scientific evidence that supports an allegation about votes of 3 million illegal aliens or dead registered constituents, which is completely groundless.

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Bruce Schneier, a computer science and cybersecurity fellow for Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School, has expressed his concern over a drastic shift to electronic database for voting system in election. He suggested the preservation of paper-based ballots to avoid the risk of potential miscounts or cheating led by technical glitches on electronic vote-counting machine.<sup>xxi</sup> This stems partly from the lessons from the 2000 presidential election on a controversial Florida recount dispute, which was eventually brought up to the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore*. At the same time, it also underscores the depth of concern the risk of cyberattacks imposes on electoral policies. Shifting trend to electronic voting system draws our critical attention to the further discussions that will relate to the issues of voting fraud and voter suppression against particular constituents.

## **Conclusion**

While it is unlikely that this Russian cyber interference will revert diplomatic relations with the United States to animosity in the Cold War, it seems plausible that the Kremlin made a significant political initiative to back the current administration. In fact, the president Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin have a close friendship through the real estate business and other interests. Paul Manafort, who was a former Trump's campaign manager, has connections with pro-Russian politicians in the Ukraine.<sup>xxii</sup> In addition, Rex Tillerson, who was confirmed as Secretary of State was formally confirmed last month, was a former chairman of Exxon Mobile. He also has close ties with Russian oligarchs and government officials in the oil business.<sup>xxiii</sup> Prior to his inauguration, president Trump stressed the importance of Russian-friendly diplomatic strategy, and repetitively criticized the Obama administration for antagonizing the relationship. In order to lift of sanctions, he appointed the general Michael Flynn to National Security Advisor for the talks in not-so-distant future.

Also important to note is that both Trump and Putin had a common enemy: Hillary Clinton. In the past, the president Putin accused Clinton, who was then Secretary of State during the Obama administration, of instigating political dissent in Russia while he was seeking his third presidential term in December 2011.<sup>xxiv</sup> Moreover, he was also slammed for invading Crimea in the wake of internecine strife within the Ukraine in 2014, and military intervention in Syria as well. There's no doubt that a bad blood between the two further boiled from increasing tensions over Syria. To a greater or lesser extent, these political factors and shared understanding of common enemy may have tempted the Russia into this behind-the-scene political intervention to manipulate public opinion for her political revenge.

## **Updates**

Michael Flynn, who was appointed to National Security Advisor, resigned on February 13 when the news reported that he had previously met with the Russian ambassador prior to his confirmation.<sup>xxv</sup> Prior to his resignation, the White House was



warned about the risk of Russian blackmailing due to his contacts with the ambassador. Ironically, this warning was issued by then Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, who was dismissed by president Trump for refusing to comply with his executive order targeting Muslims from seven Arab nations to ban entry after his inauguration.<sup>xxvi</sup> The New York Times and CNN noted that Flynn and other members of Trump's team had communicated with the Russian ambassador via phone and contacted with other governmental officials several times before the election.<sup>xxvii</sup> Responding to this news report, Trump denounced the media at the press conference and charged that information was illegally leaked from the CIA.<sup>xxviii</sup> He demanded punishment for anyone within the government who tipped off classified information to the media.

In Russia, there was also international news came out in late January. A Russian hacker was arrested and taken into custody for suspicion of treason.<sup>xxix</sup> The hacker was a program director at a private cyber security firm, who was also engaging in spying activities in various parts of Europe. He was on CIA's watch list for involving in the cyber attacks during the presidential campaign.

As I mentioned in the previous section, no clear relationship has been confirmed between Russian cyberattacks and election outcome when the CIA report was out (and as of today). However, the breaking news of Flynn's resignation could set up a new venue for investigating the issue over the ties between Russia and the Trump administration. Although their connection has not become clear yet at the time of this column, the truth will come out in the long run, as the story gradually unfolds for its development in future.

## Notes

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